



## **RESPONSE**

*October 20<sup>th</sup>, 2014*

### **Getting on with the Business of Parliament**

It is easy, with all the brouhaha taking place in Parliament recently – the expulsion of members of the Economic Freedom Fighters for ‘unparliamentary’ behavior; their failure to respect the office of the Speaker; the presence of riot police in the parliamentary precinct; the vilification of the Public Protector by some MPs; and the withdrawal of opposition parties from the Ad-hoc Committee on Nkandla – to forget that much of the work of the National Assembly and the National Council of Provinces takes place in the Portfolio Committees and the Select Committees respectively. Last week saw these Committees being briefed by the Auditor General and considering the Annual Reports of the various government departments. A glance at one of these meetings provides an encouraging example of how Parliament ought to, and quite often does, work.

The Portfolio Committee on Social Development was briefed by the Auditor-General on the audit findings of the Annual Report of the Department of Social Development (DSD) and its entities for 2013/14 financial year. This was followed by a briefing by the DSD for 2013/14, as well as consideration of the Annual Report of the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) for 2013/14 financial year. The reports had been presented to Parliament on 30<sup>th</sup> September, and it was clear from the participation of the members of the Committee that they had been studied.

The Auditor-General focused on outcomes and oversight. No significant findings were made that compromised the audit, which was regarded as clean. However, problems were identified in the supply chain which could be addressed by better use of information technology. SASSA was found to have several vacant posts, which needed to be filled. The various relief funds were also audited.

The input by the Auditor-General was followed by a presentation from Minister Bathabile Dlamini, dealing with the substance of the reports. She noted that there had been a decline in poverty due to the nutrition programmes run by DSD, with a particular focus on the poorest wards in the country. Other achievements highlighted were a call centre for victims of gender-based violence; more bursaries for social work students; an increase in the number of babies adopted; the roll-out of the White Paper on the Family; and the institution of strategies to support fatherhood. It was also reported that the Department had met its targets regarding HIV services and substance abuse intervention programmes.

In all the Department had achieved 69% of its targets, but there remain many challenges: the underspending of monies allocated to social assistance; lack of compliance by NGOs with legal provisions which would enable them to receive funding; youth programmes and services performing poorly; and the Older Person’s Register not functioning properly.

The sustained improvement in the Department's performance is most heartening as is their sensitivity to the gaps in performance. The commitment of the Minister to address these challenges and her engagement with her staff is impressive. As one MP commented, the presentations of both the Auditor General and the Department 'were no cut and paste job'!

But this portfolio committee meeting was about much more than a simple list of achievements and problem areas. It was about ministerial accountability; parliamentary oversight; and independent assessment of a state entity's fiduciary performance. At the meeting two of the three arms of government – legislature and executive – and a constitutional institution (the Auditor-General), came together in proper relation to each other, each exercising its own duty *vis a vis* the other and according to the principles of the separation of powers and of constitutional government in general. That is how it should be, and indeed how it is, more often than many people realize. Sadly, media coverage tends to reflect the superficial and immature scenes of what happens in the House; behind them, though, the real business of Parliament continues; and therein lies much hope.

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