

Minister Ndabeni-Abrahams must work together with the SABC and Treasury to save the public broadcaster

Phumzile Van Damme MP – DA Shadow Minister of Communications and Digital Technologies

Honourable Chairperson,

On the State of the Nation (SONA) red carpet the Minister of Communications and Digital Technologies, Stella Ndabeni-Abrahams declared that her dress “...was to remind South Africans that Stella is a princess.”

I thought it bizarre that a Minister, a public representative, would see it fit to “remind” the people of South Africa that she is a princess, and not a servant of the people as she was elected to be.

Princess Stella’s attitude was unfortunately not limited to the red carpet.

It became patently clear that the Minister did indeed consider herself a fairytale princess to whom all must bow.

Her approach and treatment of the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) is indeed of one who considers herself above the law that applies to us common folk.

She claimed that the judgment of High Court judgment in the *SOS Support Public Broadcasting Coalition*, and by implication, the Broadcasting Act did not really apply to her role in her role as the Minister of Communications.

In reference to the effects of the Broadcasting Act and its implications on the Minister’s relationship with the SABC’s board, Matojane J held:

Because the SABC is the medium that should allow the free flow of ideas that is necessary for our democracy to function, the state must ensure that it has the necessary structural and operational independence.

The judgment further read:

The Minister, as the representative of the sole shareholder and not a member of the Board, does not have the right to act on behalf of SABC or to manage its business or affairs... The ultimate decision-making power is that of the Board and not the Minister as a sole shareholder...”

This means, Chairperson, that the Minister has a constitutional duty to work with the SABC, without unduly interfering in operational decisions taken by the board.

And this is not my own interpretation of the judgment and the Broadcasting Act, but of a Constitutional Law Professor.

Now Minister, if you consider yourself as above the law, above our courts - uzoshelela kabi. The editorial of the City Press this Sunday, if your behaviour is anything to go by, is correct: Hlaudi Motsoeneng took the SABC to the edge of the cliff, you appear to be determined to tip it over the edge.

Minister, in the spirit of working together please ensure that the important role that the SABC plays in our democracy is protected, supported and respected.

This is a heartfelt plea I make on behalf of those people of our country who do not have money for Netflix and Showmax; DSTV, and in some cases televisions, are allowed the opportunity to be provided with compelling informative, educational and entertaining content by the public broadcaster

This is a heartfelt plea I make on behalf of the thousands of staff members at the SABC, who lived through the Hlaudi Motsoeneng reign of terror, and now live in a time of uncertainty with only 3 months of salaries left in the SABC's coffers.

We applaud the SABC's staff who made sure that probably for the first time in democratic South Africa, coverage of the election was fair across parties.

Is this why the Minister is upset, that the SABC is no longer exists to serve only the ANC's interests? Is it because the SABC bravely reported on how she attempted to block reporters from covering protests at an ANC manifesto launch? Is that why?

Well, build a bridge and get over it and stop putting your ego above that of the people of South Africa.

You have National Treasury's eleven preconditions. Work together with the SABC in good faith, and National Treasury so that the people of our country do not have to continue to suffer. You may live a life of luxury. They do not.

To the SABC I say, continue your good work thus far, but please release the following documents that are long outstanding:

- The revised Editorial Policy;
- The report on Political Interference at the SABC; and
- The results of the staff and salaries audit you conducted.

This is work that does not require funding from National Treasury, and we trust that those will be released soon for public scrutiny.

Chairperson, I must state that I am incredibly excited about the inclusion of Digital Technologies as part of the department's mandate. I trust that in the Medium-Term Budget Policy Statement (MTBPS) adequate funding will be allocated to this important mandate.

I offer the Minister some suggestions from the Democratic Alliance (DA) that will propel South African from the 20th century into the 21st.

I studied international best-practice and would suggest that the Department consider these ideas for implementation. This is but one idea, and I look forward to sharing others with the Department.

Last month, the UK government announced new measures to ensure the regulatory system can effectively support technology innovation. A Regulatory Council will be formed to government will be advised of regulations that need to evolve and adapt to respond to changes in technology. I believe the same is needed in South Africa so that companies in this sector are not hamstrung by onerous legislation. With adequate support, much needed new jobs can be created in our country.

Innovation is key if our country is to create new jobs. We cannot stick to “how it has always been done”

To my fellow committee members, I have already suggested that as the Communications and Digital Technologies Portfolio Committee, we lead by example in creating a digitized Parliament. There is no need for Parliament to be wasting money on printing documents when the same is sent to us via email. Let’s save costs and let that money be used on improving the lives of the people of our country.

We would also like to see a far more robust committee in holding companies in the private sector accountable. The DA took Bell Pottinger on and won, there is no reason why Parliament could have not done so. Let us not only protect South Africa from the misdeeds of government but also the private sector.

As a final word to the Minister, Chairperson, it is still early in her term. She has time to right wrongs and be the Minister of Communications and Digital Technologies South Africa deserves.

If not, *sizofaka upelepele*.