

Budget Debate: Parliament

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Hon Speaker,

“Why do we have a Parliament?”; “What do they do in Parliament?”; “Parliament is embarrassing”; “Parliament is of no use”;

Speaker, if you read the newspapers, or listen to radio programmes, these are some of the comments the public makes about Parliament. We have to ask ourselves why, and whether these comments have any substance.

Let’s look at legislation. This is one of the critical functions of Parliament. The people we are supposed to serve and represent in Parliament depend on us to pass relevant, meaningful and above all constitutionally compliant legislation. Legislation that will improve their lives and livelihood.

The reality, however, is that we don’t. In reality this Parliament is not seized with the processing and passing of Bills at the level it should be. In 2022 there were at least 10 bills that lapsed as it was not processed. How is this possible if there is ample time to schedule it. Parliament would rather spend its time having debates on topics that do not have a direct effect on improving the lives of the people of our country.

Bills are rammed through for political expedience, where it suits the governing party, but important legislation such as many of the private members bills introduced by the opposition, are left to lapse. This is not what a Parliament that cares for the people does.

This Parliament rather passes bills such as the Eskom Debt Relief Bill that the country can ill afford. The economic future and wellbeing of the country is clearly the last priority.

Another example is the instances where Parliament has to process and pass bills as a consequence of Constitutional Court rulings such as the Electoral Amendment Bill, now Act. Why did this have to be rushed through? The answer is that the Minister and the department sat on this instruction for more than a year and Parliament was absent in its oversight and holding the Minister and his department to account.

Parliament will soon go on recess for more than two months and as has been the practice in past Parliamentary terms, legislation will again be rushed through. The work of Parliament cannot be sacrificed for the purposes of campaigning for elections.

Let's look at one of the tools that Parliament has to hold the executive to account – questions. Parliament's own report indicates that in 2022/2023 4224 questions were submitted by members of which 2299 were answered by the executive. That is a paltry 54% the Ministers made an effort to answer. And I say an effort, as many answers, both written and oral, are nothing more than non-answers. Like swatting away an irritating fly.

I honestly hope the Leader of Government Business takes note – answering to Parliament is not about ticking the boxes, it is about being accountable to the people of the country, the people who depend on all of us.

Let's look at why Parliament is seen as embarrassing. We need to look no further than the past week. How is it possible that the kind of language used in the Defence Budget debate can be condoned by a chairperson. Is this really the best this Parliament can offer the country?

Let's look at the debates we have in Parliament and the debates that get priority. In stead of focussing on what is urgent and necessary, we spend hours on debating issues that will not make one iota of difference in people's lives. We shy away from what should be front and centre on Parliament's agenda. In stead of debating the desperate economic situation in the country that will only increase as a result of our international stance and the real possibility of AGOA not being renewed, we have debates on any possible national or international day.

Let's look at public participation. Indeed, Parliament conducts a number of oversights, but the question is, what then? Do any of these reports lead to any visible or tangible results?

Petitions are submitted to Parliament, but it takes up to 3 years and longer for it ever to be referred to and dealt with by a committee. What then is the use of this avenue for the public to express their concerns. Another box ticking exercise.

And then we have the public hearings including written submissions – the sad reality is that in this Parliament it is nothing more than going through the motions and will have no effect on the outcome of the predetermined ANC position. We have seen this with the Sec 25 process, we have seen this with the NHI Bill and we will see this with the Bela Bill.

This parliament is not for the people it is for a Party.

But this can and will be changed. This can and will become a Parliament for the people of the country. This can and will become a properly functioning Parliament, at the centre of a prosperous, thriving South Africa. This watershed will happen next year when the electorate will draw a line under a Parliament that is not there for them and vote for the DA.