

# Bees & Power Politics

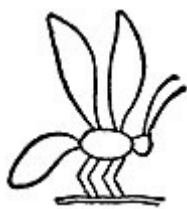
Most probably the beehive and its occupants have been used by far more than any other possibly available symbol of social utopia. It has also been used by all sorts of people, from the ones with the noblest aims for mankind's political and sociological upliftment in general, to the most rabble rousing and nefarious scoundrels to help their political (power) ends.

As time and the human cultural perceptions changed, (perhaps historical political fashions would be a better description), so did the use of metaphors or even fables regarding supposedly true stories about bees and beehive societies.

There you have it. If they didn't exist, and as the readymade phrase goes, they surely had to be invented.

Aren't beehive societies the perfect symbol for brotherly or sisterly love? Anyhow, is there any other society that may be more cooperative or organized, totally unselfish and toiling away seemingly absolutely content and fulfilled? What about being industrious and successful to the point where by comparison the most ardent followers of protestant work ethics could be regarded as mere poor imitators?

As far back as 5,500 years ago in Egypt, at the time of the First Dynasty, the bee was a hieroglyph meaning both "Egypt" and "King".



Hieroglyphic of the Bee from ancient Egypt

Much later in China, the Shang Dynasty emperor Trou Yu placed bees on his flag as an 'auspicious emblem'.

Bee politics really come alive when the ruler of the bee colony started to be seen as a king.

To Plato, king bees were like rulers of a human community.

‘They have states like ours, with king and government and organized society,’ commented the Roman writer Varro.

At the convoluted times around 30 BC and just after the end of the Roman Republic, the great epic poet Virgil sang:

‘I will tell of a tiny Republic that makes a show well worth of your admiration.

Great-hearted leaders, a whole nation whose work is planned, / Their morals, groups, defences.

That tiny and perfect republic was a hive of bees’.

Perhaps the Stoic philosopher Seneca was trying to smother his pupil Nero’s murderous instincts by flattering his bottomless vanity. This happened three years after he became an emperor at the age of seventeen (and the poisoning of his predecessor Claudius).

‘Kingship has been devised by nature itself, as you can see from the bees’. Started Seneca.

In the same way as Nero frolicked in the most luxurious rooms of his palace, ‘the king bee had the most spacious cell in the central and safest place’.

On *Mercy* Seneca wrote a deeply wishful thinking text urging Nero to see that being merciful would be far more powerful than being vengeful, but to no avail, as he murdered and poisoned practically everyone around him, ending up as the bloodiest of all Roman emperors.

The king bee, he stated, ‘has no sting’. The reason was that nature didn’t want him to be ‘savage’ and so ‘took away his weapon and left his anger unarmed. A mighty example for great kings’.

Somehow this reasoning didn’t work all that well with Nero, who eventually instructed Seneca to commit suicide, which he did in a most Stoic fashion by calmly slashing his wrists.

In 1516 the humanist Erasmus wrote a book entitled *The Education of a Christian Prince* using similar arguments as Seneca. This time the bees were to offer a model to Charles V, an emperor and ruler of an empire as great as Nero’s.

What really mattered, wrote Erasmus, was to be a legitimate ruler and not a despot.

In nature, the lion, the bear, the wolf and the eagle were tyrants ‘who live by mutilation and plundering’, but their doing so exposed them to the hatred of all other animals. The king bee

is a far better model, thought Erasmus, because, despite lacking a sting, he is actually safer in his office and less likely to be attacked.

As the absolute rule of the kings became a norm in Europe at the end of the Middle Ages, so by the time of Charles Butler's *The Feminine Monarchy*, in 1609 and about Elizabeth I, the bees form of government was no longer just 'the most natural': it was also 'the most absolute'.

After the English Civil War, in 1655, with the monarchy abolished and Oliver Cromwell occupying the post of Lord Protector, Samuel Hartlib published a book on bee husbandry called *The Reformed Common-Wealth of Bees*, as if the bees had somehow adopted the Puritan politics of the time. It should be mentioned that it was subsidized by the government and the writer had practically no knowledge about bees. Another book entitled *A Theatre of Political Flying -Insects* also emphasized that the beehive was a commonwealth, ordered by a 'Commander', who, like Cromwell, was neither a hereditary monarch nor a democratically chosen governor, but for whom the bees would 'be anything, go any whither, stay anywhere'.

In the very unsettled times posed by the Exclusion Crisis during the first year after the restoration of the monarchy, the apothecary Moses Rusden after becoming personal bee-master to King Charles II produced the innocuously titled *A Further Discovery of Bees*.

Rusden's grand eulogy to bee monarchy is even more fanciful than any medieval bestiary.

King bees, like human bees, rule by unquestionable divine right. They belong to 'The Royal Race of King Bees, being natural Kings'. One king bee equals 'the value and worth of all the rest'. But the king's subjects apparently like it that way, being quite astonishingly and squirmingly obedient, ready to defend him at any moment.

If you already think that this is major hogwash, try this:

Without a king, they would 'pine away and die'. The bees have 'an excessive love' for the body of the king, and therefore hate 'Rebellion and Treason'. The authority of the king is absolute...

During Queen Anne's reign as you may already have guessed, king bees become queen bees. Although scientifically correct in properly sexing the hive's ruler, in 1712 James Warden dedicated his *The True Amazons or The Monarchy of Bees* to her. In it he even imagined that the queen bees wore something like 'a velvet cape or fur gorget', as was the fashion at the court of Anne, and he quite admired the largess of her cell...

By the age of Enlightenment and of Revolution during the eighteenth century, both the authority of the queen bee and the virtue of her citizens were challenged. The bee monarchy, it seems, didn't add up. In 1740 a Frenchman, Jean-Batiste Simon, published *The Admirable Government, or the Republic of the Bees*. In it he praised the republican morals of the bees - their frugality, the regularity of their conduct. If only French mothers were as tender as bee mothers, he lamented.

After the Revolution, there was a major discussion by intellectuals at the newly founded Ecole Normale, which in time would become the most prestigious institute of higher learning in France. The subject was basically about how the French republicans were so extremely troubled by the view that the queen bee should be taken to provide any justification for the monarchy in nature. The head of Ecole Normal, Professor Daubenton, finally to clarify and finish any other arguments, stated: The queen in the hive was no Marie Antoinette. In fact she wasn't a queen at all. The real power lay with the workers. This had to be so because "it is obvious that in Nature there can be neither king nor queen. By "Nature", of course, he meant France.

After the beheading of king Louis XVI and many of his drones having followed him to the guillotine, the French republic adopted the hexagon as its symbol, as if the nation was now a single cell in a honeycomb.

Napoleon on his coronation day as Emperor in 1804 not only wore bee studded robes, but had the whole of Notre-Dame decked with golden ones.



Most probably he was trying to project an image of ancient royalty and permanence and used more than a thousand years previously by the Merovingian kings. Such heraldic outlook could easily be accepted by a populace tired of the many dastardly acts committed in the name of the Revolution.

A hint of an 'arrive' image would be a no, no for a Corsican emigrant. Wouldn't you agree?

Before Bonaparte Emperor's stint, there was a pope in the middle sixteen hundreds who had the same heraldic tastes regarding bees.



Arms of Urban VIII in S. Peter, Rome

Urban VIII's family, the Barberinis, were once called by the vulgar name of "*Tafani*"; or "Horseflies". As the family fortunes improved, its crest composed of three ordinary black horse flies on a blue background changed to show golden ones. The very autocrat pope couldn't accept such lowly heraldic creatures. The flies had not only to give way to bees, but lots of them in his very tall and beehive like mitre. Intentionally or not, the chosen bees weren't the virtuous or even kingly bees, but the bee as winner-take-all - the most untrumpable of insects.

No wonder that Protestants commentators had a ball during those times of major religion conflict.

Actually, he is most remembered by the persecution and forced recant of the astronomical theories of his old friend Galileo.

The beehive also had to provide a benign image to early socialists and workers' movements.

In 1901, in *The life of the Bee*, Maurice Maeterlinck wrote of the hive as a society where private life was eroded in a sacrifice of 'the individual to the common interest'. Bees were not governed by the queen, but by a mysterious power, the 'spirit of the hive', which controlled the very minds of the bees. Suddenly the queen was no more than a helpless character.

But, as time went on, neither socialism nor beehives seemed so benevolent. By the beginning of the twentieth century some people saw socialism not as a harmless dream of co-operation but as sinister social engineering. In 1908 the best-seller bee author Tickner Edwards wrote that the hive was 'a living example, a perfect object-lesson of what socialism,

carried out to its last and sternest conclusions must mean', both to the bee communities and to human ones. The hive, he declared, was governed by the principle of everyone working for 'the greatest good of the greatest number'. Population growth was accelerated or retarded according to the estimate of the food supply. The proportion of the sexes was varied 'at will'. This was a kind of eugenics in action. All the wealth was held in common. 'The rule that those who cannot work, must not live, is applied with ruthless consistency'.

On the rule of the queen Edwards wouldn't mince words either;

'The truth is that the queen-bee is the very reverse of a monarch, both by nature and inclination. She possesses only the merest rudiments of intelligence. She has a magnificent body, great docility, certain almost unrestrainable impulses and passions, a yielding womanish love of the yoke; but she is incapable of action other than that arising from her bodily promptings. Her brain is proportionally smaller than that of the worker. In a dozen different ways she is inferior to the common worker-bees, who rule her absolutely, mapping out her entire daily life and using her for the good of the colony, just as a delicate, costly piece of mechanism is used by human craftsman to produce some necessary article of trade'.

Suddenly far from being an absolute monarch, the queen bee was a kind of slave in her own bee commonwealth. As for the workers, they too were all brain washed. They were no longer individuals but machines, programmed to produce the common good. This was the anarchist dream turned into a nightmare.

The beehive, in other words, had become a totalitarian collective, and this is the view that has persisted to the present day. What has changed is the nightmare no longer includes Tickner Edwards's concept of the queen bee as the mindless slave of the workers. This is because of the discovery in the middle twentieth century of 'queen substance', the pheromones emitted by the queen which trigger certain activities in the colony. Queen substance means that the workers do take their lead from the queen - but only in the sense that chemicals from her body trigger them to act in certain ways but not others. Scientists still marvel at bee colonies achieving 'co-ordination without central planning, but also emphasize that, for a colony to be effective, it must have a fully functioning queen. This leaves the field wide open for nasty forms of politics.

More recently, the latest findings of influential bee entomologist Professor Francis Ratnieks of the University of Sheffield, England, were written in Nature magazine. In it he frequently compares the discipline of bees to human politics, the police state in particular. Bees, he writes, even use 'prisons' of wax (he should have said propolis) to trap alien infestations of

beetles. Then he goes on affirming that honeybee police force is so 'pervasive' that it rivals the former East Germany's infamous Stasi.

The queen is the dictator at the top, the workers are the Stasi apparatchiks, so thoroughly indoctrinated that they carry out political repression without having to be told.

Do you think that he went already far enough? Try this:

'Murder, torture and imprisonment - these are the standard tools of repressive regimes. But if you imagine that human societies have a monopoly on such tactics, think again. Social insects perfected the police state long before people got in on the act.' Honeybees, the article goes on, 'are the most advanced insect police state so far discovered'.

In reality, when the policing breaks down, where worker bees began to reproduce en masse, and the usual rules do no longer apply, these are known as 'anarchies'. A hive must have a queen, otherwise is doomed.

Among other functions, queen pheromones do really inhibit the workers' ovaries from developing, so that they aren't able to start laying infertile (drone) eggs all over the place. If for some reason a few workers would manage to do such a thing, those eggs would in no time be eaten by the first worker that comes across them.

Well, yes and no. This is the normal course of events for all the social bees with the exception of the Cape Bees, *Apis Mellifera Capensis*, which by some major mutation or accident of Nature they are able to lay fertile eggs, even without having ever been inseminated. When I first mentioned this peculiar ability in one of my first newsletters, a reader did email back the witty comment that 'he always knew that the Cape'ies were fake'.

It must be said that the workers must also control some of the queen's functions. It seems that they do it by how much queen food (royal jelly) they give her and so regulate the daily number of eggs she may lay.

Although the twentieth-century viewed beehive society as a darker and more repressive than previously could be imagined, now, in our time, everything has changed. Suddenly, bee societies are seen as not only essential to continuous mankind permanence on this planet, but they are part of a most fragile society, which is struggling on the possible brink of extinction through the so called and mostly man made 'Colony Collapse Disorder'.

If someone tries to research bees on the web and instead of the social insects that make honey, a lot of the time you will end up with BEE. As perhaps everybody knows, it has nothing to do with black or even darker bees at all, but with 'Black Economic Empowerment'. In other words, rapid Social Upliftment for 'Previously disadvantaged' Africans. This happened by political commandment and through wealth transfers from the also so-called 'Previously advantaged', or 'Europeans' (as in Apartheid years).

In reality and so far, these highly legislated and officially imposed laws have managed to create in a very short period of time a small but affluent Black African middle class. Perhaps with some humour these equally social beings could also be called "Queen Bees". Any better description?

A more thorough (and perhaps cynic) observer may argue that "King Drones" could be a more appropriate and even better descriptive name for those persons. His or hers argument could be described as something like:

-Just like drones, they weren't involved in any way in the creation of wealth (honey) by a particular company (or hive) and the sharing of it was not by the discretion of its rightfully owners, the female worker bees and their queen in a given hive, or the shareholders in the particular case of a company. The major difference seems to be that the humans were chosen to be the recipients of financial 'honey' gifts through externally imposed politicians (power drones?) rules.

Perhaps it should be mentioned that usually these bestowment upon people are or were members and if not relations to the ruling 'Liberation Struggle' elite.

Thanks to "The Hive" by Bee Wilson - The Story of the Honeybee and Us - for the liberal use of most of the historical information.

## American Foul Brood (AFB)

No, it has nothing to do with the possible connotations with the growing epidemic of America's obese and (to lesser degree) intellectually challenged kids.

It has to do with the invasion to the Cape Area by the spore- forming *Paenibacillus larvae ssp. larvae* (formerly classified as *Bacillus larvae*). It is regarded as the most widespread and destructive of the bee brood diseases.

Suddenly our boasts that contrary to other places anywhere on earth, we in South Africa do not need to treat our bees at all with antibiotics or otherwise, may not hold water any longer.

According to the latest deductive point of view, it seems that at least a consignment of imported honey must have not been irradiated. Perhaps there are now contaminated discarded bottles or buckets, even possibly drums with foreign honey being 'cleaned' by local bees, and so starting to infect Africa's bee population with such terrible spores.

The question that comes to mind is if the Government through its Agricultural Agencies will have the vision and the will power to use major drastic means to try and stop in its tracks such threat as early as possible. The infected hives of the very few apiaries so far affected must be eradicated and the apiarists paid for it, so that in other possible future cases there will not be the usual reluctance in cooperation.

In the mist of obvious stress and even an early bit of panic, like finger pointing and making the first victims as some sort of despicable rogues, the Cape Beekeeping Industry leadership has been proposing a number of possible solutions, together with meeting and asking help and advice from officials of the Agricultural Department.

As expected, from Agriculture's equally "collective" leadership not much is coming out and on the beekeepers side the proposed solutions are a bit contradictory.

One scientist basically proposed to let nature take its course by allowing the survival of the fittest. This eventually would permit the bees to develop immunity to AFB, not like the "over pampered" (as he puts it) American (European) bees, which have almost no disease resistance at all.

His suggestion was for the immediate destruction (burning) of the very infected hives and to let nature take its course in the less contaminated ones, and in this way gradually allowing them to build resistance.

Another great fear is that the wild population will be decimated by it. If this was going to happen, such catastrophe would cause a most negative and wide spread rippling effect. It will be not only to nature itself, but also the pollination of (fruit) crops in the Western Cape by commercial beekeepers. If this happens, they will no longer be able to source by trapping the many thousands of swarms that are required every year to replace the “worked out” ones. It must be said that this is a most contentious issue, as with its passing year they have to go further inland on “raiding” missions, as it should indicate that in large areas the swarm pool has already been drained out, with all its terrible consequences.

In reality this problem can easily be resolved by beekeepers by simply putting a bit of effort into breeding their own queens, or at least to purchase them from a breeder. Personally I can't see a great difficulty with that. Can you?

In time, a clever fellow may even be able to come about with more resistant and even harder working strains a la Buckfast. Who knows? Anyhow, in any circumstance they have to stop draining the numbers and with it the gene pool of the wild population.

It may sound a bit contradictory, but some recent research from overseas is pointing out that AFB is almost non-existent in wild swarms but quite prevalent in beekeepers hives.

What does it mean? That AFB is just a beekeepers bees' disease?

There is a couple of centuries old trick that seems to work out. It basically consists of shaking out the bees from a seriously infected hive and re-housing them in a spore free hive, in which frames with new wax foundation have been placed.

Not long ago there were big concerns raised about the arrival of Verroa, those horrible virus carrying mites from Korea and China - into South Africa. Somehow and in a relatively very short period of time the local bees must have found very efficient ways in dealing with them, as they seem to no longer pose a menace.

This is in contrast with their European cousins, be it in Europe, North America or elsewhere, where virtually every single wild (feral) swarm was wiped out and beekeeper bees were only kept alive thanks to regular and systematic treatments.

There is a question that I would like to ask around:

If our sister bees, the so-called “killer bees” are doing so well in the Americas wilds and also in beekeepers hives and if it is taken into consideration that it is exactly the same area where the AFB is endemic and as the name suggests, from where it originates, somehow they must have not only developed strong immunity to it, but in a relatively very short period of time?

If it happened there, shouldn't we expect that basically the same *scutellata* bees will not do the same here?

Some Cape beekeepers with their “freakish” (my words) *capensis* bees are rather upbeat about their charges' abilities to cope with the new threat.

‘Haven't they not only found immunity against other recent threat (Varroa), but in record time?’ They boastingly ask, just to carry on:

‘What about their enhanced “Hyg” (hygiene gene) that forces them to unrelentingly clean out anything from their hives that they may perceive as not fitting perfectly their strict and unbending norms?’ Basically, who can doubt that they have a winner in their hands, so to speak?

The same beekeepers also claim that their worker bees “freakish” ability to lay fertile eggs without ever having been inseminated, should come to their rescue “once again”.

This “once again” is my personal contention, by reasoning that similar and extremely rare “gifts” of Nature usually happen in extreme cases of genetic bottlenecks, when one or more individual member of a given species that faces imminent extinction, suddenly and by some random and unexplainable mutation(s) were able to keep their numbers alive.

Those some beekeepers reasoning on their species survival abilities, is that even if some queens succumb to a new threat, some of their workers should be able to acquire some form of resistance. Normally they should be able to pass these to their worker (female) offspring that was born from their own eggs. In time, this newborn should also not only be able to increase their own (new disease) resistance, but also

to pass it to their newly created and proper queens (and inseminating drone pool), if they so wish.

But then again, who knows what the future may bring and by not doing the “right” thing now, in time could be seen as no more than criminal negligence?

I will keep you posted.



Infected brood with AFB

Normal healthy brood

## Medicinal uses of honey & other beehive products

Once in sheer frustration I even wrote to a famous professor in New Zealand and the discoverer of the Manuka Honeys exceptional healing properties, asking for advice in how I should go about trying to find non-existent scientific research on (South) African Honeys medicinal properties.

The relevant department at Pretoria University that has done research on Aloe Davyana’s pollen protein content was contact, but unfortunately it seems to have come to a dead end.

Trying to sort out that some frustration, I come about with the following reasoning, which I must add that fully agree with.

“If I can’t find or organise specific research on a given South African honey, why can’t I do it by myself?”

The reasoning is if something positive comes about from it, it should be much easier then to stimulate or “sell” the idea to an academic research facility.

Let me be more specific:

There is a famous and most expensive honey in Yemen that is known by the name of “Sidr” and is made from the flowers of a *Ziziphus* tree. The main reason that it’s so highly sought is due to its medicinal properties. Recently research has confirmed that among others, that it kills the bacterium that causes sinus infections.

In Southern Africa there is a similar *Ziziphus* tree that is locally known as Buffalo Thorn, and which is equally renowned for its medicinal and magical properties. The honey is not only equally dark and according to people who know both, it even tastes almost the same.

There is a well known herbalist that I must mention that I am lucky to have befriended,

and his name is Yusuf Patel. Besides having a very curious and scientific mind, he also is most analytical and thorough in his quest to come about new conclusions.

So far his research has found out that in the few cases the local *Zixiphus* honey has been tested, it has been outstanding for stomach ailments, boils and sinus problems.

I have also recently come in contact with a medicinal research facility at other University, which sincerely I hope that some positive results will come out of it.

I did made some nasal sprays to try it out for sinus treatment and from which feedback has been very positive.

Your own feedback on this subject will be most appreciated.



Blooms of the Buffalo Thorn tree. It is also called *Blinkblaar-wag- 'n- bietjie* “wait a bit’ for its thorns.

## New honeys

With the exception of the Cape and its drought, it must be agreed that it has been a most blessed season for honey production. Just drool at the following list.

**Buffalo Thorn - *Ziziphus Mucronata*.** This honey from the Northern Cape drier parts is as round, smooth, malty, aromatic and wholesomely off-sweet as it should be. What a stunner.

There is a sister *Ziziphus* tree from Yemen that is also regarded as having great magical and medicinal properties. The similar honey is highly sought after and even can cost a couple of hundred US dollars per kg.

**Buckwheat** - I must confess that I couldn’t really comprehend why quite a number of older clients kept asking for a honey with such a name. Now I do.

I must also confess that it was a real fluke how I come across it, considering that most probably the only farmer on the African Continent who for some decades planted a crop like that was also a beekeeper and did it mostly out of sheer curiosity. Not only that, but he was keen to share such a treasure with me and ultimately with you. Nice of him, we must say.

The Honey is rich as it should be, a bit smoky, aromatic to almost pungent and smooth on the palate. Some Eastern European honey lovers are quite chuffed up by such unexpected discovery.

**Kidney Bean** - Today must be confessions day. Yes, it's true that for number of years I did try to find a better name to give to such great honey. Leguminous or even just plain legume honey wouldn't sound all that appetising, wouldn't you agree with that? What about runner or worse, creeper honey?

Ha! But call it whatever you want, the end result is sheer magic.

Very light in colour and taste, perfectly smooth, not too perfumed, just delicate and delicious.

**Wild Flora** - For a number of years I was also unsure what to call this honey. Although I knew that it was mostly acacia, but which one, as so many were flowering at the same time around December. First I called it "Red Thorn" due to its dark red hue, but it really meant nothing. Then I thought that "Camel Thorn" could be right, this due to being the flowering tree most prevalent at that time, even if there wasn't any information at all about this tree possible honey making abilities.

When some beekeepers want to get rid of some "unfashionable" honey, they mix a number of them together with a dark and strong tasting one. Guess what they call it? Yes, correct, "Wild Flora" it is. That's the main reason why I was not so keen in also using it.

Besides all the history under it, this honey is genuinely blended by the bees themselves around Groblersdal's bushveld and mostly from Acacias. It still has all its deep red colouring, off sweet to a hint of tartness, full body and aroma to make a honey lover's heart and taste buds twitch in ecstasy.

**Sunflower** - This year's crop is a lot smaller than last years and most probably this is due to the early set of chilly nights. The honey is smoother, rounder and a bit lighter than usual. I do like it.

**Flame Acacia** - *Acacia ataxacantha*. Again I must confess that I haven't ever read or even heard that the white flowers of this tree could make honey. Although there is a hint of the super aromatic Boekenhout in it, which must be due to residues left in the

hives, as it was the previous crop, the honey blooming plants one could see, and they were everywhere, were the trees of this same species. So it has to be true.

Be what may be, but the end result is superb. Creamy, full body and smooth honey one could only dream about

Kim the (story telling) Honey Man