Mr John Steenhuisen (DA)

Madam Speaker

Honourable President

Honourable Members

This is a strange SONA to debate, because large parts of the president’s speech are straight from the DA’s playbook.

Let’s be clear: That’s a good thing.

What we need, if we want to fight poverty, is agreement on where and how jobs are created. And for the first time someone from that side of the House seemed to get it.

On Thursday evening the president didn’t sound like a man leading the ANC, a party obsessed with centralised control of the economy and reliant on a massively bloated public sector.

Channeling the DA, the said. “Government doesn’t create jobs; businesses create jobs… government must create the conditions that will enable the private sector”.

What remains unclear though is which of these views represents the real ANC?

For almost three decades this government has done just about all it can to discourage job creation in the private sector through terrible, draconian regulations and labour laws.

For almost three decades the ANC has stuck to its ideological guns of putting government and the state at the centre of economic growth and job creation.

And for almost three decades it has treated the small business owner as its enemy, doing all it can to extract their taxes and their goodwill, while forcing them to jump through extraordinary hoops of compliance with labour legislation, BEE and a raft of other irrational requirements.

And then suddenly, on Thursday evening, we hear a different story. So what changed?

Mr President, I’m sure you’ve seen all the analysts’ comments that you must have been reading the DA’s manifesto.

But that statement needs some correcting. A manifesto is just a declaration of intentions, not achievements. Anyone can talk about the things they want to do.

None of the things in your speech that you seemingly appropriated from the DA came from a wish list. They are things we already do where we govern.

You borrowed from the DA’s track record, not its manifesto. And that’s an important distinction to make when trying to understand why our economy, under your government, remains trapped in quicksand.

It all comes down to the difference between talking and doing. And that’s what we need to keep in mind when we debate the positive things you said on Thursday. Are any of them likely to happen?

You talk about building a capable, professional state, but you still insist on deploying unsuitable party loyalists to every corner of the state. Meanwhile the DA has shown you exactly what a capable, merit-based state can look like.

You talk about solving the energy crisis and ending load-shedding, and you’ve been talking about this for well over a decade now. But as we speak, DA governments stand ready to buy their own power directly from independent producers.

You talk about making it easier for small and medium enterprises to operate and comply with regulations by cutting red tape, while the DA does exactly this. The Western Cape government has an incredibly successful Red Tape Reduction Unit, and we introduced a similar Bill in Parliament, only to have it shot down by your party.

You talk about paying government suppliers on time. DA governments consistently pay their suppliers within thirty days.

You see, Mr President, talking is easy. But doing makes the difference. The DA difference.

Cape Town Mayor, Geordin Hill-Lewis, has promised to make Cape Town the most business-friendly city on the continent, and put it right up there among the best in the world.

You might also know that Cape Town already tops the “Ease of Doing Business” rankings in South Africa. This has had a profound effect on new investments, which in turn has spared its residents the worst of the country’s unemployment bloodbath.

But that’s not good enough. The rest of South Africa cannot be the benchmark, because it’s just too low. Cape Town wants to measure itself against the world, and it wants to roll out the red carpet for every possible new job-creating business.

That’s what we mean by the DA difference. The measurable way in which people’s lives improve where the DA governs.

And arguably the biggest DA difference of all is that we get things done.

You talk – year after year, SONA after SONA – while the DA gets things done.

It could have been so different though. When you embarked on your presidency some four years ago, you had all the goodwill and support you needed to put our country back on its feet.

It wasn’t going to be easy, but it was perfectly teed up for you. You were the darling of the media and business fell over its feet to help you out and give you money.

All you had to do was to start acting on some of your promises of the first SONA. Just a little bit of progress, and then some more the next year, and the year after that.

But the reality is, very little happened.

And so South Africans heard the same old empty promises each year about how jobs will be created, how load-shedding will end, how broadband spectrum will be auctioned and how corruption will be dealt with.

Every year another task team, another commission, another road show, another social compact, another stakeholder engagement. All just kicking the can down the road, at taxpayer expense.

Now you tell us your government has given itself “100 days to finalise a social compact to grow our economy, create jobs and combat hunger.”

No one can argue with those goals.

But what were you doing for the last 100, or 1000 days, for that matter? We’ve been in this crisis for a very long time. It’s incomprehensible that you’ve come to SONA to tell us you’re now going to start thinking of a plan?

You should have used SONA to announce the plan. And not only the plan, but the progress on implementation.

Don’t say. Do.

And again, on Thursday, you told us that those responsible for State Capture will be punished.

But if you read the first two Zondo reports you’d know that you still continue to employ many of the implicated in your cabinet.

In your fifth state of the nation address you’re still promising prosecutions, yet not one implicated cadre has been charged and convicted.

Don’t say. Do.

So while I’d love to feel buoyed by your newfound insights into job creation, small enterprises, cutting red tape, simplifying labour laws, and supporting our nation’s employers, I’ve seen this film enough times to know that this is where it likely ends.

And so does everyone else, which is why the common theme of the post SONA media analysis was: “Nice words, pity it won’t happen.”

After all that goodwill and hope four years ago, you have today become the president of the comforting catchphrase, the soothing reassurance and the empty promises. Dr Do Nothing.

But here’s the thing, Mr President, we cannot have a conversation about this inaction without turning our attention to the elephant in the room. Or, should I say, the 64 elephants in the room.

You know what I’m talking about, right? Your cabinet ministers and their deputies – 64 of you, including 28 ministers, 34 deputy ministers, plus your deputy president and yourself.

Even after trimming and consolidating ministries a couple of years ago, you still ended up presiding over one of the biggest cabinets in the world. A massive jobs-for-cadres scheme where no one is too corrupt, too lazy, or too useless to land one of these plush jobs.

Every energy reform, every measure to unshackle our economy, every intention to support businesses and grow jobs sinks like a tonne of bricks the moment you walk into your next cabinet meeting.

Almost no one on your Executive would be employable in the private sector, and some of them should frankly be behind bars.

But instead of cleaning out your cabinet you simply reshuffle the inept and the corrupt, again and again, until every single ministry has the grubby fingerprints of failure all over it.

You stand up in your SONA and you talk about building a capable state. But you’re not prepared to walk away from the very essence of state capture and the incapable state: the ANC policy of cadre deployment.

Clearly, you know your cabinet cannot be trusted to get things done. You have effectively admitted that by setting up a parallel state in your own office.

Your appointment of outsiders like Sipho Nkosi, Mavuso Msimang and Daniel Mminele to do the job of your cabinet says it all.

In a functional democracy, you would have fired most of your cabinet ages ago, but we all know why you haven’t.

We’ve all seen the video where, without a hint of shame, you state, and I quote: “I would rather be seen as a weak president than split the ANC because that is not my mission. My mission is to keep the ANC united.”

In other words, you see your job as holding together this rag-tag mob of crooks and free-loaders, even if that means the destruction of our country.

Why else would minister Bheki Cele still have a job in your cabinet after the spectacular failure of SAPS to protect people and property during the riots of July last year? Over 300 people lost their lives.

You should hold him accountable, but you don’t.

Why does Minister Ayanda Dlodlo still have a job in your cabinet? As Minister of State Security, the lack of state intelligence during and preceding the July riots fell squarely on her shoulders.

You should hold her accountable, but instead you simply redeployed her to Public Service and Administration, while the third person responsible for July’s chaos, Defence Minister Nosiviwe Mapisa Nqakula, found herself redeployed as Speaker of this House.

Why does Minister Lindiwe Sisulu still have a job as Tourism Minister? Over the past 28 years she has left her trail of mediocrity across five different departments. And if that wasn’t enough to get rid of her, surely her despicable attack on our constitution and our judiciary was.

Why does Minister Gwede Mantashe still have a job as Energy Minister? We have now entered our fourteenth year of load-shedding. We have children at high school who have never known a time without these constant blackouts.

You can’t speak to the world about green energy and fixing our electricity crisis while Mr Coal over there can’t see beyond fossil fuels. Will you hold him accountable for dragging our country backwards into the Dark Ages? Of course not.

Why does Minister Patricia de Lille still have a job with Public Works? If the Beitbridge border fence fiasco wasn’t enough reason to dismiss her, then surely the fact that Parliament burnt down on her watch was.

Why does Minister Angie Motshekga still serve as our Education Minister? She’s had this same job for 13 years now, and during this time almost 6 million children dropped out of school before their matric exams.

Forget about the pass rate she crows about every year, because this means nothing when half our children don’t even sit down to write the exams. If our widening inequality is something that worries you, that is where you should start looking.

Why does Minister Stella Ndabeni-Abrahams still have a job as Minister of Small Business Development? Her transgressions in her previous role as Communications Minister as well as her flouting of lockdown regulations were already enough to fire her.

So why promote her to this crucial portfolio, only to appoint an outsider to come and do her job of cutting red tape?

Why does Minister Lindiwe Zulu still have a job in your cabinet? Surely, when you saw her spraying destitute people with a water cannon for the “crime” of waiting in a queue to collect a SASSA grant, there should’ve been no doubt that she’s not suitable for the job.

But there she is – still your Minister of Social Development.

Why on earth does Minister Fikile Mbalula still have a job as Transport Minister? Or any minister, for that matter? How is this the third ministry he’s headed up?

If the collapse of our railway infrastructure on his watch wasn’t grounds for dismissal, then surely this mess with our only drivers licence printing machine should’ve been the final nail in his coffin.

But it seems, like every other deadbeat minister, he is unfireable.

And finally, why does Minister Ebrahim Patel still serve on your cabinet? If indeed you believe, as you said last week, that the private sector and not government should be creating jobs, why put a sworn communist in charge of trade and industry?

A large part of our country’s 46.6% unemployment rate rests squarely on his shoulders. Have you held him accountable? No, of course you haven’t.

Accountability is something you only talk about, because actually doing something about it would mean firing most of your cabinet and upsetting your comrades. And we all know you’d rather be a weak president than do that.

So here is what’s going to happen, Mr President. Because you are a president of talk and not a president of action, we will make it easier for you by tabling a Motion of No Confidence, not in you, but in your whole cabinet in terms of Section 102 of the Constitution.=

If it’s not possible for you to hold your Executive accountable and still survive as president, then we will take that burden off your hands and let this House fire them for you.

Once we’ve done that, we’ll bring back all our Bills of reform to this House:

Our ISMO energy reform Bill, our Ease of Doing Business Bill, our Red Tape Impact Assessment Bill, our Public Investment Corporation Amendment Bill, our Small Enterprise Ombudsman Bill and our End Cadre Deployment Bill.

And then we’ll let this House help you do your job by implementing the reforms you could only talk about.

While we’re doing that, our governments in metros and municipalities across the country will help you do your job by becoming less dependent on Eskom, by taking over more policing duties from national government, and hopefully by taking over and fixing commuter rail.

Our governments will do all they can to fix the mess you created in our schools.

And our governments will continue to make it easier to run businesses and create jobs as we try to undo decades of your destructive economic policies.

Because we cannot sit through another year of your talk while our country slides backwards and millions more fall into poverty and joblessness.

So you can either stand back and watch us take over your duties one by one, or you can let us help you break the paralysis of your presidency by pushing through your own reforms in this House.

I assure you, as I have many times in the past, that you will find much support on this side of the House for a reform agenda

Mr President, you might just have enough time left to rewrite the story of your Presidency and salvage your legacy, but that would require taking action, now.

So what do you say, Mr President? Are we going to help you fire your cabinet and give your Executive a fresh start?

Will you let us help you drive through the economic reforms that your comrades don’t support?

Or are you content to see out your time in office as the president too afraid to put his country before his party?

The choice is yours.