

Summary and Review of

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

Executive Summary of “Confessions of a Councillor”

This paper presents a reflective and empirical case study of local government reform in South Africa through the lens of an unconventional political actor: a private citizen who became Executive Mayor of a dysfunctional municipality. Framed as “Confessions of a Councillor,” the paper interrogates three themes—confusion, naïvety, and patriotism—to illuminate the structural, political, and institutional pathologies undermining local governance. Drawing on the Cederberg Local Municipality as a case study, the paper documents how a community-driven, public–private partnership approach succeeded in stabilising a municipality previously characterised by insolvency, administrative collapse, environmental risk, and governance failure. Despite measurable improvements—including restored service delivery, financial recovery, clean audits, and infrastructure rehabilitation—the reform agenda provoked sustained political resistance, notably through repeated motions of no confidence. This paradox challenges prevailing assumptions in governance theory that improved outcomes generate institutional support. The paper argues that competence threatens entrenched interests in dysfunctional systems and that political incentives often reward disorder over reform. It further situates these dynamics within South Africa’s broader democratic risk, particularly ahead of the 2026 local government elections. The paper concludes by calling for a rethinking of local government accountability, stronger institutional protection for ethical leadership, and renewed emphasis on basic service delivery as the foundation of democratic legitimacy.

A critical review of “Confessions of a Councillor”

This paper is a powerful, deeply personal, and politically resonant address that blends lived experience with structural critique of South African local government. Framed around three confessions—confusion, naïvety, and “foolish patriotism”—the author effectively humanises governance failure while exposing the institutional and political incentives that punish competence. The narrative arc, moving from citrus farming to executive mayor, is compelling and grounds abstract governance failures in vivid, concrete realities such as sewage spills, insolvency, and political sabotage.

The Cederberg case study is the paper’s greatest strength. It demonstrates, with credible evidence, that community-driven, public-private partnerships can stabilise and even rehabilitate dysfunctional municipalities. The achievement of a clean audit, restored services, and financial recovery stands in stark contrast to the hostile political response, reinforcing the author’s central argument: that effective governance threatens entrenched interests in broken systems.

The paper is also timely, particularly in light of the 2026 local government elections and the revision of the 1998 White Paper on Local Government. Its critique of populism, unfunded mandates, and misplaced accountability is sharp and persuasive. While occasionally long and rhetorically dense, the address succeeds as both a warning and a call to action—urging honesty, competence, and practical patriotism as prerequisites for saving local democracy.