

Parliament should not be a lapdog for government but a watchdog for SA

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Note to Editors: *The following speech will be delivered today during Parliament's debate on the State of the Nation address and is under embargo until delivery.*

Speaker,

Perhaps one of the greatest tragedies of South Africa's maturing democracy is its lame-duck national legislature.

Parliament as an institution has been systemically hollowed out long before a fire gutted its roof.

We have Members of Parliament who neither appreciate nor understand the gravity of the oath they took.

For decades Parliament has failed to truly represent the people of South Africa who have sent us here.

While the President spoke at length about the country's biggest challenges, it became apparent that Parliament has become a lap-dog and not a watch-dog on behalf of the people.

In a functional Parliamentary democracy, members of the Executive would know that this institution is designed to hold them accountable and not shield them from scrutiny.

However, it is a known and fast becoming an accepted fact that the ANC will use its majority in this House to block measures to hold ministers to account and attempts to make this House effective.

It suits an ineffective and corrupt government to have the legislature as an extension of itself and not the institution to which they account.

If one reads the State Capture Commission reports, you soon realise that Parliament aided and abated this theft through its inaction.

In fact, there should have never been the need for a commission of inquiry had we had a functioning parliament.

However, committees that are empowered to demand answers from the executive and begin the work of rooting out the tentacles of corruption in our country sat idly while state looters ran amok.

While the rules of Parliament empower us to subpoena witnesses; make binding recommendations and change budgets – this House did nothing.

It became a do-nothing Parliament.

A place where inept and unsuitable Ministers and Heads of State could find refuge and not have to answer for their failures.

The same thing became evident at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic where billions were looted and this House- again- did nothing.

In fact, it was the DA that called for the first debate on the state of readiness of our health system even before the first cases were detected in the country.

We did so because we understood the assignment.

We understood the gravity of the work that we are doing here.

While in the throes of the worst pandemic in recent history, key members of the ANC saw it as an opportunity to steal and rob us blind.

Many of whom sit here today expecting to be called honourable members while in fact, there is very little honourable about them.

When the former Health Minister, Dr Mkhize was alleged to have been part of a R150 million cash heist meant for the people of South Africa, we made calls to summon him before the Health Committee and those efforts were blocked by ANC members of Parliament.

The national legislature has a role to not only to consider reports on the theft of public money after the fact, we should be using mechanisms available to us to prevent corruption from happening.

In a country that has one of the highest rates of unemployment; where 7 out of 10 young people cannot find work, this House should be doing better.

It is telling that Parliament has never amended or sent back a budget.

Malungu ePalamente, umsebenzi wethu kukuthini xa singenoqinisekisa ukuba imithetho yaseMzantsi Afrika ixhasa abo bathe basinyula.

Kutheni singenokwazi ukubeka ezopolitiki bucala xa kumele sisebenzele abantu beli?

Besingeno qinisekisa ukuba abo baba imali yoluntu bayaphendula ePalamente njengoba umgaqo Siseko usitsho?

Ingaba lamalungu alapha kulePalamente azilibele na ukuba bazokwenza ntoni apha?

Ukuba benizimisele ukusebenzela abantu beli, ngeba zange kwabiwa imali ngohlobo eyabiwa ngayo kwi State Capture nange xesha le COVID19.

But it does not have to be this way.

We can revive the powers of this House.

From the ashes of our burnt down Parliament, we can commit to putting South Africans first and stepping up as the legislative arm.

There are only four things that Parliament is meant to do:

- Elect a President;
- Pass legislation;
- Be a forum for public debate on issues facing our country; and
- Hold the Executive accountable on behalf of the people.

This House continues to fail on most of these things.

We need to urgently change the culture of doing business in Parliament.

- We can begin by getting back to work fully and earnestly.
- We need to uphold the doctrine of separation of powers. Members of Parliament are not elected to be relegated to praise singers for the executive.
- Parliamentary questions are not an exercise in mindless verbosity by some members of the executive.
- We must be able to pose questions that are uncomfortable without the ANC pledging their allegiance to Luthuli House by shielding Ministers from account.
- Parliament should be intolerant of Ministers like Bheki Cele, Nkosazana Dhlamini Zuma and Pravin Gordhan who are the serial offenders of unanswered parliamentary questions.

This House is not a place of comfort where your mediocrity can find a home.

- Committees in Parliament should be the engine room for passing quality legislation and demanding more from Ministers.
- We should follow international best practice and elect members of the opposition to chair committees.

If we are to rescue South Africa and change lives, we need to get Parliament working.

We cannot come here every year to listen to the State of the Nation while Parliament is in disarray.

It is deeply unfortunate that the President's commitment to fighting corruption made on Thursday is virtually meaningless.

Instead of removing implicated ministers like Khumbudzo Ntshavheni, Zizi Kodwa and Gwede Mantashe, he opts to create a parallel cabinet of advisors and chairs of many a task team.

What is clear is that ours is a President incapable of making the difficult but necessary decisions.

He is incapable of putting country before party.

That is why, we need a strong legislature now more than ever.

While the compromised will be accepted and even promoted in the Ramaphosa administration, that cannot and should never be endorsed in Parliament.

We are accountable to the people of South Africa.

Ours is a service to country first.

This service must go far beyond party lines.

Let's get to work.