

'Iron Lady of Africa' simply not in tone

JOHN FRENCH

SHE HAS been hailed as the hardest-working politician in SA, with an unparalleled track record of professionalism, successes and service delivery.

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

Politics is unfortunately not a straightforward and logical game. Rather, it is a strategic game, based on managing public perceptions, and earning and winning emotional loyalty and buy-in from the voters. Votes are directly linked to our core beliefs, our powerful sub-conscious drivers, and our deeply entrenched belief systems. No one is going to vote for a candidate or party that doesn't resonate with them at a core, fundamental level.

If we examine Zille as a communicator, and "box" her in terms of personality profiling, it is fairly easy to assess that she possesses powerful "driver"-type personality traits. This translates into excellent leadership skills, strength, fortitude and focused ambition.

The downside is that these strong and often stropy types tend to be too direct and sometimes lack sensitivity. This became evident recently in her Twitter remarks about "professional blacks".

As an experienced voice coach, I would attempt to analyse Zille's voice.

It was the great British prime minister Benjamin Disraeli who summarised it quite aptly, more than a century ago, when he concluded: "There is no index of character so sure as the voice."

Our entire psychological profile is embedded in this magical vocal instrument. It is specifically the tone of a person's voice that reveals their psychological makeup and so easily reveals their attitude and emotional state of mind.

In the voice-training industry, we reckon that as much as 85 percent of our overall communication impact (when we are not face-to-face) is influenced by our vocal tone. It is therefore very much a case of "It's not what you say, but how you say it" that counts in our communication.

When I listen to Zille's voice, I hear a resolute strength coming through. Her voice has fortitude, resilience, and she is unquestionably brave. Zille does



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ot in tone with the black subconscious

endure major stress from time to time, which manifests in apparent chronic throat tension, causing her to sound very gruff and slightly hoarse at times.

This was more evident in the first 18 months of the DA coming to power in the Western Cape, when the ANC was challenging DA control, at every turn. Zille's voice was very hoarse during this period, with political tension strangling her vocal chords.

Perhaps the greatest issue that needs examination is Zille's tone of voice. I often teach that "voice is caught and not taught", and that we pick up our vocal patterns from our cultural background and social conditioning.

Zille comes from a Germanic background, which has speech patterns that are very pushed, hard and guttural on the ear. German is a far "harsher" language than the more romantic lyrical languages like French, Italian and English.

This translates into coarser vocal undertones coming through in a person's voice, and I hear evidence of this vocal heritage in Zille's speech patterns.

Thus, the mix of driver-style personality and Germanic vocal strength, together with the more affluent "white" cultural accent and speech patterns, combine

to create Zille's greatest vocal and cultural barrier. When she opens her mouth, Zille unfortunately possesses the voice and sound of the "baas" and "madam" of the apartheid days that caused so much pain, trauma and hate.

The black subconscious naturally and quite understandably resists and distrusts this, and consequently is not inclined to vote for what is perceived to be the "voice of the oppressor".

Quite simply, Zille could not sound worse than she does when trying to attract the black vote.

Is there any solution or remedy to this vocal dilemma? Luckily, my answer is yes.

One only has to throw one's mind back to the other "Iron Lady" (former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher), who, very wisely, recognised the power of the voice as a political tool and successfully underwent a total vocal metamorphosis.

She lowered her pitch, softened her tone, and won over her people. Like Thatcher, Zille has definitely proved herself, and she has tremendous potential if she learns how to communicate more strategically.

But she first needs to unlock the potential in her voice.