

**“DASO’s mission is more crucial now than it ever has been”**

**By Geordin Hill-Lewis**

**Mayor of Cape Town and founder of DASO**

Young democrats.

I’m so glad to be able to join DASO at your federal congress, as you make important decisions about this organisation, which is so close to my heart.

In many ways, the story of my involvement in politics and government is a DASO story.

DASO taught me the rough and tumble of politics, public speaking, rigorous debating, the hard work of retail politics, and how to get back up after defeat. I lost my first election to a candidate dressed like a clown whose only manifesto pledge was “more staplers’.

I also made lifelong political friends – like Shaun Moffitt – who were right by my side at the beginning of DASO. Shaun is still a champion of our cause.

While I was somewhat of an activist as a pupil at Edgemoor High School student, it wasn’t until I arrived as a student at the University of Cape Town that my life in politics really got started.

I founded DASO in 2005, while at UCT, because I saw the crucial need for a liberal voice on South African university campuses, which were then dominated by ANC-style racial nationalist ideology. DASO often stood as a lone voice for non-racialism, individual freedom and other real progressive values in a sea of regressive left-wing ideologies.

University campuses are a crucial piece of the South African political puzzle. They were crucial sites of contestation and struggle during Apartheid, where the authoritarian state machinery sought to control what was taught and thought, and also where progressive students

organised themselves to stand up against injustice. This includes students who went on to lead our parent party, the Progressive Federal Party.

The campuses of institutions of higher learning still play a crucial but different role in the politics of South Africa.

At many institutions, students are taught highly politicised curriculums, especially in the humanities, that only present one kind of view.

There is a young man working in my office who was studying at UCT just a few years ago. He tells the story of how he was called a racist and colonialist in a lecture and told to go “back to Europe”– while the lecturer smiled and nodded – because he said he believed the Constitution was a non-racial document that calls for the equal treatment of people from different racial backgrounds.

If we can no longer call for non-racialism at some of our universities without being shamed and silenced, it means that radical racial nationalist ideologies have become unchallengeable.

The result of this is that many apparently educated South Africans have only really ever considered one kind of opinion on an issue, and assume that that opinion is true.

The lack of intellectual diversity on our campuses is a real emergency for South Africa. We, as a society, can never work towards better ways of doing things if we are unable to properly engage in debates in which a broad diversity of opinions is taken into account.

DASO therefore has a crucial mission in our national politics. DASO can and must be the voice for our liberal values of freedom, fairness, opportunity and diversity. DASO members can and must fight for these ideals in lecture halls, on plazas, in SRCs, and in meetings with university management.

If a lack of intellectual diversity was a problem while I was at UCT in the mid-2000s, it is now even worse. While there were some valid concerns expressed by students in the protest

movements of 2015 and 2016, these movements quickly – and predictably – turned authoritarian and totalitarian, shutting down free debate rather than encouraging it.

We are now left with universities all over the country at which academics and students are either too scared or literally unable to express their views.

This bodes very badly for the future of the national political discourse in South Africa, and for the country. We have lots of problems in SA, and we need to hear as many ideas as we can about how to fix them, so we can choose the best solutions.

DASO's mission is more crucial now than it ever has been. I encourage every one of you to take this calling seriously, and commit yourselves to it. The future of our country is at stake, and some of the solutions are already in your hands.

I also have no doubt that many of you will go on to wield influence in the DA, in parliament, in our governments, and in civil society.

To be honest with you all, my involvement in DASO directly led to my being presented with opportunities to build a career and vocation in politics. It not only allowed me to develop my skills and feel like I was making a difference in the world through making a change on campus, but it also gave me access to incredible networks which would have been unavailable to someone from my background, whose parents weren't wealthy and connected.

I encourage all of you to make the most of the opportunity you have as DASO members and leaders to build your skills, networks, and capacity for dedicated hard work and service through your on-campus activism.

The DA needs a pipeline of talented young politicians, researchers and policy makers. DASO will be the body that supplies this talent if you run it in a way that ensures it remains fit for purpose.

In my view, DASO needs to be heavily focused going forward not just on winning SRC elections, but on actively driving issues on campuses, especially those relating to intellectual diversity and academic freedom. DASO must be the unorthodox voice, just like our predecessor Helen Suzman was the unorthodox voice in Apartheid's parliament. It is on us to have the difficult conversations on campus, even if we feel rejected and unpopular.

It is also crucial that DASO remains focussed on developing the skills of its members, not just political skills like campaigning, but skills like thinking in a principled way, reading critically, and writing persuasively. There are too few politicians in South Africa with these kinds of skills, but the ones that possess them make a real difference.

On that note, I want to leave the new federal leadership of DASO who will be elected at this conference with some words of advice. Firstly, recognise how important DASO is and what a crucial role it can and must play in South Africa's future. After you have internalised that, commit yourselves to the hard work of building our branches and fighting for our ideas.

DASO is important for SA's future. I believed that in 2005 and I still believe it as strongly now.

As thoughtful and deliberate young leaders, you can and will make a change in a country that is crying out for new possibilities.

I wish you all the very best for your congress.