

Debate on the establishment of Phala Phala ad hoc committee

Speech delivered by John Steenhuisen MP Leader of the Democratic Alliance

Honourable Chairperson

Honourable Members

We've been here before. Almost all of you sat in the National Assembly as we contemplated how to hold a sitting president to account.

A sitting president who was facing multiple serious allegations of abuse of power and abuse of public funds and who looked, for all the world, to be guilty of those allegations.

A sitting president who knew he could call on the majority of you to abandon your sworn oaths in order to shield him from the law, and from those of us who still respected our own oaths.

A sitting president who knew that Parliament's presiding officers would remember who deployed them here and what that deployment demanded of them.

A sitting president who viewed this House, its members and its oversight duties with contempt.

Almost all of you were members of this House when that circus played out.

The majority of you were only too happy to play along, deploying your votes, again and again, in service of Jacob Zuma, his homestead and his handlers.

The former Speakers of this House had no qualms abandoning their constitutional duty and serving only the interests of their compromised president.

It was all so tacky and transparent. Everyone knew what was going on - the public, the press, the international community. Everyone knew that a crooked president was using you for protection, like a two-bit mob boss, and you were only too happy to let him do it.

Of course, then came the so-called New Dawn, and along with all the Thuma Mina promenade walks and gushing hagiographies in the media, we got a string of solemn promises vowing "never again".

In the wake of the Zondo Report, there was apparently much soul searching and earnest contemplation of all that went wrong in this House and how it was allowed to reach that point.

And yet, here we are again.

A sitting president who looks, for all money, to be guilty of a string of offences, but who knows he can count on his caucus and presiding officers to shut down questions, to bat away accountability, and to deny any possibility of oversight through an ad-hoc committee.

Do you not see this? Do you not see history repeating itself?

The new Speaker of this House is no different to the old Speakers. She is failing Parliament in the exact same way that her predecessors failed Parliament.

There is no truth to her assertion that an ad-hoc committee of Parliament is superfluous since some of its tasks are within the purview of other entities such as law enforcement.

These two processes are not mutually exclusive.

In 2016 the DA called for the establishment of an ad-hoc committee into State Capture, only for it to be shot down by the ANC for the exact same spurious reasons - that it was supposedly up to law enforcement and Chapter Nine institutions to investigate rather than Parliament.

Which, of course, was debunked as complete nonsense.

Even President Ramaphosa himself conceded in his Zondo testimony that:

"...when you look at it with hindsight, I would say the two would not be mutually exclusive and if anything, both checks could easily have been followed".

This was echoed by Justice Zondo when he wrote in his report that:

"...leaving it exclusively to other agencies to investigate and, if necessary, to take action regarding these allegations was not, in the Commission's view, consistent with Parliament's constitutional responsibilities."

It's not one or the other. The president must cooperate with both law enforcement AND Parliament.

Neither is there any legitimacy to the argument that the Section 89 Inquiry into the president will perform the same function as an ad-hoc committee. That impeachment process only looks at the president's role in the Phala Phala story, but the rot has spread much further.

Aside from the dirty dollars in the couch, we need answers from, among others, the State Security Agency, the Finance Portfolio Committee, the Presidential Protection Unit, the Reserve Bank and the Department of International Relations and Cooperation.

None of those answers will come from a Section 89 Inquiry. The only body with the power to summon all of these people and institutions to testify is an ad-hoc committee of this Parliament.

But rather than take my word for it, I will leave you with one last thought from President Ramaphosa's testimony before the Zondo Commission, where he fully accepted the following proposition:

"Where there is information in the public domain which - if true - would implicate a president in conduct which is allegedly unconstitutional, illegal or improper, the National Assembly is obliged to do what it can, firstly to establish whether there is any merit in the allegations and, secondly, if it finds that there is, to take appropriate action".

Those aren't my words – that's the position of the president himself.

Given all of these things - the scathing rebuke by Justice Zondo, the solemn promises by members and presiding officers of this House to do better, and the unambiguous testimony of the President himself - how can anyone still justify blocking the establishment of an ad-hoc committee into Phala Phala?

For the sake of our country, for the integrity of this House, and for the people of South Africa, let us for once do what is right.

Thank you.

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