

Opinion

Secession in the air in the Western Cape

DANIEL FEATHER¹

Senior Lecturer in History, Arts and Humanities, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, UK

The Western Cape (WC) occupies a unique position in South Africa. It was the first part of the country occupied by European colonists, it is the only province where black people do not make up the majority, it is the only province ruled by the official opposition – the white-dominated Democratic Alliance (DA), and it is, if you ask a significant number of people who live there, the only province in South Africa that actually functions properly. It is for this reason that a group of predominantly white WC residents formed the Referendum Party in November 2023 to campaign for the province's independence.

Many WC residents view the rest of South Africa with a degree of disdain. When I last visited the WC in November, a 'coloured' Uber driver described Johannesburg, the country's economic hub, in very derisory terms. Similarly, when on an organised tour the white guide greeted a black couple from the Gauteng province by stating 'welcome to civilisation'. It was not, however, just members of South Africa's 'minority' communities who held negative views of other parts of the country. A black Uber driver told me that he was mugged three times while staying in Johannesburg – twice by the same gang. Nonetheless, this point should not be exaggerated. The majority of the WC's black community vote for the African National Congress (ANC), the country's ruling party since 1994, while only 2.6% vote for the DA. Indeed, Phil Craig, the British-born leader of the Referendum Party argues that the number of black DA voters is so low in the WC 'despite all of its successes' there demonstrates that the DA will never be able to form a national government and is a key reason why the province should secede.

However, it is important to ask why, if things are so good in WC, do black South Africans there not vote DA? Is it loyalty to the ANC and a continuing gratification for its role in the liberation struggle? Or is it that many black residents in the WC do not see the fruits of the DA's apparently exemplary rule? It is true that more so than any other province the WC has more safe, affluent, and picturesque areas, whether it is the semi-rural towns and villages like Franschhoek or Stellenbosch, or Cape Town's trendy coastal suburbs of Seapoint or Camps Bay. Cape Town Central Business District (CBD) too while a little 'edgy' has nothing like the problems of many others in the country, where buildings have been hijacked and infrastructure is decaying.

However, is this perceived safety, affluence, and high-quality infrastructure all that it seems? As with most issues in South Africa it is impossible to get away from race, with these areas having disproportionately high numbers of white residents – between 66.65 and 78.3% according to the 2011 census. By contrast, the areas on the outskirts of Cape Town such as the Cape Flats - which were used by the apartheid regime as a dumping ground for the forcibly removed coloured residents of the CBD – remain desperately poor and predominantly black or coloured. This is how Cape Town is so different to cities like Johannesburg and Pretoria, where the wealthy live in the suburbs and avoid the 'dangerous' CBD. Indeed, while in Cape Town CBD and its suburbs visitors are largely sheltered from the abject poverty suffered by many South Africans. Nonetheless, one of the first 'landmarks' when driving into the city from the airport is Nyanga township – where a British tourist was recently murdered after taking a wrong

¹ CONTACT: d.j.feather@ljmu.ac.uk

turn. It is not an exaggeration to state that the affluence, safety, and order of Cape Town CBD, particularly its suburbs, is a mirage that masks the desperate levels of poverty that still exist in the WC, and the disturbing reality that the province is still largely divided, both geographically and financially, along racial lines.

When the Referendum Party's leaders talk of the importance of protecting the great work of the DA, it is hard not to interpret this as a desire to preserve the status quo and maintain their privileged and sheltered lives in the 'enclaves' of the past. This becomes even more alarming given that the party is overwhelmingly white and led by a British-born migrant. In a recent social media post the Referendum Party even used markings strikingly similar to the British Union Flag to demarcate an independent WC.

There are clear parallels with the settler colonialists of years gone by who, attracted by the prospect of a better life overseas built on the back of indigenous exploitation, established local authority and later demanded 'responsible government' from London. Craig's continued links to the UK are demonstrated by a recent appearance on 'Farage' where he heaped praise on the former Brexit Party leader's success in the European Union referendum. While the degree to which imperial nostalgia influenced those who voted for 'Brexit' is hotly debated, it is hard not to see a colonial dynamic to the campaign for 'Capexit'.