

Press Release

For immediate release



South African Institute of Race Relations
The power of ideas

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Media Contact: Gareth van Onselen, Head of Politics and Governance Tel: 073 179

5957 Email: gareth@irr.org.za

General Media Contacts: Michael Morris Tel: 066 302 1968 Email:

michael@irr.org.za Kelebogile Leepile Tel: 011 482 7221 ext: 2018 Email:

kelebogile@irr.org.za

The DA has a xenophobia problem – IRR

A tweet today by Democratic Alliance mayor of Johannesburg Herman Mashaba about the supposed health risk posed by an informal trader is contemptible and xenophobic, says the Institute of Race Relations' (IRR) head of politics and governance, Gareth van Onselen.

Mashaba 'should be rebuked by the DA leader', Van Onselen suggests.

'Mashaba, responding to a picture of an informal trader with a trolley full of animal parts, at first, and rightly, described the situation as a serious health risk. But then, in response to the suggestion that the trader be helped to comply rather than punished, he wrote: "We are going to sit back and allow people like you to bring us Ebolas in the name of small business. Health of our people first. Our health facilities are already stretched to the limit."'

Says Van Onselen: 'This is language of intolerance and prejudice, and, in an environment which is already a tinderbox of visceral contempt for illegal immigrants, is deeply problematic.

'These sorts of explicit collective slurs – “people like you” – and the implicit us-and-them rhetoric in his reference to “our health system”, is how you fuel prejudice and hate, not how you mitigate it. The idea that illegal immigrants or informal traders, often regarded as one and the same, are the harbinger of Ebola is despicable. And the idea that “our people” come first, particularly when it comes to healthcare, is a negation of the humanist spirit that is supposed to underpin any liberal democracy.

'Liberals are supposed to stand up for weak and vulnerable minorities in the face of majoritarianism, rather than jump on the bandwagon.'

Van Onselen argues that this 'mirrors the language' the DA used on its now abandoned election poster: “All South Africans first”.

'There clearly exists in the DA a deep yearning to exacerbate fear and anger with regard to illegal immigrants, as opposed to any compassionate and considered policy to address a deeply complex and wide-ranging problem.

'Whether this impulse is driven by a desire to capitalise on the populist Donald Trump-like appetite among voters for tougher measures against illegal immigration, or is the result of any genuine xenophobic impulse in the party is difficult to say, but the distinction is becoming irrelevant. Unchecked, sooner or later there is going to be an outbreak of xenophobic violence and the DA will have played its part in engendering an environment conducive to it.'

Van Onselen points out that 'this is entirely unnecessary'.

'Border control is abysmal. Home Affairs has failed fundamentally to track and document illegal immigrants. Something must be done. But all this can be said and advocated for without playing with prejudicial forces no party will be able to properly control if they are fueled.

'It is a revealing and ironic state of affairs; the DA and its supporters are the first to decry any collective slur aimed at the opposition or white South Africans by the EFF or ANC. But when it comes to illegal immigrants, many of whom have fled here out of

utter desperation, there is not an ounce of understanding or compassion. Quite the opposite; they are happy to indulge, defend and even celebrate the kind of slur Mashaba tweeted today.

'The DA needs to get its messaging on illegal immigrants under control and fast. It is fiddling with a fire that will burn its own face off.'

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