**SONA DEBATE: WE MUST NOT LOSE HOPE**

GOOD statement by Brett Herron,
GOOD: Secretary-General & Member of Parliament

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Note to editors: This was the maiden speech delivered by GOOD Secretary-General and Member of Parliament, Brett Herron MP, during the debate on the State of the Nation (SoNA) today in Parliament. This speech is embargoed until delivery. Please check speech against delivery.

Honourable Speaker,

The most precious commodity in South Africa right now is hope.

The loss of belief in ourselves, our country and our leadership has steadily eroded the hope and confidence of 28 years ago when we started our democratic journey.

When people lose hope, in an environment of impunity, it creates fertile ground for criminality, arson, insurrection and the collapse of service delivery.

When people lose hope, potential investors look elsewhere, businesses become more risk averse and shed more jobs, the privileged move their assets offshore, and the economy remains stuck.

When people lose hope, it almost doesn’t matter what the President says in the annual State of the Nation address.

People say they’ve heard it all before, while the lived reality of their lives has barely improved.

We established GOOD three years ago to fight for spatial, social, economic and environmental justice because people yearn for better. They yearn for fairness, for justice, for competent management.

We say there is still room for optimism in South Africa. It is entirely dependent on leadership of integrity, properly managed implementation and real accountability.

**JOBS AND SMALL BUSINESSES**:

Honourable Speaker,

Unemployment is our greatest crisis. As things stand, millions of young people face a lifetime of joblessness.

The President correctly identified small and micro-businesses as low-hanging fruit to create more jobs.

A World Bank analysis recently found that if South Africa was to match the self-employment rate of peers like Turkey, Brazil and Mexico we could potentially halve unemployment.

We must tackle the red-tape that strangles business growth. But it is not a panacea for our problems on its own. The Western Cape has had a red-tape reduction unit since 2011 and seen no meaningful growth in small businesses here.

The greatest barrier to self-employment and growth in the number of small businesses is not red-tape but access to finance.

Self-employment and mico-enterprises need proper State support – in the form of access to finance – and the highly risk averse financial services sector needs to be brought on board.

The President’s “bounce-back” financial scheme appears to be for the benefit of existing small businesses.

If we are to grow self-employment and small business, and potentially halve unemployment, we need a robust and accessible financial support scheme for start-ups and micro enterprises.

**POVERTY AND SOCIAL SECURITY**:

We welcome the extension of the social relief of distress grant. It’s a nudge in the right direction.

Section 27 of our Constitution creates the right to social security for people unable to support themselves. it’s time to implement a Basic Income Guarantee (BIG). We have a legal and moral duty to do so.

The President appeared to make access to social security a secondary right to basic services – that is not the constitutional test.

We agree that we must continue to provide basic services but we must ask ourselves what is the most basic need of a human being? Access to food and water.

How does an adult without any income meet these most basic needs?

The constitutional test is “within our available resources”.

The previous Finance Minister committed to implementing zero-based budgeting. If we pursue zero-based budgeting we will find excess and waste and we will find basic income can be achieved within our available resources when it is prioritised.

**TACKLING THE CULTURE OF IMPUNITY**:

The greatest weakness of the President’s speech was its failure to wholesomely address one of our country’s most critical weaknesses: The culture of impunity.

The President would have sent a very strong signal about ending the culture of impunity and tackling criminality and corruption, had he announced that the Prosecuting Authority would be strengthened with the financial resources, and the skills, urgently needed to bring the criminal network that captured the state swiftly to justice.

The volume and complexity of the criminal cases is overwhelming.

As the President said; the SIU report, alone, resulted in 386 cases being referred to the NPA for prosecuting.

Without the resources and skills the NPA will never prosecute the volume of cases, loaded with complexity, in our lifetimes – and without those prosecutions our hope will erode further and the culture of impunity will become entrenched.

I thank you.