

From Critique to Action

Renewing South Africa's Promise in a Time of Crisis

Johannesburg Roundtable
Park Place, 28 June 2016

Background Note

In recent years a number of major critiques on South Africa have been published. The critiques approach South Africa's complex social, economic and governance challenges from a variety of perspectives, though across all is significant common ground that could be tilted for ways to achieve two main aims: arrest the country's slide into still-deeper crisis; and return the country to a positive economic, political and social trajectory. 'From Critique to Action' is an initiative of The Brenthurst Foundation in partnership with the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung which brings together authors of many of these critiques along with a select group of individuals from civil society, business, politics and academia. The initial phase of the project is comprised of two Roundtables, the first in Johannesburg on 28 June, the second in Cape Town on 7 July, with different authors and participants at each.

A number of key principles animate the spirit and intent of these Roundtables. The first is a sense of *urgency*. While South Africa is still a comparatively (very) young democracy, and setbacks and reversals are common to all nation-building experiences throughout history, events over the past year suggest strongly that attention ought to be focused on immediate steps to 'arrest the slide', which in varying degrees will comprise social, economic and political elements.

The second principle is *action*. There is a wide consensus that, 22 years after the advent of democracy, South Africa has reached a critical inflection point in its young history. The country's remarkable progress – and promise – risks being undone by a host of challenges that are as widely accepted as they are reported: joblessness and low economic mobility; a stalled economy; inadequate public education and skills development; persistent inequality; leadership failings and corruption; crime; fraught race and gender relations. None are amenable to short-term panaceas. But across each challenge there is scope for concrete steps in the immediate term to ameliorate the sense of crisis and return the country to a positive trajectory. It is to these 'actions', rather than a repeating of well-known problems, that participants are asked to focus their contributions.

And a third underlying principle is that a 'way out' of the crisis exists. South Africa has a particular history which may define its present more potently than many states' pasts, but its problems are not inimitable. Nations the world over have confronted similarly grave social, political and economic challenges – and found ways to overcome them and renew their national projects, often adapting to their own circumstances key lessons gleaned from other nations' experiences.

For the purposes of our initial roundtables, we have divided the rich body of South African writing and scholarship examining how the country got to this point and how its once vast promise could be renewed, into three loose categories: Repairing the Social Fabric; Political Economy Solutions; and Strengthening Governance and Democracy. Within these three loose categories, however, we fully recognise there are myriad cross-cutting issues. As such, we expect economic arguments to form an important part of social and political discussions, and vice versa.

Summaries of the participating authors' works are attached, and complimentary copies of their books will be available on the day.

The sessions are formatted in such a way to emphasize dialogue and interchange, using the key insights drawn from the authors' works as the starting points and platforms for thinking about how we can move From Critique to Action. Authors are asked to kindly restrict their remarks to 8 minutes maximum, mindful that there will be ample opportunities to address comments/critiques. Responders are asked to restrict their responses to 5 minutes and comment on aspects of the author's remarks, or highlight issues not addressed. The framing questions below are meant only as a rough guide to the type of questions and issues likely to arise in the respective sessions.

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Agenda

08h00-08h50 Registration and Coffee

09h00 **Introduction by Event Chair**

Terence McNamee

09h10 **Repairing the Social Fabric**

- *How do South Africans develop a sufficient degree of consensus around a nation we want to be? Or can we?*
- *Can South Africa be recast as a nation which prioritises the upliftment of the underdog, the marginalised majority?*

- *How can civil society regain its voice on ALL national issues (not just eg freedom of information)?*
- *Have Democratic South Africa's core 'values' changed or been hollowed out in the past two decades? How do we create a new social code?*
- *Is persistent 'white privilege' the biggest brake on nation building?*
- *Why have we not overcome various forms of intolerance and what do recent high profile examples tell us about the distance still to travel?*

Authors: **Ferial Haffajee, Songezo Zibi**

Responders: **Loren Landau, Trudi Makhaya**

Discussion

10h00 Political Economy Solutions

- *What needs to be done to avoid a downgrade in December?*
- *How can business, labour and government work together to ameliorate the current crisis?*
- *What can we learn from South Africa's successful entrepreneurs about creating jobs and catalysing growth?*
- *How do we balance calls for more BEE, redistribution and the need to swiftly re-gear South Africa's growth trajectory?*
- *Can anything be done in the short-term to rationalise the public sector?*
- *What is the role of business in the current political juncture?*

Authors: **Greg Mills, Moeletsi Mbeki, Kevin Lings**

Responders: **Ann Bernstein, Simon Freemantle**

Discussion

11h15 Coffee

11h30 Strengthening Governance and Democracy

- *How can we better protect and revitalise institutions of accountability?*
- *What can be done to stop violent protest and unrest from becoming South Africa's new 'normal' (again)?*
- *How can we refocus public attention on issues of policy rather than political intrigue?*
- *How can we build coalitions for 'growth' and 'deepening democracy' that cross party lines?*

- *Are grand initiatives – such as the muted new Codesa – necessary and/or doable to renew South Africa’s promise?*

Authors: ***Raymond Suttner, Ray Hartley, Mzukisi Qobo***

Responders: ***Robert Mattes, Lindiwe Mazibuko***

Discussion

12h40 **Identification of Key Actions**

12h45 Lunch

13h45 **Select Perspectives**

Solly Mapaila, Thresh Govender, Ivor Chipkin

14h15 **Open Dialogue on Key Actions**

15h15 **Summary**

15h30 Ends