



Geordin Hill-Lewis

in conversation with
Ann Bernstein

To mark 25 years since its establishment, in November 2020, CDE initiated a series of discussions with global experts and prominent individuals in South Africa on important questions on democracy, business, markets and development. The series was relaunched in 2022 as CDE Conversations. This is the 36th event in the series.

Ann Bernstein: It is a great pleasure to welcome Geordin Hill-Lewis, the Mayor of Cape Town, as our guest today. He has been mayor since November 2021, and before this, he was a Member of Parliament (MP) for 10 years, where he became Shadow Minister of Finance at the culmination of his parliamentary career. He was the youngest MP when elected to Parliament, and the youngest mayor when inaugurated.

Let us start with a little bit of what I like to call station identification; tell us how you got into politics and why, and how you would describe your political positioning.

Geordin Hill-Lewis: My interest in politics started at Edgemoor High School here in Cape Town, where I was taught by exceptional teachers who introduced me to South African politics. I started reading just absolutely everything that I could get my hands on. My teachers supplied me with a steady stream of insightful literature on South African politics. I read all the Allister Sparks books, and classics like *Cry, the Beloved Country* (Alan Paton), Rian Malan, and so many others, including *Thabo Mbeki: The Dream Deferred* by Mark Gevisser. And the more I read, the more fascinated I became with politics.

My career in politics began at university. I founded the Democratic Alliance Student Organisation at the University of Cape Town to represent liberal views and challenge the African National Congress (ANC) Youth League on campus, which existed in the guise of the South African Students Congress. One thing led to another; I started working for Helen Zille and the Democratic Alliance (DA), and eventually, ran for office. As far as my political outlook is concerned, I like to think of myself as a liberal democrat in the European sense. We believe in frugal governments, free markets, a strict separation between church and state, a strong commitment to free expression, and all the fundamental principles necessary to uphold liberal democracy.

Ann Bernstein: I am sure when you became Mayor of Cape Town, lots of people gave you advice. What is the best piece of advice you received that has influenced how you lead in the City of Cape Town?

Geordin Hill-Lewis: I have learned from several incredible leaders. I had the privilege of working for Helen Zille for five years as her chief of staff, and before that, in a more junior role. She sets an extraordinary example of work ethic, integrity, leading with the truth, and being straight with people. I grew up in a middle-class home and was raised by a single mother who instilled in me the values of hard work, sacrifice, doing what is necessary, and seeing public service as a vocation. Those values are deeply ingrained, and I continue to be guided by them.

Ann Bernstein: President Ramaphosa recently referred to Cape Town as the one city that works, and even told ANC councillors that they should learn from municipalities that are run by the DA. Why do you think he did this? He is an astute politician and must have known it would upset members of his party? What is going on here?

Geordin Hill-Lewis: What he said was true, and he was correct. However, I can only assume that his remarks stemmed from an outpouring of frustration with the wasteland of failure in all ANC municipalities. He was probably overwhelmed by the fact that the ANC cannot point to a single example of real standout local government success, because no one, knowing the entirely predictable blowback he would face, would deliberately put that in his speech.

Ann Bernstein: Some critics allege that the DA attacks cadre deployment by the ANC, but when they get into power, in places like Cape Town, they appoint their own party people. Thus, the DA also practises cadre deployment. What is your response to this accusation?

Geordin Hill-Lewis: Cadre deployment occurs when politicians elevate political loyalty above all other considerations, such as competence and merit, and appoint an official because they will do the party's bidding in state institutions. There is no evidence of the DA appointing candidates based on their political loyalty. Rather, DA candidates are appointed to government positions because they are exceptional individuals and deserve every appointment ever made by the DA. We protect and defend the professionalism of the civil service, and that is why we have consistently achieved better public outcomes.

Ann Bernstein: You have often called Cape Town the "City of Hope", and that is what you want it to be. What does that mean in tangible terms for someone living in Khayelitsha or Gugulethu today?

Geordin Hill-Lewis: Residents should be able to see forward momentum and progress, despite the difficulties of their living conditions or personal circumstances. That means social services and infrastructure which are improving incrementally. It means residents have access to work and employment opportunities because the economy is improving. And, very importantly, it means they have the prospect of raising children in relative safety. Those are the practical measures that give people hope. We have made great progress in certain areas, but in others, there is still much work to do.

Ann Bernstein: I want to probe your philosophy of government. There was an American mayor a while ago in Indianapolis who took over a city that was in deep trouble. He developed what he called the 'Yellow Pages Test', in the days before cell phones. Essentially his idea was: if there were three or more companies in my city performing a service that the city was also trying to deliver, it would be best to let the private sector and competitive markets do that job. The question I want to ask you is: what are your views on states and markets at the local level? I have often felt that the DA has not sufficiently thought through these kinds of issues. How do you see this?

Geordin Hill-Lewis: While I would like to subscribe to the 'Yellow Pages Test', that theory often clashes with reality on the ground. For example, in Cape Town, almost all waste collection services in informal settlements are outsourced to private contractors. However, the outcomes we receive for vast amounts of public expenditure are substandard. This has been a source of great frustration to me, because I want people living in informal settlements to experience a basic level of cleanliness and tidiness. Often, when I visit these communities, I find an unacceptable level of squalor. Yet we pay hundreds of millions of Rands every year for waste collection services in informal settlements. The way these contracts are designed and monitored – and the accountability mechanisms that are put in place – are just as (if not more) important than the simple principle of assuming the state should not be rendering those services because the private sector is better suited to deliver them. In fact, where the City of Cape Town is responsible for waste collection, it does a much better job with almost perfect service.

At the local level the state must focus on its core delivery mandate, especially the provision of bulk infrastructure, which the market cannot deliver on its own because of the scale, cost and complexity.

In my experience, local government functions as a contract management organisation, not necessarily as a service delivery organisation, but it still achieves very poor public outcomes. We have to figure out and diagnose exactly what the reasons for that are.

Ann Bernstein: Let's turn to one of the hardest issues you have to deal with. You open the paper and very often, there have been gang killings or terrible crime happening in Cape Town. Now, you have proposed that more power should be given to the City of Cape Town to handle policing, and even prosecutions. Talk to us about how you see this, what powers you think the city should get, and how this could really help when we have a broken national policing and prosecution system.

Geordin Hill-Lewis: Delegating policing powers downwards is essential for effective crime fighting in the Western Cape. This is best illustrated by one very powerful example. We traced the case data of the more than 1 400 illegal firearms that our Metro Police officers removed from the streets over the last three years. The conviction data showed that a mere 5% of these cases resulted in guilty convictions, and alarmingly, of the 95% that failed, 80% stemmed from an investigative failure on the part of the South African Police Service, which made the case fall apart in court. The most effective way to improve crime fighting and strengthen the criminal justice system is to improve investigative capacity at a local level. This is why we advocate for the devolution of investigative powers to Metro Police officers. At the moment, they only do what I call "visible policing", which is shorthand for street patrol. Giving Metro Police officers investigative powers isn't about municipal empire building – or, in the ANC's worst interpretation, secessionism – but about securing better public outcomes and improving safety in our communities.

Ann Bernstein: How far has that debate gone with the national government?

Geordin Hill-Lewis: We have had three police ministers in the last three years. The first minister was opposed to the proposal. The second minister was somewhat more receptive, but he was fired. The third minister is by far the most open-minded of them all, but he is still new in the job. With each ministerial appointment, we have had to restart the conversation and present our draft regulations. And, so, round and round the roundabout we go. At some point, we need to see an improvement in conviction rates. In fact, the last six months of escalating gang violence in Cape Town underscores the need for action.

Ann Bernstein: Cape Town, like all South African cities, is deeply segregated, and while some progress has been made in the past 30 years to address this situation, there has not been as much of an improvement as everyone would have hoped. For many people, Cape Town is almost as segregated as it was during apartheid. Now, there are vast differences in living standards between the City Bowl, the Cape Flats, and Khayelitsha, with hundreds of thousands of people living in informal settlements. What is your administration's idea for changing that? How far have you come? How do you think you are doing in a very difficult situation?

Geordin Hill-Lewis: We need to recognise that the public housing programme has failed to address spatial inequality. In fact, if anything, it has exacerbated it because the public housing programme finds land on the periphery of cities and incentivises the development of public housing far from jobs, public transport and social amenities. The DA has concentrated on two areas of reform. Firstly, we have leveraged the small parcels of land scattered in well-located parts of the city. These are close to business nodes and are city owned. We have expedited the development process by releasing more land in the past three years than in the ten years before that combined. Several social housing projects are now out to market, and many are under construction or completed. We have pioneered efforts such as codifying and publishing a set of criteria – a first in South Africa – to discount that land to zero if we maximise the social housing yield. Additionally, we have published a set of permanent, perpetual discounts in rates, taxes, and service charges so that the rentals on those social housing properties remain as low as possible in the long term.

The second reform, which I am very proud of, is the Municipal Planning Amendment By-law. Although the by-law is not widely discussed, in ten- or 20-years' time, it will have made the biggest difference to housing integration in Cape Town because it supports an ecosystem of micro-developers. The by-law is very much based on research that CDE produced. I vividly recall during my mayoral campaign reading a CDE paper on micro-developers (See ***Building Better Cities: A new approach to housing and urban development*** 2020), and I reached out to you, Ann. You introduced me to micro-developers in Delft, where I met a lady called Zama, who had built four flats around her mother's RDP home. Her elderly mum, who was a pensioner, suddenly moved from being dependent on her social grant to earning R16 000 a month in rental income. I wondered if there are a thousand Zamas in Cape Town, and there probably are. This scale and rate of delivery is far faster than the state could ever achieve. Instead of viewing these four flats as a planning violation, we have now passed this by-law supporting major planning reforms. Our administration also has planning support officers to ensure micro-developers have proper connections to sewerage lines, the electricity grid and other utilities. In the long term this will have a huge impact on reducing spatial inequality.

Ann Bernstein: You are running a city in an urbanising country. Cities, ideally, have to plan ahead for a growing population, migrants, as well as natural population growth. And Cape Town is experiencing enormous in-migration from the rest of the country, both by poor and richer people who are coming to Cape Town. How does your city plan for its complicated present and for its future in this context? It must be very challenging. How do you see all of this?

Geordin Hill-Lewis: By far the greatest planning challenge is the rapid mushrooming of informal communities and structures. Major infrastructure projects, like the construction of a new pipeline or a new wastewater treatment works, take years of planning and fundraising. And if the city is expanding at a compounding rate, we are constantly playing catch-up. We need to accelerate infrastructure investment by planning proactively rather than reactively. My view is that we should encourage micro-developers, facilitate them building formal structures, and then plan simultaneously to get ahead of the infrastructure pressure curve. That is the shift I have tried to engineer in the city with some success, but there is still a long way to go. If micro-developers are allowed to build housing and densify the city, then the infrastructure has to be extended and upgraded so it can cope with increased usage. The alternative is that all of those people will continue to remain in far-away shacks, and that is unacceptable.

Ann Bernstein: Are there grants from national government you can use to improve the infrastructure for greater densification? Is that what you are doing?

Geordin Hill-Lewis: The national government spends a vast amount of time talking about infrastructure but does not follow through with the necessary resources. So even though we are allocated infrastructure grants from the national fiscus, they don't go far enough. We really have to row our own canoe and raise our own finances.

Ann Bernstein: One of the challenges with a city doing well, like your city is doing for many people, is that you are attracting more and more tourists, and you keep winning awards for being a great tourist destination. What is your view on this big debate from Barcelona to Cape Town? Do you think that Airbnb activity should be regulated so that locals don't lose access to well-located property, as it is claimed they do?

Geordin Hill-Lewis: I do not regard the Barcelona model as an example for us to follow because we have vastly different socio-economic contexts. Barcelona has 20 million overseas visitors annually, while Cape Town has one and a half million. Barcelona has an unemployment rate of 7% and Cape Town's unemployment rate is 21%. Tourism in South Africa, and in Cape Town in particular, is one of the fastest-growing sectors, growing at an

annual rate of 7%. Can you just imagine if the South African economy grew 7% a year, what would happen to unemployment? We must nurture tourism and help it grow even more, not see it as a threat.

There is also an element to this debate that is a red herring, because even if we removed every Airbnb overnight, there would still be a demand for well-located accommodation. You would have a short-term boost in construction because hoteliers would have to build much bigger hotels. But very quickly, the market would settle down into the same equilibrium of space availability in those highly sought-after areas because Airbnb accommodation would just be replaced by hotels. There would be no net gain of available space or available units in the market. People just have not thought through the second and third round effects of what that really means for the property economy in those tourism zones. What is really happening in Barcelona is not about being anti-Airbnb; it is anti-tourism. Cape Town has 600 000 unemployed people, and many of them could find jobs in a fast-growing tourism economy. Getting as many of these people as possible out of unemployment and into work must be our number one priority.

Ann Bernstein: Why do you think Cape Town has a better rate of employment than other cities and other parts of the country? How do you explain that?

Geordin Hill-Lewis: Tourism is certainly part of it. The three or four world class universities we have in and around Cape Town contribute to a large knowledge economy here, and to the development of a high skill economy. There's a big services economy which has attracted significant investment and brought jobs with it. Cape Town also has these historical industries in the manufacturing space that are quite small and niche (but specialised) like ship building and boat building, along with garment manufacturing. Of course, the agricultural economy is critical to employment in the region. Nevertheless, I must stress that an unemployment rate of 21% still needs to be considered a crisis, which is why we must not look the gift horse of tourism in the mouth. It is essential for the city's growth.

Ann Bernstein: I know you are very proud of what you have been able to do with your infrastructure budget in Cape Town. Tell us about this. You are one of the few cities in South Africa that is not consuming a large part of its budget with staff salaries. I know that you are attacked for looking after the good parts of Cape Town, the rich parts of Cape Town with infrastructure and not the poor parts. Tell us the facts and how you see this.

Geordin Hill-Lewis: I think this is just a convenient line used by our political opponents. The reality is that a huge portion of our budget is allocated to investment in poorer communities. We have tripled our infrastructure budget compared to four years ago. This year we will spend more on infrastructure investment than Tshwane, Johannesburg and Ekurhuleni combined. The overwhelming preponderance of investment is going to poorer areas like Mitchells Plain and Khayelitsha, where the largest expansion of public transport infrastructure in South Africa is currently under way. The largest sewer pipeline upgrade in the whole country is taking place on the Cape Flats right now. We did not start by upgrading infrastructure in the leafy suburbs. We started with the Khayelitsha Wastewater Works upgrade. The next major infrastructure project we are about to break ground on in a couple of weeks' time is in Macassar, a working-class-coloured community in the Heidelberg catchment area. The Macassar upgrade is a major R4 billion project to modernise the Macassar Wastewater Treatment Works.

Ann Bernstein: What do you say to people who complain that you squeeze the middle class to subsidise development in poorer areas? I think you had to back down earlier this year on the tariff debate. That must have been a salutary experience. Is it possible to summarise what happened or give us a feel of these tensions and how you see them, and what you learned this year?

Geordin Hill-Lewis: Well, the key thing is that infrastructure in South Africa is severely underfunded. As I said, we receive small grants, but by and large, we have to raise funding ourselves. However, because of South Africa's sovereign credit rating, we are raising debt funding at an expensive price. That implies even higher tariffs in the future as all this debt has to be repaid at very high interest rates. We have two options: we either accept infrastructure failure and watch it happen or mobilise the capital required to fund the investment to stop the failure. For me, it is a no-brainer. We will mobilise the capital required to fund the investment to stop the failure. That is how we engender a successful society. I really hope that more and more Capetonians recognise that the only way South Africa can ultimately work, and indeed the only way Cape Town works or the way it works best, is when it delivers clear benefits for everyone, when it improves the quality of life for everyone, and when it guarantees the poorest people in our city a very basic availability of dignified services.

The debate got twisted a little bit because the impression was created that we are delivering luxury services to the poor. That is not the case at all. We are trying to roll out essential infrastructure to deliver what in fact are the most basic, rudimentary, dignified services to the poorest residents. I really think that is something we should all back and be glad about and be willing to invest in.

We designed our tariffs in a certain way to 'upsize' them for the most valuable properties. What happened was that properties valued at around R3 million to R7 million were also caught in that net, which turned up the volume on the debate. Statistically speaking, people living in these households are not in the middle class – they fall under the South African Living Standards Measure nine or ten – but it's also true that many of them are under huge financial strain and already overtaxed. We introduced softening measures for that category. In the end, we passed the budget, and I think it is absolutely the right thing for Cape Town, and we will deliver a much better city for many, many years and decades to come.

Ann Bernstein: I believe you have something called the "stupid rule button" on the desks of your officials. Can you explain what this is? And can you give us an example of a stupid rule that you got rid of that really mattered? Does red tape matter?

Geordin Hill-Lewis: The button enables officials to flag what they deem to be an unnecessary policy or procedure. This is automatically escalated to a senior manager who has two possible responses: to explain the purpose of the rule; or, if they can't provide an explanation, to get rid of the rule within 14 days. We have a plethora of unnecessary rules that exist in the system, and many of them are outdated. We are signalling that efficiency is more important than process, and we encourage our staff to recommend effective measures to simplify the public administration processes. By the way, it's an entirely stolen idea, which I got from Michael Jordaan. He told me about it, and I loved it and copied it immediately.

Ann Bernstein: I am going to move on to some national issues. Do you think the government of national unity (GNU) has made a difference to the City of Cape Town? Have you noticed any difference?

Geordin Hill-Lewis: Yes, there is a significant difference and improvement, mainly in the Department of Home Affairs. The introduction of the eVisa service and the Trusted Tour Operator Scheme has already delivered growth in tourist numbers, and it has the potential to grow the number of inbound tourists from markets like India and China three, four or fivefold in the coming years. The better co-ordination we've seen from the department in managing the influx of illegal immigrants has also been very helpful. We've seen some benefits as well from the Department of Public Works and Infrastructure, in the much-improved management of land and buildings owned by the department.

Ann Bernstein: One of the things I was excited about is the possibility that the national government and its many departments, including the Department of Defence, would be encouraged to sell the land they were not utilising, and that this could free up space in cities like Cape Town for low-income housing on well-located land. Have you made any progress on Ysterplaat, which is, as I understand it, an enormous piece of land which would make a big difference for people being able to walk to work? Any progress with the GNU in looking seriously at the land the national government owns that might be released or sold for urban development?

Geordin Hill-Lewis: The short answer is no: we have not had nearly enough progress. We have had progress with smaller parcels that are owned directly by the Department of Public Works. But of course, the Department of Public Works is also the owner of all state land, even if it is used by other departments. Herein lies the tension, because when it comes to getting those other departments to agree to part with that land, it is not relevant that the land is technically owned by the Department of Public Works. They call those other departments the "user department". User departments often refuse to part with the land, and they have no incentive to do so. If I could get one message to the finance minister, it would be to change the incentive structure. If the land is sold, the user department should get to keep the proceeds of the sale. That would change the incentives fundamentally, and it would unlock a wave of land disposals. As things stand, if you sell a piece of land, all the revenue goes to the National Treasury. And so we just have this stalemate.

Ann Bernstein: As a key member of the DA, how do you think the GNU is doing overall? Have you been disappointed? Are you encouraged? How do you think the GNU has performed for South Africa?

Geordin Hill-Lewis: It has done as well as could be expected given that it is a very new experiment in South African governance and the unbelievable political complexities at the heart of it. The GNU's core key performance indicator is to change the country's growth trajectory. And on that score, it has not yet achieved its goals. It still has a lot of work to do. But on the plus side, it is infinitely better than the available alternatives. At least we have a government of reasonable centrists in power, who can further a halting, but, nevertheless slowly progressing reform agenda.

Ann Bernstein: I want to ask you about your ports. The Cape Town Port, according to the World Bank, is one of the worst in the world. Who should we blame for this? Is this the fault of Transnet, the city government, or the national government? What is the problem here?

Geordin Hill-Lewis: This is largely the result of the state's ideological obsession with controlling the so-called commanding heights of the economy, the ports and the railways and the power grid and so on. There is an obsession with state control regardless of the undeniably poor public outcomes and the negative impacts which state control has on growth and employment in the country. Several studies have shown that we could add one and a half per cent to gross domestic product growth each year (compounding) if we had effective ports. That is why we have been a strong advocate for privatising the Cape Town Port or at least concessioning it for private management. I still do think that will happen out of pure necessity in the coming years, because Transnet (like Eskom and the Passenger Rail Authority) is bankrupt and reliant on state bailouts, which can no longer be sustained.

Ann Bernstein: So, to move from one big issue to another, what progress are you making in getting control over commuter rail in the city's hands? And how optimistic are you that things can improve?

Geordin Hill-Lewis: There is a very slow resuscitation. The passenger numbers are still 85% down compared to 2019 figures, so we have a long, long way to go. But this is subject to the same ideological folly about state control,

and even worse, central state control. Factionalism within the ANC perpetuates a tug of war on policy, and the result is just stasis. Going back to 2022, there was a decision to decentralise passenger rail. There was a formal cabinet decision. The phrase used was that passenger rail would be decentralised to "capable metros". Since then, absolutely nothing has happened. We have had various verbal indications that decentralisation is still the government's intention. Other ministers have pronounced that it is never going to happen. We will keep knocking on this door, and we will keep doing it until it opens. We believe the door will open, not necessarily because they agree with the policy of decentralisation, but simply out of financial necessity. We cannot keep subsidising failing public services because the state has run out of money. I think we will get there. It is just about how quickly we can get there.

Ann Bernstein: Thank you very much for spending an hour with us and for sharing how Cape Town could serve as a model for many other cities, if they followed some of the planning, ideas and leadership that the city is adopting. It has been a fascinating conversation, and we hope to have some more on cities and economic growth and jobs in the future.

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