

Our Parliament should be a road sign to the future - John Steenhuisen
John Steenhuisen | 22 May 2018

DA Chief Whip says better this than becoming weathervanes to the prevailing political winds of the time

Our Parliament should be a road sign to the future, not a weathervane of the present

Mr. Chairman,

Introduction

Thank you very much, it is a privilege to be able to participate in this important debate today upon our Parliament. In all likelihood this will be the last budget debate of this type before the 5th democratic Parliament draws to a close and we start to prepare the legacy report for the transition into the 6th.

It's an opportunity for us to reflect too on where this Parliament has done well and where it has not. And what place our Parliament holds in the minds and experience of the people of South Africa. In doing so it would be wrong to ignore the fact that trust in Parliament as an institution of democracy has plummeted from 65% in 2004 to 38% in 2015. These findings of the Human Sciences Research Council are contained in the High Level Panel report tabled at the end of last year. Why is this significant? The High Level Panel went on to say and I quote:

"Trust is an essential element of democratic legitimacy, declining levels of trust in institutions impact negatively on nation building"

What are the reasons for this loss of trust in our democratic institutions?

Road signs not weathervanes

I would advance that one of the chief reasons there has been such a loss of trust in our institutions of democracy is because many of our citizens do not see these institutions, including our Parliament, as relevant to their daily lived experience, nor do they see them as offering hope, a ladder of opportunity, out of their present conditions.

A former leader of the opposition wrote that in politics there are two essential choices in the political arena, you can choose to be a signpost or a weathervane. A weather vane he wrote will:

"twist in the wind, trimming sails to the prevailing winds of political correctness. It is the easy path of least resistance, but it usually leads over time, downhill"

A signpost on the other hand:

" does not bend to the vagaries of the moment but stands for a cause greater, for an enduring set of principles and beliefs"

There is no shortage of examples of institutions that have become weathervanes to the prevailing political winds of the time, they twist and contort themselves, this way and that, spinning listlessly trying to find favour with the current faction in charge or point to the populist side of the latest cause De Jour.

We saw it with the HAWKS, who, when the foul winds of state capture blew, failed to act when they

should have against the Guptas and who, now as the political winds have shifted have suddenly sprung to life, too little too late sadly.

We saw it with the NPA who blew this way and that, protecting those in political office and their connected elite from prosecution, now that the winds have shifted have started to act, too little, too late sadly.

And we saw it with this Parliament, which protected and defended the worst excesses of the last eight years of the Zuma administration. Some latter day claimants of sainthood now decry the thievery, the corruption, the looting and the rot, yet they were the very same ones who sat around the cabinet table nodding, back slapping, drawing salaries and perks while they knew exactly what was going on, and they are the very same ones still sitting here today.

What we needed in these days and challenges was institutions that stood solid, rooted in values and principles, secure in their mandate and acting without fear or favour, solid, resolute standing firm for democracy, the rule of law and the constitution, we needed road signs, not weathervanes.

And so the question we have to ask is what sort of Parliament do we want to create in South Africa, how do we turn this parliament into a road sign standing firm as a beacon of democracy rather than a weathervane that twists and turns buffeted uncertainly by prevailing political winds ? Never is it more important for a Parliament to be a road sign and not a weathervane than when it is confronted by an executive that subverts, breaks the law and ducks accountability. We witnessed what happened when this house became a weathervane to the tsunami of the Zuma Presidency, instead of standing firm on the constitution, the rule of law and on principle, it was blown off course over Nkandla, over Sassagate, over Guptagate and over Zumagate . We must never have Parliament again where the velvet gloves mollycoddle the executive and shield them from accountability. This house is not a lecture hall or a classroom, it is a robust arena of accountability. And, let me be clear, no member of this house requires a permission slip from the President or his ministers to speak up, speak out and hold them accountable!

Road sign to hope

Surely we can start by making this house far more relevant to the challenges facing our nation and working in a more future focussed way on finding solutions to them. Instead of endless debates on topics that only matter to the taking heads, pundits and speak to the insider bubble we should be grappling with the challenges and offering a road sign pointing the way clearly and unambiguously to a way out of these challenges.

- We have an unemployment rate of almost 10 million South Africans, this is a national disaster and threatens the very fabric of our society, the latest labour force survey should have triggered an immediate debate in this house on what is to be done, and yet it does not.

- We have a complete breakdown of law and order, our citizens are murdered indiscriminately in their homes, our women and children are raped and murdered and criminals have taken to brazenly blowing up cash in transit vans and gangs operate with impunity. This house should be debating a plan of action on how to restore law and order across the land, and yet it does not.

- We have a crisis of poverty in our land, our children are literally starving to death, families reduced to living off sugar water and grass. This should trigger us into action, we should be developing a national plan to feed our starving children and this house should be leading the charge, and yet it does not.

Instead we find every opportunity to selectively debate conflicts and suffering in foreign lands,

ignoring the daily conflict and suffering of our own citizens. Debates on high days and holidays, Africa Day, Youth day, joint sittings commemorating this and that. All retreating further into glories past, yet all the while the present and the future lie in peril. It is little wonder the widening trust deficit exists between this house and the electorate, they don't see our work as relevant or useful to improving their lives.

Road sign to the future.

Where too is the future focus, a vision oriented with an eye on the challenges to come? Our house should be initiating debates that point the nation towards the future because innumerable challenges lie ahead of us. The legislation we pass, the debates we have, the policies we implement should be preparing our country for not only the domestic challenges but the global challenges that will confront us going forward.

We should be debating, and this Parliament should be on the very cutting edge of the debate, on Artificial Intelligence advancements, the job market is going to change significantly in the next 20 to 30 years, jobs and work as we know it today will simply not exist. We need to prepare our country and our people for its impacts and position ourselves to take advantage of its opportunities

Major advances in key technologies, the internet of things, drones and biotechnology are going to force us to compete even more to attract investment but we cannot compete if we are not even having these debates to prepare us for the future. We cannot compete if we are still indulging in backward looking analogue debates on the past in a rapidly evolving future focused digital era.

We have a golden opportunity to leap the technological divide. Our education system is broken and our skills and technological capacities are hamstrung and constrained. Policy failure and poor planning has left our citizens, particularly our youth massively vulnerable. The 2016 Global Information Technology Report released by the World Economic Forum Ranked South Africa last in maths and science for the third consecutive year.

Our disjointed and outmoded education and skills development processes, research and development all need to be massively overhauled anyway, and we have the opportunity to do so in a way that gives South Africa the competitive edge in the new economy to come. We can build a skills and technological powerhouse that will allow the youth of our country to ride the wave of the disruption to come and cash in on being world leaders in key modern industries, but only if we start leading that debate as this house. If we as legislators fail to do so, we will be failing our country and our people, particularly our youth, who will be left hopelessly behind. Our economy will slide further into decline and our people will be unable to compete globally. Moving our country, boldly and bravely into this new era should become our obsession and the very best thing we could do for our people and our country.

The legislature that doesn't legislate.

One of the primary functions entrusted to this house by our Constitution is the passing of legislation. This is not an area where there is any proud boast possible. The 5th Parliament's track record on passing legislation and has been abysmal. In the 2017 year the house passed only eleven pieces of legislation, taking into account the financial legislation we are bound by law to pass the figure is even more miserable. The truth is that we just do not sit often enough to work on and pass legislation.

This has led to a massive backlog of now 34 pieces of legislation in the NA and 15 in the NCOP. Some of this legislation has been hanging about on the books since 2015 with very little progress made on dealing with it. Given the fact that the NA will be going into an unprecedented 3 month

recess to enable the ANC to take care of their internal processes its unlikely that we are going to dramatically improve on this record in 2018.

The High Level Panel acknowledged this shortcoming and expressed its disappointment in this key failure to legislate effectively where they said”

“The time it takes between the first submission of legislation to Parliament and its passage is too long”

It did not however require the Panel to point this out, a perusal of the programming committee minutes, the joint programming committee minutes over the course of the last three and a half years shows how the opposition repeatedly sounded the warning about the legislative logjam and the need to intervene, prioritise and make provision, we made suggestions repeatedly on what would need to be done, yet these warnings were all systematically ignored with the result that now, in the final year of the 5th parliament, is the realisation and implications of this failure are emerging for all to see: We have become the legislature that does not legislate.

Improving our own legislative capacity.

But, allied to this budget of Parliament, this of course begs the further question, and that relates to our actual capacity as legislators to indeed legislate. Time and time again over every budget year the members of this house have raised their concerns about the imbalance of forces between the executive and the legislature where the executive has abundant resources, whole departments and batteries of staff, of research, review, planning, legal advice and data analysis, yet the parliamentary research capability available to members is horribly underfunded, the staff massively overworked and underappreciated.

If passing legislation, and good legislation at that, is one of our core functions, then why does the budget not reflect that? It is for that reason that members are reduced to biblical Davids trying to take on the Goliaths of departments. If we don't seriously and quickly address this huge imbalance of forces, the legislative arm is forever going to be at the mercy of the executive arm.

We need a more activist parliament, where committees are able to interrogate departments and ministers, understand policy and its effects and be armed with our own competing research, data and analysis. We cannot continue to be beholden to the executive for this information. Nowhere is this phenomenon more on display than during these very budget hearings and debates where overwhelmingly the budgets remain unamended and unaltered by this house, in many instances not for lack of will but for lack of capacity.

We need to cut back on the unnecessary expenditure of jamborees and conferences and redirect that money urgently to the support of members of this house to empower all of us to be able to do our job.

Who will watch the watchers?

The Ancient Roman Poet Juvenal in his work Satires famously asked

“who will watch the watchers?”

In any system, those who exercise oversight over others should themselves be subject to oversight. The answer to the question Juvenal poses, in our parliamentary instance is the ethics committee of Parliament.

This committee has been an abject failure and has been rendered completely moribund by committee

leadership that clearly do not understand how ethics works or how to effectively run processes. The committee has only met once this year, despite a massive caseload of complaints against members of this house, ranging from assault of women, to dishonesty, to theft of public money. It is an indictment on the chairs of that committee that the important work of this committee, deeply respected during the tenure of Ben Turok, has been reduced to low level political hit squad when opposition members are in the crosshairs but a lumbering and docile committee when governing party members are required to be investigated.

If we are to hold others accountable as parliament, then we must submit to accountability. I would like to suggest, Speaker, that the chairpersons of this committee are replaced and that the committee gets to grips with performing its functions and that the case backlog is finalised before the fifth Parliament rises. As the honourable knows too well, justice delayed is justice denied!

Conclusion

Speaker, our 5th parliament has achieved much, but has also fallen far short of what the constitution expects of us. I think we can do better as a Parliament and I think that we can do better as Parliamentarians.

This house has to become a place that realises the very best dreams of the hoppers, and defeats the worst intentions of the haters.

This house has to become a place where freedom is defended.

This house has to become a place where opportunity is expanded.

This house has to become a place where diversity is celebrated.

This house has to become a place where fairness is legislated.

And if this great Parliament can be that road sign, standing firm through even the darkest night and strongest storm, resolutely directing us to a new hope then the answers to the challenges of our Republic will be within our grasp, BUT, we must be bold enough to confront them.

The opportunities that lie before us to build a new future with total change from our broken and divided past are there for the taking, BUT we must be brave enough to grasp them.