The Durban bridge and other stories
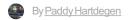
By Paddy Hartdegen

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If people wonder why so many ordinary South Africans get so cross about crime - and here I'm not talking about violent crime, just straight theft - then what happened in Durban and Alexandra are excellent cases to consider.

Over the past couple of months thieves managed, somehow, to get right up under the Elli Brown Viaduct, a bridge that is used as a pedestrian walkway, over the Umgeni River.

It was built in the 1950s so that people who needed to cross that stretch of water could do so without venturing onto the busy roads or taking their lives in their hands by wading or swimming through the water.

But that didn't deter the thieves - in fact it didn't even enter their heads.

Over a period - and the eThekwini Municipality is unsure about how long this period was - the thieves unbolted the stainless steel shackles that were used to hold up the bridge, carried them off to a scrap metal merchant where they sold them for cash.

Of course the scrap metal merchant was buying the material illegally but he probably asked no questions and was told no lies - at least that's what he'd say I guess. Systematically every one of the shackles was removed and when the last one was gone, the Elli Brown Viaduct collapsed into the water below.

The thieves got a couple of hundred rand for their troubles. Maybe they were even paid a thousand or two, depending on how much the shackles weighed. In the process, they single-handedly demolished a bridge. Gone. Finito, finished. Now it lies on the bottom of the Umgeni River.

To replace it will cost millions. If it is left unrepaired pedestrians who use that route every day are at risk; a few might even lose their lives in unnecessary traffic accidents. Essential infrastructure that has stood for more than 50 years - and been meticulously maintained too - is gone.

For the sake of a few rands.

No one knew

As Carlos Esteves, the municipality's deputy head of road systems says, no one had any idea that the shackles were being systematically stolen and sold.

This is so typical of so many events that unfold, almost on a daily basis in South Africa and sometimes it's hardly surprising that communities resort 'punishing' (usually maiming or killing) the thieves who help themselves to whatever they can.

In the other case this week, 27 shacks were burnt down in one of Alexandra's many informal settlements. These 'shacks' supposedly belonged to the "poorest-of-the-poor" - people who have virtually nothing and can hardly fend for themselves - who had moved in there because there was nowhere else to stay.

But this is far removed from the truth, or so it seems.

You see, before the fire started, these shacks had satellite TV dishes for pay television channels; there were flat-screen TV sets, radios and hi-fi systems, cellphones and chargers, even computers, along with fridges, kettles, frying pans and heaters.

In an informal settlement that has no electricity?

Clearly the settlement did have electricity and plenty of it too. That electricity was being stolen via illegal connections erected by some cunning people with the necessary skills and know-how to rig up a supply without killing themselves.

Surprise, surprise...

The cause of the fire that authorities say resulted in "extensive losses" for the shack-dwellers was completely illegal and completely unsafe.

Johannesburg's emergency management service, called to put out the blaze and save a few lives, says that just last week it extinguished a similar fire in another nearby informal settlement (also in Alexandra).

Surprise, surprise, it too was caused by illegal electricity connections.

Appeals broadcast on radio in Johannesburg went out across the city and, remarkably quickly, the citizens responded in their warm-hearted way, bringing in wood and iron to rebuild the shacks, giving the community food, blankets, clothes, medicines and personal hygiene products. Even buckets, mops and brooms because everything was gone. They needed everything they could lay their hands on.

Yet it was this self-same community who brought this disaster on themselves. Am I sorry for them? - not at all, I'd like them to be charged and convicted. Particularly as many of them are probably living on social welfare grants anyway because they are classified as the "poorest-of-the-poor".

These communities, it seems, feel they just might have a right to everything for free - and most of them succeed in achieving it too. The inconvenience of no toilets and no proper washing facilities is just that: an inconvenience.

For them that's not a problem because, believe it or not, they wash and clean themselves in our shopping centres. I have seen people stripped to their waist, washing in public toilets in these conveniences because they're there and are free to use.

I've even seen their range of soaps and deodorants on the basin nearby. If you're a squatter, a shack-dweller or a community member living in an informal settlement you just make a plan. If you don't have water-borne sewage or running water at home, no problem, use someone else's.

And I think that that's one of the reasons why so many people are running out of sympathy for the indigent or, as they are now referred to, "the poorest-of-the-poor".

I certainly have done and I'm sure there are others like me who have done too.

ABOUT PADDY HARTDEGEN

Paddy Hartdegen has been working as a journalist and writer for the past 40 years since his first article was published in the *Sunday Tribune* when he was just 16-years-old. He has written 13 books, edited a plethora of business-to-business publications and written for most of the major newspapers in South Africa.

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