



RESPONSE

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The Mangaung Outcome

Sometimes, only the cliché will do: a week truly is a long time in politics. On Friday 14th December, a couple of days before the ANC's elective conference got off the ground, almost all the speculation was that Cyril Ramaphosa would stand for the post of deputy-president of the ANC. But it *was* speculation; no-one seemed to know for sure, and he had made no public announcement. Indeed, as is now notorious, the *Star* newspaper as late as Monday 18th ran a story saying that Mr Ramaphosa would not stand. Many radio reports at the time continued to hint that he was prepared to withdraw if Kgalema Motlanthe would agree not to stand against President Zuma for the top post.

Once his candidacy was out in the open, the speculation turned to what role he would play as party deputy-president. Would a place be found for him in government? Would that happen soon, or only after the 2014 election? What influence could he hope to exert without a cabinet seat? Perhaps his nomination was nothing more than a cosmetic move, designed to reassure those delegates – and members of the electorate – who doubted the wisdom of a second term for Mr Zuma.

Well, by yesterday all that had been swept away. *Business Day's* front page headline was “Ramaphosa SA's ‘prime minister’ – Mantashe”. The report went on to paraphrase the re-elected secretary-general as follows: Mr Ramaphosa would help the government deal with growing credibility problems in the investor community (note, ‘the government’, not the party); he would hit the ground running as leader of government business (which is a parliamentary position; Mr Ramaphosa is not a Member of Parliament); he would supervise the work of Cabinet ministers; his new role in the government was as a “de facto” prime minister.

From potential candidate for party office to “de facto prime minister” of the country in less than a week. What does this tell us?

Firstly, Mr Mantashe's elucidation of Mr Ramaphosa's political role reflects not so much the happenings of this past week, but rather a well-worked out plan, nicely prepared and calmly executed. For him, for Mr Zuma, and probably for anyone else that counted, there was never the slightest doubt that Mr Ramaphosa would stand, and would be elected.

Secondly, it tells us that Mr Ramaphosa has been brought in on a rescue mission. He is to “help government with [its] credibility problems” and “supervise the work of Cabinet ministers”. Apparently, then, Mr Motlanthe was not thought capable of establishing the necessary credibility or of supervising Cabinet ministers. Someone tougher, more forceful, perhaps, with a reputation for getting things done and reconciling divergent views, was needed.

But surely both of those tasks are jobs for the President? If his government has a credibility problem it is primarily his to sort out; if there needs to be more hands-on supervision of ministers, the President is the one with the authority to do it. True, Thabo Mbeki acted as a kind of prime minister during Mr Mandela's presidency, but the circumstances were exceptional. Mr Zuma is not a 76 year-old international icon, sought after as a guest in every capital around the world. He ought to be able to deal with day-to-day governmental challenges.

Thirdly, then, the sudden emergence of a "de facto prime minister" confirms that a need was felt to bring such a post into being (albeit unofficially), and to fill it with the right person. The current top leadership of the party has lacked the set of competences that Mr Ramaphosa can offer. And, tacitly at least, Mr Mantashe's seemingly premature commissioning of Mr Ramaphosa into all sorts of government – as opposed to party – roles is an admission that the top leadership of government, too, has lacked the vision, stature, track-record and all-round capability that most people associate with Mr Ramaphosa.

This is a very positive development. It amounts to a recognition that the country could not afford another four years of uninspiring 'leadership', occasional scandal, and policy drift. We now know who – health-permitting and God-willing – is going to run the country for the next 10 years at least. This, together with the public anointing of the National Development Plan as the overall policy blueprint and the (almost) categorical rejection of the self-defeating idea of mine nationalisation, should allow those who viewed the approach of Mangaung with anxiety to relax a little and enjoy their Christmas.

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