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Repelling the black vote

South Africa's main opposition party can't cure its foot-in-mouth syndrome

South Africa's main opposition party, the Democratic Alliance (DA), has been on a steep upward climb since 2004. It has increased its share of the vote in every national poll to reach 22.23% in 2014; it has also greatly expanded its support at the municipal level, where in 2016 it secured 26.9% of the vote and ousted the ANC from control of major urban centres, such as Johannesburg, Pretoria and Port Elizabeth.

The DA has also broadened its support beyond its traditional Western Cape stronghold to build a national presence; a victory in the province of Gauteng, home to Johannesburg and South Africa's economic hub, now looks far from inconceivable in 2019.

This was all made possible by the DA's impressive progress under the leadership of Helen Zille, former mayor of Cape Town and now premier of the Western Cape. She stood down in 2014, partly in recognition of the fact that a society where politics is still defined by race would only have so much room for a party with a white leader. Her successor, Mmusi Maimane, the party's first black leader, is trying to win support from previously indifferent or hostile black communities. He seeks to reposition the DA as a party not merely at ease with the new South Africa, but genuinely enthusiastic about it.

Maimane claims the DA has jettisoned the historical baggage which caused it to be viewed as the party of privileged white suburbia. Given that black Africans make up 80% of South Africa's population, the toxicity of that image is self-evident. The DA's campaign to build black support may still be in its infancy, but the 2016 elections showed that progress has indeed been made, particularly among the urban black population.

Still, the challenge remains formidable – and Zille, who once seemed to understand what the DA needed to do to win, has suddenly made it much harder.

Don’t go there

Having made way for Maimane several years ago, Zille crashed back into the debate recently with a now-infamous spurt of tweets in which she suggested that people bear in mind that colonialism left some positive legacies. Coming from a senior member of a party with a racially narrow electoral base in a still racially fractured society, this was at best idle self-indulgence, and at worst self-destructive small-mindedness.

In the space of a few minutes, Zille undid years of work. She reinforced the entrenched suspicion about the DA: that, at heart, it is nostalgic for the days of white minority rule, and is unable to comprehend how it is received in the black communities which endured settler colonialism, empire and apartheid. Her idle tweets lend credence to the idea that the DA simply does not or cannot feel black South Africans’ pain, and that it instead caters to the narrow prejudices of wealthy whites. It takes a wrecking ball to the edifice maintained by Maimane – and indeed, by Zille herself.

When challenged, Zille bafflingly kept it up. Yes, she was technically correct when she insisted that she didn’t defend colonialism per se. But her protestations are unconvincing; to quote a senior party colleague, John Steenhuisen, her behaviour is “utterly inexplicable”. She is experienced enough to know that perceptions are crucial in politics, and that her words reflect not only on her, but on her party.

So why did Zille think it necessary to open this debate now? With all that’s going on in South Africa, what makes this issue so urgent?

Perhaps she simply sees it as her prerogative to voice any sentiment she likes under her constitutional right to freedom of speech. But there’s simply no need to exercise that right in all circumstances, no matter the cost. What of her obligations to respect party policy and to do nothing which brings the DA into disrepute?

After all, as premier of the Western Cape, she is as conspicuous a figure as any in the party, so the original tweets and her subsequent justifications can hardly be dismissed as the ramblings of a minor functionary. And it’s far from unreasonable for those outside the party to conclude that her sentiments are shared more widely among her comrades.

Turning back the clock

Crucially, Zille’s behaviour grants the ANC a welcome reprieve just as it goes into meltdown over the various problems with Jacob Zuma’s

benighted presidency. Now the party leadership can implore its constituency to cling to nurse for fear of something worse, ceaselessly deploying the Zille tweet in the months and years ahead to contrast itself with a supposedly racist and backward-looking rival.

And where the racist accusation cannot be personally levelled at DA figures, an alternative ANC narrative will quickly surface – namely that the DA's senior black figures are little more than marionettes, their strings pulled by white puppeteers.

The DA leadership knows how vulnerable it is to that criticism, and is taking action accordingly. While Zille initially refused to apologise – an action bordering on extreme egotism – she eventually issued an unconditional apology for her behaviour on June 13, and has now been removed from any further role in the party's internal structures.

While she remains premier of the Western Cape, her official sanction was a crucial victory for Maimane. Had Zille gone unpunished, his credibility would have been shattered. Still, it may yet prove too little, too late. For all the progress the party has made, it can only win power with a clear-headed strategy to attract many, many more black votes.

With her idle, tone-deaf musings, Zille has shaken her party's structures, taken the heat off the ANC and undermined Maimane's project. Her reputation is unlikely to survive, and the damage she's done could take years to repair.

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James Hamill
Leicester

James Hamill is a lecturer in Politics and International Relations, University of Leicester. His principal research interest is party politics in South Africa.