

**That a party once consigned to irrelevance and ridicule now shapes the destiny of South Africa, is the legacy I leave behind for the Democratic Alliance.**

**By DA Federal Leader, John Steenhuisen**

My fellow South Africans,

My fellow Democrats,

It is with a full heart, profound gratitude, and immense pride that I speak to you today for the final time as Federal Leader of the Democratic Alliance.

It was in late 2019 that the members of this great organisation first entrusted me with the responsibility to rebuild the DA, a mandate that was renewed twice in 2020 and 2023.

The party I inherited in 2019 was on its knees, polling at 16 percent, divided, and riven by a crisis of confidence.

The media confidently proclaimed the death of the DA.

But, together, the people in this room refused to accept decline as our destiny.

Because, as I often said at the time, we believed that there was nothing wrong with the DA, that could not be fixed through everything that is right about the DA.

Together, we set out to prove it, by navigating the party through the unprecedented turbulence of the Covid pandemic and into a local government election where we got back to growth.

After we had stabilised the party, we met in this exact same venue on the second of April 2023, when we embarked on a mission that changed the history of the DA, and of South Africa.

On that day, we collectively embarked on our Moonshot mission to transform the DA into a party of national government, fit-for-purpose in the new reality of coalition politics.

Just three years later, our presence in this hall today is a living testament to the spectacular success of that mission.

Not only is the blue machine stronger and healthier than ever.

Not only are we now routinely polling close to 30 percent.

But, for the first time in the history of our party, the DA now co-governs the Republic of South Africa.

That is what we pledged to the people of South Africa at our last Congress, and that is exactly what we delivered.

Democrats, it is important to reflect fully on the scale of what we have accomplished together.

The DA traces its roots all the way back to 1959, when a small group of brave South Africans broke away from the United Party to form the Progressive Party.

They stood alone in Parliament against the full force of apartheid.

Helen Suzman, for years, was often the only voice of conscience in that chamber.

They were ridiculed, marginalised, and threatened – but they never wavered in their belief that South Africa belonged to all who live in it.

As recently as 1994, the DA's predecessor was still a party that enjoyed the support of just 1.7% of the population.

For almost the entire history of our cause, it was unthinkable that the torchbearers of South Africa's liberal tradition would ever enter the Union Buildings.

But we are the generation that changed history.

We took our Moonshot, and we achieved what had been unthinkable for decades.

For the very first time, the people of South Africa now have a true political alternative, because we have proven that the DA is not only ready to get a few municipalities and provinces working, but that we are ready to get all of South Africa working.

Through our work in the Government of National Unity, we have proven that the DA delivers for all the people of South Africa.

Across urban and rural areas, in townships and in suburbs, in big cities and in small dorps, South Africans are experiencing the change that the DA has brought to the portfolios we manage.

In Agriculture, we are opening enormous new exports markets, while systematically vaccinating our national cattle herd against foot-and-mouth disease for the first time in South African history.

In Home Affairs, we are rebuilding the very foundation of the state, eradicating long queues and replacing paperwork and inefficiency with technological modernisation at a scale never seen before.

In Basic Education, we are safeguarding mother-tongue education through regulations, while investing in foundation phase learning and improving matric results.

In Public Works and Infrastructure, we are uprooting corruption and criminality while transforming dilapidated government-owned buildings into public assets that serve the public good.

In Communications and Digital Technologies, we are working to unlock equity equivalence to drive innovation and enhance digital inclusion.

And in Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, we have saved fishing communities from destitution by restoring their access to the sea while ensuring sustainable economic development.

Above all, DA Ministers, Deputy Ministers and our Parliamentary chairpersons are fighting every day to drive the economic reforms our country desperately needs to unlock private investment, grow the economy, and create jobs.

That is why we steadfastly fought against a destructive proposal to increase Value Added Tax in last year's budget.

It is why we pushed government to act quickly to reduce the fuel levy in the face of exploding fuel costs.

It is why we took court action against the economically-destructive Expropriation Act, which has led the President to admit in his court papers that the Act is indeed unconstitutional – it is now only a matter of time before the court strikes it down.

And it is why we continue to fight against the National Health Insurance, which has officially been put on hold through a court order.

Every day, in big ways and small, the DA is winning these battles against destructive policies in ways that were impossible before, because we now have a seat at the table.

The results speak for themselves.

The clarity and urgency that the DA has brought to bear against destructive policies and in favour of economic reform, has already led to South Africa's removal from the FATF grey list, our first credit ratings upgrade in 20 years, a doubling of economic growth, and the first signs of lower unemployment.

We obviously still have a very long way to go to rescue South Africa, but for the first time in decades our country is well and truly moving in the right direction.

And make no mistake about it: the only reason why any of this is happening – the only reason why we prevented a VAT increase, the only reason why we are fixing broken departments, and the only reason why our economy is showing signs of life – is because the DA accomplished our Moonshot mission to enter a national governing coalition.

But the DA's work in national government also matters at another, deeper level.

For almost 70 years, our predecessors strove for a South Africa where all forms of ethnic nationalism would be replaced by a liberal, non-racial governing alternative that regards citizens as individuals worthy of respect, protection and empowerment.

A country where every person enjoys access to the opportunities they need to build a life they value, and where we could unite in our diversity.

Thanks to our Moonshot mission, South Africa has taken a major step towards realising this vision.

The fact that a country as diverse as South Africa now has a multiparty coalition government that is increasingly anchored in our liberal reform agenda, is an astonishing national achievement given our divided and violent past.

Even in societies that are much less diverse or divided than ours, coalitions routinely collapse over the kind of deep disagreements that our GNU continues to navigate.

This is profoundly important, because it demonstrates that this country is capable of working together to pursue reform and growth.

It is not yet at the scale we require, but the experience of the GNU so far demonstrates that – for the first time in South African history – a future with the DA at its heart where we unite in our diversity to solve common problems, is indeed within reach.

This is also important beyond our own shores.

Globally, we have entered an uncertain new era marked by growing division, populism and violence.

We are living through a moment in time where the timeless liberal values that we hold dear – freedom, fairness, opportunity and diversity – are coming under the most sustained assault since the end of the Second World War.

Illiberalism, at home and abroad, is on the march.

And its defining feature is a retreat into populist and ethnic nationalism, based on the belief that diverse societies are doomed to fail.

This rising global tide of scapegoating, othering and ethnic division, strikes at the very heart of the DA's political project.

For our party's core belief, dating back all the way to 1959, is that a country as richly diverse as South Africa, can be made to work for all of its people.

That a country home to people who have different skin tones, who worship different Gods, who speak different languages, who love different people, and whose ancestors came from different places, is not doomed to collapse into endless conflict – but that it can succeed.

And that it can succeed not in spite of its diversity.

But that it can succeed because of its diversity.

It is clear that the rising global tide of populism also laps at South African shores.

The Doomsday Coalition that I first warned about from this stage three years ago, has taken power in Gauteng.

In KwaZulu-Natal, it is kept at bay by a single vote in the provincial legislature.

Ethnic nationalism, anti-foreigner incitement, and a drive to exploit our country's problems to drive division are all manifestations of this growing illiberalism.

At precisely the moment that the DA took our biggest step towards building a society where every person, regardless of their background, can look forward to a better future, we are confronted by new forces whose sole aim is to replace our inclusive vision with new forms of division, populism and hatred.

It is an agenda that the Democratic Alliance must reject at all costs, because it is the antithesis of what we and our predecessors fought for.

Instead, if this is where the world is going, then our job is to ensure that South Africa is the outlier.

While many places around the world have recently swung towards extremes, South Africa is one of the few countries that today has a more moderate, inclusive and diverse government than we had two years ago.

The formation of the GNU is a precious and historic opportunity to unite those who want to build a better country across the old dividing lines of race, class, language and religion.

It is an opportunity that we must seize and build upon.

We, the people of South Africa and our Government of National Unity, are now the torchbearers of the future, keeping the flame alive for a world where difference and diversity are harnessed instead of weaponised.

This is not naivety.

It is practical, because it is only through the values and principles of the DA that South Africa can ensure a prosperous future for all its people.

As I conclude my chapter at the head of the DA, it is fitting to quote the founding Leader of our predecessor party, Dr Jannie Steytler, who famously said in 1959: "One day, South Africa will be governed by our principles, because it is the only way it can be governed."

My fellow South Africans,

That a party once consigned to irrelevance and ridicule now shapes the destiny of South Africa, is the legacy I leave behind for the Democratic Alliance.

For me, it is Mission Accomplished.

I hand over the baton of leadership with immense pride and complete confidence.

The DA is stronger, larger, more relevant, and more influential than at any point in its history.

We are no longer a regional party or a perpetual opposition.

We are a national force for reform – a party in government that is already making South Africa work better.

The road ahead will have challenges.

It always does.

But the foundations we have built together are solid.

The values we defend are timeless.

And the mission – to become the largest party in South Africa and build a country where every citizen has a fair shot regardless of their background – remains as urgent as ever.

Thank you to every member of the DA for the many acts of kindness and support shown to me throughout this journey.

Thank you for the honour of leading this great party.

It truly has been the greatest privilege of my life.

Above all, thank you to my beautiful family.

And finally: for anyone who may be wondering what I will be doing next.

Aside from working night and day until we defeat foot-and-mouth-disease, I will be doing what I have always done since I first joined the DA after high school.

I will be side-by-side with all of you in this glorious blue machine, working in the trenches to support the next chapter of our storied history.

I love my party.

And I love my country.

And I will continue to serve them both with all my heart and soul.

Thank you.