People don't resist change. They resist being changed. Will history repeat itself?

Credit: Research, written and compiled by Tony Stone

The old, apartheid-era Nationalist Party (NP) rebranded as the New National Party (NNP) in 1997. The NNP formally disbanded and merged into the African National Congress (ANC) in 2005.

The absorption was primarily driven by the NNP electoral collapse. Following their loss of power in 1994, the NNP's support base haemorrhaged. After a disastrous showing in the 2004 general elections, the party was practically wiped out politically. Recognizing that they could no longer function as a viable opposition, NNP leadership under Marthinus van Schalkwyk (Kortbroek) calculated that the only way to retain political influence and government representation was to align with the dominant ruling party. Or, were they looking after their own private interests? The merger was legally facilitated by South Africa's "floor-crossing" legislation, which allowed elected politicians to defect to other parties without losing their parliamentary seats. As a result, in August 2005, NNP representatives officially joined the ANC.

In the years leading up to the dissolution, the NNP shifted its platform toward the political centre, even officially adopting the ANC's *Freedom Charter* as the basis for their cooperation

Has the Democratic Alliance (DA) gone socialist?

Today, public perception is that the Democratic Alliance (DA) has adopted socialism. This stems largely from its participation in the Government of National Unity (GNU). Critics argue that governing alongside the African National Congress (ANC) has forced the DA to abandon its core classical liberal principles in favour of interventionist policies, state-centric regulations, and expansive welfare programs.

The DA's historical stance emphasized curbing state power and shrinking government. However, critics point out that the party has accepted the ANC's centralized, interventionist framework, leading to less focus on free-market deregulation and more on state oversight. integration into the GNU has required navigating compromise, which looks more like capitulation, on overarching ANC initiatives like the National Health Insurance (NHI) and universal basic income concepts, blurring ideological lines. The DA has frequently justified its governance strategies as pragmatic compromises. However, this "flexibility" has led many traditional supporters and civil society advocates to accuse the party of assimilating into mainstream socialist-leaning ideologies and compromising its free-market identity

Looking at where it comes from, the DA has traditionally championed classical liberalism, focusing on free markets, deregulation, and a smaller role for the state. However, its entry into the GNU alongside the African National Congress (ANC) has forced the party to adapt. Why? Because the ANC has largely refused to budge on a number of key issues, using the threat of bringing in the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and the uMkhonto weSizwe Party (MK) into the GNU. Critics point to specific shifts and compromises in the DA's approach to welfare and healthcare as evidence that its strict free-market stance is softening.

The DA's changed position on non-contributory welfare programs

Historically, the DA criticized the ANC's expansive, non-contributory welfare programs, arguing that economic growth and job creation should be the primary focus rather than expanding state dependency. However, since joining the GNU, the DA's position has evolved, significantly. In the past, the DA opposed universal cash transfers like the Basic Income Grant (yet to be fully implemented), labelling it as economically unsustainable.

The party has since changed its official stance, stating it supports the precursor to the Basic Income Grant, the Social Relief of Distress (SRD) Grant, which pays R370 per month, provided it is tied to economic growth and fiscal affordability. Furthermore, in its updated Social Development Policy, the DA actively advocates for raising the Child Support Grant from its current level to match the official food poverty line (a proposed increase from R510 to R760 (R90 billion p.a. to R134 billion)). This direct push for state spending on welfare marks a departure from its historical narrative of strictly curbing the welfare state.

The DA's changed position on health services

The DA has always fiercely opposed the ANC's centralized National Health Insurance (NHI) scheme, arguing it would destroy private healthcare, overburden taxpayers, and breed state-led corruption. Now, while it still opposes the current architecture of the NHI, its strategy has shifted from total resistance to working within a socialized framework and has embraced the concept of universal health coverage, aligning itself with the core objective of the NHI.

Instead of a single, state-run fund, the DA's updated health policy proposes its "Sizani" plan. This model uses a universal state subsidy to allow citizens to buy into either public or private coverage. Rather than completely blocking health reform, the DA has focused on amending and regulating the rollout. For instance, the party has

heavily focused on submitting formal objections to reform how the NHI Board appointments are made. They are trying to limit political influence rather than fighting the existence of the overarching state health framework itself. The DA's latest election and health frameworks include a system of "post-retirement protection" for pensioners. This relies on state-mandated cross-subsidies to lower medical aid premiums, utilizing heavy regulatory intervention in the private insurance market to protect low-income groups.

Direct Policy Comparison

Policy Area	Traditional DA Stance	Current GNU-Era DA Stance
Social Grants	Limit expansion; focus entirely on private-sector job creation.	**Supports a Basic Income Grant** and demands a multi-billion Rand increase to the Child Support Grant.
Healthcare	Keep private medical aids separate; fix existing public hospitals locally.	**Supports Universal Health Coverage** via a state-funded subsidy scheme.
Economic Redress	Oppose race-based policies like BEE via pure free-market capitalism.	Replaced BEE with an **"Economic Inclusion for All" Bill**, which uses public procurement incentives to reward corporate social investment.

These specific, documented policy compromises inside the GNU are exactly what led left-wing critics to claim the DA is acting hypocritically, and right-wing critics to argue that the party has bent to socialist-leaning, state-interventionist governance.

The DA's changed position on privatisation

The Democratic Alliance (DA) has traditionally called for the aggressive privatization of failing State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs), demanding that entities like Eskom, Transnet, and South African Airways (SAA) be sold off to the private sector.

However, since entering the Government of National Unity (GNU), the DA has shifted away from demanding complete privatization. Instead, the party has adapted to a strategy of "private sector involvement" and co-governance within state-controlled systems.

Critics point to specific policy compromises and strategic changes as proof of this shift. Historically, the DA’s core manifesto focused on selling underperforming parastatals to relieve fiscal pressure. In the GNU era, the DA has agreed to a framework that keeps major SOEs under state custody.

The DA formally welcomed President Cyril Ramaphosa's restructuring to dissolve the Department of Public Enterprises and move SOEs directly into traditional state line-function departments (such as moving Transnet to the Department of Transport). Critics note that this permanently integrates these entities into the state architecture rather than setting them up for a private sell-off.

Instead of pushing to dismantle state monopolies entirely, the DA's active policies focus heavily on reforming state-appointed boards. They now prioritize transparent parliamentary oversight and professionalizing state appointments rather than liquidating the assets to private owners.

The DA has largely replaced the word "privatization" in its active governing vocabulary with terms like "private sector participation" or "concessions".

In the logistics sector, rather than selling port or rail infrastructure to private companies, the DA-backed initiatives to support a landlord model. The state retains ownership of the ports and tracks, while private companies are simply invited to buy short-term operating concessions or leases.

In the electricity sector, the DA continues to push for private power generation to end load shedding. However, their approach relies on a mixed economy where the state-owned National Transmission Company still dictates, regulates, and owns the core national grid infrastructure, which private producers must plug into.

In the past, the DA firmly stated that the government must stop bailing out unviable state companies and let them fail or face total liquidation if private buyers could not be found. As part of the GNU, DA leadership has shifted its mandate to "rescuing network industries from collapse" through cooperative state governance. By working within the Cabinet to stabilize these entities using public frameworks, they have effectively backed away from their historical hardline stance of pulling all state funding from failing parastatals.

This strategic pivot allows the DA to argue that it is introducing efficiency into a broken system. However, to free-market purists, replacing the outright sale of state assets with public-private co-governance is seen as an adoption of a more socialized, state-led economic model.

Direct Privatization Policy Shift

Historical DA Stance	Current GNU-Era DA Stance
Total Privatization: Sell off underperforming state-owned assets to private buyers.	**Public-Private Partnerships:** Retain state asset ownership but lease out operations via private concessions.
Abolish Monopolies: Completely break up state entities to trigger open free-market competition.	**Departmental Realignment:** Integrate SOEs directly into state departments to fix oversight from within.
Zero Bailouts: Stop all state financial backing and let unviable parastatals face liquidation.	**State Stabilization:** Use internal cabinet structures to reform and fund the turnaround of network industries.

DA consensus or John Steenhuizen's leadership?

The DA shift toward pragmatic, state-integrated policies was not a widely accepted consensus within the party; rather, it was driven directly by John Steenhuisen's leadership as a compromise to enter the GNU.

This shift exposed severe fault lines within the party. Steenhuisen's choice to prioritize power-sharing and pragmatism over strict free-market ideology triggered a massive internal backlash. The resulting pressure ultimately led to Steenhuisen stepping down as DA leader.

The internal struggle over this policy change can be broken down into specific political dynamics. The policy shifts caused a distinct philosophical split between two main factions the "Pragmatists" vs. the "Ideologues" inside the DA:

The Pragmatic Coalition Faction, led by figures like John Steenhuisen and Cape Town Mayor Geordin Hill-Lewis, this group argued that strict classical liberal ideology must be put aside. They insisted that adapting to social welfare and public-private partnerships was the only way to govern nationally and save South Africa from an ANC alliance with populist parties.

The Classical Liberal Faction: This group—highly aligned with federal chairperson Helen Zille—vehemently opposed the changes. They argued that the GNU had "blunted the DA's oppositional teeth". They believed the party had allowed itself to be co-opted into the ANC's political orbit by accepting state-centric healthcare and welfare frameworks.

The fall of John Steenhuisen

While Steenhuisen successfully negotiated the DA into national government, the internal cost to his leadership was fatal. Traditionalists blamed Steenhuisen for diluting the DA's core identity, particularly its historical mandate to aggressively privatize state assets and reject race-based economic policies. Tensions reached a boiling point ahead of the party's elective conference. Accused by critics of using executive reshuffles to purge internal opponents, Steenhuisen faced immense pressure from the party's Federal Executive and ultimately chose not to seek re-election.

Geordin Hill-Lewis and the new guard

With Geordin Hill-Lewis taking over the party leadership, the DA's policy direction remains a battleground: Hill-Lewis's rise marks a victory for the pragmatists who want to professionalize the state from within rather than dismantle it entirely. Despite a change at the top, the divisions have not vanished. The classical liberal wing continues to demand a tougher, less compromising stance against the ANC as the party approaches local government elections.

Internal DA Factional Comparison

Faction	Primary Figures	View on Policy Shifts	Ultimate Goal
The Pragmatists	John Steenhuisen, Geordin Hill-Lewis	**Necessary compromise.** State welfare and public-private partnerships are needed to keep the country stable.	Governance and keeping populists out of power.
The Traditional Liberals	Helen Zille, Free-market purists	**Ideological betrayal.** Accepting universal health coverage and state ownership compromises the DA's identity.	Protecting individual liberty and free-market capitalism.

Ultimately, the DA's shift toward welfare and state-led economic models was the direct product of Steenhuisen's strategy to secure power. Far from being universally accepted, it sparked a civil war over the party's ideological soul, costing Steenhuisen his leadership and leaving the DA deeply divided

Geordin Hill-Lewis will **not revert the Democratic Alliance (DA) back to its traditional, rigid classical liberal positions**. Instead, as the newly elected Federal Leader, he is steering the party toward a redefined "citizen-centred" governance model. This approach merges core DA principles—like economic opportunity and clean governance—with a permanent acceptance of state-supported welfare and public service frameworks.

Following his victory at the April 2026 Federal Congress and his subsequent consolidation of power within the national executive, Hill-Lewis's strategy focuses on evolving the party's principles rather than reversing them.

The specific ways Hill-Lewis is reshaping the DA's core values include:

1. **Welfare shift: "Agency over dependency":** Rather than trying to shrink or eliminate social grants, Hill-Lewis has officially adopted welfare as a necessary pillar. In his major policy vision launched on 2 July 2026, he outlined a model focused on building a social welfare system that fosters agency, not dependency. The party under his leadership will continue to support cash transfers like the Child Support Grant, but they will try to reform them to help recipients transition into the job market, rather than treating welfare as a permanent socialist endgame.
2. **Economic shift: Opportunity for aAll:** The old DA focused almost entirely on pure, free-market capitalism and deregulation. Hill-Lewis has modified this value into a push for a mixed economy. He advocates for an economy that offers opportunities for all, not favours for the politically connected. Practically, this means the DA under his watch will not blindly demand the total privatization of utilities. Instead, they will pursue Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs), where the state maintains the core infrastructure but private businesses are brought in to operate efficiently.
3. **Rebuilding the State Rather Than Shrinking It:** The traditional DA narrative often viewed the state apparatus as inherently inefficient and sought a smaller government. Hill-Lewis—drawing on his executive experience as Cape Town Mayor—wants to build a functional, capable state. His core message is that "the state belongs to the people, not to the party." He believes the key to fixing South Africa is replacing corrupt deployment with honest, highly competent officials rather than entirely dismantling public systems.
4. **Navigating Severe Internal Factionalism:** This modern direction has laid bare massive internal divisions that Hill-Lewis must manage:
   - **The Pragmatic Guard:** Hill-Lewis has aggressively tightened his grip on the party. This includes pushing through a leadership reshuffle within the Government of National Unity (GNU) to ensure DA ministers focus purely on service delivery. He even repositioned former leader John Steenhuisen to a lower cabinet role.
   - **The Traditionalist Backlash:** A highly vocal faction—previously aligned with Helen Zille—continues to argue that this approach makes the DA "too soft" and accommodating to the ANC. They want a total return to aggressive opposition and strict market principles.

Comparison of Core DA Values

Traditional Core Value	Hill-Lewis's Modern Evolution
Strict Anti-Welfare Narrative: Curb state dependency; focus entirely on private sector job creation.	**Welfare for Agency:** Fully support social safety nets but restructure them to empower people to find work.
Aggressive Privatization: Sell off broken state monopolies entirely to private entities.	**Public-Private Partnerships:** Maintain state infrastructure ownership but bring in private operators for efficiency.
Minimalist State: Shrink the size of the government to limit state interference.	**Capable State:** Rebuild public institutions with honest, highly qualified professionals.

Ultimately, Geordin Hill-Lewis is not taking the DA backward. He is actively reinterpreting its values for a post-ANC majority era, trying to prove to voters ahead of municipal elections that the DA can run a compassionate, functional, and job-creating government within a mixed-economy framework.

Will the DA lose votes because of the changes in leadership and policy?

Whether the Democratic Alliance (DA) will lose votes due to its recent policy shifts depends entirely on which group of voters is being measured.

Recent 2026 data and polling from groups like the Social Research Foundation (SRF) and Ipsos reveal a highly complex trade-off. While the DA is facing an active voter bleed among traditional, conservative, and minority bases, its modern, pragmatic shift is simultaneously unlocking historic growth among black voters.

The DA's policy shifts are splitting its electoral prospects ahead of upcoming municipal elections. The pivot away from strict free-market capitalism and privatization has deeply alienated the party’s traditional, right-leaning base.

- Conservative Afrikaner, minority, and commercial farming communities feel betrayed by the party's compromises inside the GNU. These voters are migrating to right-wing or interest-based parties like the Freedom Front Plus (FF+) and the Patriotic Alliance (PA).
- Historically, the DA relied on a solid baseline of White, Coloured, and Indian (WCI) voters. Aggressively pivoting to compromise on welfare and health regulation risks losing the core minority turnout that kept the DA stable at around 20–22% nationally.

By adopting a "citizen-centred" approach that embraces a functional welfare system, Federal Leader Geordin Hill-Lewis is actively dismantling the old perception that the DA is a party exclusively for the privileged.

Recent Institute of Race Relations (IRR) polling trends show that the DA's support among black registered voters has more than tripled, jumping from 5% to 18%.

With the ANC consistently polling at historic lows (around 35%), black urban voters who are fed up with corruption but rely on social grants are increasingly looking at the DA as a safe alternative. Because the DA now explicitly supports social welfare grants, these voters no longer fear that a DA government will cut off their lifelines.

Raw polling data shows that the DA's overall national support is not collapsing; rather, the demographic makeup of its voter base is changing. National Ipsos data places the DA stably at roughly 22% nationally and up to 25% within major metropolitan areas.

Instead of a massive net loss in total numbers, the policy shifts are creating an exchange where it is shedding a portion of its traditional conservative base but replacing them with a larger pool of pragmatic, middle-class, and urban black voters.

Voter Impact Breakdown

Voter Segment	Trend	Primary Driver	Main Threat
Traditional Minority Base	**Decreasing**	Angered by compromises with the ANC and the softening stance on free markets.	Defection to the FF+, PA, or choosing to stay home on election day.
Urban Black Voters	**Increasing**	Attracted to Hill-Lewis's focus on a "capable state" and safe, guaranteed welfare.	The DA being perceived as too unstable or chaotic within GNU infighting.
Middle-Class Professionals	**Stable / Increasing**	View the DA's pragmatic governance in the GNU as economically stabilizing.	Allegations of external business influence affecting ministerial policy.

The DA is running a high-stakes political experiment. The party is gambling that the votes it loses on its traditional right wing will be heavily outnumbered by the new, diverse growth it achieves in South Africa's rapidly expanding cities.

Do south Africans support true democracy and free market capitalism

While there are no exact race-specific percentages for free-market support, Afrobarometer data indicates that under half of South Africans prefer democracy to any other form of government. Disillusionment is high, with only about 14% expressing a "full demand" for democracy and rejecting all authoritarian alternatives.

Following recent elections, preference for democracy rebounded to roughly 49% nationwide, though it remains significantly below the peak of 72% recorded in 2011.

Approximately 70% of South Africans are dissatisfied with the way democracy functions, driven by high unemployment, poverty, and corruption. Due to poor economic delivery, up to 51% of citizens have expressed a willingness to approve military or strongman rule if it delivers jobs, law, and order.

Views on Capitalism and the Free Market

Support for a "true" free-market system is deeply fractured along racial and class lines due to historical disparities. Black South Africans are more likely to support systemic government intervention, state-driven transformation, or social democratic models to address historical imbalances, rather than an unregulated free market.

Major trade union federations (such as SAFTU) explicitly oppose liberal democracy and capitalism, advocating instead for socialist democracies to eradicate what they view as economic exploitation.

Pro-free market advocates and organizations (like the Free Market Foundation) argue that true economic freedom—such as the total repeal of B-BBEE and restrictive labour laws—is the only way to generate broad-based wealth and employment for marginalized Black South Africans.

Is the South African version of democracy true democracy

Whether South Africa is a "true democracy" depends on how you measure it, but international experts officially classify it as a "flawed democracy."

While South Africa excels at holding free elections and protecting human rights on paper, it struggles heavily with corruption, poverty, and delivering basic services to its people.

Where South Africa Succeeds

South Africa has one of the most progressive and protective constitutions in the world. Citizens can vote safely, votes are counted accurately, and political power shifts peacefully. The justice system is strong and regularly rules against powerful politicians. People and the media can openly criticize the government without fear of being arrested.

Where South Africa Struggles

True democracy means equal opportunity, but South Africa has the highest economic gap between the rich and the poor in the world. Billions of rands meant for public services have been stolen by politicians over the years. The government struggles to provide reliable electricity (load shedding), clean water, and safe streets. Because of these failures, less than half of South Africans say they are satisfied with how their democracy works.

The Global Verdict

International groups that score countries on their freedom and political systems do not call South Africa a "perfect" democracy, but they do not call it a dictatorship either. **The Economist Intelligence Unit: c**lassifies South Africa as a Flawed Democracy because political culture and government performance are weak, even though elections are fair. Freedom House **r**ates South Africa as **Free**, giving it high marks for political rights and civil liberties.

Comparison of South Africa against other African Countries

Tier	Democratic Classification	Countries	Where South Africa Sits
Tier 1	Full Democracy	Mauritius	South Africa falls just below this tier.
Tier 2	Flawed Democracy	South Africa, Botswana, Cabo Verde, Namibia	South Africa is a leader in this top tier, ranked 4th overall on the continent.
Tier 3	Hybrid Regimes	Ghana, Zambia, Malawi, Kenya	South Africa has much stronger institutional checks and balances.
Tier 4	Authoritarian / Not Free	Niger, Gabon, Mali, Chad, DR Congo	South Africa completely outpaces these nations, where democracy has collapsed.

Critics, free-market advocates, and liberal politicians argue that left-wing groups do use the word to create a false, negative impression of democracy. They argue that socialist and communist groups use democratic language as a "smoke screen." They believe these groups promise equality but actually want a state-controlled system that limits personal and economic freedoms. In their view, calling a socialist system "democratic" is a political tactic to win votes from people who want fairness but might fear authoritarian rule.

The “National Democratic Revolution” is really a move from political democracy into a socialist system where wealth is redistributed. The word "democracy" has been mixed with socialist ideas in South African politics since 1994. At least 40% of the ANC’s National Executive Committee (NEC) are communists.

Unfortunately, the majority of poorly educated South Africans are not sophisticated enough to discern that they are being led up the proverbial garden path – by these deceptive socialists/communists.