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# DA's Steenhuisen given helping hand by clueless ANC

*Abysmal performance of president is making the opposition leader's job look easy*

## COMMENT



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IT TAKES a genuinely abysmal president to make the opposition leader's job of overtaking the governing party look easy.

It is the toughest gig in South African politics as the DA grapples with losing electoral support in an environment of endemic corruption in society and widening poverty among citizens.

For instance, between the 2016 and 2021 local government elections, the party shed 1.4 million votes; between the 2014 and 2019 national elections, it lost 470 000-odd votes.

John Steenhuisen's conference speech marked the terrain on which the DA must fight the next election more precisely than panache, but the ability to deliver votes is not assured. Under the theme, "The moonshot pact to stop ANC-EFF doomsday", he portrayed a picture of a credible alternative to governing one of Africa's largest economies as our democracy reaches the 30-year mark.

Indeed, Steenhuisen's DA continues to struggle to get noticed by a significant percentage of the electorate until they make a mistake that costs them a by-election or a mayoral chain in successive events. So far, the DA has been attacking the ANC government without a better offer. Its inability to be an effective coalition partner has primarily confined it to carping from the sidelines.

Whenever it came up with a better plan, such as accelerating the roll out of installations of renewable energy policies, the government snatched it.

It has all along had ambitions but few policies that speak to the basic needs of the masses, leading to critics saying there is no substance in its offerings. Even at times when it has gone



JOHN Steenhuisen after his re-election as DA leader during the party's 2023 Federal Congress in Midrand, Gauteng. | OUPA MOKOENA African News Agency (ANA)

into detail, pundits have lamented the absence of a transformative vision.

Any strategy to beat an incumbent party involves appealing to a broad spectrum of voters, which risks being denounced as treason by influential individuals in DA circles.

While Steenhuisen tried his best to generate excitement among delegates about the prospect of change, he fell short of giving reassurance that the envisioned change was not alarming to the privileged few and was genuinely enticing to the black majority of voters. Even his constant reference to the "undeniable implosion" of the ANC as an inevitable event before the much-anticipated 2024 general elections did not do enough. There were no tangible signs that the DA was securely the government waiting to take over from the governing party since 1994.

The pledge to prevent an "ANC-EFF doomsday coalition" from taking power is a recognition that, on matters of public trust in the government at least, the centre is not where it was when the DA sprung up in the 1990s.

However, it is a phrase that can trigger allergic reactions in activists who associate it with late-90s fightback campaign tactics.

The broader argument – voters want a government that is prudent with their money while also investing in public services – is not new, but still

valid. Steenhuisen had mixed success grappling with several dilemmas that led to the DA's failures and successes over the past five years.

And it is not hard to imagine scenarios where the DA's two-day federal congress was mired in recrimination over missed opportunities, and consumed by factional feuding. The wounds of losing power in critical municipalities are still fresh.

The most recent round of elections – the 2021 local government poll – indicates some slippage in DA support. Taken together across the nation, its support in those elections was 21.6% – down from the 24.5% in the 2016 local government polls.

Local elections do not provide a direct comparison with national elections, but they are a useful barometer when reading the political temperature. In any event, the national picture shows a decline, too. In 2019, the DA's support slipped to 20.7% from 22.2% in 2014, and support in its Western Cape stronghold fell from 57% in 2014 to 52% in 2019.

But these lessons have not shaken the DA in the right direction as the party continues to squander most of its promising potential appeal to voters. In its newly adopted policies, it shies away from clearly outlining its position on employment equity, affirmative action and broad-based BEE.

Its economic vision is marketed as

being exquisitely designed to destroy what is left of the ANC's claim to being serious stewards of the economy while advertising the DA as a factory of favours for investors sitting on large sums of cash that is desperately needed for job creation and the millions of unskilled job seekers that the ANC government has repeatedly failed.

The DA's economic vision includes scrapping the government's two-decade-old temporary jobs scheme, stabilising the public debt-to-GDP ratio through higher economic growth rates, and safeguarding the South African Reserve Bank's independence. It plans to scrap the use of temporary public sector jobs programmes such as the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) and focus instead on skills development to create a pathway to better-paying private sector jobs.

The government spends about R3 billion a year on the EPWP (which creates job opportunities in areas such as road maintenance), early childhood development and home-based community care.

It is unclear whether the DA also seeks to scrap the newer and much larger Presidential Employment Stimulus programme, which has an annual budget of more than R11bn.

There will doubtless be times to come when Steenhuisen fails to press home all of his advantages. He will plod prosaically through moments when the DA faithful crave campaigning poetry. They would be a lot angrier if he were not winning, and he is. In recent weeks, the ANC made the opposition's task look easy by shutting down moves by Parliament to hold President Cyril Ramaphosa accountable through public scrutiny of the Phala Phala farm saga. But it is never easy because the ANC majority in Parliament determines the outcome of the crucial motions.

Steenhuisen's job at the party's federal congress was to assure supporters that he would continue making Ramaphosa's evasion of accountability and dithering on crucial decisions to advance the country harder. And he has.

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