

BOOK REVIEW

Should you buy this book?

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Eusebius McKaiser

Could I vote DA?

A Voter's Dilemma

COULD I VOTE DA: A VOTERS DILEMMA by Eusebius McKaiser
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Could I Vote DA: A Voter's Dilemma by Eusebius McKaiser

At repeated intervals in his new book, Eusebius McKaiser imagines DA leaders and strategists responding to his criticism of their party with "vitriol and defensiveness".

One can understand the impulse.

Before he is even out of the blocks and into his first chapter, McKaiser has dismissed the DA as a "comedy of political errors". And for much of the narrative the author continues in that breezily opinionated vein. The party's communications are "tone-deaf", he proclaims throughout, in a tone that suggests he is very pleased indeed with himself for saying so.

In a chapter entitled, "Please Stop Shouting at Me", he likens the DA to a high-school pupil who has recently taken up debating. "They are not terribly good at it yet", he sniffs, "but better than the lazy kids and plain untalented kids who are not in the debate club, and so with newfound cockiness they show off their debate skill".

'Debate skill' is highly prized by McKaiser, whose blurb informs us that he is a former South African and World Masters Debate Champion. Contemplating whether he, as a black South African, could rise to the top of the DA, McKaiser reckons: "I probably could – I speak fairly well, have travelled the world, won debate and public-speaking competitions, and can give [DA parliamentary leader, Lindiwe] Mazibuko a run for her debating money".

That sentence reveals a lot about his book. Instead of holding up a mirror to the DA, McKaiser succeeds largely in holding up a mirror to himself. A more appropriate title might have been, *Could I lead the DA? A Master Debater's Dilemma*.

The blurb proudly quotes DA leader Helen Zille on McKaiser: "Don't give him oxygen. He wants a controversy. Narcissism in extremis. Attention seeking". It is difficult, having read *Could I Vote DA*, to dispute that diagnosis. Yet the issues raised by the book are worth ventilating, because they are timely and because they allow for deeper reflection on recent debates about the DA's ideological and strategic direction.

McKaiser has an original and thought-provoking chapter on what the DA could do to create and nurture a more diverse pool of black talent in its ranks, and he makes some perspicacious points about the DA's courtship with Agang (presumably he submitted his manuscript before the marriage was annulled). But, for the most part, the author's critique is diminished by an over-reliance on skewed evidence, personal anecdotes, subjective impressions and second-hand party gossip.

So, for example, we are told in the first two chapters that the DA doesn't "understand

its own liberal identity” on the basis of a single blog entry by political commentator and former party staffer, Gareth Van Onselen, in which he attacked DA national spokesman, Musi Maimane, for embracing Ubuntu.

Van Onselen wrote that “there is no such thing as Ubuntu” as far as liberalism is concerned, and even if there was, it “would be anathema...to...basic human rights, individual civil liberties and liberal ideals”.

According to McKaiser, Van Onselen’s rejection of Ubuntu is “symptomatic of a perceived loss of identity, loss of power, [and] loss of a political home” on the part of liberals who want to save their DA “from non-DA values”.

McKaiser devotes a disproportionate number of pages to deconstructing Van Onselen’s argument (written, incidentally, long after he had left the DA) as if it were an official party statement on liberalism and group identity, but he says nothing about the countervailing views it generated within the party at the time. For example, DA Communications Director, Gavin Davis, responded that “it is feasible for a person [who believes in Ubuntu] to self-identify as a liberal” and he welcomed the discussion on Ubuntu as “something that liberals should celebrate and not feel threatened by”.

It is also incongruous, given that McKaiser acknowledges in a later chapter the huge strides the DA has made under Zille in building “a party culture and organisation that [appeals] to new members and supporters who did not previously find the DA appealing”.

McKaiser’s one-sidedness serves to obscure the DA’s real receptiveness to shaping a more inclusive institutional identity, one that can accommodate South Africans with different worldviews, but which is still rooted in the broader vision and values of what the party calls the “open, opportunity society for all”.

DA leader Helen Zille spoke of this openness when she addressed the Liberal International Congress in Belfast in 2008 on the theme of an “inclusive society”. She argued that liberals in divided societies must “live their values beyond the confines of a cosy club of like-minded people who think, speak and look much the same”, while noting that this would be challenging for many liberal stalwarts who “often perceive every adaptation as a dilution of principle”.

McKaiser need not take Zille’s word for it – after all, the DA has matched words with deeds, which is why the DA in 2014 looks radically different from the DA in 2000 – but disregarding her words altogether, because they undermine his case, is at best disingenuous. It is also incongruous, given that McKaiser acknowledges in a later chapter the huge strides the DA has made under Zille in building “a party culture and organisation that [appeals] to new members and supporters who did not previously find the DA appealing”.

In another chapter, McKaiser reheats the old chestnut – much loved by Tony Leon’s detractors – that the DA is shrill. It lacks tonal and “stylistic range”, he says. Well, perhaps it does – style and tone being rather a matter of personal perception. Even so, it seems a bit unfair to marshal as evidence a throwaway remark that Lindiwe Mazibuko made to a university student one night. And McKaiser altogether overreaches when he concludes that Mazibuko demonstrated “a lack of humanity”, “insufficient emotional intelligence” and “no understanding of political strategic communication” on that occasion. This is hyperbole masquerading as honest criticism.

In fact, McKaiser is only too happy to make all sorts of cocksure assertions about the DA's approach to strategic communications, particularly insofar as it targets ANC voters. Yet he seems to have interviewed none of the party's strategic communicators for his book. He claims that DA strategists regard ANC voters as "irrational" and hostages to "liberation history". This is why the party embarked on a "misplaced" – and ultimately unsuccessful, in his view – "Know Your DA" campaign, to try and compete with the ANC's struggle credentials.

Of course he completely misses the whole point of the campaign, which was not to try and out-struggle the ANC, but to tell the story of the DA's predecessor parties' opposition to apartheid and their fight for non-racial democracy on the DA's own terms.

Tellingly, McKaiser makes no reference to the seminal document penned in 2006 by former DA strategist, Ryan Coetzee, entitled "Becoming a Party for All the People: A New Approach for the DA".

The reality is that ANC voters who would consider supporting the DA – those who have asked and answered in the affirmative the question posed by McKaiser's title, but who do not have the benefit of the author's education or 'debate skill' – often ask DA campaigners whether the party would bring back apartheid if it won an election. Many believe that Helen Suzman was a member of the ANC.

These sorts of questions show just how successful the ANC has been in imposing its own version of the DA's history on South Africa's political narrative. The "Know Your DA" campaign was aimed at changing this narrative, and at conveying a more explicit sense of the DA's placement within a political tradition that stretches back 200 years in South Africa. It was developed and refined through a careful process of market research and focus groups, and was overwhelmingly successful where it mattered most: on the ground, among its target audience, if not on the op-ed pages among the commentariat.

However, McKaiser is determined to find fault. The nub of his polemic is that the DA simply does not know how to grapple with race – in its policies, in its communications, and in its efforts to win the hearts and minds of black voters. "The black voter's identity politics", he says – speaking on behalf of black voters everywhere – "need to be engaged more intelligently, with reference to "language, colour, ethnicity, class, geography", and, somewhat mysteriously, "other traits".

He writes as if he were the first person to whom this thought had occurred. Tellingly, McKaiser makes no reference to the seminal document penned in 2006 by former DA strategist, Ryan Coetzee, entitled "Becoming a Party for All the People: A New Approach for the DA".

Coetzee's document provided a warts-and-all analysis of the party's shortcomings. It engaged in a reflective and insightful way with precisely those "identity" issues upon which McKaiser pontificates, and took a critical look at the party's performance among black voters in order to identify and remove obstacles to winning their support. Critically, the document set the DA on a new course that has seen the party grow its support among black voters under Zille while consolidating and expanding its constituency among minorities.

Building a party that people of all backgrounds can identify with and attach to as their political home, under the banner of non-racialism as opposed to racial nationalism, is a massively complex task. This is especially so in a plural society with

a history of racial division and dispossession. No party in South Africa's history has ever managed to do it and at the same time build an enduring institutional legacy. The Liberal Party tried, with remarkable energy and foresight, to do it in the 1950s and 60s, but was beaten down by banning orders and, ultimately, the Prohibition of Political Interference Act which forbade non-racial membership of political organisations.

McKaiser vastly underestimates the complexity of the task. In countries that transition from liberation struggles to constitutional democracies, the party of liberation is all powerful. It can easily fall back on ethnic or racial mobilisation. Opposition parties have to fight tooth and nail to establish their legitimacy and right to exist. If they are lucky enough to survive, it is usually because they offer voters a group-based nationalism to rival the ruling party's.

By contrast, the DA grew, against the odds, on the basis of its principled opposition to the ANC, and its alternative non-racial vision, which is rooted in the values of the Constitution. Tony Leon took the Democratic Party from a 'desolate shack', as the Business Day described the party in 1995, with 1.7% of the vote, and grew it into the single most viable opposition force in the country, with 12.3% of the vote in 2004. That was a remarkable achievement, and one for which McKaiser gives Leon only partial credit.

Balancing the two, when the ANC uses race to drive wedge issues, especially on policies of redress, is hardest of all. It is certainly all much harder than McKaiser seems to allow.

Admittedly, in the first decade of the party's existence, much of this growth came from voters from minority groups, fearful of single party domination and instinctively aware of the importance of the Constitution in protecting and defending their rights. Even so, the pull towards civic disengagement is a constant threat among minority voters. So too is the power of ethnic political mobilisation in a proportional representation system whose electoral threshold incentivises ethnic entrepreneurs claiming that they can protect linguistic and cultural rights better than parties making a more inclusive offer.

So, retaining the support of minority voters is hard enough, but winning over the liberation party's constituency is even harder. Balancing the two, when the ANC uses race to drive wedge issues, especially on policies of redress, is hardest of all. It is certainly all much harder than McKaiser seems to allow.

One of these critical wedge issues is Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), to which McKaiser devotes his shortest and weakest chapter, entitled "DA Lies About BEE". To be sure, the DA was guilty of some miscommunication on BEE last year, but once again McKaiser overstates his case when he talks of "DA vagueness, flip-flopping, disunity and insincere sloganeering on one of the most crucial policy debates in our country".

The DA's position on BEE is perfectly clear: it supports BEE that broadens opportunities and creates jobs. It opposes BEE that manipulates outcomes by rigging tenders and contracts for the politically connected few, because that approach entrenches corruption, deters investment and destroys jobs. In this way, the DA's policy on BEE is ideologically diametrically opposed to the ANC's, which gives the lie to McKaiser's claim that there is a lack of "sharp ideological differences between the ANC and the DA in the policy domain".

While some of the DA's critics argue that BEE and employment equity are incompatible with liberalism because these policies allow "colour" to trump "merit" – a false dichotomy, incidentally – McKaiser's critique is different. He claims that the party's "obsession with colour-blindness" causes it to be "confused" and equivocal about BEE and this turns him off as a voter who cares about "redress for racial injustice".

In fact, there is no confusion or equivocation. The DA believes that race matters for redress. That position was endorsed by the DA's Federal Council in 2005 when it approved a policy on "equality and corrective action", and it was unequivocally confirmed by the same body in 2013. In fact, as far back as 1995, Democratic Party policy was that "individuals should have the right to redress for past discrimination on the basis of race, colour, gender or disability".

The DA is certainly not blind to race, nor is it blind to the terrible legacy of a past that has left the majority of black South Africans unable to enter the economy, let alone compete on a level playing field. The key difference that distinguishes the DA's understanding of (and approach to) BEE from McKaiser's and the ANC's is that it does not believe racial quotas are, in McKaiser's words, "morally and practically necessary and defensible in the service of redressing past injustices".

There is nothing morally defensible about Verwoerdian-style quotas. Quite the contrary. At any rate, the proof of the pudding is in the eating: the DA has produced more sustainable empowerment results – without quotas – than anywhere else in the country, as its approach to awarding tenders in the City of Cape Town and to advancing land reform through equity share schemes in the Western Cape has shown.

So, after all that, should you buy this book? Yes, because the author has put in a lot of thought to where the DA is going, and his account is certainly challenging and provocative, albeit with a great deal of himself thrown in for good measure. Could he vote DA? Yes, he could. Should he vote DA? Yes, he should, and not because, despite his protestations to the contrary, I think he might be secretly susceptible to what he calls "the muscularity of an angry [DA] rant".

It is clear that no party besides the DA can provide a home for what McKaiser identifies as his brand of "liberal egalitarianism". Certainly not the ANC – as its record on everything from Nkandla to BEE to speaking up for gay rights in Uganda – makes abundantly clear. The DA might not be perfect, but I hope that Eusebius can readjust his mirror, look at the parties in proper perspective, and make the right choice on May 7.