

# Has Minister Tito Mboweni given up?

By Geordin Hill-Lewis MP - DA Shadow Minister of Finance

We are hurtling towards a sovereign debt crisis which will spare no one in South Africa, and which will sacrifice our policy sovereignty.

We all recall the countless commitments from President Cyril Ramaphosa and Finance Minister Tito Mboweni to reform, to doing things differently, to seizing the moment.

And yet, despite the endless repetition that things will change, they have only changed for the worse, with an estimated 3 million jobs already lost through an ill-considered and ineptly executed lockdown.

The fact is there is no leadership. President Ramaphosa is a spectator whose credibility has crumbled and who looks increasingly isolated, with no authority or ideas of his own.

There should be a unified national effort to work together to stop a debt crisis. But the government itself is not working together.

Every Minister is doing their own thing, often opposing one another, and pursuing totally contradictory policy goals, in the same government.

Relatively simple problems are left unresolved to fester. And Government lurches from one embarrassing mess to another.

A year ago, I would have said that Minister Mboweni was one of the few in government who was in the arena, with his gloves on, ready to fight for the future of South Africa.

I hope he still is, but I am not so sure anymore.

There is growing evidence to suggest the Minister has given up in the fight for South Africa.

Firstly, there is no sense of urgency from him anymore. A month ago, the Minister said he would be making urgent changes to the government's Covid-19 guaranteed loan scheme for businesses. But since then nothing has happened, while thousands of businesses are closing down.

This is a central pillar of the government's stimulus response package, but it isn't working. If businesses are to survive this lockdown crisis, they need help right now, not when the Minister finally gets around to his to-do list.

We have written to the Chairperson of the Standing Committee to request that the Minister be called to account for the commitment he made a month ago.

Secondly, his usually direct and frank manner of speaking has been replaced by language that is deliberately designed to obscure, deceive and confuse.

The government puts out a statement on its position on SAA, endorsed by Minister Mboweni, which leaves everyone none the wiser on what the government's position on SAA actually is.

Instead of just saying what he knows is right – that SAA should not receive a single cent further in public support and should close down – the Minister equivocates, hedges and fudges. All of this lacks courage.

He hopes he can trick the ANC into thinking he supports funding SAA and feels very clever speaking with a forked tongue so that no one knows what he means.

Last week we had to approach the courts because the Minister refused to answer a simple question about whether he was planning to use his emergency powers under section 16 of the Public Finance Management Act to bail out SAA.

He refused to reply to two written requests, because of course that would mean going on the record about what he really intended to do.

Only after he was forced to reply to our court papers, did he provide the assurance that he would not abuse his emergency powers *"imminently"*. I am still concerned about what *"imminently"* means, but the Minister will show extreme bad faith to the court if he reneges on that commitment. But even in offering that commitment, the Minister still avoided telling the Court how exactly SAA will be supported.

So, let me ask the Minister a few direct questions now:

- Will SAA receive any public money, or any government guaranteed loans?
- Will government muscle the PIC, or the IDC, or pension funds into making meaningless "investments" in SAA?
- Will the state retain a controlling share in SAA?

Hopefully we will get some straight answers from the Minister today.

Finally, during the same week the government committed to *"mobilise funding"* for SAA, it took a court order to force the government to resume feeding 9 million children through the school feeding programme. Only one government, led by the DA, never stopped feeding children throughout.

That is the unethical, callous choice this government continues to make. Bailing out zombie SOEs with billions, while leaving hungry children to fend for themselves, and Covid patients without adequate care. It is wrong, and the Minister should have no part of it.

If he is still in the fight, then he will have our support. But if he has given up, then he has made his choice, and he can expect that we will give no quarter.