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RED, HOT: Slovo stands up to the public. And the joke's on them!

Bless his red socks, Joe is a cool Party one-liner

"WE reserve the electric chair for communists," quipped chat show host Tony Sanderson as Joe Slovo was wired up to a button microphone and an armchair in preparation for an after-dinner interrogation session with diners at a northern suburbs restaurant O'Hagan's.

Not to be outdone, Slovo told a communist joke about a man who, in the middle of being beaten up by a policeman, shouts: "Stop! Stop! I'm an anti-communist." The policeman carries on hitting him: "I don't care what kind of bloody communist you are."

But, as Slovo added, "to be a communist in this country takes more than a sense of humour ... it takes a sense of survival".

The general secretary of the South African Communist Party has survived. There he sat, very much the man of the moment in his trademark red socks, smiling, avuncular and doubtless waiting for the inevitable question: "Why do you people want to nationalise everything?"

When it came, he was ready: "We must shatter the myth that we want to create an economy that will nationalise places like this restaurant. After eating the kingklip here, I'll leave it to O'Hagan's."

He was no less quick on the draw when someone wanted to know how the party had managed to finance its existence all these years: "We've had a lot of jumble sales"

Joe Slovo was on a roll of one-liners, seemingly eager to do justice to his top-billing as that evening's after-dinner mint. "Dine in style and witness the leader of the SACP bare his soul on the Party's future!"

Slovo was Sanderson's third guest on the "No Holds Barred" show, a show that has brought new meaning to the word "entertainment". Most nights of the week, O'Hagan's plays host to a variety of more conventional artists: sexy dancers, stand-up comics and rock 'n roll singers. On Wednesdays, however, a public figure — preferably a provocative one — takes centre stage.

The Party was on at restaurant O'Hagan's when Joe Slovo faced a kingklip and some rather fishy questions. CHARLOTTE BAUER witnessed the whining and dining

On this particular evening, the mostly white audience seemed less anxious about the Communist Party's policy on nationalisation than about Slovo's recently reported remarks about Jesus Christ. What he had said was that, if Christ were around today, he would probably be a member of Umkhonto we-Sizwe, the armed wing of the African National Congress.

"Mr Slovo, are you saying you could really imagine Jesus on a donkey with an AK-47 slung over his shoulder?"

"Yes. It would be good for him because Jesus stood for the poor against tyranny."

During this exchange, a man in an electric blue jumper had become more and more agitated. By the time it was his turn to ask a question, his face had come to assume the same colour as his sweater.

"Just tell me one thing — are you or are you not an atheist?"

"Ja," said Slovo laconically.

"I believe man made God in the image of his own perfection. That's what I think is positive about religion. I also believe that Christ was a revolutionary."

The electric blue jumper fairly crackled: "How can you say that? You don't even believe in Christ?"

The man had a point. After all, Joe Slovo is not any old atheist. He's a Jewish atheist.

Eventually wearying of trying to save the soul of a Godless communist, the audience turned instead to a bit of timeless red-baiting.

It doesn't seem to matter how many times Joe Slovo tells people he never was, still isn't and never will be a colonel in the KGB — because the popular



Armchair socialist ... Joe Slovo, with host Tony Sanderson on his right, fields a question from diners at O'Hagan's restaurant

Picture: AVIGAIL UZI

memory wants to believe it.

It doesn't seem to matter how many times he reminds people that the "freedom-loving West" has given birth to such free-thinkers as Hitler, Mussolini and Pinochet because the popular memory prefers to remember Stalin and Ceausescu.

"Of course crimes have been committed in the name of socialism," Slovo magnanimously conceded. "Crimes have also been committed in the name of capitalism and religion. Look at the crusades, Spanish fascism, Catholic Church support for Hitler ... all that doesn't necessarily lead people to abandon the basic content of a given doctrine."

Freely admitting the failure of corrupted forms of socialism as practised in Eastern Europe, Slovo warmed up to his biggest laugh of the show.

"I don't believe there was communism in Russia," he ventured.

"Is this show supposed to be serious?" someone hooted as all around him people slid weakly down their chairs with tears of mirth in their eyes.

But Slovo was serious: "No society has ever claimed they've reached the point where they could call themselves a truly communist society — and I'm not talking about the distorted forms of socialism as practised in countries like Russia."

"Mr Slovo ... are you a communist or a socialist?"

"Mr Slovo ... what is communism?"

Questions like these were proof that 40-odd years of God-fearing, red-hating, black-baiting nationalism and censorship have worked like opium on our brains. People who didn't do politics

III at university genuinely don't know what communism is.

Hard-pressed to define it in a mere phrase, Slovo chose his words carefully: "True communism projects a society in which one person can't live of the labour of another. It is a society without economic exploitation."

Examining my dinner bill at the end of the evening, communism suddenly seemed a perfectly reasonable way to go.

●Next week at O'Hagans Tony Sanderson will be talking to marathon man Bruce Fordyce about being a long-distance runner, which isn't nearly as lonely as being a long-distance communist.