

2019 Liberty Lecture

An Imperfect Fit?

South Africa and the Need for a Liberal Party

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Thank you for this invitation to deliver the 2019 Liberty lecture, on a subject close to my heart and sponsored by two organisations with whom I collaborated closely during over 25 years in South African politics and whose work adds both rigour and worth to the public debate in this country.

To summarize my conclusion upfront on the topic posed in the title to this lecture: I think the need for a liberal party – armed with courage, clarity, self-confidence, vision, and purpose – is needed now, at this time of demoralisation and peril in our country, more than ever.

In this regard, although not political parties, the sponsors of tonight's lecture have been at the forefront of advancing liberalism in this country for a long time indeed.

The SA Institute of Race Relations has been at the helm of critical engagement in South Africa since its founding ninety years ago, in 1929. May it continue to practise the 'long obedience'.

That phrase, incidentally, was first brought to my attention by my predecessor as Leader of the Democratic Party, the late Dr. Zach de Beer. He reminded us newcomer Members of Parliament in 1989 of the worth of Nietzsche's view that, as a guiding star for South African liberals –

There should be a long obedience in the same direction; there thereby results, and has always resulted in the long run, something that has made life worth living.

Both as an encomium to the work and validity of the SA Institute of Race relations this is apt; it is also a useful marker for my address this evening on the Imperfect Fit and South Africa's need for a liberal political party.

With the co-hosts of this evening, the Friedrich Naumann Stiftung, I enjoyed a close relationship, and political collaboration, until I resigned the leadership of the Democratic Alliance (DA) in 2007.

One of the few non-governmental organizations prepared to publicly and usefully assist the Official Opposition, it might be no exaggeration to suggest, per Robin Carlisle's remark in

another context, that ‘South African liberalism would have died of malnutrition’ were it not for the Foundation’s thoughtful and material nurturing.

I need to add in here, two personalities from Liberal International and the Foundation who provided so much value and encouragement to the work in which, on very stony and unyielding southern soil, we were then engaged to allow South African liberalism to replenish its roots at the time of transcending democratic change in the country from 1994 onward.

The first of these was the late Otto Graf Lambsdorff – a close friend and staunch political ally. He served with distinction as President of Liberal International and as Chairman of the board of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation after his career as Chairman of the Free Democrats of Germany and as Federal Minister of Economics. He gave very useful advice on the need for ‘muscular liberalism’ and reminded us often that the departure point for a liberal view of political economy was –

As much market as possible and as much state as necessary.

Another figure from those times was the President of Liberal International in 1994, the year I assumed leadership of the Democratic Party here. Fritz Bolkestein, the Dutch liberal politician, told our small parliamentary caucus back then that the problem with liberal politicians of that era was that –

They spend too much time trying to win the affection of their opponents, and not enough time trying to win the allegiance of their voters.

No doubt imperfectly, my colleagues and I tried to operationalise both those wisdoms. Both those remarks also serve as useful introductions to this lecture.

I want to start by telling the stories of two residences.

The first of these is relatively close to here, in Pretoria. It is the official home of our president and has served for decades to house the head of state of South Africa.

I first visited it in the early 1990’s when, paradoxically, its name was ‘Libertas’, after the Roman Goddess of Liberty. I could not help thinking at the time of the crowning irony of a name chosen for this grand Cape Dutch sentinel, as the home to a succession of segregationist and apartheid leaders who had denied its essence to the bulk of their citizens.

But of course the last resident under that title, although a Nationalist, FW de Klerk, did some remarkably liberal things to advance freedom and turn his and the country's back on the grim path forged by all his predecessors.

The last occasion I visited the same residence, in late 2012, let me in full confessional mode advise, was to see Jacob Zuma the president who had appointed me Ambassador to Argentina, from which post I had just returned.

By then, the name emblazoned on the gates of his presidential home – in lieu of Libertas – was 'Mahlamba Ndlopfu', which, from the Shangaan language, translates as 'New Dawn'. That would become the winning slogan for his successor, Cyril Ramaphosa, who would be the next inhabitant of this grand home. This was against the wishes of my host that evening, Jacob Zuma; and Ramaphosa would use the exact words on the gate, New Dawn, as a rallying counterpoint against the road to ruin charted by Zuma.

Of course it was precisely the hope of the 'New Dawn' which helped power President Ramaphosa and his ANC to a fairly handsome victory, although it lost seats, but still maintained its national and provincial power bases, in the May 2019 elections here.

But it is the dashed expectations of its achievement right now, and looking into the future, in the absence of any transcending agenda of reform by his government, which offers great peril to our country.

However, it also – paradoxically – offers huge opportunity to a political movement which can embrace and refresh a principled and pragmatic programme to revive our economy and offer fresh hope to its citizens.

The name changes, from Libertas to New Dawn, also prove how illusory labels can be in politics. The late Jeanne Kirkpatrick famously observed –

Political labelling is like parsley on a plate, decorative but not nourishing.

The second residence which I visited far more recently, just over a month ago, is very far from here, just outside a beautiful town in Kent, England, named Westerham.

Chartwell was the country home occupied by Winston Churchill for over 40 years, from 1922 until his death in 1965. He left so many lessons of political leadership, innumerable

mementoes of which are dotted around the large rooms of his house, that just two are worth recalling for current purposes and tonight's topic.

In his modestly comfortable Chartwell study, he dictated the speeches and the books which helped save the world from fascist tyranny. His home served as ground zero when, very much alone, he took on the might of the appeasing British establishment in the 1930s, even though, as the grandson of a Duke, he was a charter member of it.

In his 'wilderness years' without high office but with great influence, he warned of the menace of Hitler and prepared for the inevitable struggle against it. It is worth recalling, as his brilliant new biographer, Andrew Roberts, recounts in *Churchill – Walking with Destiny*, just what a contrarian and unpopular position he held back then. Perhaps a reminder of how the heresies of the day can become the settled and received wisdom of the future.

And of course, on a raft and range of issues – from Gallipoli to India, and many other miscues – he made some disastrous decisions. Perhaps that is inevitable for someone of his vigour and longevity and willed obstinacy. But, as Roberts concludes his monumental work –

*The battles he won saved liberty.*ⁱ

Churchill himself, who displayed such a copious combination of raw bravery in battle and in politics and sheer bloody mindedness, never minded being alone, in the wrong company, or going against the popular grain of the moment. He offered a clarion call to politicians everywhere and in each epoch, which sadly finds only a faint echo today, if indeed it is heard at all –

Courage is the first of human qualities because it is the quality of that guarantees all the others.

Courage to fight your corner and stick to your beliefs is very hard, especially in South Africa where – ironically almost from the arrival of full blown democracy here in 1994 – a dominant hegemony often dictates the terms of the debate, limits the boundaries of the discourse and heaps opprobrium on dissenters.

Of course, the limits of dissent and disagreement here today are nowhere near as dire and dangerous as under the previous regime of racial nationalism, and free speech enjoys, notionally at least, full blown constitutional protection.

But in the furies of the moment and charting a principled course for the future in our politics, any party or person seeking to advance a creative and credible alternative needs, as a minimum departure point, a star and a fixed point to steer their course. Otherwise, to borrow a phrase, you will be embarking on a journey without maps. And, to modernize, without a GPS or the Waze app., you will certainly lose your way, or land up in a bad place.

Interestingly, during the helter skelter constitutional negotiations of over 25 years ago, one person who navigated by a fixed and bright star was Nelson Mandela. I incidentally enjoyed the counsel and even the friendship of the great man, even though we had some profound disagreements. But he certainly was not a liberal and his allegiance to the ANC was never anything other than unconditional and absolute. But Mandela knew, like Churchill, exactly what he wanted. Those two great leaders were not dogmatic on tactics but were unyielding on their bottom lines.

His close confidant Mac Maharaj, who used to rush out of the negotiations chamber at Kempton Park and drive to Mandela's home in Houghton to brief him on proceedings, expressed this very cogently –

*'(Mandela's) many zig zags were always leading to the same object. When I went to see him, (from the negotiating chamber) he would always ask, 'Where does this take us towards majority rule? How long will it take?' He was my compass through all the talks. The Nats (National Party) had no compass; in the end they were preoccupied with their selfish interests.'*ⁱⁱ

A colleague of mine from those times was Dene Smuts. She very sadly and suddenly died in 2016, but her impeccable and adaptive liberalism was consequence of her approach to public life and how to navigate its often murky and treacherous waters. I had the opportunity in her presence to pay tribute to her consequential career when she left Parliament in 2014.

What I said of her at her farewell function is, in my view, even more relevant to the political cause today which she served with such distinction until fairly recently.

Of the different types of politicians, I suggested –

You can either be a weather vane or a sign post. If you are the former, you will twist in the wind, depend for your advice on the last person you spoke to or the last opinion poll you consulted. You will suck up to those in power and trim your sails to the prevailing winds of

political correctness. That is the easy path of least resistance but it usually leads downhill. Or you can be that rarer bird in the political aviary, a signpost which does not bend to the vagaries of the moment. Someone who stands for a cause greater than personal advancement and temporary vote winning; but for an enduring set of principles and beliefs.

Now that the DA contemplates its future challenges after its first electoral set back since 1994, it might have regard for this taxonomy.

Martin Wolf in a recent essay in the Financial Times suggested that *liberalism is not a precise philosophy, it is an attribute.*

But quite whether or not its meaning is precise and its formula fixed, it needs to be advanced with courage, self-confidence and conviction, to rework the Churchill formula.

And as Martin Wolf, Thomas Nagel and John Rawls and many other liberal philosophers attest, it has several key fixed points by which it is guided.

The individual as the touchstone of value in any society is the essential here. As Wolf wrote recently –

All liberals share this in common: a belief in human agency. They trust in the capacity of humans to decide things for themselves. This belief has radical implications. It implies the right to make their own plans, to express their own opinions, to participate in public life. These attributes were realised in the system called liberal democracy. ⁱⁱⁱ

It is noteworthy that this was written in response to the unbridled attack on liberalism last month by the illiberal elected autocrat of Russia, President Vladimir Putin who declared that

–

The liberal idea has become obsolete. It has come into conflict with the interests of the overwhelming majority of the population. ^{iv}

Putin is the latest member of a not overly distinguished line up to announce liberalism's obsolescence.

In defence of liberalism today, its advocates noted that two centuries of human progress – intellectually, politically and materially – have been underpinned by liberalism which has brought unparalleled benefits to mankind.

In contrast to the kleptocracy over which Putin presides and reinforces with generous doses of international aggression and local repression, *The Times of London*, for example, suggested –

Societies based on the principles that Mr Putin rejected have been unarguably more successful and vibrant than their authoritarian alternatives. Citizens of liberal democracies enjoy freedoms and rights embedded in legally enforceable rules that promote social harmony, preserve justice and limit the powers of the state.^v

But there is no doubt that the brand and basis of liberalism is under threat and question. Not because its underpinnings are wrong – as no comparative global and national alternative has emerged as a template for the world to follow and order itself around – but because either it was prematurely triumphant, as in the 1989 ‘End of History’ thesis of Francis Fukuyama, or because it did not popularise itself in the face of its association with elite insiders and economic unfairness and its unwillingness to address the real concerns of democratic voters everywhere – whether from the destructive power of under-regulated big banks, to the fear of automation, the overreach of big data, dislike for unanswerable bureaucracies, contempt for elites, to alarm over uncontrolled borders.

Each of these has a liberal answer. But before it can be given, the questions need to be acknowledged and the concerns and citizens who raise them need to be respected.

Two recent democratic answers – ‘Take Back Control’, which won the argument for Brexit, to ‘Drain the Swamp’, which did the trick for Donald Trump – are in fact real and relevant concerns and fears, even if the answers and messengers chosen for their achievement are flawed.

But at this point, you might well ask: ‘What has this to do with South Africa and the need here for a liberal party?’ Having set the question; let me now briefly attempt to answer it.

Let me, though, add this: Unique as we often see ourselves or parochial as we often are in dealing with our challenges, I want to set out why the international and historic trends and the core political convictions which are needed and the courage to advance them, stem from a long and unbroken tradition.

I was born into a liberal family in Durban over 62 years ago. We were very secular in our views and way of life, although one of the tribes we belonged to was Jewish.

I suppose if I had thought about it, which I did not at the time, there is a direct link between liberalism and the Judeo-Christian tradition; or between political ideology and ethical values.

Judaism, for example, has always valued the individual. Old Testament thinkers regarded each person as precious because he or she was created in God's image. That was at a time when other people had barely begun to think of individuals except as members of a tribe, group or race.

Thus humans have intellects, capability and pride and ambition. They are capable of great achievement and great evil or great disaster and great good.

Even while growing up under the dark shadow of apartheid, my liberal education and inclination was a matter of birth and home, I never developed an early philosophy, other than a detestation of the prevailing racial order. But when I went to Wits University, and was embroiled in all manner of political antagonisms with the political left and right of those times, I read one book, *Darkness at Noon* by Arthur Koestler, which fused the liberal idea with its more ancient heritage. And, I realised, offered a way out of the racial nationalist trap in which South Africa was then (perhaps as now) ensnared.

Arthur Koestler was an intellectual apostate. He converted from staunch support for Soviet Communism when he resigned from the Communist Party of Germany in 1938, a seminal year for that country and the world. In 1940, he published his famous novel *Darkness at Noon* as testament to what he now embraced and what he had spurned. Many decades later, when I read it first, its essential passage struck me as the key ideological dividing line between liberalism and collectivism, or the individual versus the group –

I don't approve of mixing ideologies...there are only two conceptions of human ethics and they are at opposite poles. One of them, Christian and humane, declares the individual to be sacrosanct and asserts the rules of arithmetic are not to be applied to the human units. The other starts from the basic principle that a collective aim justifies all means, and not only

allows but demands that the individual should in every way be subordinated and sacrificed to the community.

If liberals in South Africa and the world recognize which side of this divide they stand on then, at least they have a compass to find their True North, and chart their responses and reactions to the swirl of events and challenges. It is likely to be more reliable and enduring than an opinion poll, Twitter outrage, ‘Wokeness’ and the fetid stew of identitarian politics and its adherents.

On the fallacy of so-called illiberal ‘identity politics’ and its rather spurious intellectual foundations, a very striking critique was provided recently by Professor Stephen Holmes of New York University in his review of the new work by Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Lies That Bind* –

All classifications, such as race, religion, culture and social status or class are false in some important sense and distort the way we see ourselves and treat one another. The fault of ‘essentialism about identities’ as Appiah terms it, is to assume that there is an ‘inner something’ common to all members of an identity group. In general, there isn’t some inner essence that explains why people of a certain social group are the way they are. The facile assumption that ‘similarity’ or ‘sameness’ can create group cohesion or explain why groups hold together is absurd on its face, since similarity and sameness are not social relations at all but simply comparisons that imply nothing about co-operative relations or emotional identifications... This allows us to simplify a complex reality by attributing a spurious homogeneity and unchanging nature to heterogeneous and constantly shape-shifting swaths of the human population^{vi}

In the same manner, local commentator and former editor of Business Day, Songezo Zibi, identified the dangers here of race-holding and its deleterious consequences. In an article entitled *Recover ‘blackness’ butchered during the Zuma years*, he writes –

...When did we, as black people, lose the ability to identify clear principles and stand by them especially when our own violate those principles? Is it the collective trauma of white racism that drives us to a mentality where irrational closing of ranks is a natural instinct even though we end up protecting and helping those who seek to destroy?^{vii}

Not everyone in our country, or even in the liberal camp here, enjoys the moral courage and intellectual clarity of Songezo Zibi and others who advance a principle first and anticipate the consequences for its advancement afterward and not the other way around. Then there are those who simply concern themselves with the reaction of the ‘normal suspects’ and abandon the principle entirely. It was former DA leader, Helen Zille, in April 2018, who drew my attention to this danger.

In South Africa today there often is a deep fear, for some of the reasons I described above and for another I will address shortly, for falling on the wrong side, not of ideology, but of political fashion or for daring to venture outside the strict limits demarcated for debate by the new thought police. These folk, who would never dream of voting or supporting the Democratic Alliance, for example, never resist calling out the party for its infractions of the ideological hegemon.

Often, instead of fighting its corner or pushing back, the official opposition tries, in the late former opposition leader Dr. Van Zyl Slabbert’s phrase, to ‘*out Mau Mau the Mau Mau*’.

There are many examples of this tendency. I will not elaborate on them, save to provide two examples of an often general trend.

Eskom is the failing state-owned enterprise which is in danger, with a debt of over R450bn, of toppling the entire economy of this country. It is a poster boy, writ large, of every failure embedded in the state-centric transformational project of the government. Beyond the well-chronicled corruption, board mismanagement, abuse of its monopoly status, over staffing, all of which are anathema to both liberal economics and sound practise, there is the issue of employment equity. Not the desire to open its doors to new entrants, but the rigid application – against all logic – of racial quotas, which meant removing qualified engineers because of their race and not because of their competence or commitment.

We recently had evidence that thousands of qualified electrical engineers were removed in this cavalier, self-harming manner. According to one report, ‘In March 2015, Eskom shared its plans to decrease the number of skilled white employees by 3 389 to meet its affirmative action targets’. ^{viii}

If this was entirely and depressingly predictable, and the concern and outrage it sparked equally so, less obvious was the response to this stratagem by a senior DA MP who messaged on Twitter –

To say that affirmative action appointments are to blame for crisis at Eskom is racist. It is based on the belief that Blacks are inferior and cannot be properly qualified and capable.^{ix}

I have no idea whether anyone actually made the suggestion imputed by the MP. But to suggest that calling out a demonstrably economically ruinous and illiberal policy makes the caller racist or implies malign, hidden and immoral stereotyping simply repeats the moral ammunition which the ANC rains down on its enemies and those who demand good governance and the application of sound policy. Mischaracterisations lead to many mistakes...

And in the same news cycle, and all this happened at the height of the recent general election here, another DA figure, its Youth Leader, offered a profoundly illiberal perspective on who should participate in the election. He commenced a lobby and petition to call for the exclusion from the poll of a racist fringe group, Black Land First (BLF), because, in his view –

The BLF has shown itself to be a cabal of unrepentant racists whose mission is to divide South Africans along racial lines and to undermine the constitutional values.^x

Taken to its logical conclusion, quite a number of parties larger than the BLF, would also have merited exclusion on this test. But the test, however electorally pleasing, does considerable violence to the ‘free market of ideas’ view of the liberal and democratic discourse. It is also worth recalling that Helen Suzman in 1970, at the moment when Communism was regarded as the greatest threat to white interests in this country, on the eve of a general election, called for the unbanning of the SA Communist Party.

Recently, the BLF was deregistered as a political party by the Independent Electoral Commission on the basis of its racially exclusionary constitution and on application by the Freedom Front Plus. But on the salient issue of its offensive and divisive postures and

rhetoric, it seems to me that the wisest, and certainly most liberal approach, is summed up in the book title by Anthony Lewis on the topic, his ‘biography’ of the US First Amendment (the free speech proviso) –

Freedom for the Thought that we Hate.

Perhaps the adherents of these views genuinely believe that contrary views and voices which do not fit the dominant narrative and stand outside the intellectual hegemon constructed like an iron wall around the policy choices for South Africa need to be excluded from the discourse. Or label those who go against the grain of these times as ‘moral criminals’ to borrow the phrase of my late friend, Professor Etienne Mureinik.

He, incidentally, from an intellectually brave and rigorous position, was among the first to call this stigma- labelling for what it is. In 1995, he wrote prophetically that liberals especially would become again stigmatised with renewed ferocity –

Liberal has again become the stigma label. Under Verwoerd and Vorster liberal was the stigma-label of choice. It meant so far left as to be almost Communist. But now it (means) so far Right as to be almost racist. It is a new psycho-trick, calculated to taint the democrats on one’s Right with the authoritarianism of those much further to the Right. ^{xi}

There is, in my view, another explanation for how the dominant discourse, often its policies and its labelling and sometimes its illiberalism has swept beyond the walls of the ANC fortress and its foot soldiers, and is now manifest everywhere, from business, to civil society and sometimes into the ranks of the official opposition.

Once again, it was Arthur Koestler who gave voice to this tendency when he made a very influential speech in 1948 at the Carnegie Hall in New York. He said –

You can’t help people being right for the wrong reasons...The fear of finding oneself in bad company is not an expression of political purity; it is an expression of lack of self-confidence.

^{xii}

Koestler was referring to the liberal critics of Communism who often feared to voice their opinions in public for ‘fear of being labelled with the brush of reaction’ as the late great historian Tony Judt elaborates in his history of Europe since 1945, *Postwar*.

Thus it was at the same time, as the first major show trials in Eastern Europe and as Stalin’s murderous fist expanded beyond the Soviet Union and the mute silence of most European intellectuals against its excesses was a feature of those times. Judt provides a compelling explanation for the lack of backbone –

The left had the wind in its sails and history on its side...at the core of the anti-fascist rhetoric of the official Left was a simple binary view history. They (the fascists, Nazis, Franco-ists, Nationalists) are Right, we are Left. They are reactionary, we are Progressive. They stand for War, we stand for Peace. They are the forces of Evil, we are on the side of Good. ^{xiii}

You can make the necessary substitutions today in South Africa: the fear of being tarred with the brush of racism or the label ‘anti-transformation’, the need for affirmation by those on ‘the right side of history’, the muting of voices of dissenters outside the dominant discourse. But to allow this to become the lodestar of the opposition or of civil society seems to me a very poor reading of history and even worse politics.

Perhaps this might explain the following paragraph which appeared in the 2019 election manifesto of the Democratic Alliance.

Under the headline of *A New Plan to Realize Economic Justice for All South Africans* the text reads –

The reason that the DA supports a programme of race-based redress is, simply put, because it is an important part of our country’s reconciliation project and vital for justice...This means that a programme of redress does need a sunset clause. As a party that believes in liberal values and principles, we would seek to ensure that we move to a non-racial position as soon as a successful redress programme has been implemented... ^{xiv}

Nothing convinces, as the saying goes, as much as conviction. But the have-cake-will-eat-it baked into the formula for race-based redress now coupled with a promise of non-racial liberalism at some indeterminate point in the future, seems to me a spectacular example of double-think, equivocation, and appealing-to-everyone-and-pleasing-no-one.

Incidentally, precisely that criticism of the British Labour Party was made of it after its electoral implosion in the recent elections for the European Parliament. On the burning issue of Brexit, which saw a new party with that name surge into first place in the British poll and the official opposition limp into third place with just 13.7% support, Labour attempted to fudge and equivocate on the issue. ‘It tried to face two ways at once, offering something to everyone and convinced no one,’ as an analyst noted.

Van Zyl Slabbert provided an early warning in June 2006 when he delivered a speech at conference on ‘The Revival of Race Classification in Post Apartheid South Africa’. He offered both a warning and prescription. He called for South Africa to move away from *its stubborn obsession with race*. And he predicted –

If you make yourself hostage to a racist past, you can bank on a racist future.

Thirteen years on, Slabbert’s prophecy has been realised, even perhaps in the party he once led.

If liberalism is about the individual as the touchstone of value in society, it always had a hard swim in the mephitic and murky waters of our politics.

Hence the need for ‘the long obedience’ and the ‘politics of the long haul’, to quote another former liberal leader, Colin Eglin. But the liberal ideal and the policies which flow from it, does provide a rallying point and fixed star to guide and navigate with. It is in marketing terms, a very useful ‘product differentiator’. Or as Professor Hermann Giliomee advised the DA parliamentary caucus some years ago, *you should not bat on your opponent’s pitch*.

The United States Chief Justice gave a pithy riposte to the urge to use race as proxy for disadvantage, a burning issue which tends to immolate anyone who suggests otherwise. He maintains –

The way to stop discriminating on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race.

But according to the formula offered by the Democratic Alliance, cited above, *race based redress...is vital for justice.*

This in turn is referenced to an undeniable and hugely relevant fact of South African life, also cited by the DA in the same manifesto: *millions of people still trapped by our legacy of racially exclusionary policy (sic) in grinding poverty, with no real chance of escape or a better life.*

If liberalism is about the rights and ambitions and affirmation of the individual citizen then, self-evidently, it cannot be indifferent to poverty and inequality. These blight any possibility that the individual can fulfil their promise, reach their destiny and improve their life chances. And that is why policies to boost economic growth are a cause not for the rich and the comfortable but for everyone, especially the most disadvantaged. Over twenty years ago, Ken Andrew MP spelt this out with crystalline clarity –

If poverty is to be alleviated, there is no substitute for economic growth. Anyone who really cares about the poor must be passionate about economic growth.

For example, if South Africa were to achieve annual GDP growth of 5.3% promised by the National Development Plan we would double national income per capita in just fourteen years. But if we continue on our present path, bumping along at the bottom rung of around 1% GDP annual growth, it will take around 70 years to achieve the same outcome.

So, is the only solution now to apply more race-based policies to offset the legacy of race-based policies in order for people to climb the ladder out of poverty?

Professor Charles Simkins, Head of Research at the Helen Suzman Foundation, thinks not. He offered a recent, realistic and, in my view, compelling answer –

Lowering the salience of race will be slow at best...But this does not imply a lack of attention to issues of poverty and social inclusion, but it does imply using criteria other than race as a basis for entitlement and obligation.

He then cites the fact that social grants use non-racial categories – age, health, status, income etc. – as the basis for allocation and then notes –

Grants are disproportionately allocated to Black people-but Blackness is not the criterion for assistance.

Precisely the same for those funding the grants, the taxpayer. Taxation is based on income, consumption and profit –

The incidence of taxation falls disproportionately on white people, but whiteness is not the criterion for the obligation.

And Simkins asks the question essential for any liberal party, indeed one of the self-proclaimed aims of the DA in its recent manifesto –

How do you stop the mobilization of voters on racial lines, if you use race as a category for your own policies of redress? ^{xv}

On 17 July 2019, in Parliament, Leader of the Democratic Alliance, Mmsui Maimane MP, called for the scrapping of Broad Based Black Economic Empowerment on grounds of its ineffectiveness and exclusions when he said: *'It does nothing for 99% of South Africa's excluded citizens.* ^{xvi}

Maimane has not yet indicated whether he will take the opposition scalpel to the paraphernalia of race-based post-apartheid legislation and regulations, a cornerstone of which is the Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998.

Let me conclude with a story from my time when the liberal opposition here was in far worse condition than any of the ailments or challenges which confront the same organisation today.

When I became the party leader in 1994, we had none of the advantages which the DA has today – a big and diverse party, multiple caucuses, governance of a province and a

professional political machine and a large funding base. Oh and we also had the singular disadvantage of leading an opposition to one of the most universally admired and celebrated icons of the democratic age, Nelson Mandela.

But one of the many disadvantages which we faced back then was that the small Democratic Party, aside from its obvious negatives, had a further and less obvious one: it was an ideological fruit salad with bits and pieces in its internal DNA, from hard-core liberals to anti-apartheid End Conscription activists to refugees from other political movements.

What had sustained and held the party together when apartheid was the dominant issue and the fight against it the glue which unified the organisation would clearly not sustain it in the post-apartheid, new era of democracy. It required more clarity and a sharper focus if it was to be seen and heard amidst the competing din of the new politics.

So we set about, among a mountain of other tasks, trying to distil the essence of our offer in the here and now and into the future South Africa. In this task, which took many forms, policies, congresses and was often railroaded by many diversions, we settled on a phrase and unpacked a set of policies which we framed around our offer of an ‘open and opportunity society’.

The ‘open’ half of our prospectus was clear enough both then and now: defend the constitution, promote the Rule of Law and advance the rights of individual citizens against those who would encroach their liberties – cultural, personal, and linguistic and economic. Advancing and preserving so-called ‘negative liberties’ had been the core business of the party and its predecessor since 1959 and we knew how to do it.

But on the ‘opportunity’ part of the agenda, it was not always clear that the liberal agenda could compete in the new political marketplace and break through the sound barrier to any effect. Despite the risks of being called various uncomplimentary names (as we duly were) and all the dangers associated with breaking the politically comfortable but economically

stultifying and job-destroying consensus which then existed between the government and the big business and labour union groupings in South Africa.

But aside from giving this party some ‘clear blue water’ between itself and its opponents, it also helped to provide a cohering vision to party members and supporters.

The party grew rapidly and attracted people who would never have described themselves as ‘liberal’ but we had a set of values, principles and policies which could be stamped ‘liberal democrat’ and helped glue our parts together. It held us together and our principles were put into practice: we opposed a raft of positively labelled legislation – such as the employment equity bill and the labour relations bill – which had, as we predicted they would, hugely negative outcomes. We were called names and we moved on. And we kept winning more votes. Some said we ‘had painted ourselves into a corner’. But the corner kept getting bigger. We proposed our own policies, from the Social Market Economy document to the Agenda for a Better Country. We advanced our principles and anticipated the reaction to their advancement, and not the other way around. Our principles and policies determined where we were positioned in the political spectrum and not the reverse.

And, just to prove that there is, in the words of King Solomon, ‘Nothing new under the Sun’, we had no shortage of problems with people demanding entitlement and promotion on the basis of illiberal categories such as race and language. At a party congress way back in 1997, I cautioned –

We need to be certain when we talk of ‘merit not colour’ and ‘excellence with equity’ and when we attack unprincipled affirmative action which favours the liberation aristocracy of the new elite, that we don’t in our own party move towards any entitlement based on group membership. The message we apply to government needs application in our own party.

Of course not everyone agreed and we had a lot of setbacks and disappointments on the route we chose and sometimes failed to hit the targets we set for ourselves. But we understood the need to keep going with the ‘politics of the long haul’.

In April 2005, appropriately at a lecture in honour of Helen Suzman, I tried to crystallise the aspect of the liberal state at work in the most positive terms –

Liberal policies can help the poor. A flexible labour market creates more jobs. School vouchers improve opportunities for education; successful private hospitals create better health care for all ...the liberal state removes barriers to market entry that stifle individual opportunity and enterprise (and then quoting John Kane Berman) 'it is frugal with taxes, recognising that they are the fruits of human labour, not the property of the state. Where it collects taxes to redistribute, it does so in a way to help the poor start climbing the ladder of self-reliance and success. It avoids doing things that profit-driven entrepreneurs can do more effectively. Where it has to make trade-offs, it favours liberty above restriction, the poor above the rich, and consumers above producers.'^{xvii}

The further advantage of a liberal state as a precursor of widening freedom and expanding choices for its entire people would be to have a nation of empowered citizens rather than a subset of victims of past and present circumstances. Then more people than ever will live the truth of Russian-born poet and Nobel laureate, Josef Brodsky who wrote –

A free man when he fails blames nobody.

Does this prescription fit the DA offer of an opportunity society today? Perhaps it does or it has been refashioned. Or parts have been discarded. But this or similar formulae provided the party with a clear road map, and a store of values to measure government activity and to promote its own agenda. It also ensured, despite the name-calling and the race-holding which so poisons the political discourse, that the party had a distinctive vision to call its own and to fire up its supporters and to confront its opponents.

Fourteen years since that speech, South Africa is still facing the same problems, only more of them and in much less benign local and international economic circumstances than it did back then.

There are many other items from the same broad menu –liberty, choice, competition, opportunity and equality – which are even more relevant today and on which much more research and real-time applications exist in the world than they did when I offered that prescription back then.

I think the need for a liberal party – armed with courage, clarity, self-confidence, vision and purpose – is needed now, at this time of demoralisation and peril in our country, more than ever.

Renewal is needed – it always has been for the long political journey. And part of that renewal is not to simply hold up a mirror to the government and point out the many things so many of us know it has got wrong. It is even more vital, now that the election dust has settled, for the opposition to hold up a mirror to its own soul.

The Chinese strategist Sun Tzu offered an ancient aphorism no less compelling in these times of bewildering uncertainty and complexity in the battle for ideas to move our country forward –

If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of 100 battles. If you know yourself but not your enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.

Thank You.

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- ⁱ Andrew Roberts – *Churchill-Walking with Destiny*. Allen Lane. 2018 – at p. 982
- ⁱⁱ Antony Sampson *Mandela –the Authorised Biography*. Harper Press. 2011 –at p.465
- ⁱⁱⁱ Marin Wolf, *Financial Times*, 2 July 2019.
- ^{iv} *Financial Times*, 28 June 2019.
- ^v *Liberalism Lives* The Times, London, 28 June 2019
- ^{vi} Stephen Holmes *The Identity Illusion-* The New York Review of Books 17January 2019
- ^{vii} Songezo Zibi *Recover ‘blackness’ butchered during the Zuma years*. News24 8 July 2019.
- ^{viii} *Eskom Wants to get rid of white engineers* -17 February 2019. <https://mybroadband.co.za >news>
- ^{ix} Tweet by Phumzile van Damme 13 February 2019
- ^x Statement by Luyolo Mphiti 14 February 2019.
- ^{xi} Etienne Mureinik *Do we want quality or ethnic cleansing?* Mail and Guardian 22 December 1995- 4 January 1996.
- ^{xii} Tony Judt *Postwar A History of Europe since 1945*. The Penguin Press. 2005 - at p. 217
- ^{xiii} Judt, op cit., p 215
- ^{xiv} Democratic Alliance Election Manifesto 2019 *The Manifesto for Change* - at p.10
- ^{xv} Charles Simkins *Politicsweb* 12 June 2019
- ^{xvi} Mmusi Maimane MP *South Africa needs a new economic consensus* Speech in Parliament 17 July 2019 – da.org.za
- ^{xvii} Tony Leon *South African Liberalism Today and its Discontents* – in *Opposing Voices –Liberalism and Opposition in South Africa Today* Milton Shain(Ed.). Jonathan Ball. 2006 –at p. 49.