

Genuine compromise must override dominance if SA's municipalities are to succeed

With coalition talks intensifying, South Africa needs extraordinary leadership that prioritises purpose over power – and brings the most capable citizens into council chambers.

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Opinion

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As we emerge from the local government elections with a soup even less palatable than the one we were slurping before, we are faced with challenges — beyond just municipalities — that could be as consequential as any we have faced since the dawn of our democracy.

Even as political parties wrestle (mud-wrestle?) for positions of influence and power rather than purpose, we will require extraordinary leadership to correct the perilous course we're on.

We need a confidence of purpose that readily invites political rivals and outsiders to form a team capable of transforming our overwhelming challenges into a platform of opportunities.

With just over a week to go, things are not heading that way.

The risk of failing to get there lies in the influence, obstinacy, arrogance, crookedness and often ignorance of players who see continued failure as their primary source of personal wealth.

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Business is hardly stepping up to the plate. The same-old, same-olds make speeches and pitch up at gatherings of the incumbent incompetents to be seen shaking hands and promising to hold hands in a future few actually intend to get involved in or take risks on. Their primary purpose is to preserve some semblance of economic stability to further the prosperity of their

local businesses – or at least keep them intact – while exporting their personal capital, if not themselves, to foreign sanctuaries that will take anyone at a price.

For those one or two rungs below the internationally exportable, the focus turns to the strength and geography of their local bubbles.

Who can blame them? Everything is going to shit, and only the strongest bubbles will stay afloat in the sea of sewage increasingly engulfing us.

The contradictions we need to confront are obvious. If power is placed above purpose, and if the source of power is the will of less than half of the lowest common denominator of voters, then you start with a mess. That mess is only made worse when yet further compromise is required to form impotent coalitions.

Ironically, genuine compromise is what we need, yet dominance is sought at any cost. In pursuing it, people resort to even lower common denominators – the most primal links of association they can find. We risk returning to the path of destruction we were on before wisdom, if not survival instincts under extraordinary leadership and tolerance, came to rescue us. All of us.

If we go back there, under whatever squashed-together government structure prevails, not even another 30 years of democracy will save us.

Because of – and yet despite – the election result, we are all called now to gather in a spirit of pragmatic sense, boldness and maturity to serve the higher purpose of peace and prosperity for all. We are invited and included, not out of desperation, but because of the obvious opportunity this present threat provides us.

We could hold hands, or we could fight.

We could remain focused on, or resort to, the barriers that divide us – or we could celebrate, or at least tolerate, our differences and invite the very best among us into the centre of power and decision-making.

Deferred gratification

The depth and complexity of our problems call for difficult, determined decisions – for deferred gratification, if that is still possible given the unbearably low standard of living the majority of our people struggle through every day.

We know the problems. Every politician has demonstrated a profound ability to describe them. Much less, however, is said about the solutions and the difficulties we will need to face in setting a course to implement them. In some metros, the financial positions simply cannot be solved through business-as-usual strategies alone.

Although these challenges manifest locally – at least the ones we can see or personally experience – they are national. Every allowance we permit for failure, however small, like only pausing at a red traffic light or offering a bribe, feeds a growing monster that we all eventually accept, allow and finally submit to as simply the way things are done around here.

We have already become beggars. So let me beg those who have been elected as local representatives to put your city before your party. Invite into your council the most competent individuals – regardless of party affiliation, and preferably without one – to sit together, argue,

debate and discover solutions within a mutual trust that must surely be found if we are to have any chance of climbing out of the holes we've dug ourselves into. Put down the shovels.

As ordinary citizens, we should scorn, not admire, those rotten individuals who have benefited from our corrupt demise. As they strut about in obvious demonstrations of unearned wealth, do not envy them. They are as unhappy as hell in their shallow pretence. They know we know. Everybody knows. Do not aspire to their ill-gotten gains unless you wish upon yourself the life of the eternally unsatisfied. They don't sleep well, they wish they'd never started, and they secretly long for the earlier days of innocence and happiness they have forsaken.

The overwhelming majority of us – even if we didn't all come out to vote that way – want the right things, and we know what they are.

It is not too late for us to gather now, to prevail, to fix it. **DM**