

THE MERCURY
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Open For Business

BY APPROVING the takeover of Massmart by US retailing giant Wal-Mart, South Africa has sent a very strong signal to investors that the country is "open for business".

But at the same time, the country has made it abundantly clear to those who want to do business on these shores that they will have to play by our rules, even the so-called "Bully of Bentonville". By attaching conditions to the deal, the Competition Tribunal has basically walked the middle road. The requirement that there be no retrenchments for two years following the takeover and that Wal-Mart must honour existing labour agreements goes a long way in giving the unions something to crow about.

They will also claim victory from the order that the merged entity must try to rehire 503 Massmart employees that were retrenched last June, three months before Wal-Mart announced its initial bid for Massmart.

Clearly, the unions succeeded in making their case about the risks the deal posed to employment. In a country with 25 percent unemployment, the government could not risk the ire of its labour allies, and be seen to be cowering to big business at the expense of the workers.

The other requirement that Wal-Mart must not challenge the South African Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers' Union's position as the largest representative union within the merged entity is also quite incisive.

Undoubtedly, Wal-Mart would have preferred that there be no conditions attached to the deal but, judging from the Competition Tribunal's two-page order, there is very little that should prejudice Wal-Mart against its new competitors in South Africa. All in all, the tribunal has come up with a balanced view of all the facts put before it. For the man or woman in the street, the approval of the deal brings about the prospect of true competition in the South African retail space - an industry where players have contented themselves with a sort of peaceful coexistence.

In the end, South Africa should see the benefits of Wal-Mart's foray into our market accrue over the coming years. But what is worth remembering is that when Wal-Mart initially expressed interest in Massmart, the retailing giant said it wanted to use South Africa as a stepping stone to the rest of Africa, where a billion consumers await.

The South African competition authorities had better prepare themselves for more work because the "open for business" sign means there are other investors looking to do what Wal-Mart plans to do on this continent. The question is, will they go via Joburg, Lagos, Accra or Nairobi?



ABOUT peace:

There is a difference between keeping peace (peacekeeping) and making peace (peacemaking).

Peacekeeping takes a lot of work and saps energy. It's never-ending. Peacemaking lays groundwork for authentic peace to rule.

Peacekeepers work hard to keep the tensions from rising. They often pretend nothing is wrong. Peacemakers allow tensions to be aired and might even precipitate necessary conflict.

Peacekeepers avoid conflict at all cost. Their reward is the semblance of tranquility, and the slow demise of their integrity.

Peacemakers invite necessary conflict. They know there is no other pathway to greater understanding between warring people.

Peacekeepers may endure fake peace for decades - and feel "called" or anointed or special. Peacekeepers often have high levels of martyrdom. How else would they rationalise the stress of trying to hide the proverbial elephant in the room? Peacekeepers are often portrayed as deeply spiritual because they can endure so much without "saying anything". They often see their suffering as persecution, rather than the product of being misguided.

Peacemakers value authentic peace. The peace that exists between people with the courage to endure conflict, for the sake of lasting peace, is as gold when compared with its counterfeit cousin.

Assume your legitimate role as a peacemaker, and give up the other as nonsense.



You & Me
 By Rod Smith

□ Rod Smith is a family therapist who lives in the US. E-mail questions to Rod@DifficultRelationships.com.

Government must get in touch with its people

Citizens need to be able to communicate with those in power over issues that affect them and their communities



By Imraan Buccus

LOCAL government elections have come and gone. Now people are jostling for positions and here in KZN a historic coalition agreement has been signed between the ANC and the NFP, securing the majority of hung municipalities in KZN.

The IFP, as many had predicted, has suffered great losses and seems to be left with just the Ulundi and Umsinga municipalities.

But when the politics of power have been settled, what will all of this mean for people struggling with bread and butter issues in marginal communities?

Would they have greater access to processes of governance in their communities and thus potentially better services?

The government has created legislative and constitutional provisions for public participation, particularly so that the poor can engage meaningfully with processes of governance.

Unfortunately, these provisions do not mean that effective participation will take place.

Civil society and other

stakeholders need to be mobilised to participate in enriching deliberations around policies that affect them.

Heaps of academic work have affirmed the need to improve the level of outreach to citizens, as it is in the interests of the government to improve participation, because it improves the quality of legislation, and strengthens accountability, transparency and trust in the government.

One of the critical points at which the level of outreach needs to be seriously improved is, quite obviously, at local government level.

A much talked about shortfall that emerged before this year's local government elections was poor communication between the government and communities, hence "service delivery" protests and apathy shown at local government level.

Bearing in mind the constitutional imperative of

building a local government system that would serve as a means to extend democracy to communities who have been largely deprived of political rights, local government is supposed to be a nodal point for South Africa's democracy.

In order to realise this objective, the local government structure has to be configured in a way that allows community participation and ownership. This structural shortfall has been a problem that almost led to the collapse of the system in recent years.

Citizens' participation in the local government system is necessary to ensure that communities own the system, rather than seeing the system solely as a dispenser of material services such as electricity and water supply.

Consequently, if the system fails in providing basic services, there remain no

other grounds for citizens to be patient and loyal to the system, since its only source of strength would have collapsed.

Citizens' participation in the system would not only strengthen the institution of local government by bolstering a sense of accountability on the part of local government officials, but will also have the symbolic effect of responsive democracy.

The standard caution raised towards the idea of participation is that it would not resolve everything at local government level, but there is no proving, except for theoretical extrapolations, that participation is a necessary facet of a true or functional democracy.

It is contested that citizens are too busy with their private lives to engage on a day-to-day basis with local government issues and it is believed that by providing

material goods such as basic amenities, water and electricity, the local government system would have satisfied its primary objectives, and the apparent demand for participation would ultimately dwindle.

While it is correct to say that citizens are not always interested in the functioning of the government, structural limitations impede participation.

Therefore, the structural limitations to citizens' participation at local government level are an issue of concern, more so for a nation with a strong history of community participation and collaboration.

More than being merely machinery aimed at ensuring service delivery, local government should be seen as a connecting point between the national government and communities.

Citizens do not get an op-

portunity to engage meaningfully with the government once they cast their votes and it is only through a well-structured local government system that a constant relationship between citizens and the government is maintained.

Democracy is a difficult concept to deal with, for once a democratic route is adopted there is no turning back. Once the basic principles of democracy are adopted, channels for the pursuit of those principles should remain open; whether or not the opportunity is utilised is another matter altogether.

Therefore, it is important that channels for citizens' participation at local government level are kept open and readily available, as this is as important a prerogative as providing basic services.

The need to capture poor, marginal voices cannot be emphasised enough, or we may be in further danger of operating in ways that are disconnected from an orientation that is poor-friendly.

● Imraan Buccus is Research Fellow in the School of Politics at UKZN.

Cause For Alarm

AS CHIEF economist of the International Energy Agency, Fatih Birol is not given to overstatement - so his comment this week that the latest figures on greenhouse gas emissions are "the worst news" should be taken seriously.

It is not just that the statistics showing another record leap in carbon output - 30.6 gigatons of CO₂ over 2010 - to make the highest annual total in history are grim.

They also come at a point when the old centrist certainties about how to tackle climate change are palpably out of date, and yet no new ideas have come along as replacement.

Over the past half-decade, three global-warming orthodoxies have pertained: the first diplomatic, the second economic, and the third industrial.

All have been shown to be flawed, and today's figures show a world still hurtling towards dangerous climate change - at a time when policymakers are out of solutions for slowing this process. "A nice utopia" is how Birol describes the hope of keeping a rise in global temperatures below 2°C. And if he thinks that, we should all be alarmed.

- The Guardian

E-mail merletter@nl.co.za, fax 031 308 2715, or post letters to: The Editor, PO Box 47549, Greyville 4023. Letters must carry the author's signature, name and address.

forum

E-mailed letters should also include a physical address and telephone number. The editor reserves the right to edit or shorten letters. Letters with pseudonyms will only be published in exceptional circumstances.

CITIZENS NEED TO CALL GOVERNMENT TO ACCOUNT

VOTING is over, for now. We citizens have handed over the "job" of running the country to politicians and the civil service. Do we still have a role to play?

Most of us think not, but wait for media coverage to keep us informed, so we can complain. After voting, our actual participation in government is largely vicarious. If, as is feared, the secrecy bill erodes the flow of information to the public, even we armchair critics will be stifled. How then can "the

(half-hearted) people" contribute effectively in a shrinking democracy?

Consider what we fledgling "democrats" really know about the government's service delivery plans. What of budgets for projects we would prefer to prioritise in our own wards? "Participatory budgeting" is a new idea, maybe an idealistic nightmare.

Currently, the process of engagement of the public with service delivery runs thus: at a macro-level, the

media gives critical feedback, sometimes biased, often provocative, often creditably illuminating.

Government publishes, after the fact, Ezasegagasoni (the little paper of gas?) to feed us its success stories, with some euphemisms.

We read, watch and listen, moan about "those in office".

Phone calls to government departments often yield no reply, so we abdicate. Consider how the ANC idea of ward committees failed to

involve public participation. How quality control suffers, as when the city uses "outsourcing", one of its laudable attempts to redistribute opportunity and wealth.

Can we imagine populism in a guise more constructive and pressing than armchair criticism and protest marches?

If we accept that democracy hopes for "government for the people by the people", perhaps we grass-roots people can turn

depressing situations to good account.

How to transform public behaviour to develop responsible participation and raise accountability at grass roots? Replace murky transparency at the top with functional openness at the bottom.

Each ward should require from government planners direct detail of service delivery projects.

Service delivery planners must promulgate publicly (on websites and in media) the

steps, dates and processes by which they undertake to "deliver" projects.

Informed about what is to happen at constituency level, citizen watchdogs, not only the media, can become public protectors, transforming into true "democrats".

Thus, informed, I might wake to the sound of trench diggers in my street, and say: "Hooray. They are on target again today. Well done!"

DESIHALSE

Durban

Councillors will all be held responsible

WE THE people of South Africa, tired of decades of appalling incompetence and tardy performance on the part of local councillors, hereby place all incoming councillors and municipal officials on terms that we will hold them to account through the most forceable, albeit legally sanctioned, way.

We will not relegate our civic responsibilities, and will enforce our legitimate expectations as ratepayers that we expect efficiency as well as competence from everyone in local government service. President Jacob Zuma has acknowledged the abominable failures which precipitated violent reactions in many areas

of the country, and has pledged that government will respond towards fulfilling the reasonable demands of the people.

The eThekweni municipality, in particular the central business district, is often dirt-strewn during the day and it is unhygienic to walk around Monty Naicker/Pixley Ka Seme/Yusuf Dadoo and Dr AB Xuma streets. This is unacceptable.

We do not hope, we expect that the municipality will employ people to clean the streets at regular intervals and not just once a day.

SABER AHMED JAZBHAY
 Durban

Calling DHS class of 1961

THE DHS Class of 1961 celebrates its 50th anniversary this year and, apart from the usual annual Founders Day activities at the school, two functions have been planned for the weekend of June 10-11. Former classmates from all over the world are attending.

down some 30 former pupils of this era and hope that this letter will elicit a response from some we have not yet managed to locate.

Please contact Nick Gray at 082 567 5886 or 031 563 4985, or jannic@netactive.co.za.

NICK GRAY

Durban

Harmless homeless man chased off with tear gas

I WANT to bring to your attention a horrible incident which happened in eManzimtoti on Friday, May 27. Metro police officers arrived en masse - five cars plus policemen with dogs - along Andrew Zondo Road (Kingsway) to chase an old vagrant out of the bush where he had been living.

The lady who cleans our offices was walking to work and arrived at the scene just as tear gas was fired.

She and another pedestrian were overcome by the gas and a few female officers also suffered the effects of the tear gas.

It is disgraceful that the police can throw tear gas around in such an

irresponsible manner, especially in view of the fact that there was a wind blowing that morning. It is also disgraceful that they deemed it fit to arrive in such large numbers to chase one harmless and homeless old man out of the bush.

How wonderful it would be if they could find the time to

respond to really serious incidents in this manner. At no time did any of the metro officers involved in this debacle ask either of the pedestrians affected by the gas if they could get them medical attention.

K CRAUSE

eManzimtoti

Pave the way for beachfront cyclists

IS IT possible to set aside a lane for cyclists (adults and children) along the beachfront promenade?

I see that the walkway there has been widened and it should be possible to demarcate a portion for cycling.

This could avoid a nasty accident happening as walkers

often have to jump aside when cyclists pass, some of them travelling fairly fast.

Creating a cycle lane would enable walkers and cyclists to enjoy themselves with no mishaps.

T HYDE

uMhlanga