



RESPONSE

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A New Jet or a New Approach

Over the weekend, media reports averred that a decision had been taken to purchase a new presidential aircraft, at a cost of around R4 billion. “Jacob Zuma to get new R4 billion presidential jet,” was the headline on the Times LIVE website, while News24 at least put a question mark at the end of its headline, “R4 billion VIP jet for Zuma?”

Perhaps it is pedantic to mention that any such purchase would not be for Mr Zuma personally (unlike, say, the expenditure on Nkandla, which was) but for an aircraft that would carry not only other members of government, but also Mr Zuma’s successors, possibly for a few decades. Despite this, of course, it could still be argued that we cannot afford anything remotely like R4 billion for a presidential jet; that there are far more economical ways of flying our political leadership around; and that the very idea, coming as it does at a time when the universities are in ferment over fee increases, and when drought and general economic stagnation threaten to impoverish tens of thousands of people, shows how out of touch the government is with the needs of the country.

But then, yesterday morning, another version of the story emerged. General Zimpande Msimang, chief of the Air Force, and Mr Kevin Wakeford, head of Armscor, gave a briefing in which it was said that no decision had been taken; that the R4 billion price was unaffordable, and in any event, merely speculative; that a ‘request for information’ had been sent out in order to enable the Air Force and Armscor to assess the available options; and that a second-hand aircraft might be considered.

Two insights can be drawn from all of this; one negative, one positive. Firstly, to judge by the media reports and the reaction to them from newspaper readers and callers to radio stations, as well as a number of commentators, we have become inured to the idea of fantastically large sums of money being spent at the behest of the President and those close to him. No-one appeared to be surprised at the notion of R4 billion being spent on a presidential jet. Angry, yes, but not surprised. This is a sad reflection of how we have become used to outrageous amounts of taxpayers’ money being spent – some would say wasted – on the needs of a few people at the top of our political tree.

The other, far more positive, insight is four-fold. For one thing, it appears that the Presidency itself has had little to do with the matter of choosing a new jet, or with its cost and its specifications. Indeed, on Monday the office of the President issued a call for transparency and for a public briefing on the issue. It would be all too easy to react cynically to this, but there is in fact no evidence to suggest that the call was a form of subterfuge. Rather, it is likely that the presidency, sensing public disquiet, wanted to give an assurance that it was not driving the process. This is as it should be. The choice of what kind of aircraft is needed, with what capacities, is primarily a matter for the Air Force, which has operational responsibility for conveying the President and members of the executive. And if it is suggested that the presidency’s call for transparency was prompted by all the bad publicity that has attended the Nkandla debacle, that is certainly no bad thing.

Next, the briefing itself was a breath of fresh air. General Msimang and Mr Wakeford provided a cogent explanation of the issues, and set out the pros and cons of the various available options. It appeared to be an honest attempt to deal openly with the controversy, and to reassure the public. It was, in fact, an object lesson in how such matters should be dealt with, and provided an example that the Energy Ministry, for instance, should follow with regard to the debate around the infinitely greater envisaged expenditure on nuclear power stations.

Thirdly, the briefing took place barely 48 hours after the story was first reported. This kind of responsiveness from the heads of two important state institutions is in stark contrast to the obfuscations and evasions that have typified official pronouncements – or the lack thereof – when questions have been raised about equally large expenditures at, for instance, South African Airways and PetroSA, to name but two. It also constitutes an entirely different approach to that adopted around the Nkandla debacle.

Finally, it is encouraging that so far no refuge has been taken behind the catch-all excuse of ‘security’, which is so often trotted out to justify a refusal to give details or to engage in public dialogue on similar matters. At a time when we are witnessing the ‘securitisation’ of many areas of public life, from Parliament to the police service to Mr Zuma’s private residence, it might have been expected that any discussion relating to the President’s travel arrangements (type of plane, its range and specification) would have been avoided; that it was not is a very welcome departure from recent practice.

In the end, of course, the government may well spend R4 billion on a new presidential jet. That possibility has by no means been excluded. But the relative openness and transparency which the matter has so far been dealt with would seem to suggest that a more modest option will be chosen. It may be that, had there not been a storm of protest prompted by the weekend’s reports, the relevant authorities would have gone ahead quietly with the purchase; we will never know. What we do know is that, on this occasion at least, a proper degree of democratic accountability has been achieved. That is something to be acknowledged and to be built upon.

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