

Centralisation of power is not the solution to failing local and provincial government

By Cilliers Brink MP – DA Shadow Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs

Honourable Chairperson,

Disaster management takes up a relatively small portion of the budget of the Department of Cooperative Governance.

But in the past two years it has consumed the lion share of the Minister and the Department's attention.

As we speak, another national disaster is unfolding. Within the next month Nelson Mandela Bay will reach Day Zero. The taps are going to run dry.

Both the municipality and the Eastern Cape provincial government have failed to put effective contingency measures in place.

The water crisis in Nelson Mandela Bay is to a large extent a man-made crisis, a political crisis, made worse by neglect and ineptitude.

There are other disasters in the making. Sol Plaatjie, Manguang, Emfuneli, Msunduzi, Ugu – the municipalities that have become by-wards for state failure.

To be sure, the National Disaster Management Centre must come to the assistance of the people of the Bay, and soon.

But managing the consequences of State failure at every sphere of government cannot become the main job of the Department of Cooperative Governance.

Neither can 'national government intervention' become the default response to all case of provincial and local state failure.

There are hard limits to the capacity of national government, even in disasters and emergencies. Just consider what is happening in flood-ravaged KwaZulu-Natal.

Despite the declaration of a national state of disaster, electricity and water is yet to be reconnected to scores of communities across the province.

The services that have been reconnected are unstable. And, in any case, it's not clear that the progress that is being made is due to national government's involvement.

There has been an extremely slow start to the work of the ad-hoc committee established by Parliament to prevent the looting of disaster relief funds.

This lesson is this: centralisation of power, and the concentration of resources, in the hands of national government is not the solution to state failure.

Not just because national government lacks the capacity to run this country from one centre of power.

But because in many instances national government policy is the cause of the problem. Doubling down on the implementation of these policies will make things worse.

These are the problems ignored by government's District Development Model and its main prospectus in favour of more centralised government.

The Preferential Procurement Policy Framework Act has made every item and service needed by a municipality more expensive.

By narrowing the pool of available suppliers, municipal contracts are set up for an extremely high rate of litigation and failure.

This is what Moeletsi Mbeki means when he describes BEE as 'institutionalised corruption'.

The legislative framework for 'institutionalised corruption' was not created by provinces and municipalities, but by this Parliament.

And so, the DA has formulated draft legislation in favour of a non-racial procurement policy, one that will allow all state entities to procure the best value for money.

But the problems that national government bequeaths to provinces and municipalities aren't limited to bad policies and bad laws.

Often national government simply fails to fulfil its own core functions, and municipalities are then left to deal with the consequences.

In large parts of the country, including the metros, the criminal assault on electricity installations and infrastructure is reaching crisis levels.

This is no longer just a matter of policing. It is a matter of cooperative governance.

Recently a criminal gang in Johannesburg took control of an entire electricity substation, operating with military-type efficiency.

Most cable thieves now have the upper-hand over police stations when it comes to logistics and intelligence.

While station commanders scramble to find vehicles to dispatch to the scene of cable theft, the criminals have all the resources needed to do their job.

The assault of municipal infrastructure has devastating consequences for communities and basic service delivery.

Think of how many substations, feeder cables and protection gear forming part of municipal reticulation networks are being operated way out of their life cycle.

Now add the effect of poor maintenance, the extreme wear and tear caused by loadshedding, the unavailability of qualified electrical engineers. Only then does it become clear how fragile the

infrastructure is that these criminals are striking at, and why communities suffer power outages beyond load-shedding.

The DA has made concrete proposals on how service infrastructure can be secured against criminal attack, including the establishment of specialised units.

These measures do not require national government to exercise more power and control, but to use its existing powers, and to optimise its existing resources.

Lastly, in many instances the answer to better service delivery is the exact opposite of centralisation.

The City of Cape Town is better able to manage the rail network than the national Department of Transport.

With the go-ahead of National Treasury, the City will now complete a feasibility study into taking over the rail network.

If devolution of powers and functions can lead to better rail services for commuters in Cape Town, surely Mayor Geordin Hill-Lewis deserves the Minister's support.

As my colleague Eleanor Spies will point out, the budget and strategy of the Department do not seem to match the commitment required from the Department to fulfil its core function.

The DA cannot support this vote.