



Briefing Paper 329

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Leadership of Service

1. Introduction

Over the years, South Africa has produced leaders of varying quality and character, ranging from those who gave us apartheid to those who selflessly gave their lives in the cause of liberation from oppression. We can be proud of the fact that, as a country, we have had four Nobel Laureates for Peace; and of course, the first president of the new democratic South Africa, Nelson Mandela, has been hailed worldwide as a model of political leadership. Leaders such as O.R. Tambo, Dennis Hurley, Beyers Naudé, Steve Biko, Desmond Tutu and many others, have provided the country with living examples of truly selfless leadership. Thus, with so many examples of what true servant and selfless leadership is, there is no excuse for mediocre, corrupt, self-serving, and ineffective leadership in South Africa. But what exactly is this 'servant leadership'?

Leadership of service or servant leadership implies that a leader must respect those he or she leads, and must regard him- or herself as their servant rather than their master.¹ Care must be taken by the servant leader to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. Servant leaders are those who seek to lead and influence others for the greater good; they are committed to building better societies and institutions by addressing contemporary problems from the fundamental predisposition of concern for the growth, well-being, and benefits of the led.

Servant leaders tend to give special attention to their social responsibility to transform the lives of their followers. Servant leaders are truly transformational when they increase awareness of what is right, good and important, and when they raise followers into leaders who go beyond self-interest for the good of the institution or society that they serve. Thus, the servant leader is

someone who focuses primarily on people and their needs, rather than on the promotion of a political, religious or economic ideology or dogma.

This briefing paper, which is based on a recent roundtable discussion hosted by the CPLO, the Goedgedacht Forum and the Hanns Seidel Foundation, will consider the issue of servant leadership as it applies to South Africa, and in particular to our politics².

2. Leadership Failure in SA Today

Three aspects of poor leadership stand out. Firstly, too many of our political leaders appear to see governance as a business venture: they invest their time and energy in it, and expect huge returns. Such transactional and self-serving leadership tends to trigger despotism and various forms of corruption.

Secondly, self-aggrandizement and status-seeking are also a problem. Leadership has become associated with driving fancy cars, wearing expensive clothes and staying in the most exclusive hotels, while people in the communities these leaders 'serve' are going without some of the most basic services.

Thirdly, there is a tendency on the part of some leaders to assume that they hold their positions by right, and indefinitely. Thus, when they are shown to be corrupt, or just incompetent, they seldom resign or accept their dismissal without fighting to retain office – and its privileges – often at great cost to the public purse.

All these attitudes are antithetical to servant leadership; but more than that, they undermine the very work of government. Good leadership is paramount to institutional success; without it,

institutions are incapable of achieving their goals. Lately we have seen numerous militant protests in South Africa about issues relating to poor service delivery, much of which can be attributed to the protesters' perceptions that their leaders are uncaring and distant.

It is not only elected politicians that stand accused of this. Government officials are continuously subjected to allegations of bad leadership in the public sector. These allegations and, in some cases, resultant legal action, permeate all three spheres of South African governance. The major factor at play is that most South African public servants, from home affairs staff to teachers to police officers are widely seen as putting their personal interests first, rather than those of the people they are supposed to serve.

The politically-motivated choice of leaders is another factor that contributes to bad leadership in the country. For example, the Constitution places the SA Police Service in the frontline against crime and obliges it to protect and secure the inhabitants of the Republic and their property.³ However, two of its last three National Commissioners, Jackie Selebi and Bheki Cele, have been implicated in criminal activities and corruption; and it has recently been revealed that over 1 400 mostly senior officers have criminal records. The National Prosecuting Authority has also suffered from the imposition of various unsuitable leaders who were appointed with more regard to their political allegiance than to their professional competence. All this is demonstrative of the extent to which effective servant leadership is lacking in public office as a result of poor leadership choices.

3. Servant Leadership in South Africa

In contrast to the rather bleak picture set out above, South Africa in fact has a long history of leadership of service. Speaking at the roundtable discussion, retired Constitutional Court Judge, Albie Sachs, highlighted Albert Luthuli, Oliver Tambo and Nelson Mandela as examples of some of South Africa's great servant leaders, who served diligently and selflessly and always put the needs of the people first. Importantly, they acted out of a culture of service; it was not simply co-incidence that threw up three such servant leaders successively.

It is instructive that all three (and numerous others, of course, from different political traditions) were prepared to sacrifice and endure suffering through imprisonment, banishment, and exile. This willingness to put aside personal advancement and security seems to be a hallmark of the servant leader – we may think also of Mahatma Gandhi and, more recently, Aung San Suu Kyi, in this context.

It is also worth noting that such leaders eschew factionalism: their vision embraces everyone, not just those who happen to belong to their movement or party. Thus, for example, Nelson Mandela made it quite clear in his famous speech from the dock at the Rivonia trial that he stood as much for the liberation of white people as of black people, even though the great majority of white South Africans regarded him as anything but their leader.

Considering these examples, it is clear that what South Africa needs now is leaders, in all spheres of the society, who bring an attitude of service to their roles, and who demonstrate that their primary motivation for seeking to lead people is rooted in a deep desire to serve. This is not merely about gaining and keeping a position, but about the character of the person. As Minister Trevor Manuel put it at the roundtable, it is about “character and service, which are behavioural, versus occupying office”.

Minister Manuel raised a further point, one which challenges the rest of society in its relationship with leadership. He noted that during the days of the struggle the attitude was that, since the Apartheid regime would do nothing for the people, the people had to do things for themselves; thus, strong, mobilised communities were formed. However, after 27th April 1994 a change occurred, where people felt that the battle had been won, and so responsibility could be ‘outsourced’ to those who would sit in Parliament. This resulted in a weakening of the accountability relationship between the people and their elected representatives. Mr Manuel's point, therefore, was that leadership is not simply about what the leader does for the people, but also about how the people relate to the leader! The responsibility for fostering servant leadership lies not only with the leader but also with those the leader serves.

This may require something of a shift of mindset

on the part of both leaders and the led. The activist and author Zubeida Jaffer, speaking at the roundtable, referred in this context to the notion that, “if we are serious about transforming our societies, we have to start by transforming our minds. We have the capacity to have good leadership develop from our local communities.” However, there was a ‘spiritual disconnect’ that affected some current leaders, and this led them to act in a way that was the opposite of servant leadership.

Leadership of service is ultimately something that must be demanded of all public officials and representatives. The duty to create a culture of accountability rests as much on the citizen as it does on the leader. Despite retrogressive developments such as some associated with the Protection of State Information (Secrecy) Bill, there is far greater transparency and openness between government and civil society today than there was in the past. This allows for more meaningful participation and accountability, particularly when it comes to how public officials conduct themselves and how public resources are allocated.

4. Catholic Social Teaching

In the Vatican II document, *Gaudium et Spes*, the Church notes that when political authority is exercised within the moral order and directed towards the common good, with proper understanding and legitimacy, then citizens are bound to obey. If not, then that authority can and should be challenged. Thus, it can be argued that leaders who fail in this regard cannot in all fairness ask of the people obedience and co-operation.

“The Church praises and esteems the work of those who for the good of people devote themselves to the service of the state and take on the burdens of this office”.

Those who involve themselves in politics should always seek wisdom and integrity, stand against injustice, tyranny, dominance, intolerance, and

“dedicate themselves to the service of all with sincerity and fairness, indeed, with the charity and fortitude demanded by political life”.

At the heart of the Catholic Church’s views on political leadership, therefore (and this is what Jesus himself demonstrated to His followers), is that leadership is not simply an exercise of power, but an exemplary public availability for guiding and realising the needs and aspirations of the community with integrity and through service. Good political leaders are those who accept office “for the good of the people” and who “dedicate themselves to the service of all...”

Catholic Social Teaching goes on to articulate various principles and values that are indispensable to a leadership of service. Thus, when we talk of leadership within this context, the values articulated by this teaching have to form the foundation. Leadership must always serve to protect and promote the dignity of the human person. Likewise, it must always promote and defend life. It must promote a spirit of solidarity, where people are free to associate with others and to participate in all spheres of life, for the realisation of their humanity and the common good. It must also respect the principle of subsidiarity; where decisions are made close to and with the people, always remembering that leaders are stewards of authority that belongs to the people, and thus that they lead at the behest of the people and for them, as their servants.

5. Conclusion

A glance around our country and, indeed, our continent and world, shows clearly that there is a close relationship between a nation’s overall well-being and progress, and the kind of leadership that it has. In some instances the nature of a given society, its history, its material conditions, and its stage of political development may result in the emergence of true servant leadership. In others, seminal individuals of the kind that arise only rarely may have provided such leadership against the odds, as it were.

Either way, there is no doubt that politicians who truly work for the good of society, who do not see themselves as holding office by right, who are prepared to give up power and position when they are no longer serving the common good, and who have the humility and sensitivity to know when that time has arrived, are the real servant leaders. The rest – of whom there are sadly too many – are in it mainly for themselves. Far from taking on the ‘burden of office’, as *Gaudium et*

Spes puts it, they themselves constitute a burden on society.

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¹ Rev John Mokoena, LookLocal, 25 June 2012.

² A full report of this roundtable can be found at www.cplo.org.za

³ ISS (2012) Polity. <http://www.polity.org.za/article/how-poor-leadership-undermines-the-work-of-the-south-african-police-service>

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