



Response

February 12th, 2016

The State of the Nation Address 2016

To begin on a positive note, it seems that President Zuma now realises more clearly than before that South Africa's economic situation is perilous, and that avoiding a further downgrade in our investment grading is a priority. A number of points in the speech indicate a heightened awareness of the need for government to stay within its means. He hinted at the possibility of disposing of under-performing state enterprises; although he repeated government's intention to build new nuclear power stations, he stressed that this would be done only at a pace that the country can afford; and, at a more symbolic level (because the savings involved will be relatively miniscule) he announced that official overseas travel and celebratory functions will be curtailed.

These steps send the right signals to both potential investors and local decision-makers. But Mr Zuma's new-found sense of financial probity merely highlights the fact that no single act or event in the last few years did as much damage to the economy as his farcical firing of the finance minister last December. The EFF may have been exaggerating when they shouted that it had cost the country R500 billion, but given the long-term effects of increased borrowing costs and the degree to which Mr Nene's axing shook the confidence of investors, their estimate may not have been too far out.

The country had a right to expect the President at least to explain his decision around Mr Nene (and his subsequent about-face), if not to apologise. Likewise, the country had a right to expect that Mr Zuma would have addressed the Nkandla matter, which has been the most contentious issue during his tenure, and which epitomised the free-spending mind-set that he now seems to have eschewed. Unsurprisingly, no such explanations were forthcoming.

For the rest, the speech was a fairly predictable listing of achievements, some more impressive than others. There was an attempt to provide a progress report on the nine-point economic programme announced in last year's speech, but it was difficult to follow which of these points had been implemented and which were still merely being talked about. Mr Zuma ended by noting that "we can't change global conditions, but we can change local conditions. Let us work together to turn things around." Perhaps this time he really means it; perhaps he will begin to weigh his decisions carefully in light of their potential to improve or worsen the local economy. If so, we will hopefully see no more Nkandlas, no more irresponsible reshuffles, no more appointments of cronies to important public posts, and an end to the unsustainable expansion of the public service wage bill. If so, the state of the nation can only improve.

The other part of the proceedings consisted of the by now inevitable disruption of the speech by the EFF and, somewhat surprisingly, by COPE leader Mosiuoa Lekota. The EFF makes no bones about wanting to put Mr Zuma on the spot and to demand a public accounting for actions that, in its view, have harmed the nation or the economy. But, leaving aside the argument that many of the EFF's own

policies, if implemented, would be even more economically destructive, their chosen strategy must be seriously questioned. Yes, Parliament should be a place of robust exchange and maximum freedom of speech; but continual interruption and the raising of spurious points of order does nothing to foster either of these. The country has a right to hear what the President has to say, and then to pass its judgement. Rendering the speech inaudible, or engaging in long, repetitive arguments with the presiding officers merely dishonours Parliament and ends up reducing, not enhancing, the degree of accountability it can exact.

Last year, the EFF succeeded in capturing the moral high ground when its MPs were physically removed from the chamber by police. This year, as they chanted their way out via a side door in what was clearly a choreographed move, they ceded much of that ground back to the Speaker and, ultimately, to Mr Zuma. It was almost as if, with the irritating children out of the way, the adults could get down to business.

Mr Lekota's intervention was surprising. Was he simply trying to grab an EFF-style headline, or was he, having come to the end of his tether, expressing genuine feelings of frustration and disillusion. Mr Lekota is one of Parliament's senior figures, having served as a cabinet minister, as national chairperson of the ANC, and as head of the National Council of Provinces, and has a struggle pedigree that very few active politicians can match. He would not have stood up last night lightly; but at the same time, his walkout, accompanied by his only two party colleagues, emphasised how isolated he has become.

The tragic aspect of the circus that erupts on these occasions is that Parliament as a safe space for South Africans to discuss, argue, and even seriously disagree – a place to fight without violence – is quickly disappearing. Instead, Parliament has become a theatre for insults, grandstanding, and extremist one-upmanship, and its main occasions have become no more than opportunities to end up as the lead story in news reports, with a guaranteed audience.

As a result, because South Africans still need to express and debate their needs and issues, the discourse has shifted to the streets and the courts, the campuses and the community halls. This sadly harps back to the 1980s, when Parliament was seen at best as irrelevant and at worst as the source of the country's problems. And, as in the eighties, we now have barbed wire around Parliament to separate warring factions, we now have riot police patrolling the streets, and we have the increased securitisation of Parliament itself. All these things serve to close the safe, open space necessary for free democratic discourse.

All those responsible for the impasse that has characterised successive SONAs and successive President's Questions need to question their role. This includes at a minimum the presiding officers, the EFF and the President himself. To allow this spectacle to continue would be seriously damaging to our democracy.

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