

Will the ANCWL back Jacob Zuma at Mangaung?

As I was **SAYING**

With Gareth van Onselen



The ANC Women's League must have been clapping with clenched teeth when the ANC rolled out its centenary celebrations earlier this year. For the first 31 years of its existence women were forbidden from joining the movement.

Perhaps they only clapped two thirds of the time. Reading its statement on the celebrations you'd never have guessed this - a suitably inane piece of propaganda that didn't even mention the fact - but that, in many respects, is the ANCWL for you. It is, for all intents and purposes, a nicety.

Something the ANC can allude to in order that it might suggest how much it cares about women (or, at least, how much it has cared for 69 of the last 100 years).

When push comes to shove, however, the league, like every other body in the ANC, is required to put aside its vested interests and tow the party line. And few organisations willing ingratiate themselves better than the ANCWL.

The defining recent example of this kind of deference (the league will no doubt argue its behaviour a sign of respect) was its December 2007 decision to endorse Jacob Zuma for ANC president, ahead of Polokwane - a decision which put paid to much of its pre-elective hype about the need for a woman in the presidency.

It is ironic indeed that the league - very often the first to load its politically correct shot gun when someone is dragged before the gender wall - has not in 61 years managed to produce a female president. 61 years, 100 if its own delusional rhetoric is to be believed. Nothing. The DA did it in less than 10.

So, the big question is this: who will the ANCWL throw its weight behind at Mangaung? Will it grow a backbone and nominate a woman, or will it capitulate and obfuscate like it did in 2007? Watch this space.

In the meantime, it is worth revisiting its 2007 decision in a bit more detail, just to get a better understanding of the way in which the ANCWL practices its own special brand of obsequiousness.

2007: The year of living hypocritically

As early as February 2007 the ANCWL was adamant it would remain "non-aligned". So it started from first principles with a cop-out. Speaking at a press conference ANCWL president NosiviweMapisa-Nqakula said whomever the league supported would be determined by its principles: "good principles, selflessness, cadreship and years of service to the movement" would be among its determining criteria. She said the league had "no anxiety" about the issue.

No one was really buying that line though. Rarely had the ANC been so publicly divided before, every facet of the organisation under intense external and internal pressure. It might have claimed no anxiety, but increased power it certainly had. It was a -

lowed to elect its own candidates and now enjoyed the status of a province giving it far more weight than its usual 50 delegates (in truth it would have only 68 of the 4075 voting delegates but women have always constituted more than 50% of the ANC's voting delegates so its influence should not be underestimated). So, like it or lump it, the league's endorsement would carry significant weight and influence. And everyone knew it.

As time passed the league occupied itself with, among other things, coming out in support of Norman Mashabane, the former ambassador and sex pest, found guilty of sexual harassment by the department of foreign affairs.

Instead of condemning his March 2007 deployment to the Limpopo legislature, they effectively blamed women themselves for his predicament: "We call on women not to abuse their democratic privileges and make statements implicating others..." Principled stuff.

Clear as mud

But the pressure to declare its support for a presidential candidate continued and the league continued to side step the issue. In late March it would again obfuscate, ANCWL spokesperson Charlotte Lobe saying: "...we will discuss the team that will lead the ANC, but not one person".

By April the league was beginning to suggest something a bit more concrete, intimating that a female president would be preferable. ANCWL president NosiviweMapisa-Nqakula said that the league was "...obliged to lead society in pronouncing its principled positions on the vulnerability of women, particularly on the issues of rape and abuse". Many saw that as a veiled reference to Jacob Zuma who was found not guilty of rape the year before, but in testifying said a range of things that suggested his attitude towards women was hardly "principled". Something the league had been openly critical of at the time.

In the background there were repeatedly mutterings that foreign affairs minister Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma would be the league's preferred candidate. Although, even here, because she was likewise seen as firmly in Thabo Mbeki's camp many members of the league argued this would be nothing more than an implicit vote for him anyway.

Mbeki himself was playing it cool. Telling the ANCWL to "forget there is a national conference in December" and focus rather on gender issues. He had himself mooted the idea of a female president some

months earlier - an idea which many in the league took as a suggestion he had Dlamini-Zuma firmly in mind. So even that proved divisive.

Position 1: A woman in the presidency

With time things became clearer. In April the league's National General Council took a resolution that it would fight for women to occupy 50% of all leadership positions in the ANC. Explaining the decision to the media, Mapisa-Nqakula said "We have not taken a position as the NGC that we want a woman president or deputy president, but we are saying certainly that the office of the presidency... has to have a woman." So, one or the other, basically. At least it was now advocating its express purpose as an organisation.

Reveling in its new found influence the league took the opportunity to make some demands. For one,

the establishment of a 'ministry for women'. One wonders what kind of negotiating went on behind the scenes on that particular request. The fact that we now have a department for women (albeit not solely dedicated to them) suggests Zuma certainly obliged.

Other names for a female presidential candidate were thrown about. Among them, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngeuka and former league president Winnie Madikizela-Mandela. And all the different machinations about who they were fronting for were endlessly discussed in the media. Another great irony. Every woman candidate was either for Zuma or Mbeki, but none for women themselves. Patronising, or telling? You decide.

More time passed. More support for people with dubious track records on gender issues. Among them, the league used one meeting to call for

ailing health minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang to be retained in her position. The very same person who had deliberately and in defiance of the constitutional court itself done everything she could to deny HIV positive pregnant mothers access to anti-retroviral drugs.

By September the league's inability to speculate was rife that Dlamini-Zuma would be the ANCWL's candidate. A source within the league told Business Day she represented the "safe choice", allowing the league to stay as far as possible out of the Mbeki/Zuma feud. "It is not a compromise candidate, it is the safe choice", the source said. Someone from the league will have to explain to me the difference between those two concepts.

Time will tell.

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