

My 2019 Election Shopping List – a Guide to Demand Side Voting

So far we have only been hearing from the Supply-side. All the politicians and parties are telling us what they will do. As if anyone still believes election promises anymore.

Voters need to turn this tendency around – and tell those in Governance what they want. Here are a few policies that many voters are demanding in the run-up to the 2019 elections.

First, we want a solid Finance Minister who can keep the economy growing and keep the Rand from slipping. We were rattled when Nene was sacked as Finance Minister and relieved when Pravin Gordhan returned. We were horrified when he was sacked in the midnight shuffle that was the beginning of Zuma's end. Now Mboweni seems not to have the confidence of the Deputy President?

Second, we want sound fiscal management not only in the Department of Finance but in the SOEs that became the last cash-cows of the ANC cronies. Now systems are being tightened up because Parliament has finally grown some adult teeth. And not a moment too soon. Plus the judicial commissions.

This means that we want to find and weed out the corruption and the patronage networks. This meant that institutions like SARS and the NPA had to be cleansed. There is slow progress. But no matter how many inquiries, commissions, investigations and cases there are at ground level, we need a party or a coalition in power that does not have a "virus" in there that keeps undermining the new "default drive".

Third, we clearly need Land Reform. Only a few years ago, the EFF had cornered the market on these votes. But now just about every politician and party is engaging in the Great Debate. Different platforms are emerging – as to HOW each party would tackle this. But this issue is now at centre stage for the 2019 election. Although other issues like Jobs could eclipse it before election day May 8th.

Fourth, we need to amend the Constitution. It is not a sacred document. It was never carved in stone, so to speak. In it are clauses that prescribe how to amend it. In fact, it has already been amended quite a few times since 1994. This is to be expected.

Whether land expropriation without compensation can be adopted remains to be seen. To me, that is actually part of item #3 on my Election shopping list – Land Reform. Public hearings were held but much of the feedback from citizens was never processed. The Great Debate is raging and that is a sign of a Participatory Democracy. Getting it passed through Parliament may be easier said than done? But the national and international furor that may then erupt could bog down progress for a long time.

Rather, this fourth item - about amending the Constitution - is with reference to the Slabbert Commission. Here are some key excerpts for its memorable Report:

4.5.4.1 Participatory Democracy: "The current system does not lend itself to participation by the electorate in the selection of candidates. That is an inherent weakness in all systems using closed candidate lists..."

4.5.4.2 Systematic Synergy: “In view of the consequences at provincial level, it is significant that there are presently three different electoral systems for the three spheres of government...”

Summary and conclusion

4.5.5.1 “The nub of the majority view is that it is worthwhile to make legislative provision for an electoral system that can evolve towards a larger multi-membership constituency system with a compensatory national list. In order to facilitate accessibility and responsiveness between voter and representative, multi-member constituencies... are envisaged...”

4.5.5.4 “If nothing else, this proposal, if accepted, will keep an essential debate alive on the ways and means by which political accountability can be strengthened...”

In the language of this Slabbert Commission, the fourth item on my 2019 Election shopping list is amending the Constitution **“for an electoral system that can evolve towards a larger multi-membership constituency system with a compensatory national list”**.

The genius of this proposal by the Slabbert Commission was that the existing systems would not be scrapped, but rather conjoined with Members of Parliament who represent constituencies. As there are 225 Local Municipalities, perhaps half the number of seats could be elected BY CONSTITUENCY? This would add a useful dynamic – in the language of the Slabbert Report **“by which political accountability can be strengthened”**.

Meanwhile, the total number of seats could be increased from 400 to 450. The other half of the seats could then remain in the existing system of closed candidate lists.

The ruling party still unpacks the original rationale for adopting the “PR system” (proportional representation). It argues that it benefits the smaller parties disproportionately, allowing Democracy to grow. This is deceiving because when it comes to critical votes in Parliament, the “vanguard party” methodology of the Liberation Movement of old kicks in, and MPs know that if they don’t toe the party line, they will be victimized by their own party. We have seen this happening in recent memory around No-confidence votes.

Parliament should not just be a rubber stamp for party policies. When one party holds a majority there, that basically can make Parliament redundant and throw Democracy under the bus.

Nor should MPs only vote by their conscience, although that is one important aspect. At least half of the MPs should vote as representatives. Through their constituency offices, they can determine the will of the people at local level. This is a different dynamic that could really enrich the decision-making of Parliament. The use of “indicative voting” by MPs has been used in the UK to try and find a way out of the Brexit labyrinth. Our Parliament could adopt that to reduce its “vanguard party” DNA.

It was disgusting to see a Party President addressing the nation on television, in front of party flags. That was sheer electioneering. The fact that the public hearings about Land Reform were not yet over – which were mandated by Parliament – highlights the contradiction between his role as State President and as party leader. In fact, all other party leaders should have been granted equal time to announce their respective policies on Land Reform. We need to lose this “vanguardism” and move into what the Slabbert Commission Reports called **“a larger multi-membership constituency system with a compensatory national list”**.

The fifth item on my shopping list is a party platform that will commit to non-violence. It is appalling to see a party leader shooting off a machine gun from the stage at a rally. That is also disgusting. That is unlawful and goes way beyond electioneering to rabble-rousing and inciting violence. It is also counter-intuitive to threaten at public hearings to take up arms and fight for your beliefs against fellow citizens. What on earth will be gained by yet another civil war on this planet?

To sum up, I cannot see any party platform on the menu at this stage that offers all five of these items. This leads me to believe that we really do need an era of Coalitions. If not, the voters just become cannon-fodder for the politicians and populists. They simply validate what parties have adopted as their platforms. Democracy is bigger and better than that! Our Constitution, by the way, constitutes the organs of the State – Legislatures, Executive branch and the Judiciary. Parties are private and have their own charters. No party is more important than the State. So why, one wonders, are decisions made at the level of the NEC – a party structure? The caucus of the party with a parliamentary majority should be driving our government. The interim step beyond vanguardism will be Coalition governments.