

Thinking Beyond the Visible Horizon

Guy Lundy and David Prilaid

South African affairs seem vexed by a short-term perspective that seems to go no further than three or four years. The fixation on the 2010 World Cup is a case in point. Why is this so, what are the detrimental consequences, and how can we develop a longer term strategic mind-set?

South Africa should be playing in the global economic arena alongside the likes of China and India. But we have one crucial ingredient missing; long-term thinking. Business and government seem hampered by an inability to grow out of the short-term mindset that has characterised our past. The fixation on the 2010 World Cup is a case in point. While it is very exciting, it is also a real distraction, leading us to focus only on the next four years rather than on the following forty.

Uncertainty has long been a key feature of the South African mindset. Back in the 1980s a state of emergency, press censorship and international sanctions were the order of the day. Most South Africans could do little to predict, let alone try and shape, the future. Nevertheless, apart from the pioneering scenario planning work by Clem Sunter and others, and the negotiated settlement reached through CODESA, a review of state and business affairs to date suggests that we're still as fixated on the short-term as ever.

Hooked on the importance of our primary resources, we still obsess about the gold price and the exchange rate (which change constantly) as if they were the most important indicators of our economy's health. Some might think we've confused our economic destiny with our ability to interpret charts.

South Africans' traditional pessimism also helps explain our short term focus. While levels of business and consumer confidence are higher than ever, our national psyche is still fragile. Depending on the result, sports fans either lose faith entirely or become excessively elated. This lack of self-belief holds us back from planning for and investing in the future.

The media has not helped, choosing a short-term hysterical approach perfected in tabloid form. There is little deep-end analysis, and reportage is so fixated on presenting the current drama that it does little to anticipate (let alone prevent) the next. If we are to progress, the media needs to grow up. A dumbed-down mass culture grown stupid on hip-hop and reality TV is not going to take this country forward.



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We are also vexed by a tall poppy syndrome, where anything new and audacious is met by a line of cynics aiming to shoot it down. The overtly critical attitude towards the Gautrain is a case in point. Contrast this with the positive Chinese approach to the future, which is essentially “build it and they shall come”. In China, a 6% growth target would be cause for embarrassment.

In the days of the American Wild West the settlers pushed on, aware of the dangers that beset them, but convinced that over that horizon lay prospects far greater than what they could conjure at home. Today it is common currency that South Africa is like a new Wild West; a land characterised by both opportunity and danger. The sad irony, however, is that the prevailing conservative mindset fixates on the danger. The glass is always half-empty. To make it half-full we must learn to manage the danger and harness the opportunities; opportunities that may only bear fruits a decade or more from now.

So how do we overcome the need for instant gratification and replace it with a focus on the long-term future? We can start by creating a common national vision, a vision of what our children’s South Africa should look like. Countries like Malaysia have successfully done this. Back in the 1990s it was stated that by 2020 Malaysia will be a developed nation. They are well on their way to achieving that vision. Singapore has a similar vision, stating that by 2020 the average Singaporean will earn as much as the average American. By designing a vision for the nation we magnetise the future, creating a power of imagination (and even myth) which pulls us towards it, shaping and ennobling our actions.

With the vision in place, we need to focus on those things most likely to get us there. India and Ireland have focussed on hi-tech education so that they can build their economies on services. Australia has focussed on tourism and sport. China has focussed on low-cost, high-employment manufacturing. With the vision in place, the focus is seldom questioned because the answer is obvious; it’s in order to achieve our long-term vision.

Working with our new-found focus, we then set about controlling the controllable and not fretting about the things over which we have little or no control. We can control things like education, infrastructure, safety and security, labour laws and the health of our people. We cannot control the gold price, the oil price or the exchange rate, so there is little point in obsessing over them as we do.

Finally, our leaders must step back from the day to day rush. They must stop being managers, delegate away pressing issues and start thinking about the things that others don’t. They need to start dreaming, imagining, mythologizing a South Africa of 2020 or 2030 that people can believe in. Only once our leaders begin thinking further into the future will the rest of the population develop the long-term mindset that we so badly need in order to compete with the rising stars in the global game.




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