

Minister Ndabeni-Abrahams, this portfolio needs radical and innovative change

By **Zak Mbhele MP** - DA Shadow Minister of Communications

Ndiyabulela Sihlalongaphambili futhi mandibulise kuni nonke. For any informed and consistent observer of the performance of our public sector for the last 10 years or so, there is only one assessment and glaring conclusion to be made: it is time for change. The longstanding trends of under-performance and failure to meet delivery targets mean that, now and more urgently than ever before, it is time to fix the fundamentals and go back to basics.

This is abundantly evident in the Communications and Digital Technologies portfolio where a number of entities are long overdue for fundamental reform, rationalisation and restructuring to turn them around from sluggish and loss-making public companies into self-sustaining and value-adding operations.

Because the truth is that, with declining economic growth and tax revenue forecasts for the foreseeable future, some kind of painful change will happen down the line for these entities whether or not they want it or are ready for it. The journey forward must be about facing and dealing with reality as it, not as we wish it to be. In short, Chairperson, it is time for change.

The Portfolio Committee heard repeatedly during the budget vote hearings about the persistent and growing challenge of increasing competition faced by state-owned companies in their respective service markets. This was relayed to us by Broadband Infraco, the Post Office and the SABC. Although the Minister has to date poured cold water on the idea, we maintain as the DA that some kind of consortium approach in these markets may be more effective and sustainable in the long-term, meaning the onboarding of private sector equity partners, as has been the discussion regarding other state-owned enterprises like SAA and Eskom.

In alignment with the rhetoric frequently used by President Ramaphosa, state entities should be pursuing co-operative compacts with various “social partners” and adopting a perspective shift that promotes collaboration, instead of competition, between them and brings about synergy, instead of the silo approach that has been the status quo.

We cannot keep doing what we have always done and expect to achieve different results. A key feature of strategic and effective leadership is to know when it is time to change track and discern when the conventional ways are no longer appropriate. As my late mother once said to me when I was considering to continue playing rugby as I moved from the Under 16 junior division to the Open senior division, “*Y’indaba ufuna ukudlala lomdlalo when there will be older, stronger players than you on the field? Uzolimala kabi...*”, which is an acutely applicable caution for many of our state-owned companies and public sector entities.

Minister Stella-Ndabeni earlier outlined the plans, intentions and ambitions of the Department and entities in the portfolio, but that was nothing substantively different from what we have heard or come to expect in these budget vote debates. Successive ANC governments have

always been about plans, intentions and ambitions but have fallen short on implementation, performance and results.

One can already predict with some degree of confidence that, barring some kind of miracle, the Broadcast Digital Migration process will fall victim to delays, bottlenecks and budget shortfalls, missing the March 2022 deadline for completion. Assuming that the analogue signal switch-off proceeds, regardless of the completion of the phased migration process as it relates to set-top box and voucher subsidy distribution, we can expect that thousands, if not tens of thousands, of households will experience what could be called “broadcast signal shedding”, just as households across the country are currently experienced power loadshedding.

Minister, it is time for change in this portfolio, radical and innovative change, because without it, for all your good intentions and well-articulated plans, and to borrow a metaphor from aviation, a good flight plan is no good if the aeroplane does not have enough fuel in the tank and its engines are outdated, defective and in need of major repair and overhaul.