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OFFICIAL OPPOSITION: RACE, INTOLERANCE KEY DRIVERS

# DA divisions 'a culmination of historical processes'

FOR many years since its formation on June 24, 2000, the DA has projected itself as a united political party which accommodates all racial groups and is tolerant of diverse opinions. However, gradually, the schism within this party has come out in the open for all to see. Only the DA repudiates this evident reality.

To some, these divisions are a new development which is unprecedented in the DA and therefore a cause for concern. The reality is that schisms in the DA are as old as the party itself.

In other words, these divisions are rooted in the DA's history. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to state that the party was built on a shaky foundation. What is being witnessed today is a culmination of historical processes.

In 1989, the Progressive Federal Party (PFP), Independent Party (IP) and the National Democratic Movement (NDM) merged to form the Democratic Party (DP). In 1997, the National Party (NP), which already had a tainted history, reconfigured itself into what became known as the New National Party (NNP). In the year 2000, the DP, the NNP and the Federal Alliance (FA) merged to form the DA.

Later, both the FA and the NNP withdrew from this conglomeration. Subsequently, in 2005, the NNP split. The reason for the split was the divergent views held by members. Those who were progressive, under the leadership of Martinus van Schalkwyk, embraced the new political changes



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which saw the ANC running the affairs of the country. This is the group which joined the ANC. The conservative members of the NNP joined the DA. This marked the early schism within the DA.

Over the years, the DA has tried to reposition itself. One of the party's strategies has been to attract black members, elevating some into leadership positions. While this was deemed a commendable move, it revealed differences of opinion within the party on race.

In 2013, the DA convened a policy conference. The Black Caucus was emphatic that the party should embrace or support black economic empowerment (BBE), affirmative action and other measures meant to better the lives of the previously disadvantaged communities – the majority of whom were black.

While this appeared to be a log-



DA LEADER Helen Zille with the party's then parliamentary leader Lindiwe Mazibuko, left, and its national spokesperson Mmusi Maimane during a protest march in Johannesburg in May 2012. Race became a determining factor of divisions within the party, pitting black members of the DA against their conservative white counterparts, says the writer. | African News Agency (ANA) Archives

ical proposal, conservative elements within the DA held a different view. Some were vehemently opposed to this idea and dismissed it in its entirety.

Others took a moderate stance and proposed that there should be a clearly specified time frame for these processes or measures. In the end, the party was divided to the core. The sad reality is that race became a determining factor as to which view one embraced.

This pitted black members and leaders of the DA against their conservative white counterparts. It did not come as a surprise, for example, when Lindiwe Mazibuko disappeared

from the DA's radar soon after the 2014 general election. Although the stated reason for her disappearance was that she was going to further her studies, it was a foregone conclusion that she was not going to retain her position as the parliamentary leader of the DA. Those who held this view were vindicated when she remained invisible even after returning from her studies in America.

Divisions in the DA also became glaring in 2015 during the search for the successor to Helen Zille as the leader of the DA. When the name of Mmusi Maimane surfaced, progressives in the DA gave it a thumbs-up. Conversely,

conservative elements frowned upon the suggestion that Maimane should take the baton from Zille. Instead, they put their weight behind Athol Trollip. Maimane emerged victorious and tried to lead the party. After many frustrations, he exited from the DA.

What is clear from this synopsis are two things. Firstly, race is a factor in DA politics.

Secondly, there are differences of opinion between the progressives/liberals and the conservatives. Sadly, in its 2018 national conference, the DA took a firm stance that race and gender would not matter when electing people into positions. This was being naive. Race will always be part and parcel of the body politic in South Africa. Any attempt to overlook it is self-deceit.

There is a general trend where black leaders have ungracefully left the DA disgruntled. Apart from Mazibuko and Maimane, other black leaders have faced the same fate. These include Patricia de Lille, Mbali Ntuli, Herman Mashaba, Zwakele Mncwango and many others.

This paints a picture of a DA that is wittingly or unwittingly veering towards the right, which is characterised, inter alia, by authority and tradition. Should the party confirm this stance, it will be digging its political grave. Politics is a numbers game. Blacks constitute the majority in this country. As such, they are indispensable!