Honourable Speaker,

Mr President,

Fellow South Africans,

In January 2019, a select group of business executives were invited to a dinner on the side lines of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.

At that dinner, the host stood up and described the term in office of South Africa’s former President, Jacob Zuma, as “nine wasted years.”

Influential people who attended the dinner said they were impressed with the forthrightness of the comment. According to one attendee – and I quote:

“It made me think about how the country had been run in the last years. We lost some of the gains we had.”

And who was the speaker at that dinner?

It was none other than President Cyril Ramaphosa, talking about the administration of his ANC predecessor.

As we look back now on that early period of the Ramaphosa presidency through the lens of this year’s State of the Nation Address, we arrive at one, inescapable conclusion.

That you, Mr President, are guilty of something even worse than the thing you once accused Zuma of.

For if President Zuma presided over nine wasted years, then President Ramaphosa has presided over five disastrous years.

If you thought we “lost some gains” under Zuma, then under this administration, we have only gained losses.

To quote one of the ANC’s favourite thinkers, Karl Marx: “History repeats itself – first as tragedy, then as farce.”

This is exactly what you have wrought on South Africa, Mr President.

What happened under Zuma was a tragedy. But what happened under your watch is a farce.

The “New Dawn” was a false dawn. Ramaphoria was a delusion. Your supposed commitment to reform was hollow.

Unemployment has skyrocketed from 36% to 43% since Mr Ramaphosa became President in 2018.

Murder has increased by 20% over the same period, with 70 people murdered in this country every day.

And, as we all know, rolling power blackouts have become a permanent feature of life in the Ramaphosa era.

In fact, when he became President in 2018, South Africa spent a total of six days under load-shedding. We thought back then, we had reached the bottom.

Since then, it has gone up every year – first to 22 days, then 35 days, then 48 days. Last year, it grew to 157 days.

Sadly, it looks like 2023 is going to smash that shameful record. Already this year, we have had over 1 000 consecutive hours of load-shedding – and counting.

Mr President, you may not have realised it, but this year’s SONA was your last chance to lead this country onto a fundamentally different and better path.

Last Thursday, you spoke to a nation that had arrived on the banks of a great river.

On this side of the river, behind us, lay the treacherous road we have walked for the past three decades under the ANC.

This is the socialist approach that his party embarked on back in 1997 when they formally adopted the policy of cadre deployment, in order to “control every lever of the state”.

His party believes that if if the state controls the economy, it will be better than if the people control the economy through open markets.

They believe the best way to deliver an affordable, reliable energy supply for the nation is for the ANC to keep full control of South Africa’s energy production.

They believe that the best way to provide affordable, reliable rail transport for the nation is for them to keep full control of the railway lines.

They believe that the best way to manage a pandemic is for their “National Command Centre” to decide who must be locked down and who can go out to earn a living.

That is why this road is marked by stage 6 load-shedding, that reaches right into the homes of all South Africans, every single day.

It is marked by failing public services.

By hospitals that cannot treat the sick.

By trains that no longer run.

And by a police service that cannot keep people safe.

These are no longer warnings about what will happen under the ANC’s failed approach of centralised state control. They are now the reality of daily life in South Africa.

Yet as we stood on the riverbank last Thursday, we could look across to the other side, where we saw a road extending to a fundamentally different, better future.

But to get there – to turn our backs on decades of failed ANC policies – we first had to cross that great river. Knowing that if we ever got to the other side, the rushing torrent would ensure that we never turned back.

On Thursday, a courageous leader who really cared about this nation would have had the head and the heart to admit that his party is wrong. That it’s time to cross the Rubicon and embrace the opposite of socialism, which is Power to the People.

Make no mistake about it. South Africans were ready to cross. The men, women and children of this country are tired to their very core from the abuse the ANC has put them through.

So, last Thursday, we looked to you. Our President.

We asked you to show us the way across the river.

To unleash the power of the market to solve our electricity crisis.

To get the incapable state out of the way of the incredible resourcefulness and creativity of the South African people.

To put us on the same road to economic freedom that all of the world’s prosperous nations have travelled.

Because we don’t want to rely on being resilient. We want to rely on being resourceful.

We don’t want to rely on meagre social grants. We want to rely on our own jobs and businesses.

We don’t want to rely on your cadres. We want to rely on ourselves.

And what did our leader do on that riverbank, with the fate of a nation at stake?

President Cyril Ramaphosa could not cross the Rubicon.

Even as our nation pleaded with him to do the right thing and take us onto the new, hopeful path on the other side of the great Rubicon River, he could not take his eyes off the rapids.

Even as the people of South Africa raised their voices in frustration, all he could do was stare, terrified, at the challenge.

Instead of leading us across the Rubicon at the SONA of 2023, Mr Ramaphosa told us to turn around. To stay on this side of the riverbank. To double down on the same failed ANC approach of state control that created the crisis in the first place.

Too weak, too indecisive and too cowardly to take on the cadres, the compromised, and the vested interests in the political party he leads, he turned his back on the Rubicon, on us, and on the only pathway that can save this country.

Instead of getting the state out of the way of private electricity generation, he gave sweeping powers to the same Minister who abused the people of this country during Covid.

Instead of deregulating and unleashing private sector electricity generation, he centralised even more power in his super-presidency.

Instead of privatising failed state-owned enterprises, he created a massive new SOE to provide fresh looting opportunities to cadres.

Instead of removing the incompetent Ministers of Energy and Public Enterprises who block reform, he added yet another Ministry to his bloated Cabinet.

By once again expanding rather than shrinking the role of the State, the President has all but guaranteed that load-shedding and all the other terrible crises we face will only get worse.

But a curious thing also happened after Thursday’s SONA.

Mr Ramaphosa clearly believed that the people would simply follow him as he told us to turn away from the Rubicon. He took for granted that the people would oblige and follow him back down the road to decay and decline.

He has gravely miscalculated.

Instead of following him, the people have stayed put – their eyes still transfixed on the promise of prosperity on the opposite shore.

The response to Mr Ramaphosa’s SONA makes it clear that he has placed the political interests of his dying party ahead of the needs of the country one too many times.

By cowering from the Rubicon, he has definitively lost the support of this country.

Last Thursday will forever be remembered as the day that history overtook President Ramaphosa.

By failing to listen to the cries of the people and doubling down on the failed ideology of state control that caused the crisis in our country, the government has effectively deserted us.

But that does not mean we can’t still cross the great river.

Yes, Thuma Mina was an empty slogan.

Yes, The New Dawn was a cruel mirage.

Yes, Phala Phala showed us who he really is.

Yes, we too wonder why he is still doing this job.

Because it is now quite clear Mr Ramaphosa has failed.

But, thanks to our democracy, we are never wholly dependent on one person.

Our democracy still offers us a way across the Rubicon.

But there is a catch. Now that the President has failed to lead us, we will have to build a bridge across the raging waters ourselves, at next year’s national election.

During his speech, the President claimed we are defined by platitudes like “hope” and “resilience.”

Wrong, Mr President. We should be a nation defined by our commitment to constitutional democracy. Because it is democracy that offers us a way out when a leader has nothing but platitudes left to offer.

It is for precisely a moment such as this, when a leader fails a nation, that we have a democracy.

If we want to get this country onto a better path

before load-shedding and economic decline make it impossible to recover, now is the time to use our democracy.

And let there be no doubt that there is only one party that offers our country a realistic way across the Rubicon and onto a better path.

While ANC-run municipalities collapse, there is only one party that is systematically fixing municipalities like Midvaal in Gauteng, uMngeni in KwaZulu-Natal and Kouga in the Eastern Cape.

As cadre deployment corruption rips apart the very fabric of the State, there is only one party that runs a clean and competent provincial government in the Western Cape.

And as power cuts get worse by the day, there is only one party that is working day and night to end load-shedding where we govern. That is why Cape Town recently became the very first government in the country to start buying electricity from the open market, and with hundreds of megawatts of power set to come online in the next few years.

That party – the only party that can save South Africa – is the Democratic Alliance.

Today, I stand before the people of our country not to offer you more idealistic dreams, like bullet trains, smart cities and empty talk of “hope.”

We tried the idealism of the New Dawn, and it turned into a false dawn.

Now, let’s try pragmatism.

For that is what we in the DA offer this country.

A credible, pragmatic and realistic set of solutions that will get South Africa across the Rubicon.

Where the ANC only offers more of the same by assigning ever more power over our lives to the incapable state, the DA offers to give power back to the people.

Rather than seeking to control “all levers of power,” the DA stands for something fundamentally different, and better. For liberal democracy, where power over economic decisions is decentralised into the hands of the people.

Accountability. Non-racialism. Commitment to the rule of law. And a social market economy that embraces the private sector as a partner. Zero tolerance for corruption.

It is these timeless principles of liberal democracy that have turned around the municipalities and the province where the DA already governs. By making the right choice in 2024, voters can bring this same DA difference at a national level.

And let’s be clear about one thing: the DA is the only game in town for anyone who really wants to cross the Rubicon and save South Africa.

The latest polling shows that we are just 10 percentage points behind the ANC.

Support for the once-mighty ANC is crashing, having been reduced to only 37%, with the DA catching up fast with 27% and growing. We are closing that gap!

No matter how anyone tries to spin it, our country now faces a very clear binary choice. There are only two options:

Next year, the national government will either be led by the ANC, or by the DA.

We will either have a Yellow coalition, led by the ANC, that keeps us trapped on the wrong side of the Rubicon, firmly on the road to a failed State.

Or we will have a Blue coalition, led by the DA, that leads our country across the Rubicon into a better, brighter and more prosperous future.

Honourable Speaker,

The people of South Africa know very well what needs to be done to fix this country.

South Africans are ready to embrace private electricity generation. To privatise failed state-owned enterprises. To replace race-based policies that only empower the connected ANC elite with non-racial policies that benefit the poor. To build an inclusive, social market economy.

The people are ready to cross the Rubicon.

And the good news is that we can still do it. We will just need to do it without Mr Ramaphosa.

By uniting behind the DA next year, we can leave behind the failed and corrupt state-led paradigm for good.

On the other side of the Rubicon awaits a new country. Where load-shedding and corruption become things of the past. Where quality education and healthcare become available to all. Where millions of people can move out of poverty and into economic opportunity. And where all of us feel safe.

The truth is that the ANC is not going lead us into this future. It represents the past.

The challenges we face are large, and tough battles lie ahead of us. But outside this City Hall and across South Africa there are millions of ordinary, hardworking citizens who are desperate for change.

In the face of growing hardship inflicted by this government, these are the people who still get up every day to build a better life for their families and our country.

These are the people we have alongside us.

Together, we can build a land of prosperity and opportunity – but we are going to need a government that’s working with us, not against us.

The only way we will get there, is by using our democracy next year to elect a new DA-led government, with the courage to do what Mr Ramaphosa couldn’t: cross the Rubicon.

Thank you.