



RESPONSE

February 10, 2012

The State of the Nation Address

Serious crime is down by 5%. Unemployment has reduced from 25% to 23.9%. Matric passes have increased marginally. 365 000 new jobs were taken up in the formal sector. All of these are surely welcome indicators of progress, but equally surely – as President Zuma admitted – not enough to be content with.

In last year's State of the Nation Address Mr Zuma announced three major interventions against unemployment: R20 billion in tax incentives for manufacturing investment; R9 billion (over three years) for job-creation initiatives; and R10 billion through the Industrial Development Corporation for high job-creation investments over five years. Results after a year? R8.4 billion in tax incentives 'approved' (not necessarily processed; these things do genuinely take time); R1 billion of the R9 billion 'committed' (not actually spent) to some 2 500 applicants for the job-creation initiatives; and the IDC has also 'approved' R1.5 billion for 60 companies. These are all solid enough achievements, but somehow they fail to reflect the sense of urgency that should be evoked by an unemployment rate of almost a quarter of the population.

Are we being asked to be satisfied with too little? Perhaps the thinking is that, as long as we are not moving backwards, we should be grateful and give ourselves a pat on the back. Maybe so, but that is hardly a basis upon which to tackle the deep structural challenges, historical and contemporary, that our society faces.

What is still lacking in Mr Zuma's addresses is anything that really stirs the nation's emotions and galvanizes us into unified action. Last night's speech was stolid; detailed on infrastructure plans; it covered most of the important areas of government intervention; every province got a mention and the promise of some or other development. But it was far from inspiring; there was no particular vision for the future, and no sense that Mr Zuma or his party has much idea of how to lead us into that future; or even that it is necessary to do so.

One or two points do stand out and are worthy of mention. That Grade R enrolment has doubled since 2003, and now exceeds 700 000, is an excellent basis for a long-term improvement in education. If this can soon be matched in the area of early childhood development, we will be able to look forward to significantly better matric performances. Similarly, if it is the case that school attendance in the compulsory years of 7 – 15 is close to 100%, this is a laudable achievement. Perhaps something more should have been said about upgrading the infrastructure of education. Poor facilities, decrepit buildings, and a lack of textbooks and teaching aids combine to undermine the achievement of getting more children into the schools.

Equally worrying is the fact that only 8% of South Africa's land has been redistributed, compared with the target of 30% by 2014. And the reason given by Mr Zuma – that the willing-buyer, willing-seller principle is not working – does him no credit. The land question has been mishandled by one incompetent minister after another since 1994, and has been reduced to a series of cheap photo-opportunities at hand-overs, while the difficult and expensive support-work that the beneficiaries require has been ignored.

Much of the speech dealt with large-scale infrastructure plans, some of them set out in great detail. Most of these appear to be well thought out, especially those that concern new and upgraded transport links. Certainly, if even half of these plans come to fruition, the benefits for employment will be huge. The notion of an infrastructure summit, involving government, investors and unions, is a good one, as long as it is firmly led and does not end up as a forum for ideological point-scoring.

Of course, as the Leader of the Opposition noted, infrastructure development is especially vulnerable to corruption, cronyism, maladministration and other structural weaknesses that the government has failed to tackle with the necessary vigour. In this respect it would have been good to hear a greater emphasis on anti-corruption and accountability at the highest levels. It will be interesting to see to what extent President Zuma is able to report progress on this score in next year's address.

Towards the end of the speech the President mentioned the fact that next year will mark the centenary of the Union Buildings; and that plans are under way to celebrate this. And that the government is purchasing and rehabilitating the homes of Winnie Mandela (at the time of her house arrest) in Brandfort; of Jacob Moroka in ThabaNchu; and of Bram Fischer in Westdene. And also that work is being done on various graves and heritage sites, including the Steve Biko centre outside King William's Town.

Compared to a new railway line or the export of 100 million tons of iron ore these may seem to be small things; but they speak, in a way that concrete and coal cannot, of our nation's history and heritage, and perhaps of a growing sense of ease with where we have come from. Clearly, we have yet to achieve a similar sense about where we are going; but even if last night's address failed to set out a perfect road map, it offered at least a couple of pointers.

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