

Democratic Alliance press statement by

Helen Zille

Leader of the DA

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One of the many things I have learnt during the last eight years, is that it is easier to lead a sphere of government than a political party. In executive government office, the rules are clear; in party politics one works on intuition, advice and instinct.

A relevant example is the leader's "term of office". In South Africa, there are term limits for presidents, premiers and mayors. But not for leaders of political parties. So, when I became Mayor of Cape Town in 2006, and later Premier of the Western Cape in 2009, I knew that I could serve a maximum of ten years in each position -- divided into two five year terms (as long as I was re-elected).

It goes without saying that I intend to complete my second term as Premier of the Western Cape, to which I was elected in May last year. This term is due to end in mid-2019.

As a Mayor or Premier (and of course a President as well), the constitution and the law define your duties and set clear parameters on what you may and must do (and, by extension, what you may not).

Leading a party is quite different. Although parties have constitutions and decision-making structures, much of the job of the leader boils down to decisions and actions informed by intuition; One has to "read" a situation, and try to get as "close to the reality" as possible before reaching a conclusion. The leader of a political party does this many times every day, in complex, rapidly-changing contexts, often bombarded by contradictory advice. And whether the decision turns out, over time, to have been right or wrong, there are always people who oppose it. That is the nature of politics.

It is in this kind of context that I have had to decide whether or not to stand for another term as leader at this year's Federal Congress on 9 May. I have led the DA for eight years now, and have worked closely with many outstanding people. From the start, I resolved that the outer limit of my term as party leader would be ten years, not because the party's constitution prescribes this (there are no term limits) but because I believe every political party needs renewal and fresh blood after a decade, no matter how well the incumbent team has performed.

So, from the day I was elected on May 6 2007, I knew that if I was re-elected at subsequent Congresses, the outside limit of my leadership term would be the 2017/8 Congress. In the last few years I have often asked myself whether I should stay till then, or whether the party would benefit from fresh blood to remain exciting and relevant, and grow its support base to build the non-racial centre of South African politics.

Facing the upcoming congress I have spent months wondering whether it is time to go now, or whether I should wait two more years. While May 2015 may be slightly too early, the greater risk is that May 2017 may be slightly too late. And I would rather err on the side of being ahead of my time. I have, therefore, decided not to make myself available for re-election as leader at the forthcoming Congress.

This decision has, paradoxically, been a long time coming -- but when the time was right, it was taken quickly, even suddenly. On Thursday last week, I took a firm decision that I would not stand for re-election as leader next month.

The overriding reason has been what I believe are the interests of the DA.

It is essential for a political party in opposition to grow in every election. While I believe we would have carried on growing beyond our current 4-million support base in next year's 2016 election under my continued leadership, I am convinced our prospects will be even better under a fresh team, armed with the new "Values Charter" we will adopt and launch at Congress. As we all know, South Africa is in a race against time to save our constitution and ensure our democracy succeeds. We cannot waste a single minute or a single vote.

An advantage of my late decision is that the campaign that will determine the DA's next leader will be short and sharp, given that our elective Congress is four weeks away. This avoids the potential for a debilitating contest that deflects attention and effort away from the party's core functions, which inevitably happens when a leadership race drags out for long periods of time.

If I had been re-elected as leader next month, the succession race would have begun the next day and been the focus of attention for two years till the next congress, sapping the energy we need to harness in order to win votes, so that we can govern South Africa in the best interests of all its people.

Of course, I will continue working unceasingly to consolidate democracy in South Africa. This has been my life's work. I shall continue to do so as Premier of the Western Cape until 2019, and in appropriate ways, where I may be needed by the DA beyond that.

As usual, with every difficult decision, there will be those who agree with it, and those who do not. But as I know the party, we will all swing behind the team that is elected on May 9. We will also give advice and speak our minds in the appropriate forums.

And whether we agree or not, we will support our new leader in the way that I have always felt supported, and for which I am deeply grateful.

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