

Journalistic independence of the public broadcaster must be protected at all times

By **Solly Malatsi** - DA Shadow Minister of Telecommunications and Digital Services

House chairperson,

The efficiency of the Department of Communications and Digital Technologies and its multiple state-owned entities have been hit the hardest by the frequency of cabinet reshuffles and musical chairs at the various boards.

From the disastrous tenures of Nomvula Mokonyane and Siyabonga Cwele to the prima donna days of Minister Stella Ndabeni-Abrahams, the Department and its entities were the biggest victims of political interference and abuse of state resources which almost collapsed them.

The Department's budget for the current Medium-Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF) stands at R7.7 billion with R5.4 billion dedicated to transfers to entities under its portfolio.

Given the scale of the lofty ambitious that the Department and its respective entities have, as outlined in the APP, there is a glaring mismatch between the budget and set targets.

This makes it even more pressing for the Department to spend wisely, align its plans to the economic reality it faces and for the political principals to lead by example in upholding the highest level of fiscal probity.

Yet the amount of monies spent by the Ministry on items such as travel, catering, and accommodation are an exhibition of disregard for financial prudence.

This Ministry ranks amongst one of the biggest spenders in the cabinet on travel, catering and accommodation.

The total amount spent by the Offices of the Minister and Deputy Minister between May 2019 and March 2022 is almost quarter a million (R248 309. 86) on catering.

While officials in the Department spent almost double that amount by squandering approximately half a million (R490 672.85) on the catering for the same period under review.

This excessive wastage of public funds is even more worrying when one reviews both the Ministry and Department's spending on accommodation for the same period.

The Minister's expenditure on accommodation amounted to R3.6 million while the Deputy Minister's expenses stood at just over R1 million (Reply to PQ 843)

In comparison, accommodation expenses for officials in the Department totaled R10.7 million.

These exorbitant amounts are difficult to justify given that a large portion of them were incurred during the COVID pandemic when most of the country was working from home or virtually.

We understand that the work of the executive often requires spending a fair number of days away from their official residences. However, Ministers and their Deputies must be more mindful that state resources aren't a ticket to endless junkets.

At a time when National Treasury has been preaching the gospel of upholding austerity measures in government and when everyone in society is tightening their belts to adjust to rising costs of living, there is no justification whatsoever for any Minister to be incurring millions on catering and accommodation.

Honourable Minister,

Please liaise with your Social Development counterpart to reverse the senseless decision by the South African Post Office (SAPO) to no longer pay the R350 Social Relief of Distress (SRD) grant at its branches.

If you claim to have so much unbridled confidence in the turnaround strategy of the South African Post Office, then lead the charge in reinstating the payment of the SRD grants immediately.

The insistence by the Post Office that its decision to stop paying the social relief grant at its branches will help "alleviate long queues" is amateurish spin to gaslight poor South Africans as the primary source of the entity's gross inefficiency.

The long queues at Post Office branches are the legacy of chronic inefficiency, shortage of staff and obsolete technological infrastructure and not because of the beneficiaries of the social relief grants.

The hard truth is that the South Africa Post Office was broken by the ANC government. And today we are asked to entertain fables of a turn-around strategy that will miraculously reposition the Post Office as a modern and profitable postal and courier services.

From having one of widest footprints of service delivery in the country with fully functional branches in some of the most remote areas in the country, Post Office branches are evaporating daily.

A total of 248 Post Offices branches were closed down between Jan 2018 and March 2022, thereby further pushing poor South Africans into far-away branches outside their communities to access their grants. (Reply to PQ 816)

The Post Office has become one of the easiest targets of corruption cartels operating in our country.

Since May 2020 when the Post office started paying the Social Relief Grant, 1131 burglaries, 631 armed robberies and 103 cases of vandalism occurred at Post Office branches through the country. (reply to PQ 815)

While there is a sizeable number of honest and hardworking individuals' working to serve the public good at the Post office, far too many of its employees are colluding with criminals to loot it to ground.

Few things illustrate this vividly like the high number of disciplinary cases against Post Office staff ranging from theft of grant monies to fraud. A total of 314 Post Office employees have been suspended with pay at a cost of R41 million since the 2020/21 financial year. (Reply to PQ 986)

House chairperson,

One of the largest contributors of widespread corruption within the public service is that the ANC, as a major beneficiary of state corruption, enables the theft and misuse of public funds with its nonchalant attitude towards its political leaders implicated in corruption.

The SABC's strategic importance in society has previously been hampered by squabbles between board members, infighting by senior executives and tensions between Minister and the board.

While the current SABC board and management are making relative operational progress in repositioning the public broadcaster into a functional public broadcaster, the handling of the suspension and ultimate dismissal of the former Head of News, Phatiswa Magopeni is a massive stain that forever taint their term of office.

We have one message to the SABC: Please pursue and protect your journalistic independence at all times.

The public broadcaster must resist all the undue pressure from the executive to reduce it into becoming a glorified communications agency for the government.

We are all aware that this administration has an insatiable appetite to exert its unholy grip on how the media reports on its service delivery failures.

We congratulate the incoming Head of News, Moshoeshe Monare for his appointment and hope that he will uphold the journalistic values that will enhance the SABC as the public broadcaster that we can all be proud of.

The fair and consistent coverage of all political parties must not just be the exception during electoral campaign seasons. It must be the norm throughout whether or not there is an election.

I thank you.