



Response

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The President's Bold Admission

There is nothing unusual about the coach of a football team telling their players to study and learn from the strongpoints of their rivals. In business, CEOs spend huge amounts of time understanding their competition's strategies, identifying their successes, and trying to copy their models. Even in churches, we hear the leadership of one denomination asking why another is more successful in keeping its youth or raising funds.

No one finds any of this strange, let alone disloyal or undermining. Indeed, a sports coach or business leader who failed to draw attention to their opponents' achievements would be derelict in their duty, and would probably fail in their core responsibility – to win matches and to grow market share.

So why did President Ramaphosa's remark last week, that the ANC should learn from DA-run municipalities, evoke such a negative response from within his party? Reportedly, some are calling for his resignation for "campaigning for the DA" and because "this thing has damaged the image and credibility of the ANC big time."¹

Not for the first time, Mr Ramaphosa has shown that, like a good coach, he understands the weak points of his 'team' and he is not afraid to say what they are. He did a similar thing five years ago, for example, when he said about corruption, "the ANC may not stand alone in the dock, but it does stand as accused number one."

He clearly realises that it is not the admission of failure – in this case, to provide reliable services and governance at local level – that damages a party's image, but the failure itself. Unfortunately for his party, and for those who live in the many underperforming municipalities to which Mr Ramaphosa was referring, it seems that the bulk of those to whom he addressed his remarks (some 4 800 ANC councillors) do not grasp the distinction.

This, in turn, is because they have lost sight of the purpose for which they are elected to office. It is not just to be a winner, or to ensure that one party beats the other. Winning for the sake of winning is what happens in professional sport. In politics, winning is merely a step towards the real goal – serving.

If this sounds ridiculously naïve, then it is worth noting that every politician happily talks the language of service – they 'serve' as councillor and hope to 'serve' as Mayor or MP or whatever – and every party makes great play in its manifesto about serving the nation in various ways. Perhaps more pertinently, the Church has taught consistently that politics is about service: "Those who are suited [...] should prepare themselves [...] for the very noble art of politics. They should dedicate themselves to the service of all with sincerity and fairness."²

The accelerating electoral decline of the ANC is due to various factors, but one of them, as identified by the President and in the annual reports of the Auditor General, is its failure to run municipalities responsibly and sustainably and in compliance with the excellent suite of local government laws enacted over the years by the ANC government itself.

¹ <https://www.news24.com/politics/ramaphosas-praising-of-da-run-municipalities-echoes-in-cabinet-rattling-anc-unity-20250918-1247>

² Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, 1965, para 75.5

Mr Ramaphosa is correct, and courageous, to point this out. If his audience was only prepared to listen, and to rediscover the notion of true public service, the ANC's municipal performance would improve – and the party's prospects in next year's local government elections might look up. But, as the reaction to his admonition shows, it is easier to condemn the messenger than to accept the message.

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