

CONFESSIONS OF A COUNCILLOR

*Confusion, Naïvety and Foolish Patriotism in local government
from a Private-Public Partnership and
Community Engagement Perspective*

Keynote address

by

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On the occasion of the 36th Annual Conference
of the FW De Klerk Foundation held at
the Radisson Blu Waterfront Hotel
Mouille Point, Cape Town

3 February 2026

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INTRODUCTION

Program Director, Chairperson of the Foundation, distinguished guests—both in the room and online—colleagues in public service, and fellow South Africans.

I want to make three confessions today. They are deeply personal—but not unique to me. I suspect they echo the lived reality of many councillors, mayors, municipal officials, and ordinary citizens across our country.

And so I've entitled this address: *Confessions of a Councillor*.

My confessions are simple:

- First, I confess that I am confused.
- Second, I confess that I am naïve.
- Third, I confess that I am blindly—perhaps foolishly—patriotic.

To explore these confessions, let me ask you three deceptively simple questions. Please don't answer them out loud—just sit with them.

First question: Have you ever felt truly confused—unsure of what is real, what is promised, and what is actually possible?

Second question: Have you ever realised, perhaps painfully, that you were actually naïve and gullible—that you trusted a system, a process, or a person, only to discover you had been misled?

And finally: have you ever felt deeply proud to be South African—only to have that pride collide with embarrassment, or even shame?

These are not academic questions. They are profoundly human ones. They also help me explain my unexpected journey from private citizen and farmer to executive mayor. More about that in a moment.

Importantly, these questions help us go to the heart of what is broken—and what must be fixed in South Africa.

The Auditor-General herself paints a bleak picture of local government revealing a horror story of apocalyptic proportions. Conservatively stated, more than a quarter of municipalities are dysfunctional. Governance is weak, finances are broken, institutions are hollowed out and corruption and political instability are widespread. At least 30% of municipalities supply undrinkable water to residents.

Cederberg municipality was one of those dysfunctional municipalities until a new approach came along – an approach based on a private-public partnership driven by a community engagement ethos and led by a group who called themselves Cederberg Eerste – Cederberg First Residents Association.

THE NOISE WE CARRY

The questions I have just posed to you compete with the noise we all carry into this room.

We live in a turbulent world. Wars grind on with no moral resolution. Civil conflicts continue to displace millions. Geopolitical tensions simmer, and the language of force increasingly replaces the language of law.

Closer to home, the noise is familiar.

- Service delivery failures.
- An economy stuck below one percent growth.
- Rising poverty and unemployment.
- Violent crime and gender-based violence
- Commissions of Enquiry with few tangible outcomes.
- Institutional decay.
- And a steady erosion of public trust, to name but a few concerns that keep us awake at night.

As a country, we seem to have lost our critical north—and risk losing our soul if things do not change.

And looming over all of this is the 2026 local government elections, an inflection point that will shape municipalities and signal the trajectory of our democracy beyond 2029.

FIRST CONFESSION: CONFUSION

Let me now explore in more detail each of my confessions. I will start with my Confusion. Yes, I have been confused. My wife will tell you I am permanently confused, and after a few decades of marriage, I have learned that such feedback should not be ignored.

At the end of 2019, I did what many South Africans do. I followed my instincts—supported by a due diligence report—and moved from Cape Town to a small town called Clanwilliam in the Cederberg region to pursue commercial citrus farming.

Two months later, Covid shut down the world.

But Covid was not the confusion.

The confusion was this: I went to farm oranges—and instead became the **Executive Mayor of the Cederberg Local Municipality**, first established in 1808.

The Cederberg municipality, three hours north-west of Cape Town, has jurisdiction over an area covering 8000 square kilometres and is divided into 6 wards: stretching from Lamberts Bay on the Atlantic coast to Wupperthal – the Moravian Mission Station in the mountains in the east. These are towns (or more appropriately municipal wards) not only separated by distance (in this instance 150 kilometers as the crow flies) but also by culture and heritage.

Agriculture and tourism dominate—citrus, rooibos, wine and table grapes—and it is a cultural heartland of Khoi and San heritage, including Elands Bay, now recognised by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) as the Cradle of Human Culture. This municipal region hums with indigenous and colonial ancestry.

Yet when we took office in November 2021, we found a municipality that was administratively and institutionally compromised.

I did not go to the Cederberg to fix politics. I went to grow oranges. And that was the beginning of my cognitive dissonance – or was it confirmation of my false consciousness. Instead of oranges, I inherited unfunded budgets, sewage spills, illegal waste sites, and institutional collapse. Why was this municipality so wilfully neglected by its political parties and local politicians for so many years?

And now what?

The short answer was this: residents decided in 2021 that party politics had failed them **and that a different solution was required**. They formed a community organisation called **Cederberg First—Cederberg Eerste** (as Afrikaans is the dominant language there) focused exclusively on local government and even more narrowly, only on the Cederberg, where we live and have our being.

The Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) confirmed our registration barely a few weeks before the election. We then launched what many thought was a hopeless campaign.

Against all odds, we achieved the second-highest number of votes in the 2021 local government elections. We formed a coalition, entered council and through subsequent by-elections became the majority party. I was appointed Executive Mayor.

One Sunday morning, a fellow councillor and I stood next to a sewage pond after a pump failure. Few things ground you in reality like untreated sewage. I remember wondering whether I was having a bad dream—or whether I had truly signed up for this mission in local government.

I went from oranges to sewage.

My confusion deepened.

SECOND CONFESSION: NAÏVETY

My second confession is more uncomfortable.

I was Naïve. In others words, I was Gullible.

I believed that if you fixed what was broken—stabilised finances, restored services, appointed competent staff, improved governance—reasonable people would acknowledge that.

When we took office, the municipality was bankrupt, beheaded, and broken. It was technically insolvent, lacked permanent senior management, and faced environmental and administrative collapse. We later discovered classic conditions of municipal capture – four of its previous executive mayors currently occupy senior positions in the administration – all from one particular political party.

Despite floods, bruising political warfare, repeated motions of no confidence, and by-elections caused by floor-crossing, we stabilised governance within one term.

- We restored clean water for the first time in two decades.
- We improved revenue collection and reduced unsustainable expenditure.
- We addressed sewage spills and environmental non-compliance.
- We repaired infrastructure, rebuilt basic services, and restored supplier confidence. You know you are in trouble when a hardware store in a rural area refuses to do business with the local municipality.
- We moved from an unfunded to a funded budget.

In November 2025, we achieved a clean audit—placing Cederberg among a small minority of municipalities nationally. In fact, only about 16 percent of municipalities achieve a clean audit.

And what was the reward for such a dramatic turnaround in governance and excellent financial management? You guessed it: Repeated motions of no confidence. Here lies the paradox, indeed an empirical anomaly. Governance theory assumes that improved outcomes generate institutional support. In practice, competence is a threat in dysfunctional systems. When chaos benefits a few, order becomes the enemy.

Interestingly, at one point, our entire Cederberg Eerste caucus was charged with breaching the code of conduct—for allegedly not acting in the municipality’s best interest.

That is when my political naïvety ended.

I quickly discovered that motions of no confidence, in general, lack legal and factual foundation and were more often a display of the raw and unbridled lust for political power – power at any cost – even if it means destroying the reputation of a fellow councillor.

Coming from the private sector, this was a shock. Our caucus consisted of farmers, engineers, security professionals, lawyer and a private sector tax consultant. Our current by-election candidate, for example, is an 80-year-old grandmother. We are not career politicians. We believed rational governance would be rewarded.

We were wrong.

I learned a hard truth: no good deed goes unpunished.

THIRD CONFESSION: FOOLISH PATRIOTISM

And now my third confession.

I am foolishly patriotic. I still believe South Africa matters. That communities matter. That loyalty, trust, and good faith belong in public life.

This kind of thinking is unfashionable, I've discovered. Politics today speaks the language of betrayal, opportunism, and permanent campaigning. I persist—perhaps stubbornly and foolishly—in speaking the language of responsibility, reconciliation and patriotism.

Local government, in my view, is too fragile for sabotage, endless factional warfare and floor-crossing.

My plea is simple: Do the basics properly – and do them together, for the sake of our country.

If that makes me old-fashioned and patriotic, I plead guilty.

THE CEDERBERG CASE STUDY

How did this public-private, community-driven approach emerge in the Cederberg?

The short answer is that one night in Clanwilliam—over pizza—community and business leaders convinced me that if residents did not intervene, the municipality would collapse completely.

I agreed to be the leader on one condition: this had to be a team effort. Success, after all, is a team sport. And so, residents took the brave step and put aside their ideological and racial differences in the interests of service delivery, and voted for Cederberg Eerste. After all, local government is about services. Provincial and national government is about ideology and policy. But at a local level it is all about services. We all drink the same water, after all. We all want our garbage collected, after all. We all drive on the same roads, after all.

Local government was never my career plan. My background spans the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the Scorpions, academia, business, and writing.

I had no idea how toxic—and how dangerous—local government could be. In parts of our country, councillors literally risk their lives. This is not rhetoric; it is fact. I have great admiration for councillors in the KwaZulu-Natal province, for example, where you literally take your life into your own hands by agreeing to participate in local government. Reports tell us that more councillors are killed in KwaZulu-Natal than in the drug wars of Columbia. Reports from Salga (South African Local Government Association) and other independent entities, confirm the worrying reality that councillors get gunned down to win political fights. Local politics in some areas of our country has become a deadly war zone.

THE “NO-PROMISES” CAMPAIGN

Cederberg First/Eerste ran what the media mockingly called a “no-promises campaign.”

No jobs.

No houses.

No miracles.

Our emphasis was: **clean water, clean towns, clean administration**—which is nothing other than the constitutional mandate of a municipality.

Our first act was diagnosis. Our operating principle was: prescription without diagnosis is malpractice. In politics, malpractice is called treason, if not municipal genocide.

We decided to follow the money—only to discover there was none. Expenses exceeded income. Salaries were paid with Eskom's money.

When I explained insolvency, opposition councillors accused me of lying. Financial illiteracy in local government is widespread—and dangerous, as the Auditor-General will confirm. Needless to say, opposition councillors called for my dismissal and the appointment of an independent consultant to explain that when expenses exceed income, things are okay.

RETHINKING LOCAL GOVERNMENT

It is significant that South Africa is revising the 1998 White Paper on Local Government. Some of the assumptions of 30 years ago are no longer valid.

Thirty years ago, Eskom's collapse was unthinkable. Climate change ignored. Political fragmentation underestimated. And the impact of technology and now Ai-completely unimaginable.

Yet the core mandate of a municipality remains remarkably simple:

Clean water.

Clean towns.

Clean administration.

If municipalities cannot do the basics, democracy at the local level collapses.

This is the real risk facing our fragile democracy.

CONCLUSION: 2026 AND BEYOND

Program Director, I hasten to a conclusion with an uncomfortable yet sobering fact: a municipality is neither a charity nor an employment agency. It is a service-delivery business legislated by government consequently raising the disjuncture between constitutional mandates and political incentives.

- Electricity is not free.
- Water is not free.
- Waste removal is not free.

Telling residents not to pay for services in exchange for their votes is not compassion—it is institutional sabotage. It destroys revenue culture and leaves municipalities ungovernable. In this regard, local government is the biggest unpriced risk in the South African economy.

We do well to inform legislators that residents don't live in constitutional textbooks. They live in neglected towns and villages. Local government is their closest sphere—and the mayor becomes the face of every failure, regardless of jurisdiction.

- Provincial roads collapse? Mayor's fault.
- Eskom fails? Mayor's fault.
- Floods and climate change? Mayor's fault.

This focalisation is politically dangerous and institutionally corrosive—but where else do people go and who else can they blame? Somehow we need to force legislative accountability and expose how national and provincial failures are dumped on local municipalities.

As I conclude, let me say a quick word to the business community. If the private sector does not help rebuild municipal capability, the private sector will continue paying a premium for state failure. And that in essence is what we as Cederberg Eerste have tried to do from the

inside of the system by taking control of governance and demonstrating that private-public partnership and community engagement can work to improve local government.

The 2026 local government elections will not be won by slogans, but by honesty.

My plea to councillors—current and aspiring—is simple:

- Tell the truth.
- Educate voters.
- Stop making populist promises.
- Reward competence.
- Practice practical patriotism.

Let me end where I began—with my confessions.

I confess that I am confused—but now I know why - because capable governance is punished, not rewarded. I admit that it is rough in local government. It's a bruising environment. But I am still standing in the trenches.

I confess that I am naïve—now I know why - because I believed outcomes matter. I desperately want to believe in the good of others in spite of baseless motions of no confidence. However, we urgently need to find an institutional shield for ethical and competent councillors because if we don't local democracy will continue to bleed from the inside.

My third and final confession remains: I confess to still being foolishly patriotic - now I know why - because I still believe South Africa can do better.

Our story and experience as Cederberg Eerste is not unique. There are many like us who are making a constitutional distress call from the coalface of governance. If parliament and government at large does not realign powers, funding, and accountability, then municipalities will remain the scapegoats for a state that refuses to fix itself.

Rome was not built in a day. Neither will our municipalities be rebuilt overnight after decades of neglect.

But if we get the basics right, we give democracy a fighting chance.

So why do we do it? In short, because we love our country. We believe a better South Africa is possible. We believe better leadership is possible.

I remain confused. I remain naïve. I remain foolishly patriotic.

And perhaps that is exactly what local government needs to survive: Perhaps it needs confused, naïve and foolishly patriotic residents to rescue our country.

I thank you.