



INCLUSIVE SOCIETY INSTITUTE

Op-ed

Coalitions must be built on trust and generosity

By Daryl Swanepoel

There are many reasons to think coalitions are good for South Africa. For one, they enable new parties that would otherwise be permanently locked out of power to get a foothold in government. This not only gives voice to the diverse communities in the country, but it also leads to a compromise around policies, so they better represent a greater proportion of the population.

However, coalitions also have a dark side: they can be unruly. The absence of an effective ruling party has the potential to exacerbate corruption and unprincipled politics based on the “exchange of favours”. There is also a strong concern that coalitions lead to opportunistic politics and can actually undermine accountability, rather than strengthen it. Some argue that coalitions formed with “fly by night” parties will lead to permanent instability in South Africa unless we make important changes to the laws related to these agreements. And that political squabbling is only part of the problem, with the real reason coalitions are failing being structural.

An example of this unruliness is the coalition governments in Johannesburg, Pretoria and Gqeberha, which are very unstable. The reason for this is that the parties do not share ideological or public policy synergies. In Johannesburg, we have the populist far left, the EFF, needing to prop up the neo-liberal Democratic Alliance. There is no policy cohesiveness, which inevitably results in policy squabbles, with threats of the withdrawal of support. And this all leads to a break in service delivery.

The other problem is that when coalitions are put together, the current approach has been very much one of entitlement, where the largest party insists on their right to hold the most important positions and reflect their party strength. In a situation where you have two or three strong opposition parties forming a coalition, such an approach may work, but where you have an array of parties from various ideological backgrounds, party strength doesn't matter, because without the mutual support of the other parties, they cannot get into government anyway.

At the Electoral Workshop held recently by the Inclusive Society Institute (ISI), an expert from Ireland spoke about the Irish coalition model and how it has evolved, in that the types of coalitions have become much more innovative and the methods around supporting them have become more extensive, both formally and informally.

The standard practise now when forming a government in Ireland is that, following an election the parties that seem likely or wish to form a coalition will appoint negotiating teams. There are two streams to the negotiations. One part is in relation to the policy plan, where negotiating teams of politicians supported by policy experts hammer out a deal on what the programme for government will be – which is usually very visible in the media. The second part, the less visible stream, is the negotiations on how the structure of government will work. Forming the structure easily ends up being 70-80% of the effort.

An important development in the procedure around Irish coalitions is that once the policy programme for government is in position and agreed to by the parties, it is put to Parliament for approval, and therefore it gets the endorsement of Parliament, which empowers the civil service to help implement the programme for government. This ensures that the machinery of government is behind the programme.

With regards formal and informal structures, their Cabinet system has evolved over time to adjust to coalition government. Ireland now have an extensive Cabinet committee system, which, again, has constitutional protection and the backup of the civil service. This allows for the coalition parties to have representatives to negotiate policy under the cloak of the Cabinet umbrella and to have support from the civil service. The system teases out most of the difficulties, leaving the most contentious issues, which are then dealt with on a number of levels.

However, even with all these structures in place to help people come together in less confrontational ways – less public ways – some governments still don't function very well. And that boils down to a number of key human, emotional and cultural factors that were summarised by the expert speaker as trust and generosity. No matter where you go around the world, trust in institutions has diminished significantly. To quote the speaker, "it's not easy to be popular when doing unpopular things". And, at present, there are many politicians globally doing many crooked and unpopular things.

In terms of generosity, with regards policies and positions within government, different parties and different politicians emphasise one or the other or a balance between the two. Undoubtedly, those who run for election need the personal ambition to survive the slings and arrows of politics, but you also need to have the broader public interest in mind.

Case in point: Recently, for the first time in Ireland, as part of the arrangement when the two main traditional parties came together to form a coalition government, the strongest party did not insist on being Prime Minister. Instead, for the greater good, together they decided that during the term of this government, the role of Prime Minister would rotate between the two parties.

South Africa can draw some important lessons from the Irish coalition model, which is clearly based on solid structures and a spirit of trust and generosity. We need to put more effective structures in place, to chase out corruption and political squabbling, and to encourage accountability. We need to realise that in the greater scheme of things, party strength means very little. We need to put less emphasis on how strong or weak a party is and more emphasis on who the best people are for the positions, in light of the broader public interest. We need to acknowledge that trust matters; the human dimension matters. But, most of all, we need to develop a generosity of spirit.

Daryl Swanepoel is the Chief Executive Officer of the Inclusive Society Institute. This article draws on the content of the Institute's recent workshop on elections and coalitions.