**Debate on Vote 2: Parliament (135)
Hon. N Singh, MP**

Honourable Chairperson,

‘Unprecedented’ is becoming a familiar term these days. We certainly live in interesting times. Firstly, with the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic and the President’s announcement of government’s decision to lock down South Africa on 26 March 2020, which lockdown was in place until the National State of Disaster was lifted as from 5 April 2022.

This necessitated a parliamentary ‘scramble’ and ‘deep-dive’ into the 4th Industrial Revolution and Internet of Things [IoT], as Members of Parliament, support staff and government officials grappled with the challenges of remote work forums and physical/hybrid Parliament sittings.

Then at the beginning of this year the parliamentary precinct was tragically set aflame, the inferno taking firefighters three days to bring under control and finally extinguish. The extent of the structural damages is still uncertain, but I think it is safe to say that it will be years before the damaged part of the precinct, which houses the NCOP, Old Assembly Chamber and National Assembly, will be operational once again.

As ever, our thanks must go to the parliamentary staff contingent, parliamentary IT and the Table staff, who have had to adapt to the new physical working environment and ensure the smooth flow of parliamentary plenaries yet again. Parliamentary communication remains out of service and this must be prioritised, as it hinders Members and parliamentary support staff in the fulfilment of their duties.

Speaker, through you Hon. Chairperson, this is the people’s Parliament: it must be open, accessible and ‘business as usual’ as soon as possible. Virtual meetings are not accessible to the large majority of South Africans. Additionally, it detracts from the democratic process when we are not able to engage physically with other Members, government officials and members of the public on an ‘eye-to-eye’ basis.

With Covid now on the way to becoming endemic, we must be investigating options to reopen in some physical form as the people’s Parliament. All political party leaders should be consulted and allowed to make inputs in this regard, so that all 490 MPs can be accommodated physically.

Chairperson, it is essential that Parliament is also capacitated in respect of its staff contingent. In this respect we welcome the appointment of the new Secretary to Parliament, Mr Xolile George, as well as thank Ms Tyawa for her term as Acting Secretary, under difficult circumstances. With Mr Xolile’s appointment we look forward to greater stability in the management of Parliament, as the institution moves forward.

Through you Chairperson, we would also like to thank the Speaker for her open-door collaborative approach in including political party leaders in strategy and decision-making in respect of how best Parliament can function and hold the Executive to account. It is most welcome, and we look forward to such meetings continuing as it enhances the way in which we conduct the business of Parliament. We would also like to again raise the issue of the Presidency: this Department receives its budget from Treasury, yet Parliament does not have oversight. We would like to ask: when is the Speaker going to establish a Portfolio Committee. What is the Speaker doing to establish such?

In respect of the Budget of Parliament, it has certainly shown a positive balance surplus, as we have not been spending on items usually associated with physical parliamentary settings. This should be channelled into additional IT equipment and possibly the provision of UPS inverter systems, so that load-shedding will not interfere with parliamentarians as they perform their day-to-day oversight and accountability duties from digital platforms, until such time as full physical sittings are possible.

Chairperson, according to a recent survey by AfroBarometer, only 27% of South Africans state that they have faith in Parliament. Democracy and the institutions that uphold democracy appear to be in decline and not just in Africa - trust in democratic governments is slipping the world over. This presents us not with a challenge but rather, an opportunity to turn the tide, take restorative action, and rebuild our faltering institution to its former glory, post-1994.

The IFP supports the Budget Vote.

I thank you.