



## **RESPONSE**

**February 14, 2014**

### **The State of the Nation Address**

More than once during the course of his address last night, President Zuma used the word 'report' to describe what he was doing. It was, in effect, a synopsis of the government's efforts over the last five years, with a number of references to the longer period since 1994. Inevitably, it highlighted the successes and achievements, with only the slightest nod to the failures, along the lines of 'there is still more to be done'. As Mangosuthu Buthelezi said afterwards, it was an election speech.

Two points stood out, especially since Mr Zuma has often been accused of ignoring the most pressing issues when he gives major speeches. Firstly, he departed from the written version to stress the need for a new approach to labour issues in the mining industry, calling on both management and workers to think seriously about the negative impact that strikes are having on our economy. It is indeed high time that both parties moved beyond their simplistic and antagonistic approach to dealing with disputes.

Secondly, he had strong words about both the violence that characterises too many of our social protests, and the often unacceptable levels of counter-violence employed by the police. He emphasised the right of people to protest peacefully, but at the same time he noted that the police must be respected when they try to carry out their duty to control such protests. Coming just a day after some ANC members threw petrol bombs at the police in the Johannesburg CBD, this was a timely and – for Mr Zuma – courageous reminder.

For the rest, two mantras were repeated in the address: 'We have a good story to tell'; and 'South Africa is a much better place to live now than it was before'. Both of these assertions are true: there are many good things to say about our country (and President Zuma certainly said them); and no-one would seriously suggest that a return to the past would be an improvement.

The trouble is that this approach to our national reality is one that sees only the positive, while resolutely overlooking the negative. What we have, in fact, is a *state of two nations* in which, to paraphrase Dickens, we simultaneously enjoy the best of times and endure the worst of times. The many instances which the President gave as proof that we are living in a better country than that of 20 years ago will really only become convincing when the government complements its physical and policy achievements with strong action to ensure their sustainability; and when it starts to deal more effectively with the people and forces that continually undermine those achievements.

For example: it is good that two new dams have been built in Limpopo and KwaZulu-Natal respectively. But such an achievement is neutralised by the fact that, in Mothutlung, North-West Province, the water-supply collapsed last month due to mismanagement or corruption (or a combination of both), and three people died in protests before it was reconnected. And by the fact

that almost all our urban rivers and streams – many of which are used by informal settlement dwellers – have dangerous levels of faecal contamination because of decaying sewerage infrastructure.

For example: it is laudable that 160 new clinics are to be built, together with ten new hospitals; and government's anti-retroviral campaign is rightly touted as a world-leader. But *Business Day* reports that, at Chris Hani-Baragwanath, our biggest hospital, drugs and medical supplies are purloined by nursing staff as soon as they are delivered, and then sold off. Without a strong and visible commitment to fighting this kind of scourge – robbing the sick should be seen as every bit as serious a crime as, say sexual violence or gangsterism – the physical achievements will ultimately ring hollow.

For example: Twelve new further education and training (FET) colleges are planned, and two new universities have recently been opened (in the Northern Cape and Mpumalanga). Teacher training colleges are also to be resuscitated. Very well, but an increasing number of university entrants are unable to cope with the demands of tertiary study, due to the inferior education they have received at school. And while the matric pass-rate is climbing impressively, we also know that up to half of the children who enter school either drop out, or are squeezed out, before they even reach Grade 12.

And so it goes on: It may be, as the President claimed, that we now have 15 million people in employment, the highest figure in our history. But our rate of retrenchments is at a ten-year high, and official unemployment remains stubbornly at 25%.

The true state of our nation is nowhere near as good as Mr Zuma makes it out to be; his speech merely cherry-picked the choicest examples of successes and achievements. Equally, we are by no means as badly off as the naysayers would have us believe; we are not about to disappear into a hole created by corruption, incompetence and shattered dreams.

It is a cliché to say that the truth lies somewhere between these two extremes, but it does. It would be good if the President would face up to that in describing the state of the nation.

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