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TAILPIECE

Acronyms Add Spice
To Life!

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Only in South Africa could it happen that the fast bowlers of a Currie Cup cricket team bear the names of English and Engelsman. This took place in the 1960s, when English (Cedric) and Engelsman (Edgar) formed a potent opening pair for Griqualand West.

And only South Africa could produce a publishing house called Shuter and Shooter, an attorneys' firm called De Leeuw, De Beer and De Katt, and another (specialising in patent research) appropriately registered as Spoor and Fisher. And let us not forget the Cape undertaking firm of Pitt and Human.

Acronyms have likewise contributed enormously to the creation of a uniquely South African flavour in our everyday life. I have written the words Ned. Geref. Kerk (NGK) so many times in the past months and years that they have become old and treasured friends. Recently, they have been joined by the Afrikaanse Protestantse Kerk (APK), the Afrikaanse Reformatoriese Kerk (ARK), the Afrikaner-Weerstandsbeweging (AWB) and the Boere-Bevrydingsbeweging (BBB).

But for sheer acronymic inanity I have yet to see anything beat the Bolandse Vereniging vir die Beskerming van Kleinboere teen Uitbuiting deur die Staat, Ko-operatiewe Verenigings en die ander Instansies (BVBKUSKVI). It sounds almost like the name of an obscure Russian novelist.

The longest acronym in the world (says the Guinness Book of Records) is NIOOMTPLABOPARMBETZHELBEETRABSBOMONIMONKONOTDTEKH-STROMONT, a 56-letter monster which forms the initials of the Laboratory for shuttering, reinforcement, concrete and ferro-

concrete operations for composite-monolithic constructions of the Department of the Technology of Building assembly operations of the Scientific Research Institute of the Organisation for building mechanisation and technical aid of the Academy of Building and Architecture of the USSR.

Among famous "indigenous" South African acronyms are MOTH (Memorable Order of Tin Hats), BOSS (Bureau of State Security), DONS (Department of National Security) and PAYE (Pay as you earn). And we still live daily with SABC-TV, SADF, YMCA, SPCA, Sasol, Iscor, Assocom and Putco. Frankly, I don't know how we'd get along without them.

South Africans have, on the whole, always watched their acronyms carefully. One which did slip through, some years ago, was the Professional Institute of Shaft Sinkers (PISS), but this was rapidly changed when members found themselves the victims of public derision.

And now - to put the polish on the porcelain, as it were - we have Eskom. The Electricity Supply Commission - formerly Escom (in English) and Evkom (in Afrikaans), and doubtless with the specific aim of further confusing its "jolted" customers and custodians - has changed its name to Eskom. To back it up, the fledgeling Eskom has the Eskom Act No. 40 of 1987, which provides that South Africa's much-maligned electricity "parastatal" shall henceforth be thus known. Not Escom, not Evkom, but Eskom - which, to my way of thinking, doesn't mean anything at all.

Says the now inevitable "spokesman": "This is the logical consequence of the dissolution of the Electricity Supply Commission and the formation in 1985 of a body corporate known as Evkom/Escom. "Eskom thus refers to a legal entity in its own right and is not an acronym for any other name," said this Anonymous Spokesman for Sanity (ASS).

Things have come to a pretty pass when people start shedding their acronyms and become, instead, "legal entities." Does this mean, perchance, that Eskom was formerly an "illegal entity?"

From my World War 2 childhood I recall with real sentiment such chestnuts as Pluto (Pipeline under the Ocean) and Radar (Radio Direction and Finding). And then were Jeep (derived from General Purpose Vehicle, or "Geepee"), GI, Wren, Waaf and a host of others.

But we no longer have an Escom.

To prevent anything like this happening again, I am starting the Acronymic Institute for the Defence of Sanity (AIDS).

(This article originally appeared in *The Pretoria News* of 5 November 1987, in 'Today's Column' by Wayfarer (alias Jan van der Merwe).