

Where Have All the Independent Politicians Gone?¹



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20 years into our democracy and we find ourselves living in a highly politicised South Africa. With a proliferation of political parties, characters and debates, one would imagine that the depth and quality of our politics would be better. The truth is starkly different. Our political class is sadly dominated by voices that too often represent the party and not the voters.

You would be right to question whether that is true. A basic understanding of democracy would suggest that the interests of the party should be aligned to and reflective of those of the voters. There should be no disjunction between the two. But theory and practice are very different things. As the American baseball legend, Yogi Berra, put it “In theory, there is no difference between theory and practice. In practice there is.”

Political parties

Political parties, whether in power or in opposition, seek to gain votes in order to win or maintain power. But the way in which they do so is influenced by their internal operations and politics. This in no small way determines who rises and falls within the ranks, and what the party’s outlook on various matters is.

The reason for this disjunction is a lack of independence within our political system, both as a personal and systemic trait. Any person who joins a political party and who wishes to pursue a political career, at some point, faces a difficult and chilling choice: do they remain true to their principles or do they remain silent so that consensus may prevail. More often than not, people remain silent. And in so doing, they allow various questionable political acts to be carried out in their name.

This should not be news to anyone.

Proportional representation as a political system actively undermines the ability of individual members of political parties to be independent and challenge existing status quo no matter how problematic they may be.

Given that MPs and MPLs are indirectly elected – in that we vote for the party and not individuals on the list – their election (to their position on the list) is dependent upon internal party processes of selection. This means that the power of the party leadership in determining which individuals are placed high on the list is inordinate. Even though parties are moving towards trying to make this process as objective as possible, the degree to which the outcome is influenced by subjective judgments and personal relationships is significant.

It stands to reason, then, that any ambitious politicians would be hard-pressed to take on their party leader given the influence the leader has over their careers. It is only very rarely that individuals that take on the leadership are rewarded. In this type of system, loyalty, which at times borders on sycophancy, is rewarded. Critical engagement usually is not.

Thus, when political parties make bad decisions there are very few people, within the party, who stand up to challenge these decisions. Personal careers are placed ahead of the interests of voters and, as a result, our democracy suffers. The more parties make decisions in isolation of the reality that the electorate faces, the more likely people are going to become more apathetic or open to populist politics. Both are dangerous.

Policy

Take, for example, the debate that raged within the Democratic Alliance (DA) a few months ago as the party attempted to clarify its position on Broad-based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) and the Employment Equity Act (EEA). After a spectacular media blow-out, the Party eventually confirmed after a meeting of its Federal Council and, to much fanfare, that it has unanimously agreed on its stance on economic redress.

Given the intensity of disagreement that was reported, unanimous support was surprising, to say the least. This is considering how mutually exclusive the positions of the two camps were.

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Consensus

So, how was unanimity possible?

- First, the proponents could have actually won the argument on its merits.
- Secondly, the opponents could have capitulated in the face of direct or indirect pressure.
- Thirdly, there is possibly no real disagreement as there is a homogenous narrative for policy ideas within the DA.

The first scenario is possible, though unlikely. This debate is not new and has long cleaved the liberal school of thought in South Africa. The sharp differences between the Progressive Federal Party ('Progs') and the Liberal Party ('Liberals') is a historically apposite example.

The second scenario is most interesting. Did any opponents of the Policy, which was favoured by the leadership, ‘give in’ as a result of any direct or indirect pressure?

The third scenario is a non-starter. The evidence, prior to the conference, suggests that there is at least some (private) contestation when it comes to policy ideas within the DA.

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While anecdotal evidence suggests that no strong arm tactics were used, some outside the party have accused the DA leadership of systematically stamping out debate. So, they argued, the leadership silenced difficult and uncomfortable points of view so that their will could be done. They contend that the fact that the leadership of the Party is so successful demonstrates just how little independence those within the DA have. A lack of security of tenure or a similar measure makes those in the minority, or even the majority, keep quiet.

Accountability

It is acceptable and reasonable that political representatives should face some degree of internal accountability to their party bosses. They, after all, are employees of the Party. They are expected to perform like an employee in any traditional organisation: further the company’s interests, be loyal, act in its interest, etc.

The danger is that politicians tend to forget that while they are accountable to their party bosses, they are also accountable externally – to the voters. And the thing about voters is that they are not just passive shareholders – or, at least, they should not be treated as such. They give a mandate to parties and pay them for representing us. If anything, parties should be working for the people.

Where politicians believe that their party is wrong, they should be able to ‘turn on their own’ in order to create wider awareness, engagement and criticism. They should be safe from retribution because their contribution to the argument is what should count. That should be the case, especially, where they believe that the position the party is taking is at odds with their principles or the interests of voters.

Imagine how many ANC MPs, free from the burden of having to silence their criticism in order to continue receiving a pay cheque, would hold President Zuma to account for any one of the scandals that have marred his Presidency? Parliament would come alive in ensuring one of its primary duties: holding the executive to account.

Independent representatives are a key ingredient that keeps political parties, especially when in power, in check between elections. They are another level of keeping parties in check in addition to, for example, courts and the people. If politicians are less independent, it is likely that the parties, especially party leaderships, are likely to go unchallenged and that we, as the electorate, will continue to suffer for it.

Free and open debate on issues is important and necessary. Voters need to know the full depth of possibilities so that they can make an informed choice. It cannot be that voters who are so important that they can elect a government but, at the same time, be treated as if they are so stupid that they cannot handle disputes within the

Party. The fact that leaders continue to be fixated on members holding the party line is incredible. Dissent may be more in the interest of voters than alleged unity.

Political reporting deserves some of the blame. Whenever differences are detected, political reporters are quick to publicise them and they are often quick to blow them out of proportion. Sensible policy differences are taken to mean a variety of things, none of which need necessarily be true. They are reported as being a sign of division, a sign of a prospective leadership challenge, a breakdown in the personal relationship between the leaders concerned, political weakness, ill-discipline, incoherence and so on.

That is not to say that where there is a difference, these things are not present. They may be. But to frame policy difference in these terms all the time means that the ability to discuss policy in a sensible manner, and disagree, becomes a zero-sum game: the more united we look, the less room there is for independence. The narrative is diabolical because it means that the ways in which parties are reported on, incentivises them to never see healthy disagreement as a good thing.

The DA's stance on economic redress is again a good example. The media have widely reported that this represented a personal schism between Helen Zille and Lindiwe Mazibuko (and a few other black leaders, the so-called 'black caucus'). Whether this is true or not, it illustrates the problem with our reportage: an alleged difference between people based on sensible arguments was taken to mean that the DA was tearing itself apart. Depending on whom you read would determine the rate of hyperbole. And all the while, the merits of the supposed disagreement were never substantively engaged with. Nor was any analysis made about the dichotomous positions. The reporting focused on the personalities and so any policy debate was immediately hijacked by issues of leadership, ambition and intrigue.

These types of differences are not unique to the DA. But political opponents and political reports too often engage in this kind of forced choice between disagreement and unity. This actively deters independence from being a regular feature of our politics.

Independence

Political leaders are caught in a damned-if-you-do-damned-if-you-don't paradox: if disagreement exists then they are weak but if they try to force unanimity, then they are ruthless. This unfortunate and unnecessary position may be more indicative of the lack of maturity on the part of those who write of our politics. Irrespective of who is to blame though, we voters come off second best. We never get arguments and policy matched against each other. We never get (difficult) judgments made on those terms. What we get are easy judgments on transient personalities while the long-term implications of policy choices are ignored. This can only be bad for South Africa.

As a maturing democracy, South Africa has very difficult decisions to make. This is made even trickier in our case because of the long-lasting effects of colonialism and

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Apartheid. For as long as our electoral system creates a structural intellectual deficit and our political reporters engage in matters of personality, and not substance, we, as electors, will never be able to make the best policy decisions for ourselves. Sadly this is owing to the fact that people we depend on to aid us in such decisions are left wanting. The less independence our politicians have the worse governance we will begot.

In the context of discussing accountability the Helen Suzman Foundation (HSF) hosted a roundtable in May 2013. The high-level panel included now-DA Gauteng Premier Candidate Mmusi Maimane, the Leader of Agang Dr Mamphela Ramphele, then Editor of the Mail & Guardian Nic Dawes and WITS academic Professor Alex van den Heever.

In introducing the discussion HSF Director, Francis Antonie, spoke of accountability in the following terms:

"Accountability represents ... a relationship between two entities. One has to answer to the other about the matters it has taken responsibility for... In a democracy, those in power are committed to serving the public interest, and the public therefore have certain expectations. If these expectations are not met, what happens? ... Accountability also depends on certain systemic features of the political system: The legal framework of the country, the type of electoral system, and the country's bureaucratic system. These features determine, for instance, how representation is established, how policy is decided and evaluated, and the consequences of not performing to expectation. Our Constitution constrains the behaviour of those in power and determines the character of accountability. But to what extent can these ideals be realised in reality? ... The importance of accountability is not only limited to the relationship between citizens and those in power, but extends to the private sphere."

What is notable is that accountability – something that we desire in our polity – is directly affected by the degree of independence that actors within the system have. Independence ensures accountability because those who ask the tough questions are protected from retribution, demotion and expulsion. This is important: emboldened MPs from all sides of the House willing to hold the government, and themselves, accountable should mean that the standard and quality of our governance should improve. Based on the engagements of the panellists, it is clear that accountability and independence are mutually supportive, rather than contradictory, concepts.

Even though some may argue that accountability indicates being answerable to someone whereas independence suggests the opposite, when one considers to whom and at what level one is accountable to and independent from these supposed opposites can fall away.

In reality, though, South Africa's independence and accountability deficit will continue. Although I do not necessarily support replacing proportional representation with a constituency based electoral system, what is clear is that our system, which is supposed to work in the favour of voters, is producing anomalous results. It is necessary that we examine the way we do things so that we may rectify this. Otherwise, the longer that loyalty and independence are constructed as being mutually exclusive and we concentrate power in the hands of party elites, the more we will be robbed of our agency and power.

NOTE

¹ This article is an adapted version of an earlier one by the author: <http://voices.news24.com/kameel-premhid/2013/12/where-have-all-the-independent-politicians-gone/>