



Helen Zille

in conversation with
Ann Bernstein

Democracy | Markets | Development

A South African resource influencing policy for 30 years

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.

Ahead of the 2026 local government elections, Ann Bernstein hosted a special edition of CDE Conversations with Johannesburg's mayoral candidates from the two largest parties. This is a summary of the discussion with the DA's candidate, Helen Zille.

Ann Bernstein: It's my privilege to welcome Helen Zille, former leader of the Democratic Alliance, Mayor of Cape Town, and Premier of the Western Cape. She chaired the DA Federal Council and was part of the negotiating team that helped the DA and the ANC establish the Government of National Unity (GNU). For the past year, Helen has been the DA mayoral candidate for Johannesburg. Helen, when you were the mayor of Cape Town, in the three years between 2006 and 2009, what would you rank as your biggest achievements in that role?

Helen Zille: Holding together a seven-party minority coalition was very difficult. The DA won 42% of the vote, but even with seven parties we fell short of 50%. Surviving from one council meeting to the next meant frantically negotiating with the Pan African Congress to abstain on crucial votes and we secured those abstentions on everything that really mattered.

Another achievement was winning the battle against the provincial government, which tried 13 different ways (including legal, constitutional, and unconstitutional means) to remove us from power. We fought back and then introduced major reforms. My philosophy was that the government would not last more than a month, so we might as well be very bold from the outset and amazingly, it held. I was very pleased about that.

Ann Bernstein: In addition to holding on to power, what were some key achievements?

Helen Zille: We introduced a transparent supply chain management system and opened the bid evaluation committee to scrutiny. Over time, that went a long way towards rooting out the corruption that had continued for too long.

Ann Bernstein: Do you have any regrets about that period? Is there some issue you feel strongly about that you didn't get to or weren't able to get going?

Helen Zille: I regret that we did not work hard enough to secure an overall majority. With a majority, we could have done much more, but keeping seven parties happy so they would not vote with the opposition at the next council meeting was a full-time job.

Ann Bernstein: Why do you think Johannesburg is so important that you've uprooted yourself to come to this city? You're running for what might be one of the most difficult jobs in the country. What motivated you to do this?

Helen Zille: I have always made it my life's mission to help South Africa work, and I have known since we were young that cities would make or break this country. That is why I left Parliament to run for mayor of Cape Town.

I felt I still had one major project in me. John Steenhuisen asked me whether I wanted to be a Cabinet minister, but I declined. I wanted to run for mayor of Joburg because, in my humble opinion, that is much more important. Cities

are where people connect with the economy and where the economy connects with the world. I always say that great cities make great countries, rather than the other way around. And so here I am.

Ann Bernstein: What is the main reason for Johannesburg being in such a desperate plight today? What's caused this decline?

Helen Zille: I think the root cause is how residents have voted over the past 30 years. They voted for the ANC for much of that time, and in turn, the ANC pursued cadre deployment and jobs for pals. We warned from the mid-1990s that this would lead to centralisation of power, cronyism, corruption and, ultimately, the full-blown criminalisation of the state. Joburg is a criminal state: an interlocking network of criminal syndicates. And that is the inevitable consequence of ANC policy. It is quite extraordinary to see.

When voters started breaking with the ANC, they returned unwieldy coalitions that depended on the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) to stay in power. That created an ungovernable situation. If that happens after 4 November, the DA will go straight into opposition. I will not try to run a nine-party coalition that depends on the EFF to stay in power.

Ann Bernstein: Is it true that the City is running out of cash and doesn't have the money to pay its bills? And how would you tackle this as mayor?

Helen Zille: It is true, and CDE's research shows that. Amazingly, there is a good financial recovery plan; we just need to implement it. National Treasury has focused closely on this, and the Deputy Minister of Finance Ashor Sarupen is very engaged with the issue and has promised to help us implement the turnaround strategy. We need to collect more, lose less, spend better, protect infrastructure revenue, restore entity accountability and impose much stronger implementation discipline. That means ending the situation in which every tender results in a contract costing five, six or seven times the open-market price. So much padding goes into tenders, and so many middlemen companies must take a slice, justified by the B-BBEE codes, that projects cost more than they should.

Ann Bernstein: Infrastructure investment has fallen by about 70% per resident over the last decade. Do you think you'll be able to find the money to start building infrastructure by dealing with corruption incrementally? Or where else do you envisage finding the kinds of enormous sums that Johannesburg is going to need? How are you thinking about that?

Helen Zille: Stabilising Joburg's finances will take a whole year, rather than one or six months. We certainly cannot raise rates and service charges during that initial period, especially in the first year or first cycle. The priority is to fix and digitise the billing system, resolve queries and disputes, and collect money properly, efficiently and fairly from residents.

To move reasonably quickly, we may also need to sell substantial surplus property. People may oppose that, but it is essential to meet the City's needs. Our approach would also combine public-private partnerships with ring-fencing money for Johannesburg Water and City Power, primarily through a hybrid model. Partnerships with Project Vulindlela in the Presidency could also draw on this large resource mobilisation group.

In the long term, the City must reliably collect what residents owe, spend much more efficiently and eradicate corruption. I read a striking statistic: adding together all Joburg's unauthorised, irregular, fruitless and wasteful expenditure, non-revenue water, massive leakages and non-revenue electricity would give us 25% more in the budget. That is huge.

Ann Bernstein: We've just released a report this week about what we are calling the 'crime ecosystem', which is exactly what you're talking about. Based on your extensive experience in government, how are you thinking about dealing with corruption? How do you deal with it as fast as possible? What is your strategy going to be if you become mayor?

Helen Zille: I would ask the President to establish an inquiry along the lines of the Madlanga Commission, led by a respected judge who is completely above reproach. Corruption is so embedded in the system that the system itself is the corruption. Honest people are not the system, and they know they cannot buck it. We need a mechanism to expose the big fish in these networks and guarantee whistleblowers' safety, rather than leave people at the bottom to risk their lives by speaking up.

Ann Bernstein: Johannesburg is unusual among the metros in having these separate entities, which the new mayor will inherit after the election. Now, some people and political parties are recommending immediately reintegrating the entities into the administration. You have said that you disagree with this for the major entities. How do you see this debate?

Helen Zille: I have analysed this closely: reintegrating the entities into the City's main administration would take five years before delivering any services. Entities are a good idea in theory, but in practice they have failed because of the ANC's policy of cadre deployment, while corruption and criminality have permeated them.

In an ANC coalition, a partner that controls a department linked to an entity can run that entity as its own fiefdom. The classic example is the Johannesburg Roads Agency (JRA). When the Patriotic Alliance (PA) joined the ANC coalition, it insisted on controlling the JRA. It also insisted on including the department responsible for internet and connectivity in an arrangement that made no sense for the JRA. We know why the PA insisted: it wanted opportunities to loot and appoint its mates to key positions.

Ann Bernstein: Many politicians wander around, especially at election time, and they tell us about all the things they want to spend money on. I want to ask a different kind of question. Have you been able to identify what you want to cut in the City budget?

Helen Zille: We must tackle unauthorised, irregular, fruitless and wasteful expenditure, especially fruitless and wasteful expenditure. It is unlawful. We need to audit every major contract to ensure value for money and cut out middlemen. We must also stop inflated tenders and people taking a cut without adding value.

Duplication is another major area to tackle. When an entity and a line department do similar work, we risk duplicating functions. We must also follow up on all the Auditor-General's findings and make damn sure we act on them. We cannot continue taking on all the unfunded mandates that provincial and national governments do not fulfil. Libraries and clinics are important, and I would be loath to stop funding them. But our constitutional mandate covers water, electricity, roads, refuse removal, sewerage and other basic services. We must fulfil our own mandate before taking on anyone else's.

Ann Bernstein: Let's talk about crime. One of the hardest issues is the murder rate, which is unbelievably high. Crime also affects what firms can do, like staying open till late at night and their workers' safety and so on. We know there's been a lot of debate about this in Cape Town, and that the City wants more policing powers. What can the mayor of Johannesburg do on the issue of crime?

Helen Zille: We can follow Cape Town's example, which has been very successful. It has a well-trained, corruption-free metro police service that provides excellent protection for many poor communities. But metro police powers are very limited: metro police officers enforce by-laws and traffic laws and perform what is amorphously called crime prevention. They cannot investigate crime, prepare dockets for prosecution or do any of the critical detective work needed to secure convictions. I must give JP Smith credit for the effort he has put in over 20 years. Cape Town also uses technology to its best advantage, including ShotSpotter, which can identify the exact location of gunfire within seconds.

Cape Town has asked the police minister to delegate investigative functions to the metro police. I know Cape Town is already starting a detective unit. Its officers arrest many people, but cases never reach court, or courts throw out poorly prepared dockets. Sometimes there is no forensic evidence, or the prosecuting authority mishandles the case. The minister is reluctant to devolve powers. Eventually, we will go to the Constitutional Court to argue that refusing to devolve those powers to the metro police is irrational.

I could not pursue that in Joburg until we had a force capable of taking on the responsibility. First, we must root out corruption, train officers properly, make sure they understand their main task and enforce by-laws so that we can secure convictions in municipal courts. That will take at least three to five years. Cape Town's metro police have reached their current position through 20 years of effort. Joburg's metro police still have a long way to go.

The City of Johannesburg has just appointed Mr Malotana as head of public safety. You could not find a more unsuitable appointment. The papers submitted to council for approval were misleading, to put it mildly. I would argue that they were fraudulent. This is how the City makes appointments. We are going to court to have this appointment set aside as irrational. We have to address problems like this before we can get going.

Ann Bernstein: One of your campaign commitments is that you hope to attract 200 000 new jobs to Johannesburg. It's important to bear in mind that in the last decade Johannesburg's working-age population has grown by about 780 000 people, and the number of jobs has grown by only 30 000. How are you going to add 200 000 new jobs?

Helen Zille: Here I want to follow Cape Town's example. If Cape Town could attract 418 000 new jobs in five years, I calculated that perhaps Joburg could achieve slightly less than half that number. The first step is to get local government working so that people want to build their future in this wonderful city, with its beautiful climate and everything else it offers. The number of closed factories and abandoned business premises in eastern central Joburg, towards Troyeville and beyond, is heartbreaking.

Commercial property is booming in Cape Town and Midvaal because they are DA governed. Yet two major food manufacturers have left Joburg this year because they cannot get reliable water to maintain hygiene. Every business, from a takeaway shop to a high-end production facility, needs electricity. Property developers are at their wits' end as tenants leave. Marshalltown, at the centre of Joburg's revival alongside places like Maboneng, has been without electricity for five weeks.

I hope we can regenerate the inner city, including Hillbrow, Berea and Yeoville, and create thousands of construction jobs. That will take time. We must address hijacked buildings through court cases and other legal processes. The law protects hijackers rather than legitimate owners or the City, which makes this very challenging.

Ann Bernstein: What have you learned about coalitions? The DA has been involved in coalitions in Johannesburg on at least two different occasions. What is your thinking if you can't get a majority in Johannesburg? How are you thinking about coalitions? What are the lessons you've learned?

Helen Zille: The larger a coalition, the harder it is to manage. One thing has changed fundamentally since I ran Cape Town's coalition in 2006: the ANC's culture. Back then, the ANC tried to persuade other parties, put enormous pressure on them and made promises, but it did not buy them off with cash. Now it does. That is how it brought down Mpho Phalatse in Joburg. Anyone who thinks parties build coalitions around principles and policies is dreaming. The ANC knows how to launder money, especially through the Johannesburg Property Company, to loot and buy smaller parties' support. Not all smaller parties fall for it, but many do. That is why you cannot have a stable coalition with many partners.

Ann Bernstein: Many people think you can have a reverse GNU in Johannesburg with the DA leading and the ANC in a secondary position. Is that possible? What is possible with parties that have very different policy ideas than the DA?

Helen Zille: That would make implementing a turnaround strategy 100 times more difficult. It is hard to say how we would structure a coalition before we know the result. We would build a very different coalition with 45% of the vote than with 40%. In fact, with 40%, although we would be the largest party by a long way, we would not be large enough to get into government. The ANC wants Johannesburg's mayoralty. We know that, and I am sure MK, the EFF, ActionSA and the PA would give it to them. Together, those parties might get past 50% before we could.

We are very likely to emerge as the largest party in Joburg, Ekurhuleni and Tshwane, but the ANC will be reluctant to give us all three mayoralties and it will want to bargain. It wants Joburg most. If residents want to prevent more of the same, which will inevitably lead to the city's collapse, they need to give us an overall majority. I will repeat this until I am blue in the face: 490 000 people need to vote DA on both ballots. That would give us 136 of the council's 270 seats.

Ann Bernstein: Let me end our discussion. How Johannesburg votes on 4 November is critically important. CDE is a non-party political organisation, but all our research in our **Johannesburg Matters** reports indicates that with more of the same unstable and corrupt politics, Johannesburg's decline will accelerate. Johannesburg needs a reforming coalition and a reforming mayor who is serious about dealing with Johannesburg's challenges. Absent that, we can only see dire consequences, not only for the residents of Johannesburg, but for the country and our ambitions for a much higher growth rate and a better life for all South Africans.

CDE is a national resource. We are sharing our findings and analysis with any party that wants to listen; in fact, we have a briefing for all the political parties on 9 October. Next week, on 14 October, I will be interviewing the current mayor of Johannesburg, Dada Morero. Lastly and most importantly, I want to thank Helen for a terrific interview.

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