

# OPINION | Generational change and its impact on South Africa's politics

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## NEW GENERATION, OLD POLITICS

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### Introduction

Many South Africans fervently believe that the quality of our political discourse – and the business of governing the country – will improve as people with apartheid memory die out and make way for a new generation, who have spent their formative years growing up in the post-apartheid era. Those who do so are likely to be disappointed. This article reflects on why the current character of our party-political contestation – a dominant but divided African National Congress (ANC), on the one hand, which covers up weak governance and corruption with fuzzy historicism, and the Democratic Alliance (DA), on the other, which compromises its support with approaches that are devoid of any historicism – is unlikely to be transformed by the replacement of stalwarts with more youthful faces. In both, party discipline trumps the fresh thinking that is required to challenge the status quo, and, until this changes, they will continue to reproduce a present that is stuck in a contested past.

### The status quo: lazy historicism, overactive ahistoricism

To evaluate the prospects for political renewal accompanied by generational change, it is important to have a sense of the nature of current political contestation, the thinking that underpins it and the leadership that guides it. Given the steady demise of smaller political parties in successive elections, I will restrict myself here to the two major contenders, the ruling ANC and the DA, which seems to have absorbed much of the drift away from smaller parties.

Almost two decades after the country's political transition, the shine of the ANC's public image as a liberator, moral paragon and people's movement is gradually wearing off. Current president, Jacob Zuma, once famously remarked that the party would rule until Jesus Christ returns. Yet, today it increasingly has to contemplate its political mortality, as it comes to terms as a party with fierce and debilitating leader-

ship battles, and as a government with rampant corruption, skills deficits and weak implementation capacity. To counter the erosion of its social capital, the ANC has resorted to lazy historicism that it hopes will cover up for its shortcomings. For example, in his medium-term budget statement in October, Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan pointed out that South Africa's stunted economic performance, in comparison to booming African peers, is due to the global economic crisis impacting on South Africa more than it has on other developing economies. In other words, a recent historic structural factor is cited to soften underachievement by the state. (Gordhan did also mention weaknesses internal to the state but reference to historic structural factors is too often the more immediate explanatory narrative chosen by many ANC politicians.) The frequent citation of the longer political and socio-economic shadow cast by a history of colonialism and apartheid has become an enduring feature of government briefings on why targets have not been met. In many instances this has been done legitimately, but in others the cynical incantation of history, such as the president's recent attempt to absolve the government for its role in the Limpopo textbook crisis, has been opportunistic. In simple terms, this strategy suggests a sense of historical entitlement to be excused for underperformance.

Here is the problem with this historicism. While it appears empirically sound and politically coherent – some 20 years of democratic governance could not reasonably be considered an adequate time frame to fully undo the legacy of centuries of social, political and economic subjugation – the ruling party has become the architect of its own misery by failing to manage citizen expectations. Instead of asking for patience with gradual steps, it has postured – often for short-term electoral gain – in ways suggesting the capability of making gigantic leaps. Once looming deadlines appear on the horizon, sudden panic erupts about the message that has to be crafted in response to the visceral disappointment of its mainly black African constituency. While there is indeed a sense in which



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present challenges can and must be historically situated, this has frequently been done in an irresponsible way.

Too often, this historicism is lazily trotted out to mask non-historic realities, such as the cadre deployment policy, and corrupt behaviour on the part of politicians and public servants. History might explain the desire to live well for the first time. It does not explain why some, but not others, loot the state. The fact that not every liberation movement here is corrupt is evidence that some politicians simply choose to exercise their political agency in ways that are self-serving and often illegal. Instead of rooting out these rogue elements from the system, lazy historicism redeems their actions and allows them to continue stripping the state of its resources. In effect, this adds insult to injury to a state bureaucracy that is already limping along as a result of skills deficits.

The media chooses to focus frequently on titillating personality squabbles and, occasionally, on ideological debates, such as whether 'to privatise or to nationalise'. Rarely, however, does it ponder the impact of such stories on the institutional character of the state. While it may be more boring, our intellectual energies need to be directed towards building a bureaucracy that works. Without it, all policy and ideological battles of this generation and the ones to follow will be pointless. As far as personalities are concerned, it is naturally true that we are more likely to build a functioning bureaucracy if we have skilled political principals leading state departments and parastatals. However, there are thousands of men and women within the state who never meet a director-general or a minister in the course of their careers. We, therefore, cannot reduce the challenge of building a bureaucracy to the identity of top leaders of the ruling party, or who they appoint to act as the political heads of state departments. This is not to underestimate these appointments; it is rather to caution against an exclusive public focus on the most prominent positions within the ANC and the state at the risk of institutional meltdown.

Where does this leave us in terms of political leadership within the ANC? Too many current ANC leaders do not grasp this insight. They trade on struggle credentials. They hide behind lazy historicism to mask choices they make that have no foundation in history. Moreover, they are short on ideas about how to move from ideological and personality battles to pragmatic leadership focused on building a state that has men and women who are technically able to improve citizens' lives.

If the ANC suffers from the reflex historicism, the DA has the opposite problem – overactive ahistoricism. The DA's core philosophical belief is that equal opportunities ought to be created for all South Africans to have a shot at living fulfilling lives. While it may sound innocuous – spot-on, even – it is far

from that. Political philosophers have wrestled with many different conceptions of equality over the centuries, and the DA's neat repetition of the idea of 'equal opportunities' not only masks deep conceptual differences between philosophers, it also almost masks the ahistoricism behind their chosen philosophical foundation.

Countless classic texts have been written on equality. A critical engagement with that literature is beyond the scope of this article, but there are intuitive differences between various conceptions of equality that are relatively easy to make sense of, and which will suffice to show up the need for conceptual rigour in the DA's foundational principle. One interpretation of equal opportunities is to simply give every person the right to start a race, for example by placing everyone at the beginning of a marathon race, say. There is nothing stopping you from competing. You have an equal chance, in that sense, of winning the race. Of course, the problem is that in reality being allowed to enter the race does not mean that all have the same shot at winning. There are many other determinants of success, ranging from genetic luck (some are born with greater capacity to excel on the sports field) to environmental luck (including a range of fortuitous factors, such as diet consumed over the years, prior opportunities to practise, etc.) Once we flesh out the more complex array of determinants of athletic achievement, it is clear that a 'fair race' cannot be reduced simply to 'a race in which everyone is allowed to participate'.

That is precisely the problem with a basic, formalistic conception of equality: it takes inadequate account of the histories of individuals and communities. It is, in that regard, typically ahistorical, and it is this kind of conception of equality that the DA is infatuated with, and which leads to its overactive ahistoricism in how it analyses contemporary challenges in South Africa. It is almost as if merely placing everyone at the beginning of a race will suffice to guarantee a more just and equitable society. That is not just naïve; it is irresponsible and poorly thought through from an intellectual and political viewpoint.

How does this bear on the leadership challenges within the DA? The DA's challenge is to find leaders who do not let the ANC get away with lazy historicism, without becoming ahistorical themselves. That is very difficult: many older white leaders within the DA find comfort in conceptions of equality – like 'equality of opportunity' – that de-emphasise history's reach. This does not play well with the vast majority of black Africans, who still experience the structural impact of our ugly past. At the same time, one is tempted at least to empathise with the desire on the part of DA leaders to sketch a genuine post-democratic alternative vision for the country,

one that lets go of the past. Strategically, however, the DA makes the mistake of not engaging voters' current psychologies because it is so enamoured with the *ideal* of a colour-blind society founded on equal opportunities for all. Thus, the question for the DA is whether a new generation of leadership can take sufficient account of this balance between selling the electorate an ideal society not held hostage by our past and, simultaneously, embracing practical solutions to achieve a just society that take effective account of history.

This, then, is the party political backdrop to the generational question. The leadership challenges in our two largest political parties run deep, and the question is whether the mere fact that younger political leaders are younger, born into a new democracy rather than into a system of racial apartheid, should give us hope of a successful changing of the guard? I believe this is wishful thinking. I will first outline why in each party there is evidence that many of the younger politicians are inheriting the political sins of their mentors. Then, I will conclude with reflections on what it will take for the situation to change for the better.

## New ANC generation, old politics

Inside the ANC, there is little visible talent in the under-40 age group. The most prominent exponent of the ANC Youth League in recent years, of course, has been Julius Malema. The fiery leader from Limpopo lives a lavish lifestyle that is near impossible to achieve, unless you are a trust-fund baby or *the business whiz kid* of your generation. Neither of these applies to Malema, and after persistent allegations of wrongdoing and excellent investigative journalism, the law caught up with him and he is currently being investigated for corruption, money laundering and tax evasion.

The point of the Malema example is this: he is not the first ANC leader that has fallen victim to the trappings of money in politics, and he will certainly not be the last. Its tentacles have spread from the older generations down to the youngest; hence, the assumption that political leaders under the age of 35 will be more responsive to the needs of South Africans than their elders have been is based on wishful thinking rather than grounded in reality.

Of course, Malema does not a winter maketh, one might say. The truth is, firstly, that he did not rise to senior positions within the Youth League structures by himself. Many of his contemporaries supported him and, consequently, their ability to judge quality leadership is also implicated; secondly, many of the Youth League leaders less prominent than Malema have also grossly underperformed. His sidekick and former spokesperson for the League, Floyd Shivambu, is a case in point. His insight on issues of national importance is limited and he routinely pronounces on them with stunning factual inaccuracy. At times, these flippant statements on crucial issues of national concern such as nationalisation encroach on some of the basic normative features of the constitutional

democracy the country has developed. Even the stand-in leader of the Youth League, Ronald Lamola, often gives the impression that he is (worse, in this regard) deliberately underplaying his formal education in law, glibly articulating views about policy issues such as land reform and nationalisation of the mines. (The most intellectually and politically impressive ANC Youth League leader I have met in recent years is undoubtedly its former secretary general, Vuyiswa Tulelo, who fortunately appears not to be lost to the state, at least, as a possible career diplomat.)

Not only is there a dearth of talent within the Youth League's top leadership structure, there is also an irritating habit of many talented young politicians – perhaps rationally so – doing what they need to in order to ensure career progress, rather than stirring the pot through more honest engagement with their elders. Take Buti Manamela, the Young Communist League boss. He is undoubtedly one of the most talented political brains among the younger politicians, but his slavish defence of the Zuma administration's weaknesses – including its bungling of the education system in Limpopo – is so spectacularly at odds with his more honest critiques of the status quo prior to his becoming a parliamentarian that one cannot help suspecting that, rather than being motivated by sheer intellectual and political integrity, career politicking is the more potent determinant of how he engaged political issues ahead of Mangaung. That, of course, is true of most politicians, but the point is that if you were hoping to find *a new kind of politics* among younger politicians, then you need to think again. Old habits die hard. As with all children who end up repeating their parents' mistakes, despite swearing that they will do better, so too young politicians often repeat the political sins of their leaders. A new politics in the ANC will clearly take more than a mere generational shift.

## New DA generation, old politics

The DA has a better leadership incubation programme than that of the ANC. It produces young leaders that are well versed in the essentials of political communication, the basic philosophical foundations of the DA (or, at least, its 'core value') and some of the main policy debates in the country.

However, as with the ANC, older politicians in the DA often create clones of themselves, rather than nurturing a new generation of leaders who are inherently critical and sceptical – in a philosophical sense – of received wisdoms within the party. In public, many young DA leaders struggle to justify the party's de-emphasis of race in its policy prescriptions. In private, some are willing to confide their discomfort with this approach, which I have critiqued elsewhere in a *Mail & Guardian* essay that has caused a stir among DA politicians.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, when pressed to explain publicly why they agree with these criticisms, there is awkward silence. The implication is clear: they do not feel up to the task of adopting a critical posture towards their political mentors and principals. How

much hope is there then of a different kind of DA leader emerging if this space for deep, open disagreement about even the fundamental positions within the party is smaller than many realise?

This is why it is difficult to draw an ideological wedge between the younger politicians and the older ones within the DA. In a sense, despite their insensitivity to evidence, it is easier to map out policy and value differences between ANC Youth League leaders and their 'elders' than it is to do so between young leaders within the DA and the older ones.

This is not to deny that there are differences among the leaders of the DA. Indeed, a leader like Athol Trollip has a very different take on how to grow the DA than does the party's leader, Helen Zille. The point, rather, is that there is no sharp break between these leaders' dialectic and what you would hear and see among those politicians under the age of 40. As with the ANC, this is suggestive of the truth that a mere change in demographics cannot be guaranteed to deliver a better quality of political leader than is currently the case.

It is surprising, for example, that the same ahistoricism and class-obsession (as a crude substitute for race-based analysis) in the politics of senior DA leaders should be found in the speeches of younger leaders. Where is the visible minority of young leaders with a different conception of what economic justice entails? Where, for that matter, is the visible minority of young DA leaders with alternative conceptions of equality, ones that are not formalistic at the core? Where, one wonders, are the young leaders who challenge policies unrelated to race – on social questions such as sex work, say – and who are fighting for a classic brand of liberalism, as opposed to the liberalism-lite of many older DA politicians (white *and* black)? The absence of these strands of alternative thinking about the DA and its future in younger DA politicians bears evidence of the fact that, like their ANC counterparts, too many young DA politicians simply inherit the political sins of their elders.

## Where to from here?

The main insight of this article may not be particularly ground-breaking: a generational shift in demographics does not guarantee a positive transformation in the quality of political leadership in South Africa. It is, however, an insight worth reflecting on, because so many of us pin our hopes for a more responsive government on young people. We often straightforwardly assume that children born in the dying days of apartheid or, even better, during democracy, will naturally be endowed with great empathetic capacity to feel for those worse off than themselves. We conclude this hopeful projection by also imagining that they are, in practise, likely to actually demonstrate greater political leadership. The

tentative evidence, based on the performance of the current crop of young political leaders, is that such hopes are misplaced. The basic reason is simple: we reproduce, all too often, the worst weaknesses of those who have role-modelled leadership to us. This leaves us with a very difficult challenge: where to from here?

Most importantly, there needs to be an improvement in the quality of political mentorship. In theory, this should not be a massive challenge for the DA; it simply needs to tweak content on their cadet programme to orient those who undergo such training to engage the material critically. One gets the sense, however, that the DA's core philosophical value is taught as an ideological *fait accompli*, rather than presented in the context of a range of competing accounts of equality. The bigger challenge for the DA will be to attract a wider range of young people to the party's youth structures, beyond the self-selection that currently happens at tertiary institutions, which feed into the youth training programmes. South Africa is not going to be a colour-blind society in our lifetime (if ever), and indifference to the look and sound of the public faces and voices of the party is a losing political non-strategy.

Equally, inside the ANC and its alliance structures, political mentors have the near impossible task of mentoring younger politicians to stand up to them (the mentors), to not repeat their mistakes and to learn to be comfortable with the demands of a competitive, liberal democracy. This is 'near impossible' because it requires political mentors to have the capacity to step back from their own performances within the political space, and to selflessly instil a different style and approach to politics in their mentees. There is little reason to be optimistic that political players, who underperform grossly in their own careers, can still be brilliant private mentors to future generations of leaders.

Ultimately, we might have to look at leadership outside the formal space of party politics in order to sustain optimism about whether or not we, as a country, will turn around our dismal rankings on global poverty, inequality, unemployment and education indices. Here, fortunately, there is good news, which is criminally underreported – there are (despite enduring weaknesses in the sector) some excellent, vigorous and effective civil society organisations and young leaders within the civil society sector. It might be worth devoting more energy to reflect on this sector, rather than focusing solely on the more depressing reality that the younger politicians inside the main political parties look and sound uncannily like their elders.

## Notes:

1. See <http://mg.co.za/article/2012-04-26-more-hugs-less-zille-will-help-the-da-to-grow>.