



Opening Remarks: Governing Gauteng Colloquium, 12 August 2026, Wits University

Good morning, colleagues, researchers, practitioners, students, policy-makers, friends and esteemed guests.

A very warm welcome to Wits and to this colloquium on *Governing Gauteng*.

Let me begin by thanking the organizers of this event: Professor Joel Quirk, Professor Loren Landau, the School of Social Sciences, the Faculty of Humanities, the Transformation and Employment Equity Office, and everyone who has contributed to bringing us together.

I want to use these opening remarks to frame our conversation around two ideas: a crisis of governability, and the need to move from diagnosis to choice and intentionality.

By governability, I mean the overall capacity, legitimacy and stability of a political system to organize collective life—to make and implement decisions, mobilize resources, enforce rules, resolve conflicts and sustain public authority.

This is somewhat different from governance, which is about the tools, processes and practices through which an administration actually takes place.

My concern today is therefore more fundamental: does our system still possess the political support, institutional capacity and structural alignment necessary for governance itself to work – is our system governable?

And so, I want to begin with a deliberately uncomfortable proposition:

The question before us is not simply how we can govern Gauteng better. It is whether we are still, in fact, governing Gauteng at all.

That may sound melodramatic. But I think it is worth asking.

Because governance is not simply about whether we have mayors, municipal managers, councils, budgets, strategic plans and annual reports. It is about whether society can collectively make decisions, provide essential services and create conditions in which people can imagine a future better than their present.

And this is why Gauteng matters.

Gauteng is not simply another province. It is, in many respects, South Africa in concentrated form or microcosm. It contains extraordinary wealth alongside extraordinary deprivation; sophisticated institutions alongside deeply dysfunctional ones; world-class universities, hospitals, businesses and financial institutions alongside communities struggling for reliable water, electricity, housing, schools, healthcare and transport.

It is our economic engine, but also one of our most unequal spaces. And it is where much of South Africa's urban future is already arriving. Gauteng is therefore much more than a provincial governance problem. It is a test-bed of whether the South African democratic project can govern the society that it has created.

Nearly three decades ago, the 1998 White Paper on Local Government articulated an extraordinarily ambitious vision: government working with citizens, groups and communities to create sustainable human settlements and a decent quality of life for all.

The architects of democratic local government were not simply trying to replace apartheid municipalities with more efficient versions of the same thing. They were attempting to construct a fundamentally different relationship between the state and the citizenry.

Local government was supposed to be where democracy became tangible. Democracy was meant to be experienced not only through Parliament, elections and the Constitution, but through everyday life: when the tap works, electricity stays on, refuse is collected, roads are maintained, children can attend decent schools, businesses can operate safely, and citizens can report a failure and reasonably expect something to happen. The very legitimacy of democracy was supposed to be experienced locally.

That is why local government failure is so consequential.

Citizens do not experience it as an abstract failure of administrative capacity. They experience it as a failure of the state—and potentially, over time, as a failure of democracy itself.

We are approaching another election in the next few months, but today we have deliberately not invited political parties formally.

There will be no promises, manifestos or campaign slogans. Instead, we have brought together researchers, practitioners and policy experts who have spent years looking beneath the rhetoric and encountering the machinery of government in its less glamorous forms.

Because campaigning and governing are profoundly different activities.

Campaigning asks: What do you want to promise?

Governing asks: What can you actually do?

Campaigning asks: What do people want to hear?

Governing asks: What will it cost, who is responsible, and can the institution actually deliver?

Campaigning can survive on aspiration, but governance eventually encounters the budget, the procurement process, the vacancy, the infrastructure failure, the court judgment, the coalition partner—and increasingly, organized criminal interests.

That is where the rubber hits the road – where political ambition meets institutional capacity.

And that encounter is what I hope we will interrogate today.

Money provides an obvious place to start. There is a temptation to explain local government failure simply as a problem of insufficient resources.

But Gauteng forces us to ask a harder question:

What happens not simply to how much money government has, but to what happens to money once it enters the system. Irregular and wasteful expenditure, municipal debt, deteriorating infrastructure and vulnerable procurement systems are not simply financial problems. Most disturbingly, we are seeing the emergence of a political economy around government failure itself. When public infrastructure fails, someone can profit from providing an alternative. When public contracts become opportunities for rent extraction, state failure becomes somebody else's business model. This creates a dangerous feedback loop: failure creates economic opportunities for those who benefit from failure, giving some actors an incentive to prevent the state from functioning properly.

That is more than administrative inefficiency. It is a political economy of dysfunction!

The same applies to corruption. We often treat corruption as an ethical defect located in individuals—a corrupt official, politician or contractor. But what happens when corruption becomes systemic rather than episodic; when appointments, contracts, political alliances and access to public resources become intertwined? At that point, simply telling people to fight corruption is inadequate.

The harder question is:

How do we redesign institutions in which corruption has become rational for some actors—and make integrity rational instead?

That requires changing incentives, systems, institutional cultures and the very distribution of power itself.

But there is an even deeper challenge.

The state is not simply struggling to deliver services. In parts of Gauteng, it is increasingly struggling to maintain its authority. When citizens stop believing that government can provide security, they do not simply become passive. They improvise. Private security expands. Businesses pay protection. Communities establish their own systems. Vigilantism emerges. Organized criminal networks discover that coercion can sometimes be more profitable than competition.

This is not merely a crime problem. It is a governance problem. When the state retreats, something else occupies the space. And once alternative forms of authority become normalized, reclaiming legitimacy becomes much harder, and we see this in the revelations at the Madlanga Commission.

The same question applies to protest. We often describe protest primarily as disorder. But what if protest is sometimes evidence of political participation in a system where ordinary channels of participation have stopped working? This does not mean every protest is justified or constructive. But we should resist seeing protest only as something to be managed. Sometimes protest is political communication – a political lexicon.

Perhaps the question is:

What is government being told when people have to block a road before somebody answers the telephone?

There is a striking paradox here.

South Africa has a sophisticated constitutional and institutional framework for democratic government: three defined spheres of government, municipal legislation, auditing institutions, courts, procurement rules, oversight mechanisms and elections. Yet there is an increasingly visible gap between the sophistication of our formal institutions and the lived experience of citizens.

And this brings us back to governability.

Institutions do not govern simply because they exist. They govern when they have capacity, authority, legitimacy and accountability. And perhaps Gauteng's deeper problem is that these four things are becoming increasingly disconnected.

We can have authority without legitimacy, accountability without consequence, resources without capacity, and democratic institutions without democratic trust.

That, to my mind, is part of the real crisis.

It is not simply a crisis of service delivery or a crisis of municipal competence, but a crisis of governability – a crisis of whether the institutions of the democratic state can still organize collective life in a rapidly changing urban society.

And that brings us to citizenship.

We tend to measure democracy through elections: who voted, which party won, how many seats it obtained. But citizenship is much larger than voting. It is about whether people believe the state belongs to them; whether government is responsive; whether the law applies fairly; whether taxes produce public goods; whether officials are accountable; whether their children will have opportunities; and whether the future is something they can collectively shape.

If those beliefs disappear, voting may remain, but democratic citizenship becomes weaker, and citizens become more atomized and disconnected.

Perhaps people are not necessarily becoming apolitical. Perhaps they are becoming politically inflected in different ways: through protest, community organizations, social media, private security, informal economies and localized solidarities.

The question is what kind of political order emerges from this social transformation.

And here we reach the central purpose of today's colloquium.

There is a danger that we become very good at describing the crisis. We can document corruption, calculate municipal debt, map service failures and demonstrate declining public trust. And then we can leave having agreed, rather impressively, patting ourselves on the back, that things are very bad. But that cannot be the ambition of today. At some point, we have to move from diagnosis to choice. And choice requires us to confront an uncomfortable proposition:

What if fixing Gauteng requires us to change some of the things we currently regard as non-negotiable?

Perhaps the question is not simply: “How do we make the existing system work better?”

Perhaps we should ask:

Which parts should be preserved? Which should be radically reformed? Which should be abandoned? And what might we put in their place?

That opens up a much more interesting conversation.

For example, do we actually need to govern Gauteng through the institutional arrangements we have inherited? People live in one municipality, work in another, study in a third and consume services across all of them. Water, electricity, transport, housing, pollution, economic activity and migration do not respect municipal boundaries.

So should we be thinking about stronger metropolitan-scale governance?

Should some functions be consolidated and others decentralized?

Should the province assume greater responsibility for particular services?

Should metropolitan municipalities have greater powers over transport, housing, infrastructure and planning?

Or would that simply create larger bureaucracies and concentrate more power?

These are not merely administrative questions. They are choices about where power should reside. We should also challenge the assumption that every municipality must perform every function itself.

Could some functions be shared, pooled or regionalized?

Could professional shared-service institutions transcend political cycles?

Conversely, are there functions that should move closer to communities because centralization itself is part of the problem?

Perhaps the future is neither more centralization nor more decentralization. Perhaps it requires intelligent differentiation.

We also need to think differently about the state.

We often say we need greater state capacity. But a stronger state to do what? Perhaps in some areas we need a smaller but radically more capable public service. In others, greater public capacity. Perhaps government should not provide everything itself.

But if it does not, who does?

Private providers? Community organizations? Cooperatives? Public-private partnerships? Civil society? And who regulates them? Who protects citizens when the markets fail? The choice cannot simply be between the state and the market.

The more interesting question is:

What combination of state, market and society can deliver public value under Gauteng's particular conditions?

Coalition governments raise another set of questions.

We should not automatically regard coalitions as pathological. Coalition government is a legitimate democratic outcome.

The question is:

How do we make coalition government governable?

Can coalition agreements be built around measurable policy commitments?

Can budgets be tied to those commitments?

Can there be greater transparency about agreements producing executive appointments?

And perhaps most provocatively:

Should it be harder to remove a government without demonstrating that an alternative government actually exists and can govern? Because there is a profound difference between removing a government and replacing it with a new government.

We should also rethink accountability.

We have become very good at auditing government after things have gone wrong. Perhaps we need to become much better at identifying failure before it becomes catastrophic.

Why shouldn't citizens be able to see whether their municipality is financially viable?

Why shouldn't infrastructure maintenance be publicly tracked?

Why shouldn't procurement relationships be more transparent?

Why shouldn't senior officials have publicly visible performance commitments?

Technology makes much of this possible. So, the question is no longer simply whether government can become more transparent.

It is:

Why have we accepted forms of governmental opacity that technology has already made unnecessary?

And perhaps one of the most radical questions is:

What if we measured the success of local government not primarily by what government does, but by what citizens are actually able to do?

Can a child get to school safely?

Can a person get to work reliably?

Can a business operate safely?

Can a family access housing and healthcare?

Can a community influence decisions?

Can a citizen get a response when a service fails?

Perhaps the real unit of analysis should not be the municipality. It should be the lived experience of the citizen.

And perhaps there is one final alternative we should be brave enough to contemplate. Maybe the objective is not simply to restore trust in government by making government appear better. Maybe we need to reconstruct the social contract itself. That means citizens accepting responsibilities as well as demanding rights – businesses recognizing that economic freedom cannot mean freedom from public responsibility; political parties accepting that public office is not an extension of party competition; public servants understanding that professionalism means fidelity to the public interest and protection from inappropriate political interference, alongside the depoliticization of the public sector; universities recognizing that expertise carries obligations to society; and communities being treated not merely as recipients of services or voters to be mobilized, but as co-producers of the public realm itself.

So I would like today's conversation to move beyond: "What has gone wrong?"

And ask:

What are our choices?

What would it mean to radically professionalize and depoliticize the public service?

What would it mean to redesign the architecture of governance?

What should be decentralized and what should be centralized?

What should government provide directly, and what should others provide under strong public regulation?

How should coalitions work?

How should citizens exercise power between elections?

How should technology transform accountability?

And most importantly:

What are we willing to stop doing?

Because reform is not simply about adding new programmes, institutions and strategies. Sometimes reform means stripping things away:

- taking away opportunities for patronage;
- taking away unnecessary bureaucratic layers;
- taking away functions government is incapable of performing well;
- taking away political discretion where discretion has become an invitation to corruption; and
- perhaps hardest of all, taking away some of our comfortable assumptions about what the state, municipalities, political parties, businesses and citizens are supposed to do.

The future of Gauteng will not be determined simply by whether we can diagnose its problems. It will be determined by whether we can make institutional choices in response to them. And those choices will involve compromises.

There will be resistance, political costs, and experiments that fail.

But the alternative to reform is also a choice. It is choosing to allow institutional decay, declining trust, criminal encroachment and infrastructural deterioration to continue. So, if we know that the current trajectory is unsustainable, perhaps the question we should put on the table today is:

What exactly are we prepared to change—and what are we prepared to risk—in order to create a different future?

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Let me conclude with the particular responsibility of universities.

At Wits, we have enormous intellectual resources. But our responsibility cannot simply be to diagnose failure from a safe distance. A university situated in Gauteng has an obligation to understand the province in which it is located and to bring its intellectual resources into conversation with the practical challenges of public life. That means bringing research into conversation with practice; listening to communities as well as governments; challenging assumptions (including our own); and confronting uncomfortable evidence, even when it complicates the political narratives we would prefer to tell.

The purpose of scholarship in a moment like this is not to provide convenient answers. It is to make the questions harder, and ultimately, more useful. So let us make today's conversation uncomfortable in the right way.

Let us not simply ask why Gauteng's government is failing.

Let us ask what kind of government Gauteng now requires.

Let us not simply ask how to repair institutions designed for yesterday.

Let us ask whether they are capable of governing today and tomorrow.

And let us not assume that the only choices are preservation or destruction.

There may be many possible futures between those extremes.

Our task is to identify them, test them, debate their compromises—and then have the courage to choose boldly. Because Gauteng cannot simply be managed through the next election cycle. Its cities are expanding, its population is changing, its economy is transforming, its infrastructure is ageing, technology is reshaping public life, climate pressures are intensifying, and public finances are constrained.

We cannot simply restore the Gauteng of yesterday. There is no yesterday to return to.

Our task is to build institutions capable of governing the Gauteng that is actually emerging, and to create a state that citizens can experience as competent, legitimate, trustworthy and theirs. That is a much bigger project than winning an election. It is a project of rebuilding the social contract. And ultimately, it is the project of preserving democracy itself.

I want to welcome you to what I hope will be a frank, evidence-led and appropriately uncomfortable conversation about what it will take to govern Gauteng better.

I hope today will be more than an exercise in diagnosis. I hope it will be a useful and productive engagement – one that generates not only insight, but possibilities, choices and a sense of intentionality about the future we want to build.

And ultimately, this is not simply a conversation about government. It is a conversation about all of us: about the kind of society we want to live in, the institutions we want to build, and the future we want to leave to the generations that follow us.

I hope, therefore, that our deliberations today will take us forward – not only as citizens of this great city, but as citizens of Gauteng, and ultimately as citizens of South Africa.

Thank you.

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