

# Navigating South Africa's loaded political lexicon

By [Dirk Kotze](#)

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The concepts and language people use when discussing politics don't mean the same everywhere we go. This is certainly true in South Africa.



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These differences manifest in ideologies like liberalism and conservatism, objectives like nation-building, and phenomena like populism or the substance of democracy.

Liberalism means something completely different in South Africa compared, for example, with America. For the majority of South Africans it is a dirty word. The roots of this go back to early colonialism.

## The role of racism

The South African understanding of liberalism has been traced mostly to the early Cape history. Compared with the racist nationalism of the frontier farmers and later the Afrikaner migrants, known as [Voortrekkers](#), South African liberals saw themselves as representing a more humane form of racism. For example, they supported a [qualified franchise](#) for black people.

During the apartheid period, liberals were against racial discrimination. But they were associated with big business, which

most black opposition groups regarded as the economic basis of apartheid. This was a dominant view particularly among Marxists.

This tension is often referred to as the [liberal-radical debate](#) of the 1960s.

## Liberalism laid bare

Liberalism's most serious crisis occurred when [black consciousness](#) founder Steve Biko split from the [National Union of South African Students](#) and formed the South African Students' Organisation. Biko's [main target](#) was the white students who spoke against apartheid but did not act in solidarity with their black fellow members.

As a result, the paths of liberals and the internal resistance movement went their separate ways in the early 1970s.

Philosophically, [South African liberalism](#) is focused on the individual in society. Its highest value is freedom - not equality. It insists on an open society where individuals have maximum opportunities to develop their own initiatives in a free market with the least possible intervention by the state or public sector.

This view holds that the state should be responsible for only the most general services such as military defence, international relations, public safety and some infrastructure.

Today, South Africa's main opposition party, the Democratic Alliance, comes closest to this stance. Its new slogan is [freedom, fairness and opportunity](#). It remains to be seen whether the party, now led by a [black leader](#), will change the fortunes of liberalism among the country's majority black population.

In the US, this philosophy is typical of the neoconservatives, or today's [Tea Party](#) movement. It is a variation on what was earlier known as [Thatcherism](#). The tax policies of those parties are good indicators of the difference between liberals and conservatives. The Conservatives, or neoconservatives, are generally in favour of lower taxes as well as government spending.

On the other hand, liberals in the US - mainly in the Democratic Party - are in favour of big government and a greater role for the state, particularly in the social sphere. They support projects such as President Barack Obama's health care reforms. This is why the party finds support from lower classes and trade unions.

In the UK, the [Labour Party](#) is comparable with the [American Democrats](#). The same values in the British context are not liberal but social democratic.

The European social democratic tradition has some points of similarity with the [African National Congress'](#) early policy propositions, especially those in the [Reconstruction and Development Programme](#), the Mandela administration's programme for meeting the basic needs of South Africa's previously marginalised majority black community, such as housing, health care, education and electricity.

## Conservatism has its own complexities

Conservatism is an even more elusive concept. Historically it is associated with philosophers like [Edmund Burke](#).

Permutations of conservatism appear in religious, social, ethnocentric or racial, and political, forms. Religious conservatives, who are present in most of the main religions, prefer a theocratic approach to politics. Social conservatives often use religious arguments for their views on, for example, the status of women, abortion, the death penalty and sexual identity.

Many shades of conservatism are found in most countries. Today, one of its forms is right-wing European populism in the National Front (France), Lega Nord (Italy) or the Party for Freedom (Netherlands).

Conservatives are protective of their own group, lifestyle and culture. They are therefore very nationalistic or xenophobic and protective of the status quo.

South African conservatism falls in broad terms within this description. Parties such as the [Freedom Front Plus](#), the [African Christian Democratic Party](#) and the [Inkatha Freedom Party](#) fit the description.

In philosophical terms, conservatism puts emphasis on the community as the main focus in society rather than the individual. Family and communal networks are seen as the essence of society.

In economic terms it tends more towards a welfare or social democratic orientation, but not absolutely in favour of free market ideology.

Contemporary English conservatism - presented by the Conservative Party since Margaret Thatcher - is exactly the opposite. It resembles very much what was earlier presented as South African liberalism. In many parts of the world, neoliberalism and neoconservatism can mean more or less the same thing. It all depends which country you are in.

## **Nation-building is another kettle of fish**

A concept of equally divergent meanings is nation-building. South Africans are well-acquainted with the concept, especially since former president [Nelson Mandela](#) included it in his post-1994 reconstruction and democratisation policies.

It was a post-apartheid strategy to forge a new national identity by way of reconciliation, cultural convergence, political accommodation and power-sharing, the removal of discrimination as well as historical redress. It was seen as a process necessary for the new South African state to forge one, united nation.

Nation-building as a concept has a completely different meaning in, for example, the US. American military leaders involved in Iraq and Afghanistan cautioned against the costs of nation-building. This referred to rebuilding the state after a period of conflict rather than unifying the people.

Nation-building in this sense means to re-establish education facilities, restore the water and electricity infrastructure, retrain the police force and establish a new defence force. The challenges of nation building are graphically explained in Paul Bremer III's book [My Year in Iraq](#).

These examples show that it is important never to take any political concept at face value. Meanings are determined by a particular historical context and even nuances of understanding among people of the same origin.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

[[<https://theconversation.com/profiles/dirk-kotze-173389> Dirk Kotze]] is Professor in Political Science at University of South Africa.

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