

# THE POLITICS OF FEAR and THE POWER OF NIGHTMARES

## *The South African elections in context*

**By Mike Burnard**



For most voters, the biggest predicament during any given election is who to vote for. Do I vote for the candidate who best represents my interests or the one who best shares my convictions? Do I compromise my vote to ensure a strong opposition, or do I vote according to my convictions with the fear that my vote will have less of an influence on the outcome? As Christians, we often feel the added dilemma that we have a spiritual responsibility to vote according to our conscience and not according to our convenience.

In order to exploit and abuse this vulnerability of voters, political parties often revert to the “power of nightmares”. In a BBC Television documentary, *“The Power of Nightmares: The Rise of the Politics of Fear”*, Adam Curtis describes modern politics as follows:

*“In the past, politicians promised to create a better world. They had different ways of achieving this, but that power and authority came from the optimistic visions they offered their people. Those dreams failed and today people have lost faith in ideologies. Increasingly, politicians are seen simply as managers in public life. But now they have discovered a new role that restores that power and authority. Instead of delivering dreams, politicians now promise to protect us ... from nightmares. They say that they will rescue us from dreadful dangers that we cannot see and we do not understand.”*

Regardless of whether we vote in South Africa, the US, the DRC or on Brexit, Christians need to find, vote for, and support politicians who do not build their campaigns on ‘nightmares’. Too often, party candidates have little to offer except the criticism of other parties and “protection” from the “evil” they could unleash. Election slogans are very often based on assumptions that inevitably lead to conclusions and voters are then encouraged to fill in the blank spaces that predict the worst.

The reality is that those who deal in the ‘currency’ of fear and criticism will not be able to lead a nation to dream of a better future. From a Christian perspective, it therefore becomes imperative to vote for leaders who have the ability to point to the future without creating ‘nightmares’ and for voters not to be manipulated by “the politics of fear”. This is not only a civil duty but a Scriptural duty as well. Depending on which translation of the Bible you use and what phrase you are searching for, the phrase “do not fear” or “do not be afraid” appears at least 130 times in the Bible. This is a character trait that God prioritises for His followers. The reason is obvious: from a position of fear there can never be healing, trust, reconciliation, peace or prosperity. Darkness will never be overcome by covering our eyes – only by lighting a candle. Fear paralyzes and causes disobedience. One sure obstacle to ensuring healing for a broken nation is if Christians cast their votes in fear, instead of in faith.

In Judges 7, we read the amazing account of how Gideon defeated the mighty Midianite army of 135,000 men with an army of only 300 men. Gideon had enough reason to be paralysed with fear: the odds were overwhelmingly against him. During the night (verse 9), the LORD said to Gideon: *“Get up, go down against the camp, because I am going to give it into your hands. If you are afraid to attack, go down to the camp with your servant Purah and listen to what they are saying. Afterward, you will be encouraged to attack the camp.”* So he and Purah his servant went down to the outposts of the camp... [verse 15] when Gideon heard the dream and its interpretation, he bowed down and worshiped. He returned to the camp of Israel and called out, *‘Get up! The LORD has given the Midianite camp into your hands.’*

Once Gideon positioned himself to see the enemy from God’s perspective, he transformed from ‘coward’ Gideon to ‘courageous’ Gideon. Fear only takes root when we are wrongly positioned. Doug Firebaugh said: “Usually a person has more faith in their fear than faith in their future.”

Christians who seek a better future can only vote for leaders who move by faith and see the future from God's perspective, not from the world's perspective.

During a visit to the Parliament in Cape Town, an INcontext delegation was introduced to some members of parliament who still believe that there is much hope for the country. Even though it seems like a flickering candle in a sometimes-dark environment, we left with a deep sense that it is possible to dream again. Those who are courageous enough to look at the positives can offer healing and we believe that through prayer, vision and hope, the dream of a 'rainbow nation' can become a reality.

We asked Member of Parliament (MP) **Cherylyn Verdon Dudley** to put pen to paper about why we, as Christians, can approach the coming elections with a sense of hope and not despair. Cherylyn Dudley is an experienced South African politician who has served as a Member of the National Assembly of South Africa since 1999. She believes she is "called into politics and civil governance for the glory of God and the good of the people". She also says about Christian politicians: "We are there not to perfect the world or nation but to offer God's perspective ... a better way ... and allow society a choice."



She offers the following reasons for the HOPE she has:

- *"I HAVE HOPE because we live in a country with **COURAGEOUS AND PASSIONATE PEOPLE** – even their idealism which sometimes sadly manifests as pessimism has the potential to set us apart and attain excellence if we can only look up long enough to notice what we have achieved.*
- *I HAVE HOPE because of the general **COMMITMENT TO DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES**. I am grateful and humbled by the privilege I have had to serve this nation and grapple with our many challenges which has allowed me to observe – over 20 years in Parliament – the growth and depth of leadership, commitment to democratic processes and a dedication to the eradication of poverty and inequality that inspires me.*
- *I HAVE HOPE because I have **WITNESSED THE TRANSFORMATION** in many – from activist status to statesmen and women – who maintain their passion for positive change but have the maturity and discipline to look long term to ensure sustainable development and opportunities that will improve the standard of living of all who live and work in South Africa.*
- *I HAVE HOPE because of **LEADERS WHO ARE WILLING TO FACE CORRUPTION**. I have watched as leaders have gained the confidence to resist the temptation to be defensive and are willing to face – head on – the scourge of corruption, its impact on our economy and so much more. This is not to say political agendas are not at play – politics is about gaining and retaining power and politicians are constantly mindful of balancing what they believe is right – or their own personal agenda – with what their voters want from them. When irrational rhetoric abounds at election time, I am reminded that rational thinking and a commitment to the people of South Africa has in the past returned to the corridors of Parliament after elections. Admittedly this took a little longer after the 2014 elections!*
- *I HAVE HOPE because of a **SHARED VISION**. I see significant numbers in our country – both leaders and people in general who are committed to making a shared, prosperous future a reality for all who live here – leaders who choose to forgive and to prioritise what is in the best interests of our country as a whole – and more and more people who are determined to reject the notion that the colour of one's skin determines their ability to govern."*

The one right that Christians in South Africa CANNOT relinquish in the coming elections is the right to vote. But even worse than that would be basing a vote on fear.

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