

Comment & Analysis

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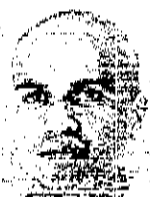


Scholarly pursuits: the number of over-20s with no education has declined, but the percentage of high school students who matriculate has decreased. Photograph: Oupa Nkosi

Yesterday and today, but what of tomorrow?

The 2007 Community Survey highlights some major demographic shifts that policymakers must consider carefully in the years ahead

Comment



The 2007 Community Survey conducted by Statistics South Africa gives an impressive account of our developmental progress, concluding that "today is better than yesterday". The survey also makes it clear that our society is undergoing massive changes. From the most intimate relations to the most abstract levels of social interaction, communities are in flux.

So while today might be better than yesterday, policymakers also need to ensure that tomorrow will be better than today. The survey raises as many questions about the future as it answers about the present, providing a useful glimpse of some of the policy challenges that lie ahead — none of which lead themselves to easy answers.

Growing urbanisation is likely to be a constant for decades to come. More than 70% of households are now in formal dwellings. If the rate of formal housing provision continues we are likely to see a steadily growing urban sprawl around major centres, which will require a constant supply of land. Building more houses will also set in motion the need for infrastructural developments to support residential living.

The choices we make about these developments might seem positive today, but will they be sustainable in the future? As it stands, the national electricity grid cannot cope with current demand. If we undertake to provide more electricity in the way that we do now, how will we supply it reliably?

The increase in formal housing has been accompanied by growing access to waste removal. Reports suggest, however, that existing landfill capacity is already reaching saturation in the metropolises. How will South Africa cope? And how will we handle the increased grid-

tion needs of our expanding formal housing developments without destroying our environment?

The survey also highlights the impact of social and economic trends on the family and the kinds of communities we are building. Though the number of households is growing, the average household size is shrinking. More than 40% of households now consist of one or two people. Research undertaken by the Human Sciences Research Council notes that more women living on social grants are becoming heads of households, but many of them lack the resources to migrate to potential job centres. Meanwhile, more black youth are migrating on their own in search of independence from family.

In poor communities, on average, six people depend on one wage earner. And it is widely accepted that it is increasingly difficult to find permanent employment in the agricultural and industrial sectors, leading to high levels of mobility motivated by the search for employment.

South Africa is experiencing increased social atomisation, with smaller and smaller units of living reshaping and disaggregating family interdependence.

Changes in the family structure and labour force account for a large part of the shifting relations between men and women — including making women more independent — while the social status of women linked to grants will also have long-term consequences for gender relations.

These trends have important implications if we believe that social cohesion and institutions such as the family can encourage constructive forms of community. This will also have policy implications for how we address challenges such as risky sexual practices, criminality and violence. Greater atomisation makes it

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more difficult to create shared spaces with common values and feelings of obligation towards others. Combined with the expansion of formal housing developments that absorb families from informal settlements, it implies that social trust built up through local familiarity over time cannot necessarily be assumed in the future, and will have to be actively fostered.

On the education front the survey notes that the number of people over 20 years old with no education declined from 17,9% in 2001 to 10,3% in 2007. This tells us that more South Africans should be literate. The link between poverty, job creation and education is, however, worth exploring. Most new jobs are created in the service sector and favour low skills. Such jobs tend to be low paid and transient, and do not lift people out of poverty over the long term.

Although the Community Survey highlights an increase in some secondary schooling among South Africans over age 20, it also shows a troubling trend: a decrease in those with grade 12 qualifications between 2001 and 2007, from 20,4% to 18,6%. More youth are going on to secondary schooling, but fewer are matriculating. How do we account for this? If we are to create a more skilled labour workforce, we need to reverse this trend, generating more students who are eligible for tertiary education.

The Community Survey tells us that we have made important advances in improving the quality of life of South Africans in a range of areas, and this has a positive effect on the dignity and livelihood of citizens. The survey also tells us that most people feel their lives have improved.

The successful solutions we develop to address the urgent social problems of ordinary South Africans will, however, have to be considered not only in relation to how we feel today, but also tomorrow and the day after.

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Where there's smoke, there's mirrors

Comment



The European and American tradition of the political novel is deeply entrenched. From Emile Zola to Gore Vidal, the perceptions and attitudes of citizens in these snug old democracies have long been shaped, influenced and reflected in many great works of fiction.

South Africa too has a rich history of political fiction, from Alan Paton to Nadine Gordimer, André Brink, Njabulo Ndebele and Lewis Nkosi. But there is, of course, a vast difference between the literary political novel and the "novel of politics", which is how Joe Klein, the originally "anonymous" author of the best-selling *Primary Colors*, described his 1996 roman-à-clef about an American presidential campaign.

Klein, at the time a journalist with *Newsweek*, caused a scandal with his thinly disguised account of Bill Clinton's 1992 bid for the top job. This was partly because he had opted to publish the book anonymously, but also because he vividly exposed the behind-the-scenes ruthlessness of contemporary American politics.

The thing about a "novel of politics" is that it can be used, as political scientist James F Davidson has noted, "in the teaching of politics and administration in supplying some vicarious experience where real experience is impossible".

And it is this exposure of the innards — the nuts, bolts, cogs and wheels within the wheels — of contemporary politics, rather than a more subtle expression of ideological ideals, that distinguishes the novel of politics from the political novel.

There are many deliberate echoes of *Primary Colors* in South African writer Brent Meersman's recently published *Primary Coloured*, (HUMAN and Rousseau) about Charlene Kennedy, a charismatic, streetwise politician and her bid to launch a new opposition party, the Social Democrats. The cover, the suave narrator, the charming but unpredictable candidate, the episodic nature of the plot and the careening from one crisis to the next all mirror Klein's original satire.

But Meersman's *Primary Coloured* is no pale copy. How could it be, set as it is in our young, robust and volatile democracy?

Other real-life echoes, of course, are that Meersman, currently the *Mail & Guardian's* theatre writer, was a former theatre

producer who served as Patricia de Lille's chief of staff at the launch of the Independent Democrats in 2004. He was largely responsible for the ID's innovative, fresh campaign, including the placement of ads for the party in the classified sections of national newspapers.

Told from the perspective of Joel Moritz, a former theatre manager who has decided to "serve democracy" by accepting a position as the chief of staff of the newly formed Social Democrats, the narrative turns — as Meersman himself has described it — into a version of *West Wing* meets John le Carré.

During a meeting with a potential funder, Joel remarks: "Politics isn't that different (from theatre) ... You write scripts, politicians perform them, you get the newspaper critic in the morning."

Meersman is an intelligent and witty writer and has packed enormous punch into the rollicking saga that brims with intrigue, subterfuge, betrayal, corruption, death threats and all those everyday ingredients that make for an interesting life in politics.

There's a mining scandal, a plot to assassinate the president and even the candidate herself. Meersman also explores a murky underworld where "money was playing a far too large role in the fledgling democracy".

From this perspective *Primary Coloured* offers ordinary readers a rare glimpse into and understanding of the political process that swirls beneath the headlines.

The author's ear for dialogue is superb and his analysis of the contemporary political landscape is astute, informed and at times highly entertaining. Meersman has also conjured to life a menagerie of fantastic characters, from Kennedy's *handlanger*, Valentine Hardy, to a range of petty political *arrivistes* drawn to power, glory and money.

Much of the book's entertainment value lies in matching real life characters (and parties) to their fictional equivalents. Ultimately *Primary Coloured* is not an unflattering portrait of the candidate, but it does expose her flaws — and those inherent in the system.

For those who view politics as a sport, *Primary Coloured* offers hilarious insights, commentary and wry satire. If there is a criticism, it is that the novel is overpopulated with minor characters that detract from the central theme. But

Meersman helps the reader to keep track of it all in his "Who's Who" list at the back.

Primary Coloured is an important addition to South African political writing in that it provides a uniquely intimate and accurate portrait of our young democracy in all its gory glory.

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