



Taking Things for Granted

1. Introduction

As South Africa approaches the 22nd anniversary of its democracy, our country appears beset by deeper and more serious challenges than at any time since 1994.

It is all too easy to respond to the situation with negativity and cynicism, and to find all sorts of easy targets on which to pin the blame for our disappointed hopes. There is no shortage of simplistic analyses: it is all just a matter of the apartheid legacy; it is all down to a corrupt and venal political leadership; it is all due to the machinations of counter-revolutionary forces; it is because there are too many white people in control of the economy; or because there are too many black people in control of government. All that these 'explanations' have in common is that they are superficial and inadequate, if not downright wrong.

In this, our 400th Briefing Paper, we will try to provide a different perspective; one that tries to avoid the 'blame game' and that, without being naïve, offers a more positive take on South Africa today.

2. The Challenges

There are too many to mention them all individually, and different ones will loom larger for some people than for others. Some are obvious and well-known, and regularly grab the headlines; others are less obvious and often overlooked.

2.1. Politics

President Zuma seems to lurch from one self-inflicted crisis to another – Nkandla, the Gupta's, the finance minister fiasco; he is criticised for failing to provide clear leadership and for

responding with a trademark chuckle when serious issues are raised, for example, in Parliament. Among other senior government and ANC leaders, much of the energy that should be devoted to giving direction to the country is instead spent on in-fighting and trying to influence the post-Zuma succession. Despite numerous resolutions and commitments to eradicate corruption, there is little sign of these being consistently implemented: too many corrupt politicians and officials retain their posts or are shifted sideways.

But politics in South Africa is not just about the governing party. Perhaps more questions should be asked about why, after more than two decades, the opposition parties in general have failed to present the electorate with an alternative vision for the country that is sufficiently compelling to bring about the kind of regular change of government that characterises many established democracies. A number of opposition parties have emerged, flourished briefly, and then collapsed under the weight of infighting and petty rivalry. Even the Democratic Alliance, which until recently had been growing its support steadily, is now showing signs of internal ructions. And the fact that we are approaching a nation-wide local government election with almost no indication that opposition parties are thinking in terms of strategic alliances and potential coalitions tends to confirm the suspicion that a kind of 'everyone for him/herself' thinking prevails.

2.2. The Economy

We have had the misfortune to be struck by a severe drought at just the time when our currency is rapidly declining in value, and when our main export market – China – is itself undergoing an economic slowdown. These two events are largely outside the immediate control of anyone in South Africa, but many of our other economic woes are

not. The most obvious recent example was the dismissal of Finance Minister Nhlanhla Nene by President Zuma in December. It seems that no-one outside Mr Zuma's immediate circle seriously believes the purported reason to be true: that Mr Nene was earmarked for a senior post in the BRICS Development Bank. On the contrary, there is a general assumption that the move was an attempt to replace a fiscally firm minister with one who could be relied upon to favour certain allies of Mr Zuma, and to adopt a more relaxed if, in the long-term, perilous approach to government spending. Either way, the decision cost the economy tens, if not hundreds, of billions of rands, mainly because it sent the currency crashing and thereby drove up the cost of public sector borrowing immensely. It has also pushed us closer to a credit-rating downgrade to 'junk' status which, if it is not averted, will inevitably weaken the rand even further. But the slide in the rand's value began long before Mr Zuma's ill-advised reshuffle. For a long time South Africa has been importing far more than it exports, and for equally long virtually the only area in which there has been any employment growth is the public service. So, we have effectively been exporting wealth to our trading partners, and we have failed to create any significant new wealth at home (government employees, with a few exceptions, are not creators of wealth in economic terms, but consumers).

We have also been disadvantaged by the lack of a clear economic vision from government. The National Development Plan, which at least had the potential to be that vision, has been gathering dust. It is hard to think of any of its main policy points that have actually been implemented, and it has become fatally politicised, with some parts of the ANC/COSATU/SACP alliance openly hostile to it. In a vain attempt to intervene constructively in the economy, successive administrations have multiplied the number of ministries involved in economic matters.¹ It is common knowledge that these various ministries do not share an overall vision for the economy but, even if they did, such a plethora of decision-makers, policy developers and operational experts could hardly be expected to form a coherent team with a clear focus.

2.3. State Institutions

The list of state institutions that have suffered from political interference of one kind or another is a long one. To some extent there was an inevitability about this, since the apartheid state itself relied heavily on being able to stack important 'independent' positions with

sympathisers and supporters; the incoming government could hardly be expected to honour such appointments as it set about trying to redress the imbalances of the past. But the policy of cadre deployment, controversial enough even when it put well-qualified and competent people in key posts, has been taken to the point where numerous unsuitable or unqualified people have been appointed.

On some occasions the courts have made formal findings in this regard, as with SABC Chief Operating Officer Hlaudi Motsoeneng and the one-time head of the National Prosecuting Authority, Menzi Simelane. At other times political appointees have crossed the line of legality and ended up on trial – former Police Commissioner Jackie Selebi is perhaps the most notorious example. And then there are the many that remain in office despite strong evidence that they are there more because of their political connections or missions than because of their objective suitability or their track-record. The Chairperson of the SAA board, Dudu Myeni and the Speaker of Parliament, Baleka Mbete, fall into this category.

On the surface, such appointments raise questions around the direct manipulation of important public offices, and that is obviously damaging to the institutions involved, as well as contrary to the spirit (and sometimes the letter) of the Constitution. But at a deeper level this trend also means that we are failing to build a culture of non-partisan professionalism in the senior ranks of independent public offices. A glaring example of the problem arose recently when Parliament attempted to nominate the ANC MP Cecil Burgess, who had chaired the ad-hoc committee that dealt with the Secrecy Bill, to the post of Inspector-General of Intelligence. Mr Burgess was a champion of the Bill, as he had every right to be as an MP representing a party, but his very support for the more draconian parts of the Bill made him obviously unsuitable to be a public servant tasked with unbiased and objective oversight of the intelligence arms of the state.

Without a competent and professional cohort of senior public servants, especially at the head of independent state institutions, it is unlikely that we will succeed in creating a truly developmental state, one that responds to the needs of its people based on their rights and entitlements rather than for short-term political advantage.

2.4. Local government

(The field of local government presents itself for consideration because this is an election year; but much of what applies to this level of government applies just as much to the other two levels.) Just as 'social unrest' was an apartheid-era shorthand for people's expressions of disgust at their oppression, so 'service delivery protest' has become shorthand for their dismay at the conditions that so many still endure after 20 years of democracy. The problems are too well known to require lengthy description: uncollected rubbish; gaping potholes; widespread corruption and rent seeking; worn-out infrastructure of all kinds. Of course, the picture is not uniformly bleak, and some municipalities do very well; but the number of service delivery protests has steadily increased in recent years, which seems to suggest that people's patience is beginning to run out.

But, again, at a deeper level, this problem may be worse than it seems. Beyond just becoming frustrated with the lack of delivery, there are indications that more and more people are losing faith in the ability of democracy as a system to give them what they need. This seems to be more pronounced among younger citizens, but it is probably not limited to them. The forthcoming local government elections will provide further evidence in this regard. If the overall turnout continues to decline, as it has tended to do for the last 15 years or so, it may well signal that many people no longer believe that voting is worth the effort.²

Will those who don't see the point of voting find other ways – apart from more or less violent protest – of influencing the way their local areas are run? It seems unlikely that someone who is disillusioned with electoral politics would nevertheless continue to be an active member of a street committee, a community policing forum or a ward committee. More likely, these important democratic sub-structures will also lose their attraction and thus their capacity to make a difference in people's lives.

2.5. Social cohesion

It is scarcely believable that there are still white South Africans who feel able to call their black fellow-citizens 'monkeys'; and others who still publicly (or for that matter, privately) use the word 'kaffir'. When both these things happened recently, there was a predictable backlash, sometimes rather crudely expressed, which in

turn encouraged other whites to defend - or trivialise - the original utterances. It is as if they had learned nothing in the last 20 years, and made no attempt to adjust to reality. The extraordinary patience and forbearance of the black majority means nothing to such people, whose blindly arrogant attitude threatens to erode precisely that patience and forbearance.

At heart, racism flows from a lack of respect for one's fellow human being. So does racism's close cousin, xenophobia, which is sadly also a feature of South African life. Patriarchy and sexism, too, are based on a mind-set that denies the equal humanity of women by men. Despite numerous campaigns and programmes aimed at eradicating these evils, and despite the enactment of laws that seek to place women on an equal footing with men in the domestic, labour and public spheres, it seems that – as with racism – those who hold to sexist views are blind to the harm they cause.

And so we fail, as a country, to cohere socially. We still by and large identify ourselves by the factors that distinguish us from each other, instead of focusing on what unites us. Certainly, much has been done, and by many people, to build unity and a sense of nationhood, and at certain times – such as when we hosted the 2010 World Cup – we can achieve moments of social cohesion. But it remains all too easy for cracks to appear and, having appeared, they are all too easily widened by selfish and disrespectful attitudes. And it is no coincidence that these destructive attitudes are held for the most part by that part of the population which fears the loss of its unearned privileges.

There are many other challenges facing us, but to discuss them all would require a book. Behind them lie a variety of causes, some quite easily identifiable, others less so. There is no single overriding cause, as tempting as it is for some people to blame everything on the incumbent political leadership. However, it is at least arguable that all – or almost all – of the serious problems we are dealing with have one common denominator.

3. A Common Thread

Behind each of the challenges outlined above there has been an attitude of taking things for granted; an assumption that things will continue positively, or that negative trends will reverse themselves automatically. It may be that this kind

of thinking had its roots in the miracle of the transition away from apartheid, and in the euphoric 'honeymoon period' that followed 1994.

A few examples will illustrate the problem.

- Why did we assume, post-1994, that racist attitudes would simply dissolve? Too many people took it for granted that racism would die out as the older generations faded away, and that the rest of us would somehow free ourselves of bigotry and prejudice. Clearly, this has not happened; scratch the surface, and racism still poisons our social, cultural and workplace relationships.
- Why did we take it for granted that the wonderful institutions put in place to enhance and protect our democracy would seamlessly move from the constitutional text to the concrete political reality? The adoption of the Constitution in 1996 was indeed a major milestone, but we should have been more alert to the ways in which its spirit could be violated even as its letter was honoured.
- We assumed that a gradual and incremental approach to the economic upliftment of the poor majority would satisfy them. Worse than that, we tolerated an economic empowerment model that adopted the worst aspects of trickle-down theory: allow a chosen few 'previously disadvantaged' individuals to become fabulously wealthy and somehow that would empower the masses.
- About one of the key underpinnings of both colonial and apartheid domination – the land question – almost nothing of consequence has been done; instead, we have taken it for granted that millions of our people will pass their lives patiently in informal settlements and overcrowded townships. Where land restitution or redistribution has occurred, it has generally been assumed that the beneficiaries would acquire overnight the skills, training, capital and access to markets necessary to thrive in our generally depressed rural areas.
- It is widely reported that South Africa's corporate sector is sitting on a 'cash pile'

of well over R600billion. This is money that companies would normally invest in new factories and equipment, in improving technology and processes, and ultimately in expanding employment. They are holding back from such investment, though, because of their uncertainty about the country's economic policies and its political direction. But at the heart of this hesitation lies another assumption: that if the corporate sector just keeps its wealth safe and waits, better times will surely follow. A consolidated democracy, and the political stability that flows from it, are seen as merely happening, not as something to be worked at.

- This last example affects our society as a whole, not just corporate South Africa. As the local government elections approach, we are beginning to read about people's levels of disillusionment with electoral politics. It seems likely that the trend towards lower levels of voter registration and election-day turnout will continue, as people lose faith in the formal processes of democracy. But, like the captains of industry, ordinary citizens fool themselves if they think that by withdrawing to the sidelines and waiting, policy makers and politicians will take more, rather than less, notice of them and their needs.

And so the list of things we take for granted goes on. The 'Fees Must Fall' movement takes it for granted that the money can simply be found to guarantee free tertiary education; the minority of the workforce lucky enough to be in formal employment takes it for granted that ten or fifteen per cent wage increases can be won every year, even in industries – such as mining – that are on their last legs; at the opposite end of the scale, chief executives take it for granted that they can award themselves multi-million rand bonuses, on top of their multi-million rand salaries, while laying off thousands of workers in order to save costs.

Politically, it must be admitted that fewer and fewer people are taking it for granted that President Zuma is the right person to run the country, but it is still generally assumed that, once his term ends, whoever replaces him will be an improvement. We assume that the culture of patronage, cronyism, state-capture, and tolerance of corruption that has come to characterise Mr

Zuma's administration will magically disappear once he departs the scene.³

In the opposition ranks it is mostly assumed that voters will sooner or later shift allegiance on the basis of government's failures rather than because another party offers them an attractive and plausible alternative. This is one of the reasons why we continue to tolerate a fragmented opposition, with ten parties in the National Assembly having ten or fewer seats. Many of these exist only to provide their leaders with a healthy pay-cheque, thus perpetuating the assumption that parliamentary politics is a lucrative career option, rather than a question of public service.

But if, then, it is the case that most of our challenges are self-inflicted, as a result of our general tendency to take things for granted, where is the more positive take that we mentioned at the beginning of this paper?

4. Helping Ourselves

It may be that there is relatively little we can do about such factors as the present drought and the global economic slowdown⁴, but for the rest the power to address the causes of our national discontent is in our own hands. There is nothing that stops us moving away from racism, if we really want to; nothing that prevents us from clamping down on corruption, if we really want to; nothing that stops us voting out of office local, provincial or national governments if we feel they have let us down; nothing that prevents us from demanding accountability, integrity and probity from our political and economic leaders.

Indeed, compared to many other countries, we have a number of significant advantages (many of which, of course, we have come to take for granted).

- We have regular, free and fair elections; it is easy to vote, and the process and outcomes are universally respected. We are not subject to the kinds of electoral fraud that subvert democracy in so many other developing nations.
- We have possibly the world's most open Parliament. Organisations and members of the public are free to interact with their representatives, to make submissions on legislation, and to observe their MPs in action (or inaction).

- South Africa's press is free, active and, with some exceptions, non-partisan. The public broadcaster may have abdicated its true role and become instead a state broadcaster, but there is a variety of other radio and television stations, and numerous newspapers and journals conveying information and analysis.
- While some important public institutions have suffered from political interference, others have avoided this fate and continue to carry out their constitutional tasks; among the latter are the Auditor General, the Public Protector, the Human Rights Commission, and the Judicial Service Commission.⁵
- The courts have proved themselves time and again to be independent, non-partisan and professional. The higher one goes in the judicial hierarchy, the more pronounced this is. The Constitutional Court has shown itself to be a formidable bulwark against misuse of power and a fearless protector of rights.
- Citizens' basic civil and political rights are intact: freedom of speech, conscience, thought, assembly, religion, movement. People are free to mobilise over issues that concern them, and thousands do so every day.

In fact, it is hard to see what more we need if we wish to face up to our challenges and begin to deal with them.

5. Conclusion

When President Zuma dismissed finance minister Nhlanhla Nene last December he took it for granted that his decision would stand. Within four days, however, Mr Zuma had been forced to change tack. Something happened that rendered Mr Zuma's assumption void. We don't know what it was, or who it was, that changed Mr Zuma's mind, but the point is that the President was forced into an about-turn on a vitally important issue. Since then, the signs have been piling up that the recalled finance minister, Mr Gordhan, is certainly not taking it for granted that we will somehow escape our economic challenges with a 'business as usual' approach.

Mr Gordhan (and whoever it was who pressurised the President into changing his mind) could obviously see how close the country had come to the fiscal cliff;⁶ with that insight it was impossible to continue on the old assumptions – that the economy would somehow muddle through, that the ratings agencies would give us another chance, that the rand would bounce back.

The rest of us, individually and corporately, need to look at the cliffs and precipices that loom in our

own fields of activity; and having done so, we need to take firm steps away from the edge. Simply put, if we wish to secure and enhance democracy, and all its benefits, for ourselves and for the next generations, we need to stop taking things for granted.

Mike Pothier
Research Co-ordinator

¹ There are ministries of Finance; Trade and Industry; Economic Planning; Small Business; and State Enterprises. The Deputy President heads the National Planning Commission, which amounts to a quasi-ministry of economic planning. There are also a number of ministries whose main focus areas are crucial to the economy: Minerals and Energy; Mining; Public Works; and Labour.

² For more on this, see <http://www.polity.org.za/article/desperate-and-divided-south-africa-has-had-enough-2016-02-05>

³ To say that these things characterise the current administration is not to overlook that fact that many of them were present well before Mr Zuma became president. Neither is it to overlook the fact that on all these counts, the pre-1994 regimes were far worse.

⁴ Many would argue that better planning and foresight would have mitigated the effects of the drought, and that wiser management of the economy would have made us less reliant on the export of unbeneficiated raw materials.

⁵ The Judicial Service Commission has been criticised in some quarters for having rejected certain candidates allegedly on political grounds, but when its track record is considered as a whole over the last 20 years this criticism is hardly sustainable. More worrying is the preponderance of JSC members who are either members of, or nominated by, the governing party. But even this has not resulted in any clear political interference in the appointment of judges.

⁶ A 'fiscal cliff' describes the sharp economic decline or collapse that can flow from a combination of unfavourable factors. In South Africa's case these included low growth, ever increasing state expenditure, a weakening currency, higher borrowing requirements, and a lack of confidence in the management of the economy.