



Holding two opposed ideas

Last month, after a family visit to South Africa, I bemoaned the electricity crisis in the motherland. A few people pointed out that the piece was rather less upbeat than my usual style of writing.

It is certainly difficult to view the glass as half-full when the power grid is on the brink of collapse and corruption runs rife throughout Eskom, as recently confirmed in the now-viral André de Ruyter interview. But I promised the editor that I would try to come up with a retort to my own pessimistic piece of yester-month, so here goes...

Trying to balance the dark cloud of load-shedding with the silver lining of hope for a better future, reminds one of the words of F Scott Fitzgerald from an essay in Esquire magazine in 1936: "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function. One should, for example, be able to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise. This philosophy fitted onto my early adult life, when I saw the improbable, the implausible, often the 'impossible' come true."

Will the seemingly impossible eventually come true in South Africa in the form of a sustainable solution to the electricity crisis? Thankfully, there are a few positive signs.

A friend in Pretoria recently told me that practically everyone in his network was effectively off the grid already, having installed solar solutions some time ago. This is borne out by the numbers: in August last year, for example, the World Economic Forum reported that South Africans imported solar panels worth \$125m in the first five months of 2022 alone.

But what about poorer people who cannot afford to go solar? In a recent

interview with Geordin Hill-Lewis, the youthful mayor of Cape Town focused specifically on this question when discussing the city's multipronged approach to load-shedding. In terms of its Power Heroes programme, all households (including the poorest ones) that save electricity during peak times will be rewarded with cash incentives.

Cape Town has also committed to buy 200MW of renewable power from independent producers who are constructing capacity. In addition, it has announced that businesses and private households will be allowed to generate as much power as they want and sell any excess production back to the city in future – a first for the country. Finally, plans are in place for storage solutions in respect of as much as 500MW of so-called dispatchable power; we are told that formal announcements in this regard are imminent.

Positive developments all, even though it doesn't much help those living in other

parts of the country. No wonder more and more families are semigrating to the Western Cape.

Making a plan

I also take heart from some of the remarks of Richard Quest, anchor of CNN International's flagship business programme, who visited South Africa last month. Quest has been to the country a few times and is clearly a fan. He tweeted to his half a million followers at the end of his most recent trip: "Thank you Cape Town and South Africa for a wonderful assignment. Whatever the challenges you are the most welcoming, beautiful, friendly place to visit." No need to pay a billion rand to some random football club in north London; South African Tourism should just fly this journalist out once a year to act as brand ambassador for the country.

But what stood out for me was the *Quest Means Business* conversation with venture capitalist Michael Jordaan in which they discussed, among other things, the challenges of load-shedding. Jordaan said he

remains positive, because he has surrounded himself with positive-minded people who are all looking for solutions to the many problems faced by the country, every one of them with skin in the game. Quest summed it up with a priceless bit of Afrikaans: "*n Boer maak 'n plan.*" I cannot put it better.

So, I'll continue to strive for that first-rate intelligence by holding on to two opposed ideas at the same time: on the one hand, my fear that the electricity situation in South Africa continues to look unfixable; on the other, my hope that everything will eventually turn out fine. Which of these will ultimately prevail?

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