

## **Gavin Davis : Zuma should quietly scrap his propaganda 'machine'**

Honourable Chairperson,  
Honourable Minister and Deputy Minister,  
Honourable Members of the House,  
Guests in the gallery.

Let me start by thanking every journalist who reports the news without fear or favour. Our democracy depends on each and every one of them.

Let me also thank my colleagues on the Portfolio Committee, especially those from the majority party.

Last year, during the Ellen Tshabalala scandal, we showed that this Parliament could hold people to account despite their links to powerful politicians. We can all be proud of this achievement.

Our task now, as Honourable Members of this House, is to hold the Minister to account for her performance over the last year. And, if we are honest, we will all agree that her performance has been a massive disappointment.

I am sure, Honourable Chairperson, that nobody is more disappointed in the Minister's performance than the President. He wanted a new propaganda ministry to clean up his government's image, but all he got was more controversy.

Just look at what's happened since we deliberated on the Communications budget this time last year.

We've had an SABC Board Chairperson resign because she was caught lying about her qualifications. But this was only after 6 damaging months of postponed hearings, court cases and other delaying tactics.

We've had an SABC Chief Operations Officer who has been shielded and promoted when the Public Protector said he should have been fired.

We have a Government Communication and Information System (GCIS) that is abused to promote the majority party, including the channeling of public money into the coffers of a government-friendly newspaper owned by the President's friends.

And then, Honourable Chairperson, in a few weeks on 17 June, we face humiliation on a global scale. Because, on that day, we will miss the International Telecommunications Union deadline to switch

over from analogue to digital television. If Minister Muthambi had not spent the last year meddling with the Digital Migration Policy, and waging an obsessive turf war to control the process, it is unlikely that we would be in the embarrassing position we now find ourselves in.

Most serious of all, Honourable Chairperson, is that the Minister wilfully misunderstands her role in relation to the SABC. She believes that the SABC is a state-owned company instead of an independent public broadcaster. She wants to take us back to the apartheid era when the SABC was a tool in the hands of politicians, instead of a resource belonging to the people of this country.

This is why the Minister thinks there is nothing wrong with unilaterally seizing the powers of the SABC Board, even though this is in clear contravention of the Broadcasting Act.

And it is why the Minister thinks it is okay to send independent SABC Board Members threatening letters, even when she has no power in law to appoint or remove them.

In her Budget Speech last year, Minister Muthambi said that stabilising the SABC was at the very top of her agenda. I bet she regrets making that particular promise now.

Because, since then, no less than three SABC Board Members have resigned, while three others have been forcibly and illegally removed. As a result, the SABC Board does not have a Chairperson, or a quorum to legally constitute meetings.

Last year, the Minister also promised that a new Chief Executive Officer would be in place by the end of September. Nine months have passed and the post is still vacant.

No wonder the SABC is in crisis, the scale of which is only starting to become clear.

I hold in my hand internal SABC financial documents recently brought to light by the Sunday Times newspaper. They show that the SABC faces a projected loss of R501-million for the financial year just ended on March 31. This loss is projected to double to R 1 billion in the next financial year.

So Minister, the SABC is not on “a sound financial footing”, as you said in Parliament a few weeks ago. On the contrary, the SABC is facing financial ruin.

Honourable Chairperson, we need to fix our public broadcaster as a matter of priority. But the only way to do that is to ensure that there is less political interference in the SABC, not more.

In this regard, we call on the Speaker’s Office to release the legal opinion on the removal of Board Members Hope Zinde, Rachel Kalidass and Ronnie Lubisi. Once we have this legal opinion, the

Portfolio Committee can deal with this matter as we are mandated to do in terms of the Broadcasting Act.

As a Committee, we need to work together to find the most qualified and independently minded candidates to take up positions on the Board. And then they need to be left alone to do their jobs in the interests of the public we serve.

These steps will go some way to get the SABC back on track, but they won't fix all that is wrong in the Communications Department. Because, the truth is, this Department should never have been created in the first place.

Honourable Chairperson, we live in the age of convergence – where traditional broadcasting is rapidly merging with new digital telecommunication technology. This is why it never made sense to create separate Communications and Telecommunications Departments.

As a result, we have an Independent Communications Authority that doesn't know which Minister it should account to.

We have the entities expected to roll out digital migration accounting to Minister Muthambi, even though they legally fall under the Department of Telecommunications and Posts.

Worst of all, we have the unnecessary duplication, inherent contradictions and overall lack of policy coherence that has resulted from splitting the Departments. Let me give one important example of this.

On the 14 November 2014, the Telecommunications Minister gazetted the National Integrated ICT Policy Discussion Paper for public comment. An entire chapter of it is devoted to broadcasting, including regulation, language diversity, the funding and mandate of the SABC, and media diversity and development.

Yet two days before, no doubt in anticipation of the release of the ICT Discussion Paper, Minister Muthambi announced that she would be doing her own Broadcasting Policy Review — on precisely the same topics covered in the ICT Discussion Paper. What a waste of time, energy and resources.

Honourable Chairperson, let's be honest: in his drive to create a propaganda machine, the President has created a mess. And the great irony is that he never got the propaganda machine he wanted. Because no ministry this dysfunctional could ever be referred to as a 'machine'.

So today, I would like to offer the President a reprieve. If he quietly scraps the new Communications Ministry and goes back to the old converged Department, we will never mention this failed experiment again.

I thank you.