

Federal Congress Opening Address – Helen Zille

The historic place of the Blue Machine in South Africa

We have just watched a powerful - if brief - history of the Democratic Alliance, beginning with our founding Congress 26 years ago.

But the values we stand for are far older. We did not invent them. We inherited them. We took the baton from those who ran the race for liberal democracy before us, 67 years ago.

To Congress delegates as young as you, 67 years may seem a long time. In political evolution, it is the blink of an eye. Those who study these things remind us that, in building a sustainable liberal democracy, the first 500 years are always the most difficult.

And yet, in just under seven decades, we have made extraordinary progress - in soil that has never been fertile for liberal democracy.

Historically, liberalism has taken root in relatively homogenous societies. As those societies become more diverse - as so many are in our shrinking, interconnected world - liberal democracy often comes under pressure. Identity politics rises. Ethno-populism thrives. The principle of individual freedom under law begins to wilt.

Historians will one day ask: how did South Africa - of all countries - chart a different course?

The answer will be: the Democratic Alliance.

We have taken on two powerful racial nationalist traditions in our history. We defeated one at the end of the 20th century. We have prevented another from dominating our new landscape, acting as a powerful brake on the trend in liberated countries, where oppressed become the oppressor.

And we have done this in an era when much of the world is beating an alarming retreat from liberal principles; and the moderate, rules-based order itself is under threat.

There is no shortage of parties in South Africa seeking to pull us in that same direction. Hundreds will appear on the ballot in the next election. Many will seek to weaponise our diversity - to divide South Africans along racial lines.

We reject that path.

We are the party of inclusion. We call ourselves the Blue People - not black, not white, not brown.

Blue people distinguish themselves by shared values.

- We believe in a nation defined not by race, but by principles:
- The rule of law.
- Constitutional democracy.
- Individual freedom.

- Human rights. And
- a market-based economy that creates opportunity for all.

These once uncontroversial principles are under attack.

And yet the DA stands as an extraordinary outlier. Unbent and unbowed in the face of a global liberal retreat.

We have built one of the largest, proudest and most resilient liberal movements in the world. And we did it in one of the most hostile environments to liberal politics imaginable.

We are on course to become the largest party in South Africa's metros. And from there, we move to the next milestone: becoming the largest party in the country.

How did we do it? Because we learnt some hard lessons on our journey that made us stronger.

We must never compromise on our core values.

We must resist the pull of race-based politics - whether from the far right or the woke left. And we must build, and defend, the inclusive, rational centre.

We have also built strong internal institutions - structures that work, and a culture that values open debate over factional scripting.

This Congress is proof that the Blue People do things differently.

We contest leadership openly and fairly.

We elect leaders peacefully - without bribery, without coercion.

We debate policy in good faith.

If you don't win an argument or an election, you are not punished. You are respected for putting yourself out there, as long as you do it with integrity. When you fail in the DA, you come back stronger by working harder, not by looking for excuses, playing the race card, or retreating into victimhood and factionalism.

This is our culture because we are bound together by something greater than ourselves: a relentless commitment to making South Africa succeed.

We understand how fragile a rules-based democratic order truly is - how easily it can be eroded by the forces of tyranny and anarchy.

We do not take our progress for granted.

Over three generations, we have learned this truth: democracy is never finally won. It must be defended - again and again - in every generation.

That insight must guide us as we pass the baton to the next generation.

And so, I close with the words of our first leader, Dr Jannie Steytler, spoken 67 years ago:

One day South Africa will be governed by our principles—because it is the only way it can be governed.

Jannie, you would be proud of our progress.

Thank you very much.