

Press Release

For immediate release

11 February 2019



South African Institute of Race Relations

The power of ideas

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B-BBEE: The DA again surrenders to the ANC

**Statement by Frans Cronje, chief executive of the Institute of Race Relations
(IRR)**

This past weekend, the DA's Federal Council determined to shut down any debate on empowerment, choosing instead to adopt the ANC's model of Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE), and the mantra that "race is a proxy for disadvantage" as a justification for its position. It was the decision of a party that has surrendered itself intellectually and morally to the ANC's grand hegemonic hold over South African policy.

A few points are worth making:

First, race is not a proxy for disadvantage, as the DA is the first to admit. There are many, particularly the rich ANC elite, who have abused B-BBEE in all its iterations for their own purposes, who are not disadvantaged, and who do not require state assistance to accrue capital. The same is increasingly true of a burgeoning black middle class. This is well-evidenced and statistically uncontroversial. Even if race was a proxy for disadvantage, the only reason not to use disadvantage itself is a public desire to pander to race. This is likely the hard truth of the DA's current position.

Second, there is now nothing to distinguish the DA from the ANC on this particular issue, a trend that supersedes this particular policy and has become well-established on a wide variety of fronts. On B-BBEE, the DA Federal Council has in effect adopted wholesale the ANC's model of empowerment – a failed model not merely because of its political abuse but because it destroys economic growth, cannot bind business to it in an effective manner, and cannot properly address disadvantage. The only difference, it appears, is the DA's intent and application. The DA's argument is that it is able to better implement the ANC's model, more fairly and without bias. But, as for the model itself, it is the ANC's, down to the fine detail.

What the DA is saying, is that it can be a better ANC than the ANC. Under Mmusi Maimane, the DA has ceased to be a thought-leader; it is now a thought-follower.

Third, the fact that the DA has been forced to do this is the consequence of two things. One, the increasingly anti-intellectual character of the party leadership – weekend reports state that Mmusi Maimane told those who wished to debate this to 'shut up'. Two, the political weakness of the party, internally and externally.

That fact is evidenced by Maimane's own position. In February 2018, he stated that 'we need a wholesale change in empowerment policies, to move away from race-based policies that enable elite enrichment, towards policies that fundamentally break down the system of deprivation that still traps millions of South Africans in poverty'. He could not carry his party, win his own argument or stand up with any conviction for the principle he set out. That is not leadership, it is cowardice.

Maimane's policy contradictions are many and various. If a leader lacks intellectual clarity and moral authority, the inevitable consequence is internal confusion and division. When you cannot control that confusion, the consequence is authoritarianism and the censorship of discussion, another worrisome internal DA trend.

By way of illustration: fourth, according to the public record, it appears there was no debate at all on empowerment inside the DA, but merely a series of discussions about whether there should be a debate in the first place. It appears there was no policy alternative tabled for discussion at the Federal Council. If press reports are to be believed, the party has in fact produced a manifesto before it has even adopted or produced the policies that typically underpin such a document.

In August, the DA stated publicly that its policy unit had been given 'a mandate to work on alternative models of empowerment'. It said of its approach to B-BBEE in August: 'We look forward to announcing our revised policy platform ahead of the 2019 elections.' But press reports this weekend on the developments in Federal Council speak of no such alternative being tabled, but rather of anyone wishing to have such a debate being told to 'shut up', and instead a manifesto appropriating the ANC's model of B-BBEE being adopted.

This is symptomatic of the DA's intellectual and moral weakness, its fear of debate and its deference to such things as expedience and market research. It is a weaker, poorer institution for it.

No one would argue that this debate is an easy one, for any political party. And no one could prescribe a policy for the DA; it must be true to its own character. The problem, then, is its character or the lack thereof. The fact is, the DA could not even bring itself to develop or debate a policy that would distinguish itself from the ANC and give life to its own leader's public direction. When a party cannot even debate an issue, that is when political death sets in. It starts internally, closing minds, before it spreads externally. Eventually, all that is left is an empty, hollow shell.

Unless the DA changes its worrisome ideological course, soon enough those voters who seek a liberal alternative to the ANC, and a move away from race as the basis for policy-making, will be forced to look elsewhere.

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