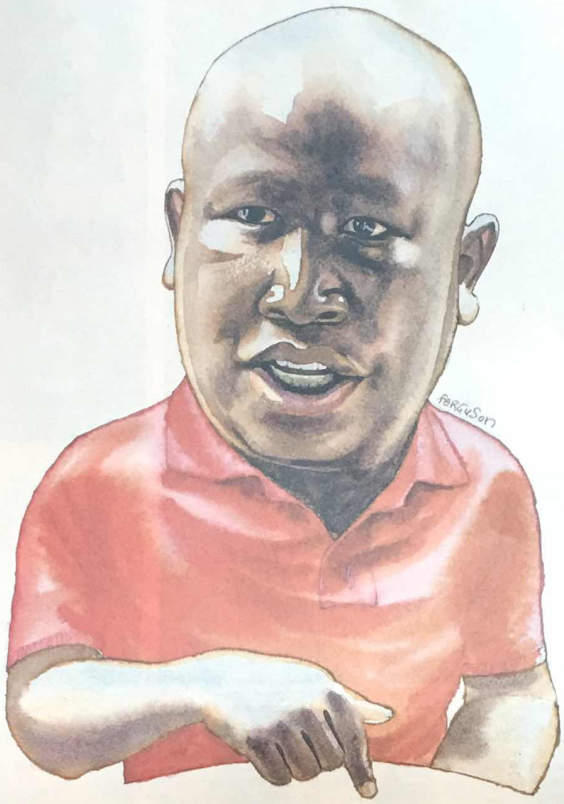

Lunch with the FT Julius Malema

'The revolution is still coming . . .'

Combative politics and a lavish lifestyle have earned the leader of South Africa's Economic Freedom Fighters party notoriety. He tells *David Pilling* that apartheid still exists and why no one can tell him how to dress

For a supposedly dangerous revolutionary, Julius Malema looks a lot like a giant baby. As I enter the room, the rabble-rouser who was expelled from South Africa's governing African National Congress party in 2012 for insubordination looks on sweetly, shaven head glistening, as he fiddles with his mobile phone. Famed for his penchant for bling and designer labels, today the 34-year-old political leader, among the most loved and feared in the country, is turned out in fairly casual attire: khaki slacks, slip-on shoes and a bright red Burberry polo shirt stretched over his pot belly.

He stands to greet me, flashing the most disarming of smiles. "Hello chief," he says, proffering a huge hand. "Sit down."

We are meeting at the Orchards restaurant in the Parktonian, a four-star hotel in a slightly rundown part of central Johannesburg. It is just a few doors down from the offices of the Economic Freedom Fighters, the political party Malema set up two years ago to challenge the ANC.

The big, round, glass-topped table is set for eight, though it is just Malema, me and Mbuyiseni Ndlozi, the party's spokesman, who is tapping busily into a laptop a few seats away. Not knowing quite where to sit in the oversized arrangement, I self-consciously plonk myself down right next to Malema.

We're going to have the buffet — though, as it is not quite noon, final preparations are still being made in the dining room. Originally, Malema had wanted to meet at his office, until I reminded him that you can't have Lunch with the FT without a lunch.

The prissy rules of a capitalist newspaper must bemuse a man more used to rowdy street protests and parliamentary brawls but he shows no sign of irritation, and turns out to be mostly soft-spoken, almost gentle. Only once or twice does he show flashes of the temper that led the ANC to send him to anger-management classes.

A political activist from childhood, Malema was elected leader of the ANC Youth League in 2008, in a contest marred by allegations of intimidation. Four years later, he was expelled from the party. Among his offences was calling President Jacob Zuma a "dictator". He was also found guilty of hate speech for riling crowds with his rendition of "Shoot the Boer", an anti-apartheid struggle song aimed at white farmers.

He once said that his blood ran black, green and gold — the colours of the ANC — and that he would kill for Zuma. But once outside the party, he devoted all his energies to bringing it down. He attacked it for rampant corruption, though he himself had been accused of using party and local government machinery to make a small fortune — something he denies. More fundamentally, the ANC had, he said, betrayed the ideals of the revolution by selling out to "white capital".

It is a message that resonates with the poorest in South Africa's black population who resent their lack of economic opportunity two decades after apartheid's supposed demise. Even some middle-class blacks smile wryly at Malema's antics, saying whites and the ANC alike need shaking from their torpor.

Within a year of setting up the Economic Freedom Fighters, Malema's party had become a force in South African politics. "They used to say, it's cold outside the ANC, but we have made it very warm," he grins, vowing to topple the ruling party within a decade. "If Zuma can be a president of this country, anyone can," he scoffs, referring to a leader enveloped in sexual and political scandal.

When I challenge his assertion that the end of apartheid has changed nothing, he shifts seamlessly into crowd-pleasing rhetoric. "We are voting, but we can't eat that cross," he starts out quietly, referring to the right to vote that black South Africans won in 1994. "That cross has not taken our kids to school. That cross has not given our people the better life that was promised," he says, his voice rising. "That cross has not returned our land. That cross did not return the minerals. So, when you say to me we have ended apartheid, when there is a huge economic apartheid in this country, I don't know what you mean."

His own party, which draws inspiration from Marx and Frantz Fanon, a Caribbean-born revolutionary who advocated the violent overthrow of colonialism, promises to rectify the situation. It proposes seizing white-owned land, with minimum compensation, and nationalising mining companies and banks.

ORCHARDS RESTAURANT
Parktonian All-Suite Hotel, 120 De Korte Street, Braamfontein, Johannesburg

Buffet lunch x 7 including:	R1,365
Neck of lamb	
Creamed spinach	
Steamed hake	
Pumpkin	
Roast beef	
Penne pasta with olives	
Tomato salad	
Tap water	
Total (inc tax, service and tip)	R1,565 (£67)

The buffet is ready so we wander over to the school-dinners-style counter, set with big silver trays of food. Malema points to several dishes — luridly orange pumpkin, gloopy creamed spinach, neck of lamb and steamed hake. His chosen dishes are ladled on to a plate. I go for two slices of beef with gravy, penne with olive and tomato sauce, a generous heap of tomato salad, some cubes of feta cheese and a few red chillies to keep it interesting.

The food looks pretty good, if not exactly the haute cuisine frequently associated with Malema, a revolutionary mocked for his high-living. There are bottles of tap water on the table, but I wait in vain for him to order up some Veuve Clicquot.

As we begin to eat I ask about his childhood. Malema grew up under apartheid in Seshego, a township in Limpopo province to which his grandmother's family had been forcibly removed by segregation laws. "I was born to a single parent," he says of his mother, a domestic helper who suffered from epilepsy and was unable to work after burning herself on the stove during a fit. "We all stayed in my grandmother's house." His grandmother had nine children of her own.

Did Malema have his own bed, I probe doubtfully? "The bed was for the elders," he replies. "The kids were sleeping on the floor." By his account, he used to go "hassling for food and money", hunting for bushmeat and knocking birds out of trees with stones.

The only white people he saw were soldiers. "When the soldiers came, everybody ran for cover. We knew they were enemies of our people," he says, prising open the flaky flesh of the hake with his fork.

Malema's father left before he was born, and his grandfather had also gone after Malema's grandmother objected to him taking a second wife. For male influences, he turned to ANC recruiters. "We moved into politics at an early age, between nine and 10," he says, repeating a story that some, including his biographer, suggest may have been embellished. Even at that tender age, he says, he had considered joining Umkhonto we Sizwe, the armed wing of the ANC. One of the elders "would train us in the bush; he did some military training, taught us how to handle firearms".

What did he know about Nelson Mandela back then? "We hadn't seen his face. But Mandela was spoken about by almost everyone as this messiah, who, once released from prison, is coming to take us out of our suffering," he replies, stacking a piece of pumpkin and a chunk of lamb on his fork. "Then poverty will be something of the past. And life would be good for black people."

Did he watch Mandela's release on television in 1990? "There was no television," he replies deadpan. Later, when Mandela visited the nearby town of Polokwane, the ANC leader singled him out because he was so young. "After Mandela shook my hand," he says, he went home happy. "It was a dream come true."

Yet it did not take long for Malema to become disillusioned. "As things were changing, things were remaining the same," he says, sucking the marrow diligently out of one of the lamb bones. The schools stayed bad, there was minimal infrastructure and almost no job opportunity, he says. The ANC called for patience. "They kept on saying no child was born and walked at the same time. But even when this child was becoming 21, this child still couldn't walk," he says, referring to the 21st anniversary of apartheid's end last year.

Were the ANC leaders too conciliatory? Did they yield too much ground to whites, I ask? "It was a complete blunder," is his uncompromising verdict on what many once considered the most remarkable political transition of the late-20th century. "The negotiations achieved nothing except to affirm the status quo. Anything that failed to return the land into the hands of the people has not achieved the strategic objective of the liberation struggle."

I ask whether it would have been better if the revolution had been won by force rather than through negotiation. "I think the revolution is still coming," he says. "There hasn't been any revolution. You can't have a revolution where the enemy forces lose nothing. That's not a revolution. The enemy should lose and once the enemy loses and the victims of colonialism and apartheid begin to attain something, then we'll all say the revolution has taken place." He picks a fish bone out of his teeth and deposits it on a side plate.

While the anger is understandable, aren't his plans for nationalisation and land expropriation doomed to fail? As in Zimbabwe, won't they simply frighten foreign investors and send the economy into a tailspin? "If needed, we will tell our enemies that their sanctions and investment withdrawals are worth it," he says, taking a sip of water. "We shouldn't be threatened by business. Businesses invest in countries where there is blood on the floor."

Of potential land expropriation, he says, "You might confuse it with violence, but it's not violent. It's robustness." I can imagine Robert Mugabe, Zimbabwe's leader of 36 years and counting, saying something similar.

"Robustness" aside, few such transfers of wealth have succeeded, I suggest, noting that most end in Venezuelan-style farce. Malema used to fashion himself on the late Hugo Chávez, even donning a red beret to go with his red jumpsuit, a piece of working-class style clothing that he has worn in parliament. Is there a country he can point to that has brought about the economic transformation to which he aspires? After retorting that no capitalist African country has done so either, he mentions China. I object, saying China's size means investors will go there whatever.

"Let's go to a small country because you are refusing China," he says. "The Cubans own the economy. The Cubans own the country," he says, adding that Cuba has exceptional levels of health and literacy. "Even when illegal sanctions were imposed on them for over 50 years, they were resilient. They were determined to a point where the imperialist forces had to give in and say, let's begin to talk to them," he says, alluding to Barack Obama's decision to restore diplomatic ties.

We're both chomping through our food rapidly. I'm savouring one of the chillies with the last of the beef. If the discussion weren't so interesting, I'd probably go back for some more.

I pick up on his use of "the enemy". Is he referring to whites? "It is not white people who are the enemies," he says. "The enemy is white monopoly capital that wants to produce cheap labour."

Surely he can't aspire to power outside the ANC? For all its tarnished image, the party still possesses a formidable political machinery, not to mention indelible emotional ties to the liberation struggle. "I will not go back to the ANC," he says definitively. It has co-opted the very economic system it inherited from apartheid, he adds.

Why did it take him so long to leave, then? Critics say he was happy to be a member when it suited his personal and political ambitions. "I didn't leave the ANC. I was kicked out," he replies, as if this were a point of honour. "This ANC is rotten. We are here as a new generation."

I pour him some more water. The spokesman is fidgeting to leave so I move on to the whispers of corruption that have dogged Malema for years, although I know he'll just bat them away. He has been involved in a long-running dispute with tax authorities over alleged non-payment of taxes to the tune of about $1m in today's (fast disappearing) rand. He has also been accused of living an opulent lifestyle far beyond his declared means and of profiting from public tenders awarded by his home province of Limpopo. "When the court called me, I was always there because I knew I had nothing to hide."

If he has not broken the law, isn't it offensive for a self-styled revolutionary to be brandishing luxury watches and living it up? He rises to the provocation. "We must smell so we show commitment to the revolution?" he demands rhetorically. "We must go and stay in a shack and then get into a bus to show that we are revolutionary? That's incorrect. That's actually vulgarising the revolution, because both the socialist struggle and what the Economic Freedom Fighters represent is not sameness — like we must dress alike, we must walk alike, we must sing alike, we must dance alike," he thunders. "I dress properly. I dress anyhow I wish and no one can tell me how to dress."

Time is nearly up; we talk briefly about his wife, whom he knew in Sesh-

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ego and married in 2014. He also has a son, Ratanang, from a previous relationship. He wants him "to grow up in a brighter South Africa, in a prosperous South Africa, in a non-racial South Africa . . . because these kids must see each other as human beings and not as white and black."

That South Africa is not yet born. "Whites are more privileged and we are not privileged. And the only explanation is because we're black." It is his last word. With that he stands up. "All right, chief," he says, bringing the lunch to an abrupt conclusion.

I shake his hand in the routine English way, apologising that I don't know the elaborate South African variation, which involves three different grips followed by a finger click. "We must shake properly," he insists, guiding me through the steps and smiling indulgently at my miserable efforts. I say I'll take care of the bill and Malema and his spokesman stride purposefully away.

When the bill arrives, I notice I have been charged for seven buffet lunches. Thinking there's been a mistake, I check with the waiter. He points to a vacated table across the room where four of Malema's "comrades" had been sitting. It appears that the FT has treated them to lunch too. I laugh quietly to myself. The expropriation has begun.

David Pilling is the FT's Africa Editor