

EFF's pseudo-radicalism gives voters a false sense of how things will really work

Chris Mann (<https://web.archive.org/web/20160727010900/http://mg.co.za/author/chris-mann>) 22 Jun 2016 00:00



Hot air: The EFF's stance is radical indeed, but will it provide what its manifesto claims? (Delwyn Verasamy, M&G;)

(<https://web.archive.org/web/20160727010900/http://mg.co.za/article/2016-06-22-00-effs-pseudo-radicalism-gives-voters-a-false-sense-of-how-things-will-really-work>)

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There's none so rhetorical as the pseudo-radical. The EFF's election manifesto for the local government elections in August shows why that is the case.

The manifesto states that its focus is to create jobs and provide quality services for all, and sets out 24 pages of commitments. These range from increasing the allocation of state revenue to municipalities to broadening the range of municipal services defined in the Municipal Systems Act.

The EFF differentiates itself from the present ruling party by committing itself to building "PEOPLE'S municipalities whose primary inspiration and focus is the PEOPLE" [the EFF's capitals]. Municipal councillors will reside in the ward that elected them and would report back monthly to their constituents.

An EFF municipality would expropriate land for the use of residents on the basis of "use it or lose it", provide bulk services and stands to people for free, insource workers, ensure that schools and clinics have electricity and water, and that no councillor receives financial or sexual favours for allocating houses.

Other ideas that would attract voters include wiring bus and taxi ranks with wi-fi, building an early childhood education centre in each ward, giving free land to religious organisations, employing community safety workers, installing security CCTV in streets, and opening six-days-a-week service-delivery complaint centres.

EFF councillors would make their contact details available to all constituents, respond to requests from the community 24 hours a day, act as a father or mother figure to orphans in the ward, ensure no one in the ward goes hungry and that the poor receive a proper burial.

An EFF municipality would ensure that a minimum of 50% of basic goods, services and products consumed in the municipality is manufactured, processed or assembled within the municipality.

It would also establish municipality-owned companies: a human settlement agency for housing, a roads agency, an abattoir and meat processing entity, a fresh produce market, a printing company for municipality stationery and a theatre and recording studio for artists.

Also, community trusts will own 40% of all malls, mines and industries in the municipal area, returning 40% of all profit to the municipality.

It would also establish a driving school for matriculants, parks and sports facilities and host arts and music festivals.

An EFF municipality would not accept cadre deployments, and would do away with consultants.

Furthermore, tenders would be issued to local citizens who would be employed directly by the municipality with a "decent living wage and pension".

An EFF municipality's hugely increased range of services would be financed from several sources. Income would include, as at present, local rates and conditional grants from central government. In the future, revenue collected from municipal-owned entities would be added.

The EFF would in addition raise funds from progressive international partners and private-sector corporate social-investment grants.

No attempt is made to estimate the increase of expenditure by an EFF municipality: Would it quadruple, or more? Nor is there an indication of which central government departments would be prepared to forfeit a portion of their current treasury allocation to fund the increase. The crucial and complex issue of income and expenditure occupies a scant 10 lines.

A lack of financial and economic expertise has bedevilled the ruling party's policies and leadership for years. The same type of numerical illiteracy is visible in the EFF's manifesto, which shows nowhere any acquaintance with the eminently clear Municipal Finance Management Act of 2003.

South Africa has more than 250 municipalities, over 90% of which, according to auditor general Kimi Makwetu, are in financial difficulties.

Summaries of auditor general reports show that most municipalities are culpable of unauthorised, fruitless and wasteful expenditure. It's not surprising that, over the past three years, there have been on average 1 200 service delivery protests a year, many of which turn violent, according to the minister of police's annual report. In response, Pravin Gordhan, during his brief tenure as minister of co-operative governance and traditional affairs, initiated a national "back-to-basics" campaign.

The aims are similar to the EFF's: putting people first, improving service delivery, ensuring good governance and sound financial management, and building strong institutions.

This initiative does not tackle other local government issues, also not mentioned in the EFF manifesto: • The capital and skills flight from rural to urban areas; • The chaotic inefficiency caused by ruling-party cadre deployments; • The paralysing lack of financial, engineering and managerial skills; • The authoritarian power of the executive mayor, who is answerable to fickle provincial party leaderships; and • An excessive number of disabling feuds among underskilled managers jockeying to retain credibility.

A frequent complaint on radio phone-in programmes puts the issue succinctly: "Abaphathi bethu abawaz' umsebenzi wabo [the people who govern us don't know their work]" .

The manifesto promises a flush toilet to all and bulk sewerage and sanitation to make this happen. How would EFF councillors make this happen, given the Water Affairs and Forestry Report of 2010, which stated that most of South Africa's 852 waste-water treatment works were in a state of disrepair and only some 3.8% would meet international "blue drop" standards?

The sewage works run by Makana Municipality (Grahamstown) provide a case in point. As in numerous other small municipalities, probably a third of the town's sewage now runs untreated into the river system and water table.

A future EFF councillor, tasked to repair and upgrade the facility, would be in a difficult position. The already hard-pressed director of infrastructure would not have the time or skills to design a sewage plant, nor can the short-skilled director and staff of the finance department be expected to prepare the budget of a multimillion-rand civil engineering project.

The EFF councillor may not employ consultants. They would be especially reluctant to do so if these were deemed colonialists and settlers. These societal generalisations are othered and demonised in the EFF's founding manifesto with a fervour reminiscent of Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot's vindictive and ultimately murderous attitude towards the bourgeoisie.

If a special dispensation were to be signed by the area commander of the EFF, or the self-styled commander-in-chief himself, the municipal councillor would then find it difficult to comply with the requirement that 50% of municipal expenditure must be spent on goods and services produced locally.

The incumbent EFF councillor could provide builders' sand but what about the cement?

Would a cement manufacturing company have to be established by the municipality? Would the planks for the scaffolding have to come from an (as yet) unplanted forest, sawn in a sawmill not yet built?

The unit costs of production of small runs of pockets of cement and planks would be much more expensive than those produced in large quantities elsewhere in South Africa or abroad. Who would pay for the capital set-up cost of these North Korean-like ideological entities, their recurrent annual loss and the irrational price of their products? State pension funds administered by the Public Investment Corporation? The ratepayers of a small impoverished town?

Rhetoric and the language of manipulation used by unscrupulous marketing executives, religious extremists and politicians alike suffuses contemporary culture.

Is the language of the EFF's manifesto, with its beguiling idealism and Fanonist trappings, realistic? Or is it the utopian rhetoric of a personality cult doomed to make bad things worse? Or something else?

As elections approach, South African citizens need to examine such use of language with greater diligence than ever.

Chris Zithulele Mann is a research associate at the Institute for the Study of English at Rhodes. His most recent book of poems is *Rudiments of Grace*. The views expressed here are his own.

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