

Budget Debate on Vote 30: Communications and Digital Technologies

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It is ironic that the Department of Communications and Digital Technologies is struggling to live up to its name and fulfill its basic mandate.

While the world over digital technologies are used as core contributors to job creation and providing user friendly services, the South African Department of Communications and Digital Technologies is still stuck in the primitive era of redundancy.

This Department is supposed to spearhead the government's service provision towards digitization and leveraging ICT is a key enabler for inclusive economic growth.

Yet any assessment of every metric of government's use of technological interventions will reveal the obvious truth that it lacks both the infrastructure and innovation to fully migrate its services to digital.

So all that talk about pioneering the Fourth Industrial Revolution is wishful thinking if you can't get the basics right.

This Department is overpopulated with multiple SOEs, many of which we can do away with by streamlining functions for more focused and maximum results.

Yet instead of amalgamating some of these entities for a much leaner, effective and centralised focus, the Department will now have two new entities namely the State Digital Infrastructure Company and State Digital Services Company.

As things stand, the Department is unable to conduct vigilant oversight of the SOEs in its portfolio to ensure that they all function as optimally as they should.

There is nothing as regular as load shedding in our country, as is the reshuffling of Ministers in this department.

The appointment of Minister Gungubele means he is now the 14th minister in this Department in 14 years! This is definitely a contender for a Guinness World Record!

On a more serious level, this is not the way to achieve organizational stability.

The cumulative effect of this has been endless conflicts between different Ministers and some of the management of these state-owned entities.

To aggravate matters, the Department is once again yet to appoint a Director General.

All of these factors contribute to the general state of mediocrity engulfing the Department where poor performance goes unpunished.

And where there is no accountability for unethical conduct in the public service, wrongdoing always thrives.

All the while, millions of rands of taxpayers' monies are then lost in lucrative investigations that are wasted investigating the rot planted by beneficiaries of cadre deployment.

One of the worrying developments in the Department and its entities is the ever-growing number of accounting and financial management concerns raised by the Auditor General.

The SABC, SITA, SAPO and Postbank are all beset by material irregularities some of which have led to arbitration and court proceedings due a legacy of wrongdoing that has compromised the financial sustainability of all these entities.

On a more positive note, we welcome the appointment of the SABC board.

The filibustering efforts by the President to delay the finalization of the appointment of the SABC board must never be allowed to happen again.

In this case, credit must go to the portfolio committee for delivering a pool of diverse, skilled and competent individuals to be part of the current board despite some unprecedented bullying by the Presidency and Ministry.

The executive must respect the separation of powers that empowers legislators to do our work without any fear or favour.

Simply because the executive does not like the outcomes of a fair, robust and credible parliamentary process does not give them powers to stonewall the work of Parliament.

Minister, a government that respects the rule of law and appreciates the doctrine of separation of powers doesn't need to be dragged to court to do the right thing.

We all agree that the SABC is a strategic asset of national importance.

While we may often disagree with how certain operational matters are handled and complain about the disproportionate coverage we get, we must all fight to protect the editorial independence of the SABC.

The SABC is far too important in educating, informing and entertaining our society to be handicapped by overzealous political interference masquerading as executive oversight.

Where the SABC deviates from its mandate and values, we will not flinch in holding both the board and management accountable.

We just have one plea to the SABC ahead of the 2024 elections campaign: cover all of us — fairly and impartially.

Honourable Members, we need to work together to eliminate the cumbersome red tape that is driving high data costs to enhance meaningful access to the internet for poor South Africans.

To this end, the DA's vision is to position South Africa as the innovation and technology hub of Africa by advocating for more affordable data costs and faster connectivity for all South Africans, closing the digital divide by reaching high levels of digital competency and skills and pushing for rapid digitization of government, industries and the private sector services.

This Department has a lot of potential but has been let down by the constant reshuffling of Ministers by successive ANC Presidents, to provide the leadership it needs to succeed.

Perhaps it will only reach its full potential with a new government that will prioritize South Africa's quest for digital competitiveness and innovation comes to power in 2024.