

A strong, stable DASO will be critical to the DA's chances in 2024

By John Steenhuisen MP

DA Federal Leader

My fellow Democrats

It's wonderful to address a DASO Congress. And especially at a time like this. With the DA growing once more and building momentum towards 2024's crucial elections, it is incredibly encouraging to see all of you on this forum, and to know that our party's student structures are strong and healthy.

So much of our success in the DA relies on developing new talent and building continuity for our party across generations.

That's why we put so much time and effort into things like our Young Leaders Programme, and why we value the incredible work done by our young MPs, MPLs and councillors.

Young people bring an incredible energy and positivity to our party and our governments.

And so I am delighted to see a vibrant and energised DASO. You are important, not just for the DA, but indeed for South Africa.

I'm sure you've been told, many times, that you - the youth, the students, young South Africans - are the future of this country.

Normally when people say that, they're speaking of acknowledging the rights of young people - your right to be considered, to be heard, and to be taken seriously.

And also your right to inherit a country - and a world - that hasn't been stripped bare and destroyed by those who came before you.

These conversations place a duty of care on the older generation to make sure that we don't mess things up for you. That we act as responsible custodians, and leave for you a world in which you can thrive.

We have to acknowledge and respect your right to such a world, and everything we do - every plan, every policy, every action - has to safeguard your rights.

But there is a flip-side to all of these rights of yours, and I'm sure you know what that flip-side is.

For every right there is a responsibility. And just because you are young, doesn't mean you don't also have responsibilities when it comes to shaping the world you want to inherit.

Fortunately I know that each and every one of you has already embraced your responsibilities as an engaged citizen of South Africa.

There's a reason you're sitting in this conference today. There's a reason you decided to become involved in campus politics, and there's a reason you chose the DA for that involvement.

It takes a particular type of person to want to make a difference through politics, and this is clearly not for everyone. Thousands of students will stay busy with other things throughout their campus years, and likely beyond. And that's fine.

But if you're sitting here today, it means you've made an important decision. You've decided to invest your time, your energy and your ideas in making this country of ours a better place.

You are here because you have a picture in your mind about where our country should be headed - a vision for South Africa. And you joined DASO, because you saw in the DA a pathway towards realising that vision.

Not everyone on this forum today will necessarily agree on every aspect of that vision, but there is enough commonality for us to make it work. We agree on the big things - the values and the principles that must underpin this new-re-imagined South Africa - and then we can debate the details.

That, in a nutshell, is what the DA does. We bring people together - from all walks of life - around common values and a shared vision for our country.

We're not a party for one particular group of people. We don't advocate for the interests of only some people or try to mobilise our support around any of the "identity" markers such as race, language, religion or culture.

We fight for all South Africans, and our vision is of a South Africa that works for all who live here. And we're the only party doing this, which is also why we're, by far, the most diverse party in the country.

A recent research study into South Africa's political landscape found that the DA's support is split almost exactly evenly between black, coloured and white South Africans. No other party comes close to this kind of diversity of support.

This shows that our messages and the fights we have chosen to fight are universal. It is also the reason the DA is now, according to the same research study, the strongest party in urban South Africa, having just overtaken the ANC in the metros for the first time.

What this means is that South Africans are increasingly moved by ideas rather than identity, and particularly in the cities. And this bodes very well for our party as we look ahead towards 2024.

But I must also warn you: what we do is hard.

In this intense political cauldron of ours - and against the backdrop of incredible anger and frustration at the slow pace of economic inclusion - it is far easier to whip up anger, suspicion or resentment.

It is far easier to mobilise around race, or to play on minority fears. It's far easier to scapegoat foreigners or to incite violence.

Our job of building a rational centre in South African politics is a lot tougher. And you only need to look at what happened on campuses in recent years to see what I mean.

When the Fallists and other radicals started taking over public spaces, disrupting the academic programmes and destroying property, the rational voices were quickly drowned out of the conversation.

When the populists start throwing toys, it's not easy to be the only adult in the room.

But that is your task here. If you want to see DASO succeed, you are going to have to make a compelling case on your campus for ideas like individual liberty, Constitutionalism, the Rule of Law, accountability, the power of a market economy, true non-racialism and the building of a capable state.

And you are going to have to do this while the populists on either end of the spectrum shout their slogans and whip up their anger.

I hope you are up for this fight, because a strong DA requires a strong DASO.

We need to turn every university and college campus in the country into a battleground of ideas once more, because that is where the DA wins.

We need to take back the territory we ceded to the populists, and we need to cement the gains we've already made.

I assure you, this is possible. Just look at DASO's historic victories on campuses like Nelson Mandela University, Fort Hare and the TVET colleges in Mpumalanga. We can be successful, even on the most unlikely campuses, but it takes hard work.

Our country's more than 300 campuses with close to 2 million registered students offer one of the DA's biggest growth potentials ahead of 2024.

We know that millions of young South Africans are not registered to vote, and many of them will share your campus with you. Just imagine if we can reach those people over the next two years and open their eyes to the possibility of real change.

Imagine we can convince just half of those unregistered young voters that 2024 could realistically offer South Africa's first real chance in 74 years to break the shackles of one-party dominance. Our first shot at real multi-party democracy after four decades of National Party rule followed by three decades of ANC rule.

That's a very powerful message, and we know that it's within reach. But most people outside of politics don't know this. They don't realise just how close we are to making this breakthrough.

If ever there was a time to be involved in campus politics, it is now. The next two years will be make or break for our country, and you have a rare opportunity to play a part in setting our country on a different course.

I have recently described 2024 as our country's Moon Shot election - our one chance to land on the metaphorical moon, if we do everything right in our preparation.

When Kennedy announced in 1961 that America would put a man on the moon and return him safely before the decade was out, he managed to focus an entire nation on achieving a seemingly impossible goal.

That is what we have to do by 2024. We need to get a critical mass of South Africans to believe what we know can be done. It might be our only chance to reach that goal.

But what I haven't mentioned before when speaking of our Moon Shot is the massive team it took to put that little lunar module on the surface of the moon.

Back home, and behind the scenes, thousands of people played their part to make it possible for two men to walk on the moon on 20 July 1969.

What we need to do by 2024 is no different. We are going to need an army of activists across the country to help us reach our massive goal, many of whom will be students on campuses.

I hope we can count on you to help us win the hearts and minds of young South Africans. No one can reach these young people like you can. No one else can speak to them as authentically and honestly as you can.

You have an incredibly important role to play in getting us across the line.

But first, you have the small matter of a Congress to attend to.

I wish you all a very successful DASO Congress 2022, and best of luck to those contesting leadership roles.

Let us show the world how we at the DA do things - how we respect the democratic process, abide by the outcome and rally behind the new leadership.

And then, let us immediately get back to work winning the hearts and minds of young South Africans.

A strong, stable DASO will be critical to the DA's chances in 2024, and I thank you in advance for being part of this effort.