

“People are identified with their view. So much is at stake to protect it.”

Recent comments made about ANC dissidents being “dogs” will come back to bite the ones who uttered them – and, be prepared, the barking will continue well into the night. Not because of who is involved or what they stand for, but purely because it is a human dynamic certainty.

History provides rich and outright scary examples of leaders squashing, negating, terrifying and obliterating the voices that bring discomfort and challenge. When we follow the results such leaders achieve, the pattern is clear to see: a dissident view never actually dies. It will, in fact, outlive any cat. It might shrink back temporarily due to fear of being ostracised or lack of public support, leaving the false impression that the voice is “dead”. But if you care to look closely, you will see that there is no such thing as a strong voice dying. After some time, in some other way and with different, new energy, it pops back up again.

Our country’s history tells this story with crystal clarity: try to oppress a voice of resistance and it will go underground, gather strength and come back with a vengeance. We celebrate the courage it took from these underground leaders that brought fairness and equality. But did we bank the lessons we lived through? Apparently not.

If Thabo Mbeki had listened to the voices that differed from him and sometimes even criticised him, I’m certain he would still be our President today. The grow-

ing frustration with his inability to include the concerned voices turned those concerned into crusaders for leadership change. And it came like a tidal wave at night: unexpected to those who were not paying attention.

Did we bank the lesson to listen to the dissident voice this time? Again: no. This time around we simply have a change of roles. The critics of the past regime are now the new regime. The critics of the new regime are now in the dog box.

This pattern is another social reality: it’s easy to know when we are not being heard (and therefore we shall revolt), but it’s as if we have a blind spot for seeing when we cannot and do not listen to another. It’s easy to identify when I have been marginalised. It’s almost impossible to see when I do the marginalising.

Few of us know what happened behind the ANC scenes recently, but observing the change of the guard over the past year clearly indicates polar opposites who cannot hear each other. More concerning is that it is not about the point of view any more: it is personal.

People are identified with their view. So much is at stake to protect it. When we study group behaviour, it is clear that the moment a view is personalised, it is impossible to see anything of value the opponent has to say, even if there is a gem on the other side. The opponent might recite a love poem and on this side we hear a war cry. It is in this moment that the

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seemingly opposite voices are clones of each other. It amuses observers. The parties involved are oblivious.

The result? We are stuck in an orgy of mud slinging and oversimplifying the issue. We become obsessed with the way we see it. We cannot hear, we cannot have healthy dialogue and we cannot learn or grow our understanding of reality.

The need to be right becomes a form of violence.

The public stage is always a good mirror for us, sitting privately and protected in the audience – lights dimmed.

How often do I call someone a dog if they do not agree with

my way of doing things? When I switch off talk radio when someone says something extremely annoying? Bad dog! When I smirk on the inside in a meeting when someone raises a problem I think is a bit ridiculous? Stupid dog! When I get defensive the moment I sense I am being criticised? How dare you, dog?

The toughest leadership task is to make space for diversity. Especially when a position of power brings with it the seduction of controlling who gets to say what. It takes active will and sharp awareness not to step into that trap.

The other option is to continue living in a dog eats dog world!