

EXTRACT

The Accidental Mayor: Herman Mashaba and the Battle for Johannesburg

Mashaba's challenges with the DA were compounded by the fact that the party was going through an existential crisis. It had become deeply divided and those factional lines were drawn from the top all the way down to our caucus.

On the one side were the self-proclaimed 'true liberals', who feared that the party was abandoning its liberal values in order to expand beyond the confines of its historical support base. I believe that many of these people wanted the DA to remain within the comfort zone of suburbia, happy to continue as a small, tight-knit party with a largely white electorate.

On the other side were those desperate to see the party grow into a force that could contest and win elections, while giving expression to its liberal values in a way relevant to the South African context.

At one stage, it was reported in the media that these two groups had been branded 'the Laptop Boys' and 'the Bruma Boys'. Not exactly the stuff of hardened prison gangs.

At the centre of the schism was how the DA would respond to the question of race and racism. The party was severely divided on these subjects, and since 2016 any discussion on them had become unmanageable. The 'true liberals' rejected race as a proxy for disadvantage, although some begrudgingly agreed that race and inequality did in fact coincide. They believed that race-based policies to redress the legacies of apartheid should be abandoned. How the diagnosis and the cure could be unrelated in their simple minds is beyond me.

Mashaba and I believed they were mad. In our opinion, in South Africa the lines of racial inequality undeniably mirrored the injustices of the past. Those injustices were perpetrated exclusively on the basis of race, so to address disadvantage through any other proxy is simply denying history. Furthermore, besides a small black elite, inequality had worsened in the 25 years of ANC rule. Not only did we have to overcome the better part of four centuries of oppression, but also the past quarter of a century during which the ANC had failed and elements within the party had plundered with impunity. To bring it home, Johannesburg was now among the most unequal cities in the world.

Then there was the party's 'ambulance-chasing' approach to racism. The DA used incidents of racism as a means to try to shed its image as a 'white' party. Every time a racist incident took place, a party spokesperson was dispatched to condemn it. This was a dangerous game for a supposedly centrist party. We risked being criticised for being selective and opportunistic in our response to cases of racism. The DA's internally compromised position on race and racism ultimately resulted in a profound confusion in its external messaging.

It was probably not surprising that it was the 'true liberals' who took the greatest exception to Mashaba. As a student of politics, I had read the works of the great political philosophers and had studied John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*. I understood liberalism to be located in the idea that individual freedom is supreme in the balancing of authority and liberty. It was my view that the DA's so-called 'true liberals' would have been more aptly labelled conservative.

They were the fiercest opponents of our relationship with the EFF. They apparently believed that the only way a voting arrangement with the EFF in Johannesburg could survive when it was falling apart everywhere else in the country was if we somehow sold out. 'We are compromising

our values,' they would proclaim, retreating into their intellectual laager. When asked which values we were compromising and how, you could see them scanning for an answer, like old computer software being overloaded. Ultimately, we were met with stony silence.

The truth was that it was entirely Mashaba's leadership that held this arrangement together. Through consultation, sharing the credit and constructing a joint agenda to deliver change in the city, he managed to achieve a shared ownership that ensured that all partners would defend the project. It was an approach that made total sense in a coalition government.

As one example, as we approached the approval of our adjustments budget in January 2019, we learnt that the EFF had been directed to absent themselves from all council meetings in order to work to fill a stadium for their manifesto launch three days later. We were gutted; we had broken our backs to make history and pass an adjustments budget in January, rather than February, as was custom, so that we'd have more time to deliver change through the revised projects before the financial year end.

The adjustments budget had involved endless consultation to ensure it reflected the service delivery imperatives of our partners and the EFF. Mashaba asked the EFF caucus leader if he could petition their national leadership to change their minds. 'No problem, but I don't think you will succeed,' he was told. Mashaba called Julius Malema. 'I understand your views,' Mashaba said, 'but we have achieved an adjustments budget with your councillors here in Johannesburg which would ensure accelerated delivery to the poorest residents of our city. We can wait until February in terms of the law but I don't think we should ask the poorest residents to wait another month.' To our surprise, Malema answered: 'Don't worry, Mayor, our councillors will be there.' True to their word, they arrived and supported the budget.

This is how coalitions work. When your partners feel left out, on the periphery of the process, you cannot expect them to rally behind you.

Unfortunately, for some in the DA, this notion proved too inconvenient to accept. They did not want to hear that the EFF made good partners at local government level. The EFF were against fraud and corruption and therefore gave our agenda in this regard their full support. They wanted acceleration in service delivery, especially to the poor in Johannesburg, as did we. They wanted to see jobs being created by a growing and more inclusive economy, as did we. They wanted to professionalise the civil service, as did we. It wasn't difficult for us to find enough areas of mutual interest for our arrangement to be effective.

When the EFF called Mashaba the 'EFF mayor' in a parliamentary debate in 2018, claiming him as their own, my heart sank. I knew our antagonists in the DA – the 'true liberals' – were going to use it against us. Some of them took to labelling Mashaba the 'EFF mayor' when voicing their concerns about the coalition arrangements. It hurt Mashaba that those who were meant to support him in this near-to-impossible task were so unwilling to claim him as their own.

By their own admission, one of the reasons the EFF embraced Mashaba was his willingness to engage with them, particularly over the insourcing of security personnel. This irritated the liberal faction of the DA. 'We don't have insourcing in our policy suite,' they argued. 'Why are we pushing an EFF policy?' Mashaba's response was simple: 'Given the benefits and the business case for insourcing, don't you think we should write our own policy?'

Whether our detractors in the party felt threatened by having to share the limelight with Mashaba's ever-growing public profile or whether they could not get behind an arrangement with the EFF ideologically, I have no idea. Perhaps they didn't like the idea that Mashaba was

his own man, beholden to no one because he had no political ambitions, or that he set his own policies, circumventing tedious party processes that took ages to come up with a position that was neither here nor there.

I suspect all of the above played a role in their antipathy towards Mashaba, exacerbated by frustration that, while they sat on opposition benches, he was getting the governing experience they lacked.

In the run-up to the 2019 general election, we had the displeasure of observing the decline of the DA, which was then cemented in the results. DA support dropped in the region of 1.7 per cent, down from 22.4 per cent in 2014 to 20.7 per cent in 2019. While not catastrophic, it was the first time since 1994 that the party did not grow in an election, *and* it took place at a time when the ANC was in crisis. The ‘nine lost years’ under President Zuma and the consequent disillusionment with the ruling party had made the opposition space fertile ground. The ‘Ramaphoria’ that had swept the nation when Cyril Ramaphosa succeeded Zuma had begun to wane and the ANC was in deep trouble. The unemployment figure of nearly 35 per cent was an all-time high, the economy had all but stalled at 1 per cent growth, and various commissions of inquiry were revealing the extent of the corruption within the ANC.

That the DA not only failed to grow but actually declined in this climate was an indictment.

For the ‘true liberals’, the electoral losses were the excuse they needed to seize control. I suspect our government in Johannesburg was high on their agenda as they sought to hang the party’s failure on every hook that suited them. They claimed that it was the DA’s refusal to abandon race as a proxy for disadvantage that lost us support in our traditional constituencies. They also blamed our arrangement with the EFF in Johannesburg and the slow pace of change in our municipalities for the party’s misfortunes.

Mashaba and I sat through a variety of meetings in which our administration was fingered as the culprit in the DA’s demise. Fortunately, I had come prepared. My approach is always to allow my opponents to fully ventilate their views so that by the time I enter the debate with the facts that render their arguments invalid, it is very difficult for them to change tack. ‘We lost votes in Johannesburg because voters were frustrated with grass-cutting,’ someone would say to rapturous applause. ‘We declined because our voters don’t want us governing with the EFF,’ another would opine. When it came our turn to respond, I would put forward the actual figures of losses across all municipalities. The losses in Johannesburg were the lowest. ‘So unless local factors in Johannesburg drove losses in different parts of the country, which would be difficult to claim, your argument and its intent have been laid bare,’ I would conclude.

The reality, as Mashaba and I saw it, was that the campaign had been a disaster, beset by what one commentator best described as ‘unprovoked acts of self-mutilation’. The party’s poorly executed firing of former mayor of Cape Town Patricia de Lille, the indecision around Mmusi Maimane standing for Western Cape premier and the resignation of policy director Gwen Ngwenya all took their toll. The campaign message was another glaring problem. Your electoral offer has to be clearly defined and distinguishable, and then conveyed to the electorate so that they know exactly what you’re offering. To this day I do not know what the DA’s 2019 election offer actually was. ‘One South Africa for All’ is a great vision, but it is not an offer. Add to this an almost complete collapse of the party’s ground structures’ ability to deliver a message outside of the airwaves, and you had a recipe for disaster.

Mashaba was deeply frustrated throughout the campaign, especially by the party’s inability to

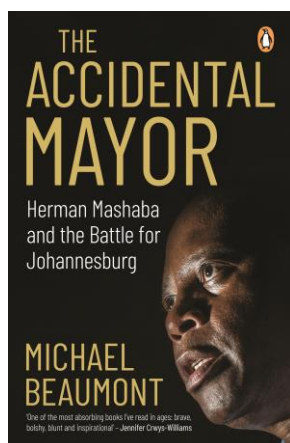
communicate its achievements. Here we were rolling out services to people, some of whom had not seen a government service in the last 25 years, but when it came time to take ownership of the achievement, such as the electrification of 4 000 households in an informal settlement, there was never a DA branch member to be seen. For a party that suffers from a trust deficit with the majority of the electorate, there can be no better remedy than demonstrating actual service delivery achievements that improve the lives of such people.

It was self-sabotage of the highest order: those in the party who opposed our government would not lift a finger to champion its successes, and they would be the ones to turn around and question what we had really achieved by way of growth.

I recall one meeting at Mashaba's house with a senior party fundraising delegation in which they asked him to plough money into TV adverts attacking Ramaphosa. In 2016, Mashaba had thrown his money at the DA's mayoral campaigns. Never once was he thanked, not even by the party's candidate in Tshwane, Solly Msimanga, for whose campaign Mashaba had had 10 000 T-shirts printed.

At a Youth Day celebration in Alexandra in 2016, Mashaba had accompanied Maimane to the home of the family of a young man who had been killed by police during the 1976 uprising. Mashaba offered R500 000 to a trust that the DA would need to set up to fund tertiary education for deserving youth in Alexandra, in the name of the victim's family. The DA promoted the gesture unreservedly, but did not do a thing to set up the trust or assess its work down the line. This and the party's ingratitude had a lasting impact on Mashaba.

When the delegation concluded their pitch, Mashaba said he would think it through, but I could see he had no interest. The party had disappointed him personally and had failed to back the work of his government, and the campaign was an incoherent disaster.



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