

## **Helen Zille**

# Persistent Voice of Opposition

Helen Zille worked as a political correspondent for the *Rand Daily Mail*, before entering politics. She covered several important political stories during this time, including the death of Black Consciousness activist Steve Biko. Contrary to the official version of the story which ascribed his death to natural causes, she provided evidence that he had been tortured to death.

From the 1980s onward she became involved in civil society and activist organisations, including the Open Society Foundation, the Independent Media Diversity Trust, and the Black Sash. She also campaigned against vigilantism and repression in Western Cape townships, and was part of the peace movement that worked to bring warring factions in Crossroads together.

She obtained a BA degree from the University of Witwatersrand (Wits) and joined the former Democratic Party in the mid 1990s, where she was asked to reformulate the party's education policy and stand as a candidate for the Western Cape provincial legislature. She was also a Technical Adviser to the Democratic Party at CODESA in the early 1990s.

Zille was elected to the Western Cape Provincial Parliament in the 1999 general election for the newly-named DA.

From 1999 to 2001 she served as Minister of Education in the Western Cape Provincial Government. When the ANC gained power in the province in 2001 she became leader of the opposition in the Western Cape legislature, where she remained until she was elected as a member of the National Parliament in 2004.

As an MP she served on the Portfolio Committee on Education, and acted as the DA's National Spokesperson. Her constituency included Langa, Gugulethu and Khayelitsha.

On 15 March 2006 she was elected mayor of Cape Town, and resigned from Parliament.

On 6 May 2007 she was elected as the leader of the DA at the party's Federal Congress in Johannesburg and in May 2009 she became Premier of the Western Cape.

**H**elen Zille credits her parents for shaping her political values and thinking, and for being the source of her inner strength and unrelenting drive. She says the experience of her parents, who were half-Jewish and fled Nazi Germany in the 1930s to escape persecution, had a major influence in her upbringing. "My parents were very politically engaged while I was growing up, influenced by the fact that they were compelled to leave Germany because of the political situation there, and political issues were often discussed in our home. We were taught to stand up for the underdog, and see things from their perspective. This resulted in my having a lot more exposure to the evils of apartheid than most other white youngsters."

Zille's parents were early members and supporters of the Progressive Party formed in 1959 and her mother was also a fervent Black Sash activist in the 1950s. Zille says she is particularly grateful to her mother who taught her to be independent-minded and to have confidence in her own informed judgement. "My first memory of politics impacting on my consciousness was when the NP government ended the school-feeding scheme for black children during the 1950s. I can still see my mother's anger. She was very active in the Black Sash Advice Office at the time, which put her in close touch with the realities of black people's lives. Over supper in the evening she would recount the things she had heard about during the day, which resulted in a deep inner disconnect between the culture to which I was exposed in my school and that of my home environment." Zille saw the political injustices of the apartheid government as contradicting the principles she had internalised while growing up in her parents' home. This motivated her to get involved in politics, initially as political reporter and social activist and eventually in the Democratic Party and the DA.

## Exposing the Biko cover-up

The murder of Steve Biko by the apartheid security police in 1977 was a defining moment in Zille's life. She states that although she never met Steve Biko, he significantly influenced her personal and professional life. "As a student at Wits, I still recall my confusion when the young and dynamic Biko led black students out of the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS), and announced, 'Black man, you are on your own'. It took a while for me, an activist for non-racialism, to understand his analysis of the need for black solidarity in the psychological struggle against racial oppression. I understood it better when he said: 'The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed.' I knew that blacks needed to liberate themselves. I understood Black Consciousness in that context."

As a budding journalist on the *Rand Daily Mail* (the Johannesburg daily newspaper that was under constant attack by government and forced to close down in 1985) Zille was assigned by the newspaper editor, Allister Sparks, to uncover the truth behind Biko's death in detention. "He sent me to Port Elizabeth, where Biko had been detained, to track down and interview the doctors who had treated him. When one of the doctors who examined Biko's body provided me with information that contradicted the police report, it was clear that this was going to be an extremely important story. The public and international community needed to know what had happened," she says.

Thanks to the newspaper's relentless investigative journalism, Zille recalls, "we finally were convinced that Steve Biko had not died of a hunger strike but from brain damage". The exposure of Biko's death was a critical event in Zille's journalism career, making a huge impact on her and her family. She received several death threats and had to go into hiding with her son when the security police sought to arrest her. "I received several death threats and moved out of my flat in Berea. It was a harrowing experience, but the threats also made me more determined to continue," she says. She also had to endure the indignity of being hauled before the press council, which found her guilty of "misleading" and "tendentious" reporting, with the newspaper being forced to issue a "correction".

At the inquest into Biko's death, she remembers that "witnesses described how he was transported, naked and manacled in the back of a police vehicle to Pretoria, and how he died alone on a cell floor". She also recalls with sadness watching the grieving Biko family following inquest proceedings. "From time to time, I would look up at the face of Biko's regal mother, dressed in black,

who sat as if in a trance, listening to the account of her son's last days. His wife, Ntsiki, sat next to her mother-in-law. The portrait of them, united in grief, has stayed with me always." For Zille, the most crushing moment of the inquest was when the final words were uttered by the presiding magistrate, Marthinus Prins. He ruled that: "The available evidence does not prove that death was brought about by an act or omission involving an offence by any person." The inquest had found that Biko's death had been the result of a serious head injury, but failed to find any individual responsible.

Zille says Biko's abiding legacy is that he called for "the psychological liberation of both black and white people in order that they might meet as equals," and she believes the history of South Africa would be very different had Biko lived. "There are some individuals who make such a profound difference at the time and show such exceptional qualities of leadership as he did. I have no doubt in my mind that Steve Biko, although I never actually personally met him, would have been such a person." She is concerned about, and cautions against, the appropriation of Biko's teachings and legacy by some in the South African body politic to promote parochial political agendas and vested interests. "It is not my place to seek to be an interpreter of Biko's vision and worldview. Black Consciousness was a necessary step on the road to non-racialism. That may be so, and I have no doubt that is how Biko himself understood it. The great risk of defining identity exclusively in racial terms is that race classification and racial preferment become entrenched, to advance vested interests. An even greater risk is that they become a smokescreen for promoting the agenda of a small elite and pretending this is in the interests of the masses. This is not what Steve Biko stood for."

### **Political activism**

Zille's active involvement in politics started in the 1970s when she enrolled as a student at Wits University. She had initially wanted to join NUSAS, but after attending her first meeting she felt alienated by the organisation's politics. "When I went to Wits I had expected to join NUSAS but the first meeting I went to completely turned me off. The atmosphere was dogmatic and dominated by Marxist rhetoric," she recalls. She chose instead to join Remember and Give (RAG), the student charity fund-raising organisation, and also became increasingly engaged with the liberal Youth Progress Party and the Academic Freedom Committee which shaped her desire to fight apartheid.

Her political activism continued in the early 1980s, after she left journalism in the aftermath of her breaking the Biko story. During this period, she worked and held leadership positions in a number of non-governmental organisations and human rights groups, including Black Sash and the End Conscription Campaign, the South Africa Beyond Apartheid Project and the Cape Town Peace Committee, the Open Society Foundation and the Independent Media Diversity Trust. At the height of the 1986 State of Emergency Zille and her husband, Johan Maree, opened their home to anti-apartheid political activists who were sought by the apartheid security forces.

She further exposed herself to physical danger when she, as a member of the Cape Town Peace Committee, gathered evidence for the Goldstone Commission which investigated attempts to destabilise the Western Cape before the elections in 1994. “I did more investigative work in the 1990s when I was working for the Cape Town Peace Committee trying to expose the “third force” in the Western Cape. This was the only time in my history of political involvement when I have felt in danger. There was no doubt in my view that agents within the police were using any fault lines in the black community to try to turn people against the ANC and foment violence. I went to the Goldstone Commission with a dossier but my evidence was found to be inconclusive.”

### **Entering party politics**

Zille’s formal political career started in 1994, when she joined the liberal Democratic Party – later to become the DA. Since then, she has held various leadership positions within the party and in government including party spokesperson on education and deputy federal chairperson, education minister in the Western Cape Province, mayor of Cape Town and, currently, national party leader. It was Zille’s election as mayor of Cape Town in March 2006 that elevated her public profile and made her one of the DA’s most high-profile figures. In the 2006 municipal elections, the DA became the single largest party in Cape Town with 42 percent of the vote, ahead of the ANC. Zille was elected mayor by 106 votes to 103, after the DA obtained the support of several smaller parties.

She describes this event as “an important milestone in South Africa’s history”. In her inaugural mayoral speech, she stated that: “For the first time since 1994, citizens removed an incumbent political party through the ballot box. The voters understood their power and they used it. This is the bedrock

of any sustainable democracy.” For Zille, the election victory represented a valuable opportunity for the new DA administration to showcase its governance credentials and to implement its policies that were informed by a governance philosophy that was different to that of the ANC.

### **Open opportunity society**

Zille argues that the political contest in present-day South Africa is between two competing political philosophies and that its “outcome will determine whether or not we succeed as a nation”. The first philosophy, which she says is currently being propagated and practised by the ANC, is that of a closed, crony society for the politically-connected few. In this system, the state is hijacked by figures in the governing party to dispense patronage to their political contacts through tenders and “jobs for pals”. Institutions that promote transparency and accountability are shut down or taken over, because they threaten the survival of this patronage network.

The other philosophy, which is expounded by the DA, is termed the Open Opportunity Society for All. This is a society in which all South Africans are free and equal in rights; in which each has the opportunity to go as far as their talents will take them; and in which all South Africans have the space to be whatever they wish to be. In such a society, she says, the role of the state is to give citizens the space to be who they want to be as well as state support, such as education and health care, to realise their intent. This, she insists, requires enlightened policy decisions and an efficient public sector within which there are people who are capable of providing competent government.

It is to this guiding philosophy that she attributes the DA’s policy achievements in the Western Cape, insisting that the DA is the only political party that is giving meaningful expression to Nelson Mandela’s vision of building “a society free from prejudice and in which every individual could thrive”. “The ANC,” she says, “has abandoned the values of Mandela and trampled on his vision of building one rainbow nation with one shared future.” She contends that the DA, thanks to its policies that promote openness and opportunity, succeeded in turning around a city in decline as a result of the closed, crony system. “The DA-led coalition that came to power during March 2006 wasn’t perfect. No government ever is. But we did succeed in arresting the City’s decline and turning it around, moving step by step in the direction of development and progress.”

At the heart of the open opportunity philosophy, Zille emphasises, is

effective governance. She points out that in 2006 the DA administration inherited a city that was failing – characterised by poor services, a deteriorating infrastructure, insufficient maintenance spending, declining revenue collection, high external debt and low staff morale. She points out that the DA took several measures not only to rescue and improve the administrative bureaucracy in Cape Town, but also to accelerate service delivery to the poor. These measures included cutting external debt, providing emergency funding to run-down services such as nursing, fire-fighting and policing, completing the amalgamation of the seven separate administrations that were brought together to form the Cape Town Metro, equalising conditions of service, improving revenue collection, ramping up infrastructure development, dealing with duplication and reversing a legacy of deploying people without the requisite skills to lucrative jobs as a political reward, and cracking down on corruption.

These steps, she maintains, have resulted in a better-governed city, with significantly improved conditions for the poor. She proudly states that her policies helped, among other things, to grow the city and provincial economy, reduce crime, decrease unemployment, stimulate urban renewal, and raise the rate of capital investment in infrastructure. Citing a number of independent studies and surveys, she claims that Cape Town now delivers more services – such as water provision, sanitation, refuse removal and electricity – than any other city in the country. Despite these policy successes, Zille acknowledges that there are still many hurdles to overcome if the goal of “a better life for all” is to be attained. “Far too many people still live in poverty, there is still a huge divide between the rich and the poor. There are still people living without access to basic services. There is still much we can do to improve their lives.”

### **Challenging ANC dominance**

Under Zille’s leadership, the DA has become the most vocal opponent of the ANC. Since her election as leader of the DA in 2007, Zille has stridently challenged the ruling ANC government on a range of policy issues, including crime, public health, judicial independence and South Africa’s policy towards Zimbabwe. She has also worked hard to broaden the appeal of her party. In order to challenge the dominance of South African politics by the ANC – which won 66 percent of the vote in the 2009 general election – Zille has sought to shift the DA (which won 16 percent of the national vote in that election and beat the ANC in the Western Cape) away from just being seen as the political home of South Africa’s white liberals.

“Growing the base of a political party on the foundation of a political philosophy and a value set is very difficult in a racially-divided context, where people tend to see politics as a choice between different race groups. And so growing your base across all barriers requires a mix of strategies,” Zille observes. Widening the appeal of the DA to the average black voter and positioning the party as a force to be reckoned with outside of the Western Cape – where the majority of voters have, since 1994, consistently denied the ANC a clear mandate to govern – necessitated a departure from the party’s tactics of past elections. For one, during the 2009 election the DA avoided foregrounding race in its election messages, opting instead to focus on the service delivery record of the DA as the ruling party of the Western Cape and Cape Town. It also sought to project itself as a party that is part of the heritage of the struggle against apartheid – holding one of its election rallies at the Solomon Mahlangu Square, in Mamelodi, Pretoria, where Zille invoked struggle icons such as Oliver Tambo together with icons of South African liberalism such as Helen Suzman. This political approach has had the effect of portraying the DA as a pivotal part of South Africa’s struggle heritage.

While she recognises the huge contribution that the ANC has made in the quest for human rights and the triumph of democracy, Zille is concerned that it has in recent years deviated from its own roots. In a message of congratulations to the ANC on its centenary, she recognises that the organisation has much to celebrate. She states, however, that “within 17 short years, it has betrayed many of its principles. The party that once punted democratic values like free speech and the freedom of the press is shutting down the media and suppressing dissent. The party that once prided itself on its commitment to the poor has become a crony self-enriching elite.” Her major concern is that in seeking to enrich themselves, the new elite in the ANC have adopted policies reminiscent of the previous regime. The outcome, she argues, is that “the ANC more and more resembles the regime it fought so hard to bring down”. She says that the DA is committed to promoting the agenda of human rights and good governance for which the ANC and other organisations have fought over the past hundred years. She is also concerned to ensure that no single party in South Africa is ever able claim total ownership of the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. She sees the fight against apartheid, which was at different stages led by the ANC, a range of black organisations and some white groups, as something that all South Africans need to own and take forward.

Broadening the appeal of the DA has also involved speeding up the

internal transformation of the party, with priority being given to “growing our own timber” – identifying young black leaders and giving them opportunities to come through the ranks. The elevation of Lindiwe Mazibuko to the position of DA’s parliamentary leader – and of other young, credible black leaders who can appeal especially to the new generation of voters for whom the ANC’s liberation credentials are becoming less and less important – represents a critical step in the party’s ongoing transformation in order to broaden its electoral base. Mazibuko epitomises the DA of the future and is a symbol of its hopes and possibilities. “We know we are on our way to that tipping point which will change this country forever,” she proclaims. “The elevation of Mazibuko is a sign of good progress towards that tipping point,” says Zille. She believes that forging coalitions with opposition political parties is crucial to the realignment of South African politics. “There are people who share our values in all political parties. If we manage to bring all those people together in one political vehicle I believe we will be a majority. We must build this new majority.” She adds: “I remain convinced that coalitions are a crucial step in the realignment process. We must now move to the next step. We must bring together all those who still believe in a place called the New South Africa.” Asked whether she thinks the DA would one day govern South Africa, she replies emphatically: “Not in 2014, but 2019 is a distinct possibility.” Having won the Western Cape resoundingly in 2009, she thinks it is within the DA’s capability and reach to take one or two other provinces in 2014 – possibly the Northern Cape and perhaps even Gauteng.

### **Being a leader**

Asked about the role of leadership in governance, Zille reflects back on her mayoral stint, stressing again the vital role that good leadership and effective governance played in reversing Cape Town’s decline. “In my role as mayor, the biggest challenge was trying to get the right people in the right places to ensure the city of Cape Town ran as efficiently as possible,” she says. “This has taken a lot of time and some trial and error.” She speaks of “how quickly functional institutions can become dysfunctional under the wrong leadership, and how long it takes for them to become functional again under the right leadership”. She says that the the turnaround strategies that she led and implemented as mayor succeeded largely because of the skilful and capable administration that she was able to assemble. “Generally I try to

surround myself with people who have relevant subject knowledge and skills for their jobs, pro-active dispositions and are trustworthy. Then I listen to their advice.” She says this is the leadership approach President Jacob Zuma would be well-advised to emulate.

Responding to a question about what constitutes good leadership, she says the essence of leadership is, in the first place, having a vision – knowing where one wants to go, based on where one is. It is then being able to develop a strategy on how to get there and move towards it in a way that other people will follow the leader. She says a leader must be able to act in different situations – depending on the nature of the problems being tackled. For her, there are many attributes of leadership, but good judgement is critical. “Sometimes you have to lead from the front, sometimes you have to confront, and sometimes you have to lead from behind. Steering from behind is a very challenging role of leadership. Sometimes you have to be consensual in approach, sometimes conciliatory.” Above all, she points out, true leadership involves integrity and courage “because sometimes as a leader you have to have huge courage to do what you know is going to be unpopular”. Referring to her leadership experience in South Africa, Zille says her years as Western Cape mayor and Premier as well national leader of the DA have been the happiest of her life, simply because of the challenges she has faced. “I really enjoy taking complex problems and finding solutions for them. I’m never happier than when I’m facing major challenges,” she says.