

SA's bizarre and brutal centuries at the polls

John Harvey

What makes the works of historians Matthew Blackman and Nick Dall so appealing is that they are not afraid to tear strips off SA's power elites, past or present.

By no means is historical negationism new to the republic, but certainly in this age of fake news, online propagandising and Carl Niehaus it is enjoying a huge resurgence, particularly among those who claim to be leaders of the people.

Were the repercussions not so tragic the utterances of SA politicians would be comical, as exemplified by some of the testimonies at the Zondo commission of inquiry.

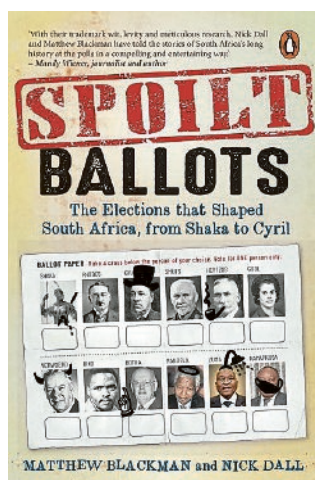
The thing about Blackman and Dall, whose previous offering, *Rogues' Gallery*, was a delightful takedown of the country's most notorious political curs, is that they not only uncover items that provide a fresh perspective on old events, but deliver reams of evidence that make their insights irrefutable.

A lot of what they find would undoubtedly leave today's politicians embarrassed which, to be perfectly honest, is exactly what they deserve.

Their latest book, *Spoilt Ballots: The Elections that Shaped South Africa, from Shaka to Cyril*, analyses SA at the polls over the centuries.

It's an exhilarating journey, even if bumpier than a Makhanda street at Easter (or any time for that matter).

As was the case in *Rogue's Gallery*, the authors have spent a lot of time on Cecil John Rhodes, which stands to rea-



son given his influence in Southern Africa.

Rhodes represents all that was wrong with colonialism — racism, greed and lies.

Yet in a superb piece of research, the authors have tied the mining magnate and imperialist to none other than Walter Rubusana, co-founder of the South African Native Congress (SANC), later to become the ANC.

Towards the end of the 19th century, Rubusana and his followers had taken issue with John Tengo Jabavu, the editor of the influential *Imvo Zabantsundu* (African Opinion) newspaper and a man who worked to protect the non-racial franchise in the Cape.

Rubusana was at odds with Jabavu, believing he did not reflect the views of all the black people of the Eastern Cape.

The problem was that this faction did not have a newspaper of its own.

That is, until Rhodes was approached.

"In 1897 SANC members

raised some money locally to start a newspaper, and in 1898 Rhodes, faced with an election battle where the black vote had some importance for him, gave them the rest of the cash."

Essentially, a forerunner of the ANC received start-up capital from Cecil John Rhodes.

Politics is awash with hypocrisy and irony of course, yet even so, this nugget of history is hardly one likely to be mentioned with gusto at future ANC conferences.

The formation of the apartheid state and its brutal policies is covered in many chapters, and here again, there is enough skulduggery to make a prison gang boss blush.

JB Hertzog was about as vile as they come, and he had no qualms in lying to people of colour in his bid to best Jan Smuts in the 1924 election.

Believing his falsehoods proved to be deadly for generations of black, coloured and Indian people.

On August 12 1924, newly elected Nationalist MP AJ Stals told parliament: "In this country, there is a small number of whites against the natives, a few civilised people against uncivilised hordes, and for that reason it is so important that not a single white person should be allowed to go under ..."

As the title suggests, post-apartheid elections also feature in *Spoilt Ballots*, with the ANC's Nasrec conference in December 2017 being among the most dramatic.

This is where Jacob Zuma's reign — "SA's lost decade" — came to an end.



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"The moment Nasrec hinged on was when [now deputy president David] Mabuza invited his supporters to 'vote with your conscience' just minutes before voting began.

"Quite a change from his promise to Zuma 24 hours earlier that he would deliver the 2,500 votes needed to ensure an NDZ [Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma] victory."

Blackman and Dall have produced another scintillating read that causes one to reflect deeply on what exactly having the franchise means in SA, and whether the electorate really does deserve the government it gets.

Spoilt Ballots is published by Penguin Books