

# Cape's history is a salutary lesson in coalition politics



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HAD King João II of Portugal had a glimpse of Cape metropolitan politics five centuries later, he might just have endorsed a Bartolomeu Dias suggestion to name the majestic promontories, and all that lay beyond them, *Cabo das Tormentas* (the "Cape of Storms").

Far from being pejorative, it contrasts that have defined Cape Town: the very same Cape described by Sir Francis Drake in 1580 as "the most stately thing and fairest Cape we saw in the whole circumference of the Earth" had unleashed the deadly storms in which Dias disappeared on board a vessel en route to India in 1500. And it is the very same Mother City that gave birth to the United Democratic Front in Mitchell's Plain in 1983 – mobilising one of the largest social movements of the 20th century – that is perhaps the political entity in post-apartheid South Africa with the most unpredictable political outcomes.

It is such features and moments in the history of the Cape from the 15th century that have made its internal politics both vibrant and definitive in South African political history. Six years of metropolitan politics in Cape Town have continued this trend. The Mother City has seen the emergence of a vibrant and highly competitive multiparty political system that has been accompanied by an emergent political culture of coalition governance.

The city has experienced three different types of coalition governments since the inauguration of the new local government regime after the 2000 local elections: a Democratic Party (DP), New National Party (NNP) and Federal Alliance (FA) 2000 electoral coalition that paved the way for the creation of the Democratic Alliance as the majority party in the Cape Metropolitan

Council; an African National Congress and NNP legislative and executive coalition, formed as a consequence of the new floor-crossing regime, and following the break-away of a significant segment of the NNP leadership from the DA; and a DA-led seven-party coalition (comprising the African Christian Democratic Party, the Freedom Front Plus, African Muslim Party, the United Democratic Movement, the United Independent Front and the Universal Party) produced by a hung metropolitan council after the competitive 2006 election.

Each of these experiences in coalition governance has provided valuable lessons on the construction of effective internal structures, procedures and mechanisms to manage internal coalition issues, to resolve internal conflicts and discipline coalition members.

It reveals a gradual political maturity in coalition partnership – from a DA marriage prone to fractiousness and disharmony, eventually fragmenting like an exploding grenade, to a massive seven-party partnership that has used a textbook situation for a post-election deadlock highly effectively, surviving numerous attempts to topple it.

What does all this tell us about the history and future coalition formation in the Cape?

The first coalition's fundamental weakness was that, while it encouraged a pre-election alliance between parties with very different ideological orientations, it failed to provide adequate measures to hold the centre and consolidate political power.

An example is the street-naming scandal.

The ANC-NNP alliance stands in direct contrast to this. While given power through floor-crossing, its success at holding the centre was largely due to the actual policy

framework that brought the two parties into coalition, the National Cooperation Agreement, and the NNP's partnership with a large and powerful national majority party. But it became an entirely different matter when that political arrangement was put to the 2006 polls.

The third coalition government seems to have stabilised the internal multiparty system in the metro. Despite the coalition being propelled into power by just one seat, it seems the horse-trading in the aftermath of the hung council has provided a strong enough platform for seeking common ground and working together on policy matters.

The inclusive features of a seven-party coalition, regardless of the diversity in make-up of the coalition partners, provides the basis for building a political culture of consensus-based politics that could be a model for multipartyism in South African local politics.

Most importantly, the recent outcome of the "battle to control the city council" draws further lessons for multipartyism in South Africa in general.

Thus, perhaps King João II should be forgiven for discarding Dias's suggestion – after all, if indeed it is the *Cabo da Boa Esperança* (the Cape of Good Hope), then there should be great optimism in the engendering of consensus-based coalition politics for the future of the Mother City, regardless of the power of the various political players.

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