

Has SA finally hit the reset button?

 By [Nicci Botha](#)

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If, for no other reason, I'm glad I'm a South African it's because this country is never boring. I mean where else in the real world, does the [skinning](#), intrigue, and corruption offer more plot twists than *Game of Thrones*?

Yet amid the media exposé of about eight gigs of email traffic revealing how deep and widespread state capture really goes, and the rumblings of a discontented citizenry, journalist and political commentator, Max du Preez, throws in an unexpectedly positive message at the Glacier by Sanlam i3 Summit in Cape Town recently.



Journalist and political commentator, Max du Preez

Pushback by the people

He likens the country to a properly functioning nuclear power station, which has the ability to self-correct and cool down when it starts overheating.

"I can say with conviction that we have had much darker days as a nation - mass killings, displacement of people, drought, famine. Every time, we made it through because of our built-in self-correcting swinging back; the deadlock of the past five years is broken. And this time it's not being brought about by a messianic figure like Mandela, but, importantly, by the people themselves."

Since 2014, there's been pushback against an "uncaring and ineffective government". For the first time, political parties as diametrically opposed as the DA and the EFF are working together, and parliament is starting to reclaim its role of keeping the executive in check, unlike when it was dealing with the Nkandla scandal.

Du Preez pointed out that TV coverage of debates in the portfolio committees is "the greatest gift to democracy. It's exhilarating to watch backbenchers, some of whom are named Pravin, roasting the president."

The shockwaves to the economy brought about by the presidential firing of finance ministers Nhlanhla Nene and Pravin Gordhan was, in fact, a silver lining, said Du Preez. For the first time many ordinary citizens, including ANC branch members realised it was part of the global economy; the party's constituents felt it in their pockets and expressed their displeasure.

"At least now we've turned the corner," he said. "We have reason to be proud and optimistic. Open societies such as ours don't fail. We do not have a problem of religious fundamentalism, terrorism, recurring natural disasters, military uprisings, or regional or tribal strife. Our constitution is guarded by an independent judiciary; we have infrastructure, banks, a free press, communications, transport."

However, Du Preez warned that the assault on state institutions is scary. "Sars was once the best in the world. It's down to the media to fight corruption because these institutions have been captured, and we've only seen the beginning with this flurry of emails."

"The political temperature is dangerously high at the moment; there is justified anger that social inequality has not been ameliorated since 1994. There is great frustration that black participation in the economy is still minuscule and among the poor, the anger is deeper. So, the temptation to play on populism was just too much for some politicians."

"We mustn't confuse populism with people-orientated politics. Populism is divisive and plays into people's most basic fears and prejudices. It only really gained momentum in 2007, after the Polokwane leadership conference. This populist narrative has raised the political temperature further and normalised insults across the racial divides, shortening the time we have left to transform our economy and reduce inequality. Stability is currently our most precious commodity."

Long-term success lies in education

Du Preez argued that we should embrace radical economic transformation, as it would ensure the stability of the country. "But how do we implement radical economic transformation without it resulting in radical looting or radical ruin?"

"South Africa's long-term success lies in education," he said, labelling the present situation of underfunded schools and unqualified teachers "a crime against humanity". The government's inattention to education "has done more harm than white monopoly capital."

He also roundly lambasted big business, saying it has sat back for two decades and made policy and transformation the problem of government. "Instead of getting involved, corporates sat on huge amounts of capital and watched the country deteriorate. Right now, I advocate that the private sector sets up a R150bn development fund for mass-scale skills training and on-the-job apprenticeships, and insists on having worker representatives on their boards of directors."

"It is time for radical solutions. If it doesn't happen, the pace of decline will speed up."

Touching on the Singapore nerve and social grants

While Helen Zille took quite a beating for her tweets on Singapore and the legacy of colonialism, Du Preez said another remedy for the current socioeconomic malaise would require an acceptance that a Singapore-like form of state capitalism, coupled with rapid wealth redistribution to the poor via higher social grants, was required. He acknowledged that this was a taboo subject among the South African business community opposed to wasteful state-owned enterprises and welfare

handouts.

"It is a myth that social grants lead to lazy people who are dependent on the state. Brazil uplifted 50m people by that process. Grants were not unconditional - recipients had to prove they spent the money on education, vaccinations, food, and so on. It had a knock-on effect, providing stability to communities but also fostering entrepreneurs who previously had no fallback."

As for state capitalism, Du Preez said Singapore followed a strict recipe of strong corporate governance, a focus on high skills levels, and the use of technology. All of which built a stronger economy, more jobs, and better state-provided benefits and incentives for the poor.

"Needless to say, none of our state enterprises follows that model – not Denel, the Post Office, Eskom, SAA, or the SABC. How do those wasteful bureaucracies benefit poor people?"

Radical economic transformation and land redistribution

Du Preez said the ANC's commitment to radical economic transformation has to be met halfway. The issue of land ownership, for instance, should not be seen by the private sector as a desire on the part of the state to confiscate commercial farms. "The land issue is complex. It's not about agriculture, but symbolism and dignity."

The problem thus far was that the government has wasted billions of rands by bungling the settlement of land claims, and not knowing what to do with the land it has already appropriated.

Instead, Du Preez said, newly empowered farmers in South Africa could be encouraged to follow the Ethiopian example, where even single-hectare farms, properly managed and supported by both private and public money, are economically sustainable. A million families in Ethiopia have found stability through small-scale farming.

"Looking through the fog of pessimism, things are moving very fast. Although there's naked fear in the NEC, and Zuma's control of the cabinet is reminiscent of the PW Botha era, the game is up for the Teflon president. I've never seen this level of unity in the country," he concluded.

ABOUT NICCI BOTHA

Nicci Botha has been wordsmithing for more than 20 years, covering just about every subject under the sun and then some. She's strung together words on sustainable development, maritime matters, mining, marketing, medical, lifestyle... and that elixir of life - chocolate. Nicci has worked for local and international media houses including Primedia, Caxton, Lloyd's and Reuters. Her new passion is digital media.

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