

Without trust, the consensus you seek Mr President, will remain elusive

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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.*

Madam Speaker,

Today, I stand in this glorious Hall, heartbroken that I get to deliver this speech in somebody else's House. Because this year, our magnificent National Assembly building burnt down leaving this 6th Parliament homeless.

While the cause of the fire remains a mystery, the extent of the damage is concerning. It is evident that there is a litany of failures by those tasked with safeguarding our beloved Parliament that got us here. A Health and Safety Audit in 2018 warned of the paucity of systems and processes in place in Parliament. The BDO Report, commissioned in 2020 and kept hidden for over a year, had 2 significant and 1 critical finding related specifically to fire safety on the Parliamentary precinct. The response to this report by the Department of Public Works and Infrastructure has been characterized by a total lack of urgency to self-correct.

An electrical fire in March 2021 provided an opportunity for introspection and thus highlighted some of the issues with respect to fire safety on the Parliamentary precinct. Ten months later, not one of the recommendations that followed has been implemented. Littered with excuses, Minister De Lille's department's response has been negligible. Not a single identified failing rectified. In fact, the report from the City of Cape Town Fire Department indicated critical breaches in fire safety that contributed to the magnitude of the January fire – that the valves for the sprinkler system were closed, that the fire doors were latched open and that the only alarm that was triggered was in a neighbouring building and activated after the fire department was already on the scene.

Mr President, this is certainly not indicative of a capable state. This is a state that is incompetent and deleterious, and wholly lacking in action and urgency.

Yesterday, Minister De Lille announced that the Coega Development Corporation has been appointed to conduct an assessment on the damage caused by the fire. Minister De Lille promised us independent experts. What we appear to have is a regularly utilised Public Works implementing agent, with tenuous specialist engineering credentials but extremely powerful ANC connections. Experts? Conceivably. Independent? Not so much.

Mr President, you spoke several times in your address of a need for consensus. You stated that "... the state must create an environment in which the private sector can invest and unleash the dynamism of the economy". Excellent concept. But let's do a reality check:

Abagold is a company that cultivates abalone – the most sought after seafood in the world. They have been based in Hermanus for 23 years. 3 years ago, they started the process of renewing their lease with the Department of Public Works and Infrastructure, which comes due in June of this year. One would think that their proactive approach would have seen this process resolved timeously and effortlessly. One would be wrong. I have submitted two different questions to the Minister on this. I have written to the Department on their behalf. Minister De Lille has been directly engaged on the matter during a visit

to the Hermanus Harbour and the lease has still not been renewed. 450 permanent, sustainable jobs created by business, hang in the balance. So, instead of creating an enabling environment for the unleashing of dynamism, your government is strangling private enterprise through inefficiency, bureaucracy and a total lack of urgency.

Meeting the accommodation needs of its client departments is a fundamental role of the Department of Public Works and Infrastructure. And yet, these needs are at best, being met without any sense of urgency or care. And at worst, just not being met at all.

The Department has spent R872 million on the Telkom Towers building in Tshwane to house the South African Police Service. 6 years since the inception of the project, these extremely expensive offices remain unoccupied.

In the meantime, 51 detectives and 2 support staff in the Florida SAPS in Joburg have been working from one hall for 3 years because there has been a complete lack of urgency by all roleplayers to solve their accommodation needs. Similarly, we have Correctional Services personnel who work with parolees housed in a privately leased building in Qgeberha which is so appalling that the Department of Labour shut it down in 2020. The DPWI, devoid of a better solution, sent them back. These offices cost close to R70 000 per month.

Mr President, on Thursday night you said that “Government must work for the people”. Perhaps, you should have been more specific. Government should use the resources entrusted to it, to provide the best possible service to the people it serves.

The citizens of the town of Hoedspruit go days without water almost every month because the Department of Public Works and Infrastructure and the local and district Municipalities see absolutely no need to find a solution to the water provision for the town. There are very real, very possible solutions to this crisis, but it requires action and urgency – both sorely lacking.

We have the Village of Hope – a visionary project which will, on completion, house up to 1200 orphans in Hartebeespoort. 8 years after it was approved, the transfer of land to the project by the DPWI has still not been facilitated and the private sector funders having already invested upwards of R150 million are unwilling to plough any more money into the project as it has no security of tenure. This is a concrete measure to address poverty, inequality and unemployment. And instead of supporting the project, Public Works seems hell-bent on obstructing it.

Mr President, if we are ever to achieve a new consensus – based on action and not just words, our first step needs to be to build mutual trust. As the examples I have mentioned today show, we cannot trust this government to look after its employees, its partners or those who are creating jobs. We cannot trust this government to look after the very structures that house it. We cannot trust this government to work in a meaningful way for its people. And without trust, this consensus you seek will remain ever elusive.

What we need is an Executive that serves all the people of this country, not just their party or, in Minister De Lille’s case, her benefactor’s party. We need a public service that embodies service excellence led by servant leaders who take pride in their work and deliver a dignified experience to our people. We need a government spurred to action and focused on delivery. We need the Minister of the Department Public Works and Infrastructure to be fulfilling her mandate – urgently and with no excuses.

When we have this, we will be on the way to a capable, ethical and developmental state built on a new consensus that the DA can get behind.

Until then, we have only words.