

South Africa needs a dedicated Presidency Portfolio Committee

By Zakhele 'Zak' Mbhele, DA Shadow Minister in the Presidency

The Constitution is clear that members of the Cabinet are accountable collectively and individually to Parliament for the exercise of their powers and the performance of their functions, and this accountability is exercised through the parliamentary mechanisms of written and oral questions to Ministers, as well as Committee meetings.

However there are still gaps and weaknesses in that framework, which are hindering the process of building a culture of accountability and responsibility in the public sector and specifically through our oversight mandate as Members of Parliament.

A longstanding and very big gap in the system is the lack of a Portfolio Committee on the Presidency.

The DA has long held that a single hybrid portfolio committee for the DPME and DPSA, among other entities, cannot do effective oversight over those two departments, and our position has recently been vindicated by the recommendation of the Zondo Commission on State Capture, which says that Parliament should consider the desirability of establishing an oversight committee on the President and the Presidency.

By having two portfolios on one Committee, it means that the finite time and attention available to perform oversight on each basket of ministries and entities in a given year is split in half, which is further diluted by the fact that Minister Gungubele himself rarely appears before the Committee.

Before someone thinks to point out that the President does account to Parliament through Oral Questions, it should firstly be highlighted that this is only four times a year and therefore not enough, and secondly that Ministers also have Oral Questions but they also have to appear before and directly account to Portfolio Committees – the President and Presidency should be held to the same standard, if not higher.

The Phala Phala saga clearly demonstrates the need for a dedicated Presidency Portfolio Committee because that would have been the obvious and ideal first port of call of a parliamentary platform to interrogate and probe this scandal as an oversight exercise. In addition, Parliament needs an avenue for follow-up scrutiny and oversight of the litany of presidential projects and initiatives that are announced in the SONAs and various Presidential Summits and convenings, such as the GBV Summit last week.

Of course and as always, it is the DA that is setting the standard where we govern because in the Western Cape Provincial Parliament, there is a dedicated Standing Committee on the Premier. So as Parliament takes forward the process of implementing the Zondo Commission recommendations, we will make our proposal submissions to the Speaker, drawing on the

benchmark model from the Western Cape to implement this much-needed parliamentary reform.