



Response

May 15th, 2017

The Molefe Saga

The reappointment of Brian Molefe as Chief Executive of Eskom signals yet another low point in the ethics of public governance in post-1994 South Africa. As with so many irrational and illegal appointments recentlyⁱ, this one will in all likelihood be set aside – though probably only after protracted litigation, at enormous cost to taxpayers rich and poor.

Encouragingly, the ANC itself seems to have realised that this has been a redeployment too far, and has called the responsible minister, Lynne Brown, to account. But while we wait for the saga to play out politically and legally, there are at least two tangential aspects that demonstrate a deep malaise in the way public office is valued and approached.

Firstly, Mr Molefe's reappointment has been justified partly on the basis that it is an alternative to having to pay him out R30 million; indeed, the Eskom board approved such a payment before it was prohibited by Ms Brown.

Mr Molefe worked for Eskom for 21 months (at an annual salary of just under R10 million) before he resigned in the wake of the Public Protector's *State of Capture* report, which implicated him in questionable dealings with the Guptas. The R30 million payment thus represents R1.42 million for each month of his actual service to Eskom. (That amount, added to his salary, would have meant that he was earning approximately R75 000 per day; at the time, the recipient of a state old-age grant was receiving R50 per day.)

The private sector in South Africa is often – and rightly – criticised for the obscene amounts that some of its chief executives earn. It is pointed out that the gap between their earnings and those of their lowest paid employees is among the highest in the world; and that this is contributing to the gross inequality that characterises our economy and society.

It is surely not too much to expect that state owned enterprises such as Eskom would set an example of restraint in this regard, and would show the private sector that it is not necessary to accommodate such levels of avariciousness. Instead, it has demonstrated a level of profligacy that echoes the Nkandla scandal. While Ms Brown must be commended for blocking this unconscionable payout, the fitness for office of a board that can propose such a waste of public funds must be strongly doubted. In fact, the whole ethos underpinning the payment of senior executives of state owned enterprises needs to be investigated; a couple of years ago the SABC board, for example, happily acquiesced when Hlaudi Motsoeneng awarded himself a multi-million rand salary increase.

Secondly, Mr Molefe's recent history shows just how unimportantly Parliament is regarded by the dominant faction of the governing party. To be an MP ought to be one of the most valued and highly esteemed jobs available. People of real skill and talent, with a deeply developed sense of public service, should be put forward by their parties; and once there, they should not be removed for flimsy reasons.

Mr Molefe's record in business, before he became embroiled with the Guptas, was such that he would have been a considerable asset to various parliamentary committees, especially in the economics and finance clusters. As a former senior treasury official, and having been chief executive of the Public Investment Corporation and of Transnet, as well as of Eskom, he would have been ideally placed to lead parliamentary oversight of a range of government departments.

Instead, it turns out that his seat in Parliament was merely a convenient parking space while he – or his backers – waited for something more 'important' to turn up. To argue, as many people have, that his deployment as an ANC MP was simply a preliminary step to his being appointed finance minister, a plan since frustrated by internal ANC resistance, merely reinforces the point – clearly, if he was not to become a minister, being an 'ordinary' MP was not good enough for him, and a better position had to be found.

This diminishes and demeans the office of MP and the status of Parliament. Membership of the National Assembly should not be a mere rung on the ladder to an executive position or to high political office. (In this regard it is encouraging that – so far at least – speculation that Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma would be 'deployed' to Parliament, and thence to Cabinet, as a means of giving her a higher profile in the ANC succession race, has not been proved correct.)

This attitude – which although prevalent in the governing party is probably not unique to it – has contributed to the overall weakening of Parliament *vis a vis* the executive. Ministers routinely fail to honour calls from committees to appear before them, and when they do, they are too often treated obsequiously, with little or no proper questioning being allowed. It is as if the ministers are in command and the MPs are there to take instructions – a reversal of what the Constitution provides.

It will be interesting to see what Parliament chooses to do by way of oversight into this latest attempt by executive to diminish its role, power and prestige.

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ⁱ Menzi Simelane's appointment as head of the National Prosecuting Authority; Hlaudi Motsoeneng's as COO of the SABC; and Berning Ntlemeza's as acting head of the Hawks all come to mind. Likewise, the 2015 decision to suspend Robert McBride as head of the Independent Police Investigative Directorate (IPID) was set aside by the High Court, as was the suspension of Gauteng Hawks head, Shadrack Sibiyi.