



September 2016

Herman Mashaba: Jozi's Libertarian First Citizen

There is little competition this month for the most keenly scrutinised new entrant to local government - Herman Mashaba. The former entrepreneur, best known as the founder of the Black Like Me cosmetics company, as well as avowed free-marketeer, faces a challenging tenure as Johannesburg's Executive Mayor given not only his contentious outlook on running a metro, but also that his party - the DA - governs without a majority. Whatever one's view of Mashaba, there is no doubt that he brings more flamboyance, controversy and individuality than previously seen in South African mayors.

Can an "unapologetic capitalist" lead Johannesburg?

57-year old Mashaba was an interesting mayoral candidate for the DA from the outset. While his rags-to-riches back story is one that aligns with the DA's market-friendly policies, Mashaba comes with no experience of the public sector, and in fact only joined a political party two years ago (www.news24.com).

This does not mean that the former Chair of the Free Market Foundation is without opinions on the running of a city, and tackling unemployment which he has identified as Johannesburg's biggest challenge, through a decidedly free-market bent (www.rdm.co.za).

Mashaba, a son of domestic worker raised by his sisters in Hammanskraal, had his tertiary education (B.Admin) at the University of the North interrupted in the 1980s due to political unrest, which led to Mashaba taking clerical work and salaried employment that kick-started his entrepreneurial career and led to his entry into the hair products industry that saw the launch of Black Like Me in 1985 (www.news24.com, www.entrepreneurship.co.za). Since then Mashaba has invested in mining, construction, exhibitions, real estate, security, aviation and information technology, as well as sitting on a number of boards and winning multiple awards (www.entrepreneurship.co.za).

Part of the controversy raised by Mashaba on the campaign trail was the scrapping of broad-based black economic empowerment (BBBEE) policies - a stronger view than the DA has ever ventured to take - by arguing

that "Government must create an environment where business can operate – an environment where business does not have to be done along racial lines" (city-press.news24.com).

Mashaba has unsurprisingly had run-ins with Cosatu, which threatened to boycott Black Like Me products last year given Mashaba's role at the Free Market Foundation which launched a challenge to the Labour Relations Act's bargaining provisions (www.news24.com, www.cosatu.org.za).

This history perhaps explains the labour federation's quick response to Mashaba's mooted idea to spin off parts of Johannesburg's waste utility company, Pikitup, to city entrepreneurs, stating that "We are ready and willing to collapse and shut down the city of Johannesburg, if mayor Mashaba thinks he is going to do the bidding of his friends from the Free Market Foundation by introducing their anti-worker and anti-union policies" (www.bdlive.co.za).

Mashaba has stepped back from his Pikitup proposal but perhaps the issue is a portent for further conflict with the DA's loose alliance partners in Johannesburg given Mashaba's unapologetic stance on being market friendly. Mashaba is adamant that his perspective does not conflict with a pro-poor agenda (www.rdm.co.za).

National EFF chairperson, Dali Mpofu, has argued that "I think he bought too much into the dogma of market fundamentalism. We do not believe that he will be able to have a favourable look at the poor" (ewn.co.za) and the Party threatened to depose Mashaba during the Pikitup controversy (ewn.co.za). Dissent was also evident among EFF supporters who demanded to be paid for campaign work this week (www.timeslive.co.za).

Some of the City's poorer residents may however be won over by Mashaba's plans to transfer title deeds "to people so that they have the dignity of a proper home which can be passed on to their children" (www.rdm.co.za). Mashaba may face a backlash from environmentalists and middle-class cyclists with his plans to scrap cycle lanes, as demanded by the EFF several months ago (ewn.co.za), but the leafy suburbs may well be won over by plans for a "First Line Response Team" initiative to isolate water leaks within two hours of a major burst being reported, as well as a focus on waste service after dismissing Pikitup's MD last week (www.rdm.co.za).

Potential conflict also lies ahead with Mashaba's inter-governmental colleagues, with the Mayor undertaking not to support eToll enforcement (www.rdm.co.za). A more immediate challenge lies in appointing a City Manager to steer Mashaba's vision, with Trevor Fowler's contract extended only to December (www.bdlive.co.za). There is little doubt that a very savvy ANC will watch Mashaba's every move from unfamiliar opposition benches, with former Mayor, Parks Tau, labeling Mashaba as a sexist (ewn.co.za).

With all of these issues on Mashaba's plate, one has to wonder whether he ever wonders whether there might not have been an easier entrance into politics.

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