



Next time, I'll take a cab

Last month, my view from the Thames was bedecked with South African flags, all the way up to Buckingham Palace and back via The Mall. The occasion? The first state visit of the new monarch's reign, and the fourth one in a quarter of a century by a leader from the rainbow nation. Apparently this rate of frequency is some kind of record.

On the last night of President Cyril Ramaphosa's jaunt, there was a reception and banquet in his honour, hosted by the Lord Mayor of the City of London at the Guildhall, a building with more than 800 years of history and the only secular stone structure dating from before the Great Fire of London in 1666 still standing in the City. And, as you'd expect of your intrepid UK columnist, I was there, representing the readers of the FM.

How on earth did I crack an invite, I hear you ask. I'm not really sure.

But this is the story: about five years ago, I met a Twitter connection in real life (I'm a bit weird like that: I've done this on a few occasions, but that's a tale for another day). This new friend is a risk consultant and political

commentator, an all-round smart guy. I once helped him arrange a speaking gig with one of South Africa's biggest institutions, but apart from that we've had little direct contact in the intervening period.

That's until a couple of months ago, when an e-mail arrived out of the blue: would I mind if he put my name forward for the guest list of the upcoming state banquet? Why not, I responded, and promptly forgot about it. A few weeks later, I got an e-mail confirming an invitation in the name of DE Gouws, Esquire.

The dress code was the interesting part: we needed to arrive in white tie, military uniform or national dress. Sadly, I never went to the army, so a uniform was out of the question. I considered national dress but decided it would probably not be a good look to appear before the president and Lord Mayor in a khaki suit with short pants and vellies, with a comb in the long sock on my right foot.

So white tie it had to be, except that I had no idea what that entailed. A quick internet search revealed that this particular outfit was a notch up from black tie, and the most formal in traditional Western evening dress

codes, consisting, inter alia, of a black tail coat and obligatory white waistcoat. And of course, a bow tie in the whitest shade of white. You can rent the full monty from a number of outlets around town, costing the equivalent of a small emerging market's annual GDP for an evening in dapper apparel.

It was a strange sensation, walking up to my local tube station fitted out like a minor royal. For some reason, I was reminded of Warren Buffett's words when he spoke about Wall Street: that it's the only place people ride to in a Rolls-Royce to get advice from those who take the subway.

Lesson learnt

The night itself was filled with the usual British pomp and ceremony. There were trumpeters, guards of honour in elaborate costumes, and a string orchestra playing *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika*. No fewer than 700 guests squeezed into the room ... good thing this event wasn't scheduled at the height of Covid.

We had rainbow trout from the Wye Valley and lamb from Carmarthenshire in Wales, while drinking wine from, among others, Spier and Nederburg. Another small nation's annual GDP spent to entertain and feed each person in the room, no doubt.

Apart from that, not much else to report, just your average state banquet. If you've been to one, you've been to them all, I reckon. But what do I know.

I don't think it's likely that I will ever be invited to an event of this nature again. Which puts me in pretty good company, I reckon, as neither will Ramaphosa, judging by the fallout over the past few weeks surrounding the little mishap at Phala Phala.

One thing's for sure: if I ever crack another invite to an event of this nature, I'm taking a cab.

Gouws is chief investment officer, Credo, London



Stately: President Cyril Ramaphosa arrives for a banquet at the Guildhall in London

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