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## Aspects of Political Leadership Leadership and Vision

*"He remained to the end on all fours with us, an example of what we all could be, above and beyond us only in his vision, and in the depths of his commitment..."<sup>1</sup>*

### 1. Introduction

The ideal notion of political leadership suggests a strong, visionary leader who can help his or her society to move away from what is old and unsuccessful, towards a brighter and fairer future. Such people exist, but they emerge only rarely; for the most part, we have to be satisfied with leaders who fall short of the ideal. The South Africa of the past certainly threw up some formidable politicians, but it is questionable whether they can be considered true leaders, given that their first priority was the preservation of an oppressive and unjust order.

Our transition to democracy resulted to a large extent from the emergence of an apartheid president with a wider vision than his predecessors, F W de Klerk, along with the receptiveness and magnanimity of Nelson Mandela. That these two played a true leadership role seems undeniable, even if it is argued that the former had little choice but to abandon the dead-end policies he inherited. The transition that they helped to bring about had a clear goal of freedom and equality, which in turn acted as a shared vision for the whole nation. When we look back at the period around 1994 we have a sense that we knew where we were going; we were full of hope for the future, and we had a leader whom we could trust. Today, that hope has become blurred and fragmented; for many it has evaporated completely. Can this be blamed simply on the quality of our political leadership? Or should we look to ourselves and conclude that, as the saying goes, we have got the leadership we

deserve? Then again, is leadership itself really all that important; should we not be focusing instead on the strength and durability of the institutions of government? This paper will attempt to answer some of these questions, at least tentatively.<sup>2</sup>

### 2. Leadership and Vision

Leadership has no one definition and is a concept which varies across contexts; it means something different to everyone. Nevertheless, there would probably be consensus on certain points: a leader should lead by example; be willing to take unpopular steps if necessary; display moral force, honesty, and integrity; be prepared to make sacrifices, including his or her own popularity; and act with the intention of doing what is best for the people he or she leads. In addition, leaders must have vision: the ability to see further, and wider, than the people they lead, and to identify possible challenges and opportunities ahead of time. Such vision also allows the leader to set achievable targets and to put in place the means to reach them. Finally, good leaders are able to communicate their vision to their people, thus creating a shared view of what the nation's future could be, and enthusing their followers to work towards it.

### 3. Past and Present Political Leadership

Since it came into being in 1910, South Africa has had a greatly varied experience of political

leadership. In Jan Smuts and Nelson Mandela it had two major international figures, the impact of whose leadership and vision was felt way beyond our borders. On the other hand, for over 40 years we were burdened with leaders who, though forceful, were myopic: their vision stretched no further than the narrow, short-term interests of a small minority. Today, in the assessment of many commentators, we have a shallow, populist leadership: it attempts to keep competing interests happy, instead of identifying which is more likely to serve the nation's interest as a whole. It is also not a 'leadership by example', as the Nkandla episode amply demonstrates; and few people, it seems, would associate it with notions of moral force, integrity and honesty. As for vision, we might fairly suspend judgment until we see whether or not the National Development Plan is actually implemented. (If it is, and if President Zuma stands up to those constituencies in his alliance that are set against it, he will have gone a long way to answering his critics.)

Leaders can either be role models, whom citizens admire as they rule with authority of values, or they can be authoritarian figures who maintain power by means of force, oppression or coercion. Most of our pre-1994 government leadership fell into the latter category: 'strong-men' who did whatever was necessary to preserve white power and privilege. But they were not our only political leaders. The majority of the population looked to figures such as Albert Luthuli, Robert Sobukwe, Oliver Tambo and Steve Biko, among many others; these were people who, though differing in ideology, all ultimately shared and promoted a vision of a united, democratic and free South Africa. They were willing to sacrifice their freedom for this goal; their lives were inextricably linked with those of their people, and most of them endured severe persecution.

No-one can say with certainty how any of these figures would have turned out as formal political leaders had they entered government in 1994. What does seem clear, though, is that too many of those who have occupied national, provincial and local leadership positions over the last 19 years have fallen for the trappings of office, and have become increasingly distanced from the people they serve. Widespread corruption, the arrogance displayed in 'blue-light convoys', and the shameless expenditure of millions of rands on official cars, overseas travel and hotel accommodation, are all manifestations of that fact.

#### **4. The Shaping of Leadership**

Perhaps the current state of our political leadership is an indication that, while the greatest leaders shape their times, most are shaped by theirs. Nelson Mandela, more than any other individual, brought about the transition to democracy. He was able to unite the vast majority of South Africans behind him (even some who did not support his political party) and to allay the fears of the minority. He was willing to partake in dialogue and to compromise with his political enemies so that peace could be realised. His first instinct, it will be remembered, was to form a true government of unity, and he went beyond constitutional requirements by offering cabinet posts to the leaders of various minority parties. Even his last official decision – to step down after his first term in office – displayed true leadership: he could easily have taken a second term, but chose instead to step back in view of his advancing years.

If Mr Mandela had imposed himself on the times, the same could not be said of his successor. Thabo Mbeki will be remembered – perhaps somewhat unfairly – mostly for the way in which he failed to deal effectively with two of the most pressing problems of his era: HIV/AIDS and the disintegration of Zimbabwe. It was also during his two terms in office that corruption, nepotism, 'tenderpreneurship' and other improprieties entrenched themselves. Far from being able to tackle these issues, Mr Mbeki seemed powerless, taking refuge either in aloofness and inactivity – for example, where corruption was concerned – or in outlandish and uninformed positions, such as his absurd denial of the link between HIV and AIDS. The issues, in other words, imposed themselves on Mr Mbeki.

Things have scarcely improved under Jacob Zuma. Certainly, Mr Zuma was quick to correct some of the errors perpetrated by his predecessor, especially around AIDS and, to some extent, around Zimbabwe. There were also signs, early on, that Mr Zuma would be far more in touch with grassroots concerns regarding service-delivery and other day-to-day issues. But Mr Zuma, too, found himself being imposed upon, rather than doing the imposing. Corruption and maladministration have flourished, to the point where the governing party itself regularly calls attention to their cancerous effects. And there is little sign that Mr Zuma has any firm idea of how to reverse the tide. We have arrived at a point

where, according to one commentator “the measurement of a leader is not how principled, or energetic, or inspirational he or she might be. The measurement instead is a choice to belong to a group in ascendancy, the earlier the better.”<sup>3</sup>

## **5. How Important is Leadership?**

At CPLO’s recent roundtable discussion, Prof Steven Friedman described one of the methods by which ancient Greece selected its leaders. There was no election process, and no campaigning; a lot was drawn and it was simply a stroke of luck – or bad luck – if your name was picked. It was an honour to serve as leader, and an immense responsibility, but there was no pretence at a complicated system of election, or that whoever happened to be chosen was necessarily superior to anyone else.

This contrasts markedly with modern practice in most democracies, in which there is much competition and campaigning, with various mechanisms designed to ensure that only ‘the best’ candidates emerge. And the eventual winner is then imbued with all sorts of qualities (at least until he or she falls out of favour). In Africa this tendency is particularly apparent in the ‘big man’ syndrome, where loyalty to the chosen leader is expected to be unquestioning, and citizens are required to adopt a subservient attitude. As Fr Smangaliso Mkhathshwa put it at the roundtable, “the reality in Africa is [that] office-bearers occupy a position in society which is out of all proportion of what they were elected to do. They take advantage to engage in actions that are not always in best interests of society. Corruption is rampant [and] many leaders are interested in enriching themselves rather than serving.”

Prof Friedman notes that this over-emphasis on leadership occurs despite the fact that leaders, while potentially influential, seldom make or break the societies they head. In fact, placing so much emphasis on leaders and leadership, he argues, can be more of a problem than a solution. By focusing on leadership we tend to neglect the importance of institutions. Ultimately, a good institution can survive a bad leader, but it is much more difficult for a good leader to fix a bad institution. We should therefore place a greater emphasis on seeing that our public institutions – Parliament, the courts, the civil service, the security forces – are strengthened and kept fit for their purposes. In addition, we should look to the

health of civil society, and ensure that organisations of all kinds are engaging and interacting with one another, and with government, and forming networks to ensure that South Africa’s democracy can grow and put into practice the principles on which it has been built. If we are able to build good, strong institutions we will inevitably strengthen democracy as a whole and hence be able to demand accountability from those in power. Through these institutions, and the interaction between them, the voice of the people at large will influence the type of leaders we get, place limits on their power, and ensure that unsuitable ones do not overstay their welcome.

## **6. The Temptation to Nostalgia**

As with the quality of consumer goods, the behaviour of young people, and standards of private morality, the political leadership we enjoyed in ‘the old days’ is always somehow superior to that on offer today. The tendency to compare is understandable, and if a country has a Mandela, a Gandhi or a Churchill in its past then it is inevitable that the comparison will tend to deride present incumbents. But we should guard against allowing genuine, potentially instructive, comparisons to descend into mere nostalgia. Every leader occupies office within a given context, and those who perform well under one set of circumstances might fail under another. The brave, inspiring war-time leader may be quite unsuitable when peace comes; the leader who brings liberation may turn out to be unable to deal with the mundane affairs of day-to-day government.

## **7. Conclusion**

There is undoubtedly widespread dissatisfaction with the quality of our present political leadership. President Zuma’s approval ratings are at a low-point, and a concerted effort was made at the Mangaung ANC conference last December to replace him. The fact that he easily defeated his rival has as much to do with the mechanics of ANC branch voting as with his genuine appeal to rank and file party members.

As we approach the 19<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our democratic dispensation and the inauguration of Nelson Mandela as president, we need to reflect on the successes and the failures of our political

leadership. How have we ended up with a leadership corps – it is never accurate to see political leadership in terms of a single individual – which enjoys only fragmented support? By placing such emphasis on the leaders are we neglecting the importance of our institutions? Indeed, are we even justified in our dissatisfaction? Perhaps, if we have lost the unity of purpose that we recall from 1994, we should look to ourselves as much as to our leadership to regain it. Similarly, if we have really deviated from the path to our shared national destination, who is really to blame? If at present South Africa’s leaders possess no clear vision of where we are heading and how to get us there, then perhaps it is time for us as citizens to decide on

our own vision for the country and then act on it alongside the institutions that can help us realise it. And if by some chance we find someone of integrity and vision to take the lead, then so much the better.

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<sup>1</sup> Said of Steve Biko by Aelred Stubbs, ‘Martyr of Hope: a Personal Memoir’ in Steve Biko, ‘I Write What I Like’, Ravan Press, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> The paper is partly based on the first of a series of five roundtable discussions on ‘Aspects of Political Leadership in South Africa’, jointly hosted by CPLO, the Hanns Seidel Foundation, and the Goedgedacht Forum, and held on March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Ranjeni Munusamy, Daily Maverick, 9 April 2013.

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