



RESPONSE

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The Right Thing, at Last

One of the less edifying aspects of our democratic Parliament has been the reluctance, even refusal, of its members to resign when an adherence to proper standards in public life has strongly indicated that they should do so. This attitude has both grown from, and bolstered, the culture of non-accountability that is doing so much harm to the credibility of public office and public institutions, including those at the highest levels.

Parliament itself has been complicit in this, for example by failing to deal effectively with those MPs who defrauded it in what became known as the 'Travelgate Scandal', in which they pocketed money intended to be used for official travel. It has also allowed a number of ministers to keep their seats despite clear evidence of corruption or misuse of public funds. The principle of innocent until proven guilty has been trotted out to justify a 'no-consequences' approach to inappropriate, indeed crooked, behaviour by one senior politician after another.

To its credit, the governing party has itself identified and admitted these shortcomings, and has pledged more than once to ensure that the people it chooses to represent in the various legislatures and municipal councils will be held to high standards of honesty and integrity. Sadly, this commitment has not always been upheld.

In this context, yesterday's resignation from Parliament by Pallo Jordan (after it came to light that his claim to be the holder of a PhD was false) stands out as something of a beacon of probity. It was a fairly quick decision, as these things go, and it doesn't appear that he was pressurised in to it by his party; on the contrary, the ANC's parliamentary leadership tried hard to dismiss his misrepresentation as irrelevant to his position as an MP.

It is also worth noting that his transgression was not one which involved theft of public resources; gross self-aggrandisement at taxpayers' expense; misleading Parliament on a substantive matter falling under his responsibility; or accepting a bribe in return for influencing a decision – all of which far worse sins have been committed by some of his present and former colleagues. It was at worst a hubristic, maybe arrogant, decision, taken decades ago, to enhance his own intellectual standing. There is no suggestion that he was ever appointed to public or party office strictly on the basis of this non-existent qualification.

A cynic might argue, of course, that Mr Jordan would have acted differently – perhaps have dug his heels in – if he had been closer to the beginning, rather than the end, of his career; or if he was still hopeful of high public office or preferment within the ANC. But the fact is that he did, voluntarily, what he believed was the right thing, and that he has thereby helped to re-assert a higher standard of behaviour than we have become used to among his peers.

Many people will hope that Pallo Jordan's departure from Parliament will not signal an end to his contributions to South Africa's political discourse. But, however that turns out, the fact of his departure, and the manner of it, has served to enhance the status of the institution. And that is surely what we would like to be able to expect of an Honourable Member.

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