The elephant in the room
A sociology of Polokwane

How do we explain what happened at Polokwane? Was it a result of a rebellion from below and if so, how do we explain this? The **South African Labour Bulletin** reports on a presentation by **Eddie Webster** who seeks to provide a sociological explanation of the dramatic shift in the leadership of the ANC at its December conference.

In order to understand the dramatic shift in the ANC leadership, Eddie Webster said, one needs to go beyond a focus of the ANC as a political party and the personalities involved in the leadership succession battle. On the one hand the ANC is trying to become a normalised political party and in that sense there could well be a similarity to the current US presidential primaries (except that the competition between candidates is open and being fought within the public domain). However, the ANC is more than a conventional political party as it has its roots in a national liberation movement – a movement that can best be understood through the lens of social movement theory.

Webster believes that we are currently not yet in a space where the 'normalisation' of politics has occurred which is synonymous with people becoming demobilised and accepting the separation of the political from civil society. The ANC, he said, is in a transition from a social movement towards a normalised political party. But it was that element of social movement dynamics which came to the fore in Polokwane and reflected in the fact that the power did not simply lie with professional full-time politicians but with branches and ordinary members.

Decisions over the election of leadership are decided by the delegates at the conference, 90% of who are drawn from the branches. So what are the demographics of membership at a branch level? Webster argues that the middle class and professionals have moved out of the branches as a result of them being deployed into government or elsewhere. The space in the branches has been filled by a new generation of activists, creating what Webster believes is a grassroots mass base inside the ANC. A survey conducted by the ANC in Gauteng during 2006 revealed who constitutes the base of the ANC:

- 42% of paid up members (621 237) are unemployed;
- 30% live in informal settlements;
- 44% do not have water in their dwellings;
- 47% have less than a matric; and
- 25% households have less than R1 000 monthly disposable income.

The survey reveals rather starkly the extent to which the social composition of branches has changed while it also highlighted that amongst the new branch members there is a 'growing resentment in some quarters against what is seen as a new, educated elite that is using ANC members and office-bearer status as a stepping stone to employment elsewhere'.

So, if people claim that Polokwane represented a rebellion from below, how do we explain this? Webster argued that what appeared to emerge is that during the transition period, a sharp cleavage developed inside the ANC. The result is effectively two ANC's – the ordinary members (as reflected now in the composition of the branches) and the professionals. Polokwane, he said, provided the cleavage, a political opportunity to mobilise on a national basis.

Attending the conference, Webster said, he could visibly see and sense the difference in the delegates. The ordinary members arrived by bus or taxi and were served (conference) food in big tents, while those in power arrived in their 4x4's with their drivers and entourages and went to lunch in the air-conditioned network lounge where they were served their favourite wines.

This cleavage facilitated collective action amongst ordinary members

who constantly sang: 'Idedela abanye, idedela Msholozi' – 'Give way to others, give way to Msholoz i' (Jacob Zuma). Polokwane, he said, provided an opportunity for a social movement to be mobilised. Drawing on social movement theory, mobilisation was facilitated by informal networks of different groupings coming together with 'bonds of solidarity emerging' – this solidarity was largely forged by a sense of aggrievement that they had been excluded. Webster said it was through Zuma that delegates were able to frame their collective actions in a shared sense of moral indignation. It is not surprising that the media labelled this grouping the 'coalition of the aggrieved'.

An analysis of Polokwane (or understanding what it means politically) would be superficial and incomplete if the focus was simply on what happened there as opposed to providing some history to the event. And that history, according to Webster, is explained by what he calls the elephant in the room. This is a metaphor, he said, for when a powerful force exists and is not visible or publically acknowledged. The elephant, he said, is the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) and the SA Communist Party (SACP). Neither had voting rights, but both organisations were at the centre of the challenge. Both organisations felt they were marginalised within the alliance which goes back to 1996.

Zuma, Webster said, was ideally placed to take on the mantle and become the rightful heir of the tradition of liberation. He has been able to articulate multiple and often contradictory meanings that appeal to a range of groupings including some on the left, anti-elitists and traditionalists. Effectively, these groupings were looking for an anti-

Mbeki man – against the neo-liberal modernisation project of Mbeki.

Some people have suggested, Webster said, that what has emerged is a populist movement. In this context, populism means a demagogic mobilisation which is normally characterised by mobilisation against a demonised enemy, for example, Jews, foreigners etc. Some people have suggested, he said, that this is what is emerging and there is some evidence to suggest this is reflected in the behaviour of some delegates at the conference as reflected in the rowdy heckling of officials, the threatening and at times violent language used, with some of it evoking ethnic identities. Others have suggested it could simply be a contestation between two petit bourgeoisies (two different factions), thereby reducing the dynamics to political opportunism.

For him, Polokwane marked a wake-up call for the political leadership of South Africa and the development path being pursued. Webster believed Polokwane provided both a 'warning and opportunity'. The opportunity, he said, was 'for us to engage in a genuine reflection on the last decade' and that reflection would reveal that the transition period has not been sufficiently inclusive of all the social groups in the country. It is possible that the Mbeki modernisation project is the best we can get, but the flaw has been that 'we have not drawn ordinary people into that project. We by-passed key consultative structures in the country'. Webster argued that this began with what he termed the 'original sin' of by-passing these structures and imposing the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (Gear) strategy in 1996. 'I believe at the core of the rebellion is a desire for greater

Leaders of the ANC

participation... at the core is a style of management which was distant and aloof and did not use the democratic institutions created such as Parliament and the National Economic Development and Labour Council (Nedlac)'.

The warning of Polokwane, Webster argued, is, what Ari Sitas has described as authoritarian populism which sadly has been widely prevalent in post colonial Africa. 'I am concerned that within this context, labour will lose its autonomy. The lessons of post colonial Africa (see page 52) is that unions should not get too close to the governing party'. If they do, Webster said, then they either become subordinate to it and lose their autonomy or end up as a focus of opposition as in the case of Zimbabwe.

Drawing from Greek mythology, Webster concluded that like Icarus one should not fly too close to the sun as your wings can get burnt and you melt. (Icarus, despite his father's warnings, flew too near the sun on wings of feathers and wax. The wax melted and Icarus plunged to his death in the sea.)

Eddie Webster is professor of sociology at the University of Witwatersrand. This article is based on a presentation he gave together with Luli Callinicos at a Sociology for Work Unit breakfast session.