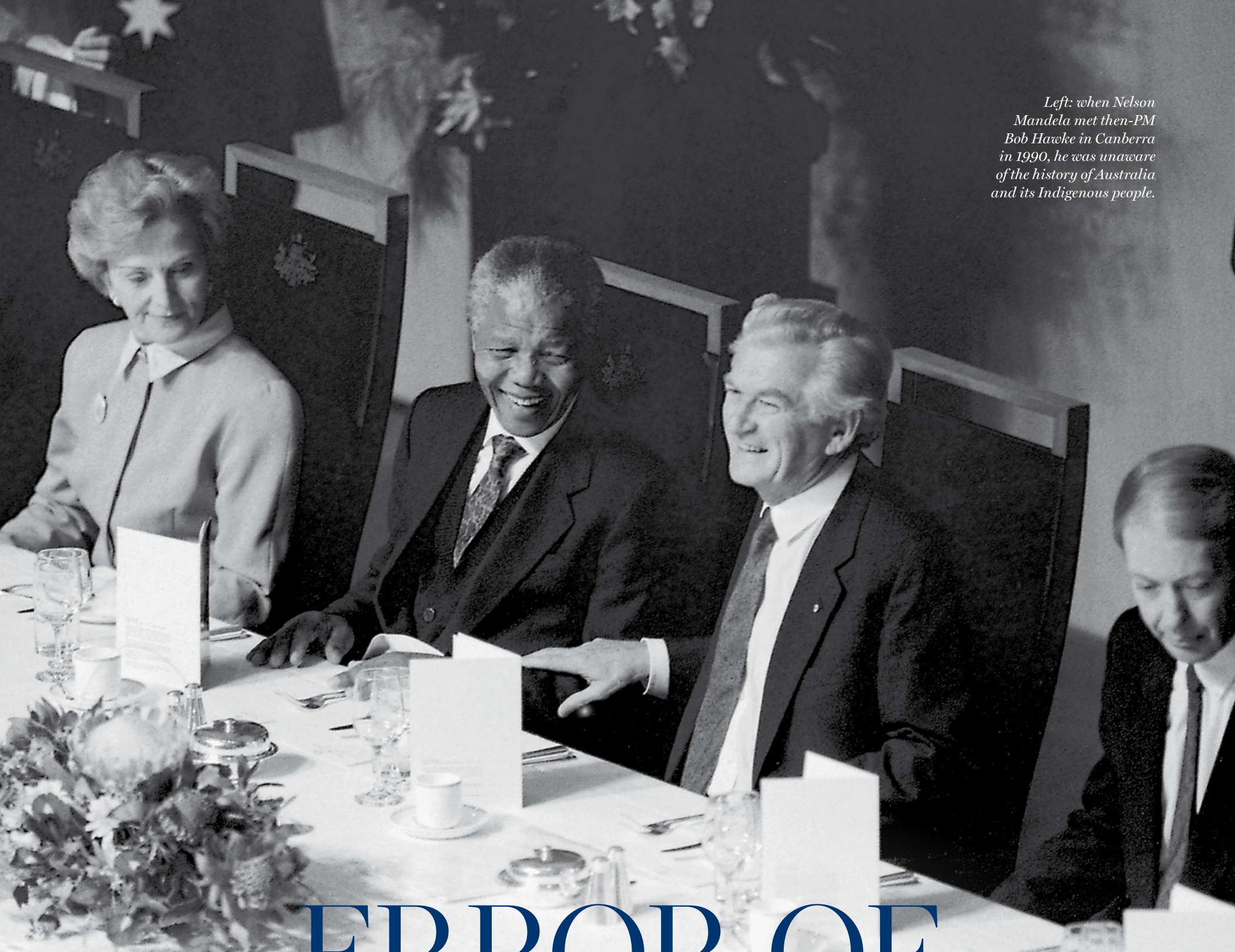


Left: when Nelson Mandela met then-PM Bob Hawke in Canberra in 1990, he was unaware of the history of Australia and its Indigenous people.



ERROR OF JUDGMENT

As a personal physician to Nelson Mandela in the later years of his life, Dr Peter Friedland thought he knew everything there was to know about the elderly statesman. Until the day Friedland handed in his resignation...

BY *Fill Margo*

DR PETER Friedland, an ear, nose and throat specialist, was a regular visitor to Nelson Mandela's home in Johannesburg in the early 2000s, during which time he treated and developed a rapport with the elderly statesman over several years. After losing yet another close friend to escalating street crime, Friedland braced himself for telling Mandela he was moving his family to Australia. But the former president of South Africa had his own piece of surprising information to share....

For the past eight years, I'd driven this route with pleasurable anticipation. But now, with dread in my heart, I was on my way to Madiba (his clan name) to tell him I was abandoning South Africa. This was going to be my most difficult meeting with him ever. I was terrified.

As usual, our sessions were closed, and we had privacy. We went through the usual formalities, and I settled into my work. I removed his hearing aids, cleaned them and examined his ears. I quickly ran out of medical things to

do and could defer no longer. I had thought about how to frame my news and had rehearsed it, but couldn't bring it to mind. So, I launched: "Madiba, I would like to explain, as I've alluded to before, that I will be leaving South Africa. I'm desperately worried about the criminal situation and I want my children to experience life without it.

"Although I've accepted a job in Australia which requires me to leave in a few weeks, I have come to ask your opinion and, although

this order of events is unorthodox, to ask your permission, retrospectively, to go.”

He was sitting very still, almost stern, and looking at me intently. I continued. “I have also come to thank you for the honour of being allowed to treat you. I am going to miss you. I would like to ask your permission to come and visit you when I return to South Africa in the future.”

I fell silent, not knowing what to expect. Madiba stared at me without expression for what seemed like an eternity, and I felt ashamed. Then, in that deep and deliberate voice that I’d come to know so well, he said, “No, doctor...” and after a long pause, “don’t think that you are so clever.”

Shock coursed through my body. Oh God, here it comes. He’s going to tell me don’t be a bloody coward, don’t run away, don’t be so clever. Then he repeated himself. “No, Doctor, don’t think you are so clever. I went to Australia many, many years before you.”

What did he mean? I was puzzled. Was he telling me not to go? Then he explained. In prison, he knew that the Free Nelson Mandela Movement, which originated in the UK, had led to a second movement in Australia. He got word out that when he was released, Australia would be among the first places he would visit outside of Africa.

As he hadn’t had the luxury of looking at an atlas or map for 27 years, he told me he was only vaguely aware of where Australia was. In October 1990, after a stop in Asia, he flew to Australia. This was such a crucial juncture for me that his words seared themselves into my memory:

“When we arrived in Canberra, we had a big state dinner with lots of dignitaries, Prime Minister Bob Hawke and many, many others. During dinner, my assistant told me that there was a very important call I needed to take. So, I went to the telephone. On the telephone, there was an Aboriginal leader who was very upset with me.

“He was shouting, ‘How dare you come to Australia. You are the leader of all the oppressed peoples in the world. And you are sitting at a white man’s table. And you have ignored the Indigenous people of this country. You have not asked us for permission to come onto Country. You have not asked us to sit at your table.’”

“Doctor, I wasn’t fully aware of the history of Australia. I’d been in prison for 27 years and I had not studied anything about the Aboriginal people and their persecution.

“I apologised to this man, but he said it was too late, and my apology was not good enough. I needed to visit the elders and receive a Welcome



“He was shouting, ‘How dare you come to Australia. You are the leader of all the oppressed peoples in the world.’”



Above: Mandela slipped away from his itinerary, including an appearance at the Sydney Opera House, to meet Indigenous representation. Below: Dr Peter Friedland with Mandela.

to Country ceremony. I apologised again and that was the end of the conversation.

“I came back to the table, and I was upset. When I sat down, those around asked what had happened. I relayed the story and one of the great leaders at the table went like this with his hand [Madiba brushed his hand away]. “Oh, don’t worry, we’ll sort it out,” he said. Doctor, only when I saw this white man’s gesture did I fully realise the importance of that phone call and the very serious mistake I had made. I understood the Aboriginal people’s suffering and the fact that this had been ignored not only by the people at the table but by me.”

“So, what did you do?”

“I immediately called my assistant and asked for a meeting the following day, with the Indigenous leader or leaders, even if it meant cancelling something else. We were due to go to Sydney or Melbourne the next day, and I was determined to have this meeting, and if necessary, a plane should be arranged for 7am.”

Madiba said an unofficial meeting was arranged and, against protocol, he slipped away for it, without his security detail or entourage.

“And so, Doctor, I want to tell you, don’t think you are so clever because I thought I was so clever. I was arrogant. Never use ignorance as an excuse as I did. Make sure you thoroughly study the places you are going to, the history and all its peoples.

“And Doctor, wherever you go in the world, read about the indigenous people, and give them the respect that I failed to give in Australia. There is no excuse.

“We are all part of humanity. If you go anywhere in the world, and you contribute to the underprivileged, it doesn’t matter if it is in Africa or Australia or anywhere else. If you do that you have my permission.”

When I heard that I cried, openly and unashamedly.

As I drove away, I turned it over and over in my mind. I never knew he had been to Australia almost 20 years earlier. Back at my desk, I checked it out. The evidence was there in print and on video, and I began to appreciate the depth of his mistake.

I also gave myself a crash course in colonialism in Australia. Although a meeting with

Aboriginal representatives was on his official run sheet for later in the itinerary, Indigenous activists were so upset they called for a boycott. The act of asking for permission would have acknowledged them as the traditional owners and custodians of the land, which they had been for more than 60,000 years. A ritual welcoming ceremony would have ensured mutual respect and understanding between visitor and host.

When Madiba first arrived at Parliament House in Canberra that day, Aboriginal activist Michael Mansell staged a conspicuous one-man protest. He waved an Aboriginal flag and shouted, “What about Aborigines, Mr Mandela? Why doesn’t someone say something about the Aboriginal people in this country?”

Madiba was apparently ignorant of the brutal frontier wars. He didn’t know that First Nations people carry the burden of this inter-generational trauma and were still fighting to be heard. Unaware, he gave a long speech thanking Australia for its anti-apartheid activism, its sports boycotts and its financial help. There was no mention of the plight of the Indigenous people.

With embarrassing irony, when asked why he hadn’t raised this issue, he explained that he didn’t want to “interfere” in the internal politics of another country. *What?!*

So many other nations had done all they could to interfere in apartheid, and Madiba had honoured and remained loyal to them. He also didn’t know that Aboriginal people had come out strongly against apartheid.

His message for me was that every country has an indigenous history that needs to be acknowledged, studied and understood. There is no excuse for ignorance. It was significant that 19 years after that excruciating event, he was telling me this. It must have been hard-wired in him.

He’d made a political, diplomatic and humanitarian blunder. When he returned to Australia a decade later, he made good. His original sin was largely forgiven, but not forgotten. ■

This is an edited extract from Quiet Time with the President: A doctor’s story by Peter Friedland with Jill Margo (Australian Scholarly Publishing \$35).