



Response

October 9th, 2018

Getting the Easy Things Wrong

At around 09.30 this morning, the senior management of the Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa (PRASA) sat down in a conference room at the Townhouse Hotel to brief members of Parliament's Portfolio Committee on Transport on the ongoing spate of burnings of Metrorail trains in Cape Town. PRASA claims to have a plan to tackle the problem.

Two and a half hours later, the city bowl was covered by a cloud of black smoke, as another train (some reports say two trains) burst into flame in Cape Town's central station, about 600 metres from where PRASA was explaining its plan.

Whether this was just an unfortunate co-incidence, or whether the perpetrators of these arson attacks have a keen sense of irony, we cannot know. But it is yet another blow for the long-suffering, mainly working class, commuters of Cape Town, who have seen the rail service decline over the last few years to the point where less than half the scheduled number of trains run on any given day; where armed gangs roam the carriages more or less at will, robbing people and routinely throwing them out of the broken windows and doors.

The utter failure of PRASA and Metrorail to offer even a basic, acceptably safe service is not limited to Cape Town, as recent rail accidents in Gauteng demonstrate. 320 people were injured when two passenger trains collided near Kempton Park last Thursday; barely a month earlier, 112 were injured when two trains hit each other at Selby, in the south of Johannesburg.

At the other end of the public transport spectrum, SA Express, the state-owned regional airline, had its whole fleet grounded in May after an audit by the Civil Aviation Authority revealed "severe non-compliance or non-conformance that poses a very serious safety risk to the public."¹ And SAA Technical, which maintains the SAA fleet, and which at one time enjoyed a reputation that brought it work from numerous other airlines, has now lost so many skilled staff that customers such as Comair – which operates Kulula and British Airways flights – is sending its planes to Europe for maintenance.²

South Africa faces many deep and seemingly intractable problems, many of them the result of our divided past, others – especially in economic matters – the consequences of geo-political forces largely beyond our control. But running a reliable urban passenger rail service is not a difficult thing to do. Scores of countries do it, many of them far less developed and resourced than we are. Carrying out aircraft maintenance according to schedule, and then ensuring that the necessary reports are filed with the relevant authority, is likewise an easy thing to do. As for delivering the post, another vital

public service which has virtually ceased to function, there can be few more straightforward tasks for a government to accomplish.

A lot of energy is going into the search for solutions to our big problems – last week’s Jobs Summit is one example. For years now, government and the mining industry have been holding indabas and conferences about the Mining Charter, while mines close and jobs are lost in vast numbers. The health ministry is still doggedly pursuing a National Health Scheme which will cost many billions, and which would strain the administrative capacity of a top-rank economically-advanced country. Where is the energy that should be going into solving our simple problems?

At some stage the body politic as a whole surely has to realise that there is little point in talking about the creation of 270 000 new jobs per annum (as the President did at the Jobs Summit) or about providing nationalised health-care for 57 million people (as the Health Minister regularly does) when we lack the capacity, or the competence, or the skills, or the political will, or the sense of accountability, or some combination of all these, to stop people burning our trains in broad daylight in the centre of our second city, while those responsible for the trains discuss ‘plans’ for the umpteenth time – within sniffing distance of the smoke.

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¹ <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/companies/transport-and-tourism/2018-05-24-sa-express-grounded-amid-serious-safety-concerns/>

² <https://www.pressreader.com/south-africa/sunday-times/20180923/282638918504052>