

'DARE YOU PONDER THE OBVIOUS: OF COURSE MBEKI IS ALOOF.'

By Thabo Mbeki
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In 2001, the ANC National Working Committee (NWC), of which I was a member, issued the seminal document, "Through the eye of a needle? Choosing the best cadres to lead transformation." ['The eye of the needle'.]

Among others, this document specifies the critical requirement that, "A leader should constantly seek to improve his capacity to serve the people; he should strive to be in touch with the people all the time, listen to their views and learn from them. He should be accessible and flexible; and not arrogate to himself the status of being the source of all wisdom."

Six years after this document was issued, the ANC held its elective 52nd National Conference in Polokwane. At this Conference I lost the contest for the position of President of the ANC, with the delegates electing Comrade Jacob Zuma as President.

Before the Conference there had been much public/media discussion about the possible outcome and meaning of this election, which continued long afterwards, to date.

Some of this discussion advanced the proposition that one of the reasons I would and did lose the election was that I was 'aloof', a leadership defect which had allegedly alienated the majority of the ANC members, and therefore the delegates at the Conference.

If this charge of being 'aloof' was correct, this meant that even as I was President of the ANC, with the obvious obligation to serve as a role model, I had disrespected the directive contained in 'The eye of the needle' to "strive to be in touch with the people all the time, listen to their views and learn from them...(to) be accessible and flexible; and not arrogate to (oneself) the status of being the source of all wisdom."

The reason the 'Eye of the needle' raised this matter was that it had been discussed by the ANC leadership in both the NEC and the NWC, as well as in our National Conferences and the National General Councils.

One of the observations that had been made in these discussions was that because so many of the ANC leaders were involved in demanding Government work at National, Provincial and Local levels, the ANC leadership as a whole was losing direct and immediate contact with the people and that this had to be corrected.

However, in my specific case, the charge of being 'aloof' rested on the assertion that whether intentionally or not, my very style of leadership meant that I deliberately chose to be 'not in touch with the people', (and the membership of the ANC), obviously having 'arrogated to myself the status of being the source of all wisdom.'

Some elected constantly to propagate this notion as an established and self-evident truth which did not even require that any evidence should be produced to substantiate this 'truth'.

Thus in September 2009, Blade Nzimande, General Secretary of the SACP, was quoted by the Mail and Guardian as having said that "there is an almost complete national consensus that Mbeki's aloof and intolerant personality was a disaster...Thankfully we are now once more in a situation in which national dialogue and debate are possible."

Earlier still, in September 2008, the UK Financial Times had carried a report from its correspondent in South Africa, Alec Russell, entitled "Thabo Mbeki: Aloof leader who fell from grace". Russell went on to say:

"It was clear even then (when he succeeded President Mandela) that Mr Mbeki was a curious politician. He made clear he would never be a crowd pleaser... His undoing, friends and enemies agree, was his aloofness."

Another September 2008 article in the US Chicago Tribune, entitled "South Africa's Mbeki aloof to the end", said, "Even to the bitter end, Thabo Mbeki stayed true to his aloof self. 'He was never much good at connecting with his own people,' said Raenette Taljaard, the director of the Helen Suzman Foundation, a pro-democracy think tank in Johannesburg."

In June 2013, the Daily Maverick published an article by Ranjeni Munusamy entitled "Zuma, Mbeki, and the shifting sands of public perception", in which she wrote:

"Once upon a time, people detested their president (Thabo Mbeki), believing he was too aloof, too disconnected, too scholarly, too proud to admit his mistakes and impervious of criticism."

In January 2014, the Financial Mail carried an article by Justice Malala in which he wrote; "Remember when people said all those nasty things about Thabo Mbeki - "aloof, educated, too much Shakespeare, old chap"..."

With regard to the ANC, the first point I would like to make is that (i) the National Office Bearers (NOBs) met at least every Monday, (ii) the NWC met at least every fortnight, and (iii) the NEC met at least every quarter. I regularly attended all these meetings as President of the ANC, never standing aloof from the ANC leadership.

Further, one of the decisions we took in the NWC to help ensure that we maintain closer contact with the ANC membership was to hold our meetings in the Provinces, spending two days in each Province.

We would divide the NWC members into small delegations, in which I participated, each of which would spend the first day in one of the Regions in the Province, to familiarise itself with the state of organisation at this lower level. On the second day the delegations would then report to the NWC as a whole, which thus gained a more detailed understanding of ANC affairs in the Province concerned.

Further, the participation of ANC Provincial Chairs and Secretaries and the Chairs and Secretaries of the Women's and Youth Leagues in the NEC, meant that our national leadership was regularly informed of developments and views in the Provinces and the Leagues.

On various occasions the ANC National Office Bearers, the NWC or other NEC delegations would have to engage some of our Provinces to help find solutions to the then extant problems. The President of the ANC would be involved in these initiatives.

Even when, as President of the Republic, I ceased to be a Member of Parliament, I continued periodically to attend the meetings of the ANC Parliamentary Caucus.

At Government level, we instituted the "Presidential Izimbizo Process". This resulted in our holding many meetings with both urban and rural local communities, in which as many people as possible spoke directly to the President to communicate whatever they considered important.

By the time I left Government we were very concerned about the security challenges posed by the increasingly enormous size of these local Izimbizo which derived from their popularity. Our concern arose from the fact that it was proving impossible to allow time for everybody who queued to speak actually to reach the microphones and address the President, which, we feared, might result in conflict.

Nevertheless we always took the necessary action to respond to what had been raised at these Izimbizo, covering all three spheres of Government.

To ensure that the National Government remained exposed to the thinking of our country's broad leadership, we established a number of standing Presidential Working Groups, during all of which I, as President of the Republic, would lead a Ministerial groups which would engage the leadership delegation in each Working Group.

The Working Groups were made up of leaders in each of these areas, constituting (i) the women, (ii) the youth, (iii) the trade unions, (iv) big business, (v) black business, (vi) agriculture, (vii) the religious communities, and (viii) academia.

The relevant Ministries would then assume the responsibility to cooperate with the appointed representatives of each of these sectors to follow up on relevant matters that had been raised at these Presidential Working Group meetings.

It is also important to understand that, of course, in addition to the instances I have mentioned relating to the ANC and Government, there were also other countless instances during which I interacted with ANC members and structures and the South African population in general, at all times ready to listen and engage.

Thus I have never been able to answer the question – from whom and what was I ‘aloof’?

Shortly before our 2004 General Election, the 9 April 2004 edition of the UK newspaper, The Guardian, published an article by Rory Carroll which, among other things, said:

“In recent weeks (during the election campaign, Thabo Mbeki)...has reinvented his public persona by playing with children and dancing, an astonishing departure which has won rave reviews, but for a decade, as Nelson Mandela’s Deputy and then as President, he abhorred the common touch. Give him an opportunity to empathise with the poor and sick and he would retreat into technocratic jargon. Give him a baby and he would plop it into the nearest lap.”

Thus did Rory Carroll, years ahead of the 2007 ANC Polokwane Conference, provide a simple answer about what I would have to do to shed the deadly image of being ‘the aloof’, and thus win ANC elections and popular approval – display the common touch, play with children, dance, cry publicly for the poor and the sick, and kiss babies, all this in front of the television cameras!

But of greater significance in terms of the future of our country was neither an alleged aloofness nor what a British journalist thought. Much more relevant were the views expressed by a leading South African journalist, Ms Karima Brown, who clearly sought to convince all who would listen that – Mbeki must go!

As early as August 2006 she had written that my “sell-by date” was ‘stapled on (my) back’. She even thought that what might happen would be that I might face “the ignominy of an investigation...(being) the focus, or the centre, of a new criminal probe into the arms deal... Is it any wonder then that the smart (ANC) MPs are beginning to look at life beyond Mbeki?...The writing is on the wall.”

In November 2007 she went on to write, "In the hurly-burly of the ANC succession battle, the question still needs to be asked, let alone be answered, why it is that the ruling party is willing to countenance the perpetuation of Mbeki's rule beyond its natural and constitutional end-date, all because of the false obsession of "legacy".

"After all, with the "benefit" of the past eight years of Mbeki's rule to look back on, it does not appear that the legacy - creditable macroeconomic management peppered with a dangerously pathological denialism - is worth preserving...

"It is a bitter irony of African politics that our leaders stay in office beyond their welcome, so that they may fix problems that are wholly of their own creation. Johnson diagnoses it perfectly (remember he gets to be right twice in a 24-hour cycle): "We are at a crossroads where the central possibility is the indefinite extension of one-man rule by a paranoiac. In a word, Mugabeism."...

"It is of course nearly impossible to love Mbeki. Not in the way one can love Mandela, or even, for that matter, Zuma. "Let me have men about me that are fat, sleek-headed men, and such as sleep a' night," said Caesar to Mark Anthony. "Yond Cassius has a lean and hungry look. He thinks too much. Such men are dangerous."

Writing five years later in October 2012, Zweli Mkhize, the current Treasurer General of the ANC, commended Ms Karima Brown for her reporting ahead of that year's Mangaung ANC National Conference and said:

"Very few journalists are confident to find a positive side of this very important conference of the ANC. Journalist Karima Brown seems to have been one of the few brave ones to buck the trend. Her recent article in the Sunday Independent about the trends in the ANC structures is correct but under the atmosphere, it swims against the dominant trend in most media."

As Zweli Mkhize had correctly stated concerning Ms Brown's reports about the 2012 ANC National Conference, history suggests that she was also very accurate in foreseeing that her wishes would be fulfilled at the 2007 ANC National Conference.

In this regard, she obviously had the correct understanding of the impact the sustained charge of aloofness, and other similar negative assessments of the then President of the ANC, would have on the delegates gathered at the 2007 Polokwane Conference.