

# Her own voice may be Helen Zille's obstacle to success

**John French**

**S**HE HAS been hailed as the most hard-working politician in SA, with an unparalleled track record of professionalism.

Helen Zille should be perceived as a paragon of national strength and patriotic determination, and yet this "Iron Lady of Africa" is failing to win over the majority black vote.

In a country plagued by a lack of service delivery, corruption and mostly ineffectual politicians, surely Zille should be held as a serious political contender by the majority of SA voters.

There seems to be some vital missing "connect" with the people.

As a communication strategist and voice coach, I'm of the belief that it's Zille's voice that creates the major obstacle to her reaching most South Africans. She simply sounds too European and affluent.

Zille's German heritage also comes through in a rather harsh and cold vocal tone, and she suffers from throat tension which makes her sound hoarse and even gruff at times.

But there is a solution. One only has to recall the other "Iron Lady" who very wisely recognised the power of the voice as a political tool and successfully underwent a vocal metamorphosis.

The British prime minister began to work on her vocal image after the critic Clive James, writing in *The Observer* in 1977, compared her voice to a cat sliding down a blackboard. It may be hard to

believe, but the young Margaret Thatcher had a totally disempowered voice: too light, too high and totally non-assertive. She certainly didn't have a voice that would be listened to or taken seriously in a male-dominated parliament.

Thatcher, who realised the importance of voice in winning

votes, took steps to lower her pitch and speak with more authority.

Under the guidance of the National Theatre, she embarked on vocal training that produced astounding results.

Thatcher now sounded like an empowered leader and owned a voice that would be taken seriously.

Thatcher's vocal make-over was completed and paying huge dividends by the late 1970s when her nickname "the Iron Lady" was coined in 1979 by the Soviet Red Army newspaper *Red Star*.

Britain's first female prime minister referred to it in a famous speech, declaring in her powerful new voice: "I stand before you tonight in my Red Star chiffon evening gown, my face softly made up and my fair hair gently

waved, the Iron Lady of the Western world!"

She underwent one final vocal adjustment once she had consolidated her power.

Having proved her strength and used her new voice to win public support, she then learned how to soften her vocal tone, to project an image of being warmer and more caring.

Our Iron Lady of Africa can indeed learn some very valuable lessons from the original.

Communication is everything in the politics. Like Margaret Thatcher before her, Zille has proved herself and her tremendous potential.

Perhaps the political landscape may indeed change if the white lady learns to sing...

● *John French is a communication guru*



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