

Ward councillors trampled on our democracy

I AM among those who tremble with indignation at lack of good governance, accountability and responsiveness from government.

Once in a while though, bright sparks appear in our public institutions and they, as catalysts, take on difficult and unpopular tasks that have the potential to turn our public institutions around for the good.

Such is the report of BCM speaker Alfred Mtsi to council that the June 4 article "Failed to serve" in the Daily Dispatch made reference to.

The speaker's report paints a bleak picture of the performance of ward councillors in the metro.

Of 50 ward councillors, it appears in the last quarter, only half performed their duties in full, as mandated by law.

At face value, this might seem mundane, one meeting missed in one quarter – no big deal. But in light of the economic and political realities in Buffalo City Metro and the vision of a developmental local government, the transgression is of a very serious nature. The gravity of it is best presented by way of example.

Suppose a family lived in extreme poverty and believed their hope for the future lay in educating their children.

They send their children to school hoping that one day they will find good jobs and help uplift their families out of poverty, only to realise that the teachers at the school are not teaching. These teachers come to school every day, chill in the staff room having great conversations and send the children



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home at the end of the day, every day, while collecting their salaries at the end of the month. Upon discovering this, it is understandable if the parents in the impoverished family are angry, and feel robbed of their dreams, with a potential of being locked in poverty for good.

The teachers in this example not only betray the trust bestowed on them by the parents but that which is bestowed on them by society as a whole. They have worked against the socioeconomic vision of a democratic South Africa.

The same goes with the ill-performing half of BCM ward councillors: they have betrayed our trust, tampered with the long-term socioeconomic upliftment of the wards they represent and trampled on the social contract they made with

their ward communities. One wonders, on whose mandate do they speak if they are not taking a mandate from their communities through the transparent and democratic process that a public ward meeting is supposed to be?

The impact of the social distance of ward councillors from their communities is a concern because it breeds mistrust and results into all sorts of social ills.

The department of cooperative governance (Cogta), in its back to basics assessment report, identified that "the so-called service delivery protests are a reflection of community frustration with slow or inadequate responses to service delivery challenges and the breakdown of trust in the institutions and councillors by communities".

Trust is built through engagement, feedback loops and reporting mechanisms, through accessibility, openness and responsiveness. This happens in community meetings.

A municipality is made up of three cogs: the politicians (elected and deployed), the administration and communities. The Municipal Systems Act allows for a process through which communities give a mandate to their elected representatives while participating in other decision-making spaces provided by a municipality.

It is intended and expected that these elected representatives report back to their communities (thus confirming their mandate). This reciprocal process is meant to ensure that through the elected representatives, the people govern.

In not holding community meetings,



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the ward councillors have trampled on this essential founding value of our democracy: that the people shall govern.

Furthermore, central in the vision of a developmental local government is a responsive, caring, transparent, accountable and capable local government. We should be very concerned if councillors are submitting fraudulent reports and attendance registers; that is gross dishonesty which in the corporate world would be grounds for dismissal. Why do we lower the ethical and moral standard for our public representatives?

The article points out that BCM is among the first municipalities to name and shame ward councillors for not performing their duties.

This is commendable because the culture in our public institutions has been to close ranks, even when the efforts of a few were working against the vision of an institution as a whole.

It is for this reason that I believe we ought to commend the speaker for breaking away from this culture and shining a spotlight on poor performance when it rears its head.

Accountable local governance is about serving the people better.

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