

Portfolio Committee on Science and Technology Chairperson`s Budget Debate Speech by Dr MB Goqwana

21 May 2015

It is our mandate as the Portfolio Committee on Science and Technology to exercise oversight over the Department of Science and Technology.

During the past ten months, we have met with the Department several times, visited some of the entities and seen some of the scientific research being undertaken at certain universities.

We have met with communities to assess the impact of some of the projects undertaken by the Department of Science and Technology.

We have also met with the Auditor-General on several occasions to assess the performance of the Department.

Chairperson, as a Committee, most of us feel the Department is on the right track. Even though there are challenges, this Department cannot lament about being in a developing country. They have to compete globally and benchmark their achievements against those of both developing and developed countries.

This Department is crucial to our priority of transforming the skills capacity of our country and growing and diversifying our economy. Hence, there is an urgent need for the authorities to give them adequate resources to compete comfortably and favourably. They need more financial resources if they are to transform South Africa from a net-importer of technology to a net-exporter of technology. This will also mean that we have the capacity to retain the skills we develop, as well as attract the expertise we need.

This transformation and dynamism will result from innovations created and scientific research conducted by our own human capital.

We know of countries that have no minerals, oil or good agriculture but their innovations have contributed to healthy economies.

Before 1994 in South Africa, less than 25% of the population were studying science, 75% were not given the opportunity to do so. In fact, the latter were told science is not for them.

The challenge is to expand the net to encourage and enable more people to study science and to consider careers in research so that we have the skills to improve our economy through innovation.

Chairperson, this year we are celebrating the Freedom Charter, with specific emphasis on creating "better lives for our people".

In celebrating the Freedom Charter, I want to reflect on how far the Department of Science and Technology has come. I will try and show how science, innovation and technology resonates with ANC strategy.

Last year I said that saying science is difficult is a myth. Science and technology is about asking "Why" and "How" questions. It is about thinking out of the box to come up with ideas that can be turned into products and services; creating new or improving on existing innovations.

My Grandmother could barely believe that it takes one hour to travel from Cingco to Johannesburg when it used to take her three days. This is the result of science.

So too Mr Vorster, who said that science was only for a privileged few, would be astounded to know that South Africa is currently one of the leaders in Astronomy, and that experts the world over, are flocking to come and do their research here. In South Africa.

Mr Vorster would also be astounded by the expertise of African scientists and researchers, like Prof Willie Makgoba, Bongani Mayosi and Prof Koleka Mlisana.

The existence of this expertise and the efforts to enhance and grow these skills is the work of the ANC.

The ANC has ensured that science, technology and innovation drives transformation.

Long before 1912, people were asking why skin colour affected peoples prosperity. Answers to such questions were known but could not be documented, and raising these concerns only made the situation worse for those who drew attention to these matters. Hence, it was the ANC, who in transcending mental slavery, came up with the Freedom Charter.

The same Freedom Charter that we are celebrating this year.

As we all know, matters became worse as political organisations were banned, people were jailed, killed and others had to flee the country.

ANC artists composed songs asking "SENZENI NA?" That was asking why?

I will not sing it here because if I do.....it will be declared un-parliamentary to do so.

It was not until 1996 when the Department of Science and Technology (then with the Department of Arts and Culture) came into being, that we saw a breakthrough.

The "Why`s" and "How`s" of the ANC were now being addressed.

The Government of the ANC transformed a mere directorate into the fully fledged and functional Department that you see now.

It is through the Department of Science and Technology and the innovation enabling environment that it seeks to create, that the ANC-led Government will transform the country and its economy.

This ANC-led transformation will benefit South Africa and all who live in it. It will NOT discriminate based on the colour of a person`s skin.

There is clear documented evidence that this Department, has in the 17 years of its existence, transformed South Africa and its people.

One very important example of this, is that during the term of the ANC-led Government, the life expectancy of South Africans has increased.

All you need to do, to be convinced, is to follow the work of the Department and its entities. Look at the innovations developed, the research done and the human capital developed.

The competition they are waging in the global arena, despite being inadequately resourced, is commendable.

As mentioned earlier, there are challenges. However, the ANC-led Government is blessed to have in the Department of Science and Technology, a leadership that is achievement oriented, proactive and committed to the transformation of this country and its human capital. A leadership that does not run at the sight of the challenges.

Chairperson, we have oversight of a Department that has, up to now, shown it has a strong internal locus of control. The team in the Department of Science and Technology believe that their own ability to control the outcome of their efforts is relatively decisive in determining South Africa's fate. These are people who acknowledge and are realistic about their own efforts and related results and generally do not ascribe outcomes to factors beyond their control.

Research has proven that successful leaders hold more internal locus of control beliefs than the general population.

To the general public out there, I encourage you to come up with your ideas for products and services and to engage with the Department of Science and Technology and others to translate these ideas into products and services. Not everyone can be a scientist or an innovator, but surely many can have ideas worthy of being implemented into products and services.

We have all the confidence in the Department of Science and Technology that it will continue to promote the creativity needed for South Africa to become an innovation-driven society.

Chairperson, allow me to stand in the gap and speak as ME, while actually meaning US, and when I say MY, actually meaning OUR.

Do not despise me because of my skin colour; when my brain has the same white and grey matter as yours.

Do not despise me because of my rural or urban background, for it is not my origin that activates my thinking, it is my white and grey matter, and my attitude.

Do not despise me because of my gender because I did not choose it, instead, judge me on the grey and white matter of my brain.

Do not despise me for my humility for it is my guiding principle; that I am what I am because of others. Arrogance will lead me astray.

Do not try and fit me into a box because I might not fit.

Do not try and change me to what you want me to be, for you may not like it and neither will I.

Accept me as I am.

I am an African born in the hinterland of the African continent.