

Friends,

I am writing this to you to try and provoke a moment of reflection after the events of the last few weeks. The sudden departure of the DA Leader, the Federal Chair and the Executive Mayor of Johannesburg are as momentous as the return of the former leader in the position of Fedex chair of Helen Zille.

These events have the potential to derail us from asking searching questions about why the party lost votes in the last general elections. While the review of the party's performance is very comprehensive and is to be taken seriously, there are more fundamental questions we have avoided dealing with for years. Had we done so I believe the damage caused by Helen's comments, which are hurtful to many black people, or the poor handling of the Patricia de Lille issue in Cape Town, would have been negligible.

The first question we have to ask is whether the DA can continue to propound a brand of politics that strains to emphasize that race does not matter, and yet recognizes that in order to win elections, it has to have black leadership? I do not think this is sustainable because it is fundamentally hypocritical for more than one reason, which I set out below.

Firstly to many black people, "blackness" is irrevocably linked to their material conditions, which are more dire compared to their white compatriots. It absolutely does not hurt to acknowledge this predicament. It is a just, humane and honest thing to do. When the argument in the party appears to fundamentally be about steadfastly refusing to acknowledge this reality, it also communicates that the black people in its ranks are there essentially as political packaging to win votes, rather than to change the material conditions of the same black people from whose ranks these leaders are drawn.

Secondly, there are those in the party who, on the one hand say that they believe in the country's constitution but simultaneously balk at the injunction to redress the injustices of the past. It is particularly striking that these people only obsess about "race", and not gender and sexuality historical and ongoing discriminations. This perpetuates the belief among some South Africans that the party is there to protect the interests of white South Africans only. The DA has to make a choice: either it stands with the South African constitution or it does not. It is confusing and dishonest to lay claim to the Constitution but the repudiate the racial aspect of the country's redress agenda.

South Africa's history was for over 300yrs, defined by racism. We cannot wish that history away or think we can bombard voters with slogans that make them forget what remains a scar etched in their collective memory, and shall remain so for generations to come. The party has to come to terms with the reality that if it is serious about political power, then it cannot win the hearts and minds of black South Africans while avoiding acknowledging their historical pain. Doing so takes absolutely nothing away, except make those who are apartheid apologists feel uneasy. In that vein, I do not think that any political formation that regards itself as progressive should find itself a safe haven for apologists of racism or people who want to use semantics to describe the racist nature of our history.

That question leads us to a more fundamental one, which is whether the DA believes that it should rather wait until the majority of voters "see the light" and "move away from thinking about race" and vote DA; or it will make a genuine attempt to provide an interpretation of liberalism that does not think acknowledging the existence of racism and racial inequalities as anti-liberal. If we are serious about political power, then the former is a path that leads to a dead end which also puts South Africans at the mercy of populist demagogues who will say the right things in order to win power and then continue with corruption and engage in abuse of state power.

I am therefore saying that the most sustainable path for the DA is not picking black leaders who are expected to tip-toe around our historical albatrosses, but a position that is genuinely compassionate to the ongoing racialised, gender and sexual orientation inequities in our society. Were we to take that position, ironically, I believe most people would not care whether the leader of the party is white or black. South Africans have shown, time and again, that they are attracted to what one's politics stands for, not just the colour of their skin. This is why it was possible for Athol to be executive mayor of the Nelson Mandela Metro, with the DA gaining the most votes in that metro.

In that context we cannot divorce the outcome from the person of Athol, who is a fluent Xhosa speaker and does this in a manner that demonstrates a deep respect for the people who speak it, who are black. I believe that part of the reason so many voters could trust the DA was because they believed in the bona fides of the person who was to be mayor, a person who was as at ease in Summerstrand as he was in Zwide, speaking to salt of the earth people who are poor but still full of hope.

But there are bigger issues

I have gone on this long polemic on race not because it is the only issue, but it is the one issue that continues to stand between the DA and legitimacy. South Africa is a broken society. We have a long history that was about breaking up communities, and spatial development arrangements that worsen inequality, not make it better.

We have a broken economy that the ANC is simply unable to recover. We have millions of young people who are losing hope in the democratic experiment and have begun to flirt with notions of "benevolent dictatorship" in order to find a way out of the lawlessness and chaos the ANC has visited upon this great country of ours.

There are millions who yearn for an economy so inclusive that people who wish to earn an honest living by plying their trade every day will have a place where they can work, make a living and feel that their dignity matters. We have a state bureaucracy that has been so damaged by ANC cronyism and corruption that it simply does not know what excellence looks like anymore.

We have shambolic government finances that, together with a rapidly deteriorating economy, have us on the brink of a credit rating downgrade all the time. We are in an unsustainable situation as a country, and yet our party is being driven apart by a belief that right wing apologists must be courted back into the party in order for it to be sustainable. This simply beggars belief.

Yes, it may be true that people who hold these views have congruence with some of the party's donors. If we are so married to principle, then we need to tell those people we choose to side with the Constitution of the Republic, and the majority of South Africans. If they genuinely were interested in the nation-building project then they should not be threatened by a position that acknowledges the historical reality for the same people we want to vote for us in their millions.

What we need to be is to be a party to which millions of talented young South Africans of all backgrounds to come together under a new project to rebuild South Africa as a more transparent, inclusive and compassionate society. We need a project that is going to fix the brokenness in our communities that we seem to believe can only be resolved by criminal justice interventions, and not communities that are thriving, stable and nurturing of their young.

The world is moving on without us. While we are stuck on ideological questions and dogmas, progressive countries are getting on with the business of talking to their electorates about reforms that will take those countries forward. This may sound like a contradiction, but it is not. What I mean is that we need to decide once and for all whether we are going to represent a brand of liberalism that embraces the realities of South Africa, or that behaves as if 1994 was Day Zero where history no longer existed. We need to do this fast so that we can move on with the business of sending an inclusive, unambiguous message of hope to South Africans.

So what am I saying?

I am writing this to you because I want to say this is the reason I am standing for interim party leader. I am standing because I believe that the most urgent question of the interim leadership is not just to prepare for the next electoral cycle, but to take a definite shift towards the centre of South African politics.

If we continue to believe that we are the only centre, and the rest of South Africa must shift towards our position, we will fail in our historical duty to fight for power so that we can change the lives of South Africans. If that means doing without racists, then so be it.