**Prince Mangosuthu Buthelezi (delivered by Narend Singh)**

National Assembly: 14 February 2022

Honourable Speaker; Honourable Chairperson of the NCOP; Your Excellency the President; Honourable Members.

“In times of crisis, more than at any other time, the President must lead government in communicating a single, clear message about what is happening, why it is happening and what the government is doing to address the matter.”

These words, Your Excellency, are taken from the Report of the Expert Panel that investigated the July 2021 civil unrest. That “orgy of violence” left 354 dead and thousands injured. It wiped R50 billion off South Africa’s economy and destroyed thousands of jobs. It left a deep and lasting wound in our nation. And it could have been avoided.

Despite constant warnings from the National Intelligence Coordinating Committee, “The need to stop corruption in government and start addressing the needs of the people kept being kicked down the road, like the proverbial can.” Again, Your Excellency, these are the words of the Report.

As damning as it is, this Report does not stand in isolation. It comes on the heels of the Report on State Capture, and the SIU’s Report on corruption in PPE procurement, and the Global Risks Report of the World Economic Forum.

We ignore – or cherry pick from – these Reports at our peril, for they warn of State collapse, the hollowing out of State institutions, sponsored State capture, national instability, and a “culture of violence and criminality within the ruling party”.

The question we are faced with is whether, in this time of crisis, the President has provided a single, clear message about what is happening, why it is happening and what his government is doing to address the matter.

And then, as we always do in Parliament, we must ask the follow up question: Can we believe the President?

I am not here to question the President’s integrity or even his intent. Indeed, I pity the President, for it would be impossible to address even a fraction of the flood of expectations. But my concern is with the political will, and the ability, of the ruling party to do everything the President has committed to do in his State of the Nation Address.

There is strong precedent to suggest that no matter what the President tells us during SONA, it is not a blueprint but a wish list. It lists all the things that would be nice to have. Yet year after year the commitments made during SONA are delayed, changed or unfulfilled.

Like the President, I cannot respond to even a fraction of what should be addressed. But we must take stock of what the President called “the foremost, overriding priorities of 2021” –

* Defeating the coronavirus pandemic;
* Accelerating economic recovery;
* Creating jobs;
* Fighting corruption; and
* Strengthening the State

While 60% of our people over the age of 50 are fully vaccinated against Covid-19, for those between the ages of 18 and 34, that figure is just 28%. To put it differently, 72% of young South Africans are not protected by a vaccine.

This should drive home the importance of PPEs as the first line of defence in saving lives. How is it then that PPE procurement became a cesspool of dodgy deals, implicating more than 200 government officials in thousands of irregular contracts to the tune of billions of Rands?

We have the single, clear message about what is happening. It is time to face the truth about why it is happening. Without that, any message about what Government is doing to address the matter will be empty intention.

I have commended you before, Honourable President, on moving away from the previous era of telling us a good story. You excel in your blunt assessment of the facts. In February last year, you told us: “Our unemployment rate now stands at a staggering 30.8%.” That was true. But then you told us, “As a result of the relief measures that we implemented and the phased reopening of the economy, we expect to see a strong recovery in employment by the end of the year.”

That strong recovery in employment was nowhere to be seen, as the unemployment rate climbed to 34.4% in the second quarter of 2021, and reached a record high of 34.9% in the third quarter. Within one year, the economically inactive population grew by close to a million people.

With our country’s gross inequalities, some felt the emptiness of SONA’s cheery optimism more than others. By the third quarter of 2021, the official unemployment rate among black South African women was 41.5%. Our women still bear the brunt of an economic crisis that is simply not being handled correctly.

In my mind, I hear the refrain of Nina Simone, calling us to celebrate being “Young, Gifted and Black”. But there is pain is being young, gifted and black when there is no place for you in the labour market and opportunities in the economy are inaccessible. To be young, female and black is to stack the odds even higher against social and economic justice.

The IFP therefore supports the laudable intervention of a relief grant. Last year, we heard that the Social and Economic Relief Package was providing additional grant payments to almost a third of our country’s population. Yet by January this year, the SIU had uncovered 2.1 billion Rands’ worth of irregular contracts. 224 Government officials or entities were referred for disciplinary action and 386 referrals were sent to the National Prosecuting Authority.

Again, there is a single, clear message about what is happening. But why is it happening, Mr President? How has this level of corruption been allowed to establish itself within a government that is meant to be for the people?

It’s not as if we weren’t warned. In September 2020 the Auditor General warned of the risk of abuse of the social relief grant to channel money away from where it was intended to go. Again in March 2021, the Auditor General highlighted the lack of coordination and weak controls that left the relief fund vulnerable to fraud and looting.

We need to make one thing very clear. There is no split between Government and a criminal network that infiltrated Government. When you say, Honourable President, that there was State capture, you imply that it is behind us. But we are still living with its effects. That criminal network, just like those individuals who conspired to defraud Government, was enabled and assisted by officials and leaders in Government. Our own Government became part of a criminal network. Unless we admit to this fact and stop playing semantics, the solution will evade us.

Your Excellency, I have said before that raising our people’s hopes and expectations is dangerous when it will be a hope deferred or an expectation unmet. What happened to the imminent appointments to the National Anti-Corruption Advisory Council? What happened to the land and agrarian reform agency that was being established last year to fast-track land reform?

The National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide was announced in 2019. Three years later, we are still talking about implementing it. There is a trend here.

Both last year and this year you spoke about rolling-out broadband. That policy was adopted by Cabinet nine years ago.

Eight years ago, the IFP’s Dr Mario Oriani-Ambrosini introduced a Private Member’s Bill to unlock the potential of the cannabis sector.

Twenty years ago, as the Minister of Home Affairs, I drafted legislation to streamline the visa process to enable the entry of skills; but my Immigration Bill was mauled by Cabinet.

We do not have all the time in the world.

Honourable President, when you spoke last year about the Lanseria Smart City, you never mentioned that it would take 25 years to complete. When you told us about the Mokolo-Crocodile River water project, you never explained that actual delivery is scheduled for 2026. When you said that the Student Housing Infrastructure Programme would provide 300 000 student beds, you never said ‘over the span of ten years’. In fact, you said it was an approved project for 2021.

Government must look to long-term projects. But let us not pretend that talking about tomorrow’s solutions solves today’s problems. Where are the solutions for today that were started yesterday? Tragically, the answer to that question is likely to become the shocking finding of yet another special investigation.

Honourable President, last year you presented us with, and I quote, “one of the most significant expansions of public and social employment in South Africa’s history” – the Presidential Employment Stimulus. Last week, you told us how it had helped small-scale farmer Mama Nosipho Cekwana from Impendle in KwaZulu-Natal, and that it would now be expanded to reach 250 000 small-scale farmers this year.

Yet on 13 January 2022, the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development suspended Presidential Employment Stimulus vouchers to all subsistence farmers “with immediate effect”, literally taking food off the table in many homes. Why? Because it was not being implemented properly.

Two of the more than 8000 words spoken last Thursday speak volumes. Those two words are “properly managed”. If properly managed, the energy transition will benefit all. If properly managed, the many plans and programmes presented could work. But is our country being properly managed?

Decades ago, I reminded Government that my friend, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, fixed the economy of Britain when she sold the parastatals and slapped down the Trade Union Council’s Arthur Scargill. After that, the UK’s economy blossomed.

Talking about social employment takes us back to socialism. We need to decide now whether ours will be a welfare or a developmental State. Failing to do what is needed and right has caused us far too much damage.