

**46<sup>th</sup> Alfred and Winifred Hoernlé Memorial Lecture**

# **Embracing Machiavelli to Achieve a Liberal Future**

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**Embracing Machiavelli to Achieve a Liberal Future**  
**by**  
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# 1. Introduction

Thank you Dr John Endres for the kind invitation to present this 46<sup>th</sup> Hoernlé Memorial Lecture. I am deeply honoured. Thank you, Tayla Dalton, for your professionalism and efficiency in organising this event and allowing me to escape the Platteland to the big city!

Established in 1929, the IRR has been at the forefront of intellectual debates and policy initiatives to promote classical liberalism. It is this vision of classical liberalism that I too share. At this particular crisis-prone state South Africa finds itself in, we need the thoughtful intervention of the Institute more than ever. It is for this reason that I have partnered with the IRR on several joint initiatives over the years through the good offices of the ever-dependable Terence Corrigan.

This lecture series is in honour of Reinhold Frederik Albert Hoernlé and Agnes Winifred Hoernlé. While the former was a renowned philosopher and a bastion of liberal thought, the latter was regarded as the mother of social anthropology in South Africa. In honour of Alfred Hoernlé, my talk will be grounded in political philosophy, with a particular emphasis on classical liberalism.

Agnes Hoernlé was celebrated not only for her intellectual contributions but also her social activism against apartheid policies. Given the enormity of the crisis confronting South Africa, we all need to be activists. The current configuration of the South African government will not rescue us.

Indeed, Pretoria, through its atrocious policies and corrupt leadership, threatens each and every South African. We all need to ensure that this government reforms or is replaced if we are to embrace a liberal future and provide for our children a more peaceful and prosperous tomorrow.

## 2. From Rousseau to Mill

Growing up as a non-white South African in the 1970s and 1980s, the ideological choices on offer to me were brutally stark and equally unappealing. There was the apartheid ideology espoused by the National Party dressed up with the thin religious veneer of Christian nationalism. The tribalism of the various homeland leaders as well as the manifestations of Black Consciousness and Pan Africanism I found to be unappealing. These were merely perpetuating the same us-versus-them dichotomy inherent to apartheid.

Initially I was drawn to the African National Congress (ANC), then in exile, and specifically the ideals of the Freedom Charter, which was adopted by the Congress of the People on 26 June 1955.<sup>2</sup>



However, I quickly grew disillusioned with it. For instance, the phrase “we the people”, which appeared throughout the document, was not really unpacked. To me, it appeared similar to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s “general will”.

For Rousseau, citizens had to move from self-love and self-interest to the collective and needed to devote themselves to their state’s needs. While stressing that people are sovereign, the notion of a “general will” subordinates the individual to the collective represented by an all-powerful state. It sets the basis for an autocratic state.

Rousseau’s ideas were published in the Social Contract in 1762 and inspired the 1789 French Revolution.<sup>3</sup> No small wonder that the overthrow of King Louis XVI did not bring about emancipation but led to Robespierre and the guillotine.

Lest we forget, many communist states referred to themselves as “People’s Republics”. Some still do, like North Korea and mainland China. These, of course, gave their people nothing but repression and the gulag. For this reason, I have always felt uncomfortable with the ANC’s still referring to itself as a national liberation movement.<sup>4</sup> In 2025, one might well ask: liberation from what? ANC looting and misgovernance?

In 2011 I published a book entitled Against all Odds: Opposition Political Parties in Southern Africa.<sup>5</sup> While my focus was on the political opposition, I could not do this without also considering the incumbent ruling parties.

What the erstwhile liberation movements – now ruling parties – all had in common was this view of themselves as revolutionary parties, representing the will of the people. Conversely, the political opposition was portrayed as counter-revolutionary and unrepresentative of the people, which only the ruling party could represent. Worse, opposition parties in southern Africa were viewed as representing some foreign interests.

We see the same dynamic in South Africa, with members of the ruling party and senior civil service portraying the DA or AfriForum as representing the interests of an imperial power or combination of imperial powers. Needless to say, this makes for a severely adversarial relationship between ruling parties and opposition parties and even civil society in southern Africa.

In contrast to Rousseau, there is the liberal tradition. It champions a political system which privileges individual rights – creating a private space distinct from the public realm, recognising individual rights to property, respecting religious freedom, maintaining a healthy scepticism of government, and insisting on a system of checks and balances.

Jeremy Bentham led the charge in 18<sup>th</sup> century England with his desire to rationalise the legal system and thereby make it accessible to ordinary citizens. It was Bentham who proposed limited government, the primary purpose of which was to ensure that individual citizens received the rewards which they had toiled for.<sup>6</sup> How is that for a revolutionary idea!



It was John Stuart Mill who, following his meeting with Bentham in 1808, dedicated himself to the task of examining the relationship between the individual and government. For Mill, the primary rationale for the existence of a government, and its enduring purpose, was to protect its citizens' property – allowing individuals to pursue their own self-interest without encroaching on the rights of others.<sup>7</sup>

From that perspective, and despite the pretensions of the South African Constitution, we are not a liberal state. If we were, we would support the Democratic Alliance's proposal on land reform. This entails redistributing 2 million hectares of state-owned land and 4,300 farms that the state owns to its rural black citizens immediately.<sup>8</sup> By granting title deeds to these, it would empower people in a real sense – allowing them to access finance and the like.

While Mill argued that the government had to be imbued with sufficient power to accomplish its primary task, he was concerned that public officials might well pursue their own selfish interests while in office to the detriment of citizens. To prevent this, Mill passionately argued for regular elections and an active citizenry to hold government to account.<sup>9</sup> In his book, Considerations on Representative Government (1861), there was however a discernible tension between Mill's desire for public officials to be elected by citizens and the danger that this inherently held – that anyone could be elected to office. To put it differently, much like with the ANC, people would be voted into public office who did not have the requisite skills to govern. Here, Mill attempted to secure a balance between popularly elected officials and experts who had the requisite skill sets to govern the polity.<sup>10</sup>

In his 1859 book On Liberty<sup>11</sup> Mill went further in expressing his concerns about the limitations of representative government. He suggested that despotism was a legitimate form of government for societies which had not evolved the capacity for self-rule. These then must be governed by an autocratic state regulating their lives. However, once citizens had evolved to a level where their lot could be improved by free and equal discussion, the despotic regime was no longer needed and must be replaced by a more liberal government.

### 3. From Mill to Machiavelli

It is precisely here where Mill intersects with Niccolò Machiavelli. Most famous for The Prince, published in 1513, he advocates for the abandonment of conventional morality and advises the ruler on the callous action needed to gain and maintain power.<sup>12</sup> In Machiavelli's defence, he wrote his treatise during the rise of powerful nation states like England, France and Spain, which could wield bigger armies than Italy's fractured city states. These city states were at the mercy of brigands and mercenaries. Meanwhile, in 1494 French's king Charles VIII invaded Machiavelli's own city state of Florence.<sup>13</sup> Machiavelli decried the weakness of Florence and Italy and sought a strong ruler who would restore order – ruthlessly if necessary – by creating a united Italian state.<sup>14</sup>



Four years later, Machiavelli published The Discourses.<sup>15</sup> Here he made clear that he was no advocate for tyranny for its own sake, writing that he preferred republics since they secured the liberty and interests of all. However, before one could transition from a more autocratic regime to a more democratic dispensation there had to be order and citizens needed to be educated in civic virtue. This position is not dissimilar from that of Mill – when people have the capacity to self-rule, a transition from authoritarianism to a more democratic dispensation may occur. In Machiavelli's thinking the Prince creates a secure and viable society. Then he must step aside for citizens duly educated in civic virtue to exercise self-rule responsibly.

## 4. The South African pathway to a liberal democracy

While political commentators have much to say about the current merry-go-around of Parliament, whether the Government of National Unity will collapse as well as the latest corruption scandal, there are far deeper questions which they give scant attention to.

Three of these questions are the following:

1. Can South Africa be classified as a liberal democratic state?
2. What impact has state failure had on the quest for a liberal democratic state?
3. Will liberal democracy follow the exit of the ANC from power?

These three questions will now be answered in turn.

### 4.1 Can South Africa be classified as a liberal democratic state?

Despite the pretensions of our Constitution, South Africa has strayed far from the classical liberal vision of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. Bentham vehemently argued in 18<sup>th</sup> century England that the primary purpose of government was to guarantee that individual citizens received the rewards for which they had toiled. Mill, taking his cue from Bentham, would go on to argue that the enduring purpose of government was to protect its citizens' property. South Africa's Expropriation Act as well as its draconian employment equity legislation, however, suggest that socialism continues to have traction in the upper echelons of the ruling party.

Moreover, the ANC continues to regard the opposition as acting at the behest of foreign actors.<sup>16</sup> Recently, Mcebisi Jonas, MTN non-executive chair and President Cyril Ramaphosa's special envoy to the United States, in response to ongoing legal cases against MTN for violating the US Anti-Terrorism Act, lashed out and spoke of a "deliberate campaign by local actors of 'dirty tricks' to discredit South Africa and make it a pariah state".<sup>17</sup>



Nor does the ruling party countenance dissonance within its own ranks. Earlier this year, suspended Minister of Police Senzo Mchunu and former Minister of Finance Malusi Gigaba came under fire from the ANC for defying its protocols. Gigaba was quoted in the media as stating that the ANC National Executive Committee (NEC) had “lost its way” while Mchunu publicly stated that the ANC was “on the brink of collapse”.<sup>18</sup>

Far from engaging with the substance of the statements, the ANC decided to shut down any critical voices within the party, declaring that all structures and members of the party must “speak with one voice, guided by democratic centralism”.<sup>19</sup> This is censorship. The ANC’s dismissive and/or hostile attitude towards other political parties and competing views within its own ranks suggests that this is a party not comfortable with liberal values like freedom of speech or tolerance. It also answers the question of why the ANC cannot engage in critical introspection and change its direction.

In 1966 Barrington Moore published his classic Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World<sup>20</sup> where he eloquently argued that a vibrant and strong middle class was essential for democracy to take root and flourish. Perhaps, more to the point, this middle class must be autonomous, Moore argued. If one considers the demographic profile of South Africa, it is crucial that we look at how autonomous the black middle class is from the state. Sadly, it is not very autonomous but is instead “dependent on clientelist government policies for its well-being”.<sup>21</sup>

If one considers the middle class as a whole in South Africa, it is clear that it is contracting in purely economic terms as a result of the ANC’s ineffective and predatory economic policies. While incomes have been decreasing in real terms, living costs have sharply escalated. In Bentham’s terms, the state is not allowing citizens to receive the rewards they have toiled for. In one survey, 70 percent of middle-class respondents stated they were financially stressed.<sup>22</sup>

Nor does the future trajectory look promising, with the state doubling down on its unrealistic promises of a universal basic income grant and National Health Insurance for all. While wonderful as an ideal, the state cannot afford it. Where is the money for these entitlements supposed to come from? Our overburdened and dwindling tax base cannot absorb additional taxes. This is a point which Edward Kieswetter, the commissioner of the South African Revenue Service, has repeatedly had to make clear to our political class.<sup>23</sup>

The question remains: where is this money supposed to come from? While some have suggested taking on more debt to fund these grandiose ANC projects, it is worth reminding ourselves that South Africa’s annual economic growth rate is less than 1% and that our sovereign debt increased from a modest R650 billion in 2009 to a staggering R5.5 trillion at the end of 2024.<sup>24</sup> Equally unsustainable, the government is more focused on the provision of social grants than growing the economy and creating jobs and dignity for its citizens. Currently, 7.9 million taxpayers support 28 million social grant recipients.<sup>25</sup> The future for the country’s struggling middle class looks bleak, as do the prospects for a liberal democracy.



## 4.2 What impact has state failure had on the quest for a liberal democratic state?

There can be no talk of a liberal democracy without a capable state. It is precisely for this reason that Francis Fukuyama's majestic *The Origins of Political Order*<sup>26</sup>, which traces the historic development of the state from ancient to modern times, places the level of stateness, or a state with capabilities, at the centre of order, stability, economic growth, peace and sustainable development. State capacity in South Africa, however, has been steadily eroding. The state proved itself unable to quell the July 2021 riots, mitigate crime, keep the lights on, stimulate the economy or fix a pothole.

The Fragile States Index monitors various factors which contribute to state fragility in 179 countries. These factors include the security apparatus, factionalised elites, group grievances, economic decline, uneven economic development, human flight and brain drain, state legitimacy, human rights and rule of law.

By 2024, South Africa's fragility was scored at 69.6, up from 57.4 in 2007. The country rose from 132<sup>nd</sup> to 80<sup>th</sup> place over the same period, where higher rankings signify greater fragility. That places it in the company of countries like Belarus, Bolivia and Mexico. According to the Index, this is the warning category. It is no coincidence that so many analysts have warned about the prospects of civil war or, at the very least, South Africa's very own Arab Spring.

Buttressing the state must be a vibrant nation. The concept of the nation is, however, under threat, especially in its "rainbow nation" form which was so enthusiastically espoused following April 1994. What the May 2024 election highlighted was an increase in tribal politics. Think here of the Zulu support base of the uMkhonto weSizwe or MK Party and the coloured support base of the Patriotic Alliance.<sup>27</sup> This is very dangerous for other reasons too since secessionist tendencies have emerged in both KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape.<sup>28</sup> It is often forgotten that a unitary South Africa is a relatively recent phenomenon, having only been established in 1910. As such fragmentation of the nation and society constitutes a real threat.

Order is absent in the country. This is evident in the 26,632 murders recorded in 2024 in South Africa. This translates into 72 murders a day. It makes us the second-worst murder capital in the world after Jamaica.<sup>29</sup> There is no order when the construction mafia costs this country R63 billion in stalled or cancelled projects in 2022 and R49 billion in lost revenue in 2023.<sup>30</sup> When Intercape buses are attacked by taxi bosses in the Eastern Cape<sup>31</sup> or e-hailing drivers are assaulted by taxi drivers in Gauteng<sup>32</sup>, it negates Mill's view of a state protecting private property and allowing the conditions for citizens to pursue their own self-interest without encroaching on the freedom of others. In this state of disrespect for the law, business confidence and profits are evaporating, and so are taxes to the state. In the process, state capacity is eroded because those taxes pay for the capacity within the state to govern for the well-being of all South Africans.





### 4.3 Is liberal democracy going to follow the exit of the ANC from power?

It is naïve to believe that liberalism in South Africa will flourish once we see the back of the ANC. There are two reasons for this: the choices on offer from political parties and the resistance which a new government will confront.

Was it wise for John Steenhuisen, the leader of the liberal opposition Democratic Alliance, to personally join the cabinet, or would it have been better for him to stay outside and redirect his energy at building the party in the run-up to the local government elections and the general election thereafter? In my view this was a strategic error. Similarly, was it wise for Helen Zille, chair of the DA Federal Council, to state that the DA would protect Ramaphosa from the threat of impeachment over the Phala Phala allegations?<sup>33</sup> There are few in South Africa who find the president's version of events at Phala Phala credible. The liberal DA, which is supposed to believe that all are equal before the law, was quite willing to sacrifice principles to be in the cabinet, however. This is an issue not lost on its disillusioned supporters.

Then there is the ever-present issue of race. Roman Cabanac, Steenhuisen's erstwhile chief of staff, did the DA no favours with his allegedly racist remarks.<sup>34</sup> Nor, for that matter, was the choice of Renaldo Gouws as a DA member of parliament helpful, after old videos emerged of him using racially charged language to make a political point.<sup>35</sup> While the DA did take decisive action in the case of Gouws by suspending him, it does beg the question as to why such individuals would feel comfortable to join the DA? The DA's image as a dominant white party amongst black South Africans was reinforced. Neither did it help the liberal cause to be associated with a "white party". Of course, the DA did try to at least have a black leader in the form of Mmusi Maimane and make other ill-fated attempts to have a black face. These efforts, however, failed since they were not perceived to be authentic black leaders.

Possibly for this reason, the Oppenheimers funded political parties with black leaders who espoused ostensibly liberal values, like Rise Mzansi, which received R15 million, and ActionSA, which received R10 million in the run-up to the 2024 national elections.<sup>36</sup> The return on investment was poor, judging by the election results. In my view, the South African business community that donated to parties like Rise Mzansi and ActionSA was motivated by desperation and did not critically engage with who these gentlemen really are, their personalities, their commitment to liberal democracy and so forth. Other businessmen generously donated to the Patriotic Alliance. Once again, no serious due diligence was performed on the character and capacity of the leader, other than his support for Israel, it seems to me.





There is now speculation that Patrice Motsepe will succeed Cyril Ramaphosa to lead the ANC. The good ANC, we are told, will rally around Motsepe and they will form a strong alliance with the DA and herald some new nirvana. What every South African should know by now is that there was no new dawn and that there is no good ANC. If South Africa is to have a fighting chance, we need to see the backs of the ANC in totality. You would recall that the business community rallied around the good Cyril Ramaphosa against the bad Jacob Zuma. One does not build a black middle class overnight through quick-fix solutions. This has to develop organically and cannot happen without growing the economy.

There is a second reason to doubt that a liberal polity will miraculously develop following the ouster of the ANC. This entails the inevitable resistance which any new government will experience from vested interests, whether inept civil servants in bloated government departments or those accruing wealth from various corrupt tenders. With the cost of corruption in the trillions, the stakes are high. The killing of whistleblowers like Babita Deokaran<sup>37</sup> suggests that those benefitting from corruption and the like will go to extreme lengths to protect their ill-gotten gains.

So, what is to be done?

## 5. The path to a liberal South Africa

Our politics is broken, and citizens have lost faith that political parties will deliver the promised better life for all. One indication of this is the millions of South Africans who do not vote. More than 11 million registered voters chose not to exercise their vote in 2024. Millions more chose not to even register<sup>38</sup> to vote. South Africans have lost faith in the ballot box to deliver change. Another indicator is that support for military rule in South Africa according to Afrobarometer has almost doubled from 28 percent in 2022 to 49 percent in 2025.<sup>39</sup> This reflects growing popular disenchantment with the existing political system which has scarcely had a positive material impact on ordinary citizens' lives.

It is precisely here where we need Machiavelli's Prince – not a classical African strong man – but someone with the highest integrity and the required measure of toughness who will stare down the corrupt and do what is necessary to restore order and build capacity.

This kind of thinking was recently aired by Rob Hersov in his discussion with Biznews when he referred to a “benevolent despot”. Here we need to be honest. Our security services are politicised and criminalised and inept.<sup>40</sup> Whether to quell a July 2021 riot, secure northern Mozambique from Islamist insurgents or secure eastern Democratic Republic of Congo from M-23 rebels, our security forces have proven to be woefully inadequate. Yet order can be restored if the private sector works with a radically overhauled state security apparatus. I penned an article a few years ago discussing the mechanics of how this collaboration would work.<sup>41</sup>



This “benevolent despot” would need to be surrounded by a group of technocrats. We have a number of bright people in the business sector who could play the role of these technocrats, building capacity in the state or “stateness” in Fukuyama’s terms.

This technocratic – and, I would add, meritocratic – society has long historic roots from Plato’s philosopher-king to Francis Bacon, Henri de Saint-Simon, Auguste Comte and to Thorstein Veblen and the American Technocratic Movement in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>42</sup> Once again, a number of detailed proposals have been discussed in depth by scholars and members of this movement as to the practicalities of the concept.

I realise that what I am proposing is radical, but I see this as an initial starting point and invitation for further discussion and critique. Frankly, given our moribund politics and our crumbling economy I see this as an attempt to find a workable alternative to the current crisis confronting us.

While the establishment of law and order would be the first priority area for this new government to focus on, the economy must also be prioritised. Shedding the various odious constraints on business is the quickest way to ensure that more people participate in the economy. Given the prevailing demographics in the country, it would result in more participation in the formal economy of black South Africans and especially the youth.

There are a number of excellent proposals emanating from John Endres and the IRR to kickstart the economy. Here I would single out the Institute’s Blueprints for Growth, which I endorse. Ann Bernstein’s Centre for Development and Enterprise has also done excellent work here.

Order and economic growth would result in a vibrant and independent middle class, citizens would be schooled not only on their rights but their responsibilities, and civil servants chosen on the basis of their competence and their commitment to South Africa as opposed to their political connections. Following this transition period, a more liberal order can once again be restored.

## 6. Conclusion

Since 1948, South Africa has been effectively governed by two dominant political parties – the National Party and the African National Congress. Both were highly centralised parties which believed that they represented all of South Africa. The NP and its malevolent ideology of apartheid brought the country to ruin. The ANC’s reign has been equally ruinous with its endemic corruption and gross incompetence.

In contrast to this stands the liberal tradition. While many liberals assumed that the 2024 election which heralded a Government of National Unity would mean the demise of this dominant party hegemony, the reality is this will not occur smoothly. Inept civil servants will resist any effort to dislodge them from their lucrative posts. The corrupt will fight any attempt at clean governance. Therefore, for a liberal polity to take root, order has to be established. The path to John Stuart Mill’s liberal utopia may well mean embracing Niccolò Machiavelli’s Prince.



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# The Hoernlé Memorial Lectures

The IRR is republishing the text of the Hoernlé Memorial Lectures, a series of talks which started in 1945. The original introductory note to the lecture series reads as follows:

*A lecture, entitled the Hoernlé Memorial Lecture (in memory of the late Professor R. F. Alfred Hoernlé), President of the Institute from 1934—1943), will be delivered once a year under the auspices of the South African Institute of Race Relations. An invitation to deliver the lecture will be extended each year to some person having special knowledge and experience of racial problems in Africa or elsewhere.*

*It is hoped that the Hoernlé Memorial Lecture will provide a platform for constructive and helpful contributions to thought and action. While the lecturers will be entirely free to express their own views, which may not be those of the Institute as expressed in its formal decisions, it is hoped that lecturers will be guided by the Institute's declaration of policy that "scientific study and research must be allied with the fullest recognition of the human reactions to changing racial situations; that respectful regard must be paid to the traditions and usages of the various national, racial and tribal groups which comprise the population; and that due account must be taken of opposing views earnestly held."*

## About the IRR

Since 1929, the Institute of Race Relations has advocated for a free, fair, and prospering South Africa. At the heart of this vision lie the fundamental principles of liberty of the individual and equality before the law guaranteeing the freedom of all citizens. The IRR stands for the right of all people to make decisions about their lives without undue political or bureaucratic interference.

To support the IRR or learn more about its work, please visit [irr.org.za](http://irr.org.za).