

Response to the Debate on The Presidency Budget Vote

National Assembly, Cape Town, 24 June 2004

Madame Speaker,
Deputy President,
Honourable Members,
Ladies and gentlemen:

I would like to thank the Honourable Members for the comments and observations they made during the debate on the Budget Vote of the Presidency. The Hon Sybil Seaton urged that to deepen democracy and promote non-racialism, we should draw on the contributions of all political parties and civil society.

I agree with this advice. Accordingly, we have taken note of the suggestions made by the various Members who spoke yesterday. This does not necessarily mean that we agree with these suggestions. What it does mean is that we should at least consider the suggestions and not ignore or reject them simply because they have been made by parties other than the ruling party.

For instance the Hon Pieter Mulder said "In 1993 and 1996, we were forced to talk to each other on these problems (relating to the place of Afrikaners and Afrikaans in our society.) Now elections and the style in this house force us to fight as opponents. It makes these problems worse and does not solve any."

I would like to assure the Hon Mulder that we do not have to fight as opponents. Like him, the government is concerned that in everything we do we should ensure that the Afrikaners and the Afrikaans-speaking people are not discriminated against, being treated with the sensitivity and dignity that must be accorded to all our people, regardless of race, colour or gender.

I am certain that the former Member of this House, Cassie Aucamp, will not object to my mentioning the fact that he has not accepted the pessimistic view expressed by the Hon Pieter Mulder. I say this because not long ago, he approached me to raise various matters not different from those mentioned by the Hon Pieter Mulder.

We will respond to the suggestions he made, precisely to ensure that such concerns as those mentioned by the Hon Mulder are addressed. I would also like to assure the Hon Mulder that we will discuss these same issues with him.

In this regard I would also like to draw the attention of the Hon Mulder to the remarks made by the Deputy President concerning the operationalisation of the Commission for the Promotion of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities. I am certain that it would help all of us if the Hon Mulder approached the Deputy President to see in what ways this important Commission might help to address the issues he raised.

I agree with the Hon Sybil Seaton that in the interests of all our citizens we should ensure that the Presidency functions smoothly and efficiently and that the interaction between the Presidency and Parliament should continue to be, as she puts it, 'both streamlined and seamless'.

The matter she raised relating to salaries of Members of Parliament has been affected by the new amendments to the relevant legislation, which have meant that the Commission on Remuneration of Office Bearers had to follow new procedures for the determination of these salaries. The consultative process was also delayed by the elections. However the Commission is giving urgent attention to this matter.

The honourable Patricia De Lille made the point that we should align our poverty alleviation programmes so as to achieve maximum impact. Already the cluster system that we have announced in this House has begun to have a positive impact on government's planning, implementation and monitoring.

Although the Honourable Member said she is looking forward to fulfilling her function of watching closely, I would suggest that she extend that role to include finding ways of practically assisting in the implementation of all these programmes whose main objective is to bring a better life to all our people.

This I believe is the task of our public representatives, to ensure that they are not merely content to watch the unfolding processes from the sidelines, but that they become active participants in the transformation of our country into a non-racial, non-sexist, democratic and prosperous society.

The Honourable Motsoko Pheko is correct when he says that the National Youth Commission should work for the development of all young people, irrespective of party affiliation, geographic location or gender. Indeed, the National Youth Commission should communicate better so as to reach more young people.

Both Honourable members Meshoe and Nefolovhode have made appeals for urgent intervention in the situation in the DRC. I can assure the honourable members that we are fully engaged in that situation and we will continue to do whatever we can to help bring peace and stability to that country.

The Hon Stephens of the UDM knows that monetary policy is a responsibility of the Reserve Bank. He might therefore direct his comments to Governor Mboweni. He is also aware of the steps taken by the government to mediate the impact of the high price of crude oil. We will keep this matter under constant review. At an appropriate time, the Minister of Health will respond to the proposal to make AIDS a notifiable disease.

I am particularly happy that most speakers agreed with the programme we have put before Parliament and the country. I also agree with the various emphases that the Hon Members made with regard to various elements of the programme, including poverty eradication, youth development, the empowerment of people with disabilities, gender equality and the emancipation of women and the improvement of our educational system to produce the skilled people we need. I trust that we will all find ways of making our own contributions to the successful implementation of the programme with which most of us seem to be agreed.

But with regard to the wider context, I would like to thank the Hon Sybil Seaton and the Hon Tony Leon for their contributions to the discussion of the important question of what we want to do with our country and ourselves.

I trust that others among us will follow their example and contribute their views about the future of our political and economic systems.

In this regard, surely we must agree with the often-expressed view of the Democratic Alliance that a vibrant democracy necessarily means the coexistence of diverse views. Accordingly, we should not judge any national debate as having succeeded or failed merely by the extent to which it has or has not led to the emergence of a consensus.

The fact is that among ourselves, we may and will disagree on many issues. There is no rule that requires that any of our national debates should lead either to agreement or disagreement. Neither does the fact that we do not and will not agree on a number of issues constitute a threat to democracy, or translate into bad manners or behaviour on the part of the government.

The very persistence of different points of view, and especially the availability of the political space to express and propagate these different views, signify precisely the health of our democracy.

But sometimes I get the impression that some believe that the President of the Republic is excluded from enjoying the right to hold and propagate views that may differ from those held by other people. The rule seems to be that the President should only say those things about which everybody is agreed.

This condemns the President merely to project those views accepted by public opinion, or media opinion posing as public opinion, as common knowledge, prohibiting the President from saying anything that some may characterise as "controversial".

I raise this matter because I was concerned at the import of some of the comments made by the Hon Seaton. For instance she called for acceptance of criticism. This has never been a problem. The problem arises when our response to criticism, the exercise of our own right to hold and express our own views, is read as a frightening intolerance of criticism.

In a speech he delivered a fortnight ago, on June 10th, the Hon Tony Leon conveyed this message when he said "There is fear across the country that one might incur the displeasure and wrath of the ANC; that one might be denounced as a racist; that one might inadvertently express agreement with or support someone who has already been denounced as a racist - someone like the leader of the DA, for example.

It will have truly surprised everybody in the ruling party to hear from the Hon Leon that "The sad truth is that there is precious little intellectual independence from the ANC in business, in the media, in civil society, in the universities. (And that) indeed even in the rest of the opposition, there is no real independence from the ANC..."

In the light of all this, the Hon Leon says "We desperately need in our country a plurality of views and true intellectual and moral independence from the ruling party."

This conclusion is based on an assessment of what is happening in the country with which we disagree. Indeed if we had the time, we could demonstrate quite easily that what the Hon Leon believes is desperately needed is precisely what characterises public discourse in our country.

Of course it may be that when he speaks of a desperate need for a plurality of views, he is calling on everybody to differ with and oppose the ruling party, regardless of the merits of the propositions of this ruling party. This amounts to arguing that to agree with what is patently correct is to suppress the plurality of views.

Apart from anything else, all this amounts to an attempt to frighten everybody with false propositions to encourage opposition to the ruling party merely for the sake of opposition, for obvious reasons. The strategy of the use of fear is reflected in the comments he made about the pronouncements of the Ministers of Minerals and Energy and Agriculture and Land Affairs.

To take only the latter, the Minister of Agriculture was correct to call for a national discussion of the issue of foreign land ownership. To stop this discussion, which will take place, the Hon Leon seeks to frighten the country with the notion that "restrictions on foreign ownership are a red flag for foreign investors."

And yet many countries have such restrictions. These include Switzerland and Canada, to cite only two. We know of no reports that this has served as a "red flag" to the foreigners who have invested in these countries.

Quite why Switzerland and Canada can have such restrictions without frightening foreign investors, while similar restrictions in our country would produce an opposite response from foreign investors is difficult to fathom.

There will be time in future to discuss the ideological construct advanced by the Hon Leon which results in him talking about a so-called fundamental contradiction "the racial nationalism of the ANC on the one hand, and the liberal democratic values of our nation's Constitution, on the other."

Suffice it for now to say that what he has sought to do is to superimpose this construct on our history and contemporary reality not to improve our understanding of that history and reality, but to obscure them to create the space for the hegemony of the socio-economic paradigm Will Hutton described as American conservatism.

The end point he wants us to arrive at is explained in a speech he made on Youth Day, June 16th, when he spoke of an economic policy with such elements as "a minimal budget deficit, lower taxation, a deregulated labour market, privatisation, enterprise zones, opportunity vouchers and the like."

To get there, he believes that among other things, he must convince us that the African majority in our country was not oppressed and exploited as Africans but as individuals, and that the legacy of that past impacts on this majority not as Africans, but as individuals.

This derives from the proposition contained in the same speech that "For us, (the DA), society is comprised at its most basic level of individuals, and not of racially defined groups, or for that matter of classes or ethnic groups...As liberals we do believe that people are more than the sum of the forces that are brought to bear on them, or at least that the combination of forces produces individuals with a unique outlook on the world, who construct their own meaning and who are best placed to apprehend their own truth, or truths."

If this has any meaning, it constitutes a vain attempt to eradicate our history. Accordingly, the Africans as a national group did not and do not exist. What we had and have are merely individual Africans, who were oppressed as individuals and who suffer from the legacy of racism as individuals.

They did not come together as a national group to fight oppression, but struggled as individuals, each constructing his or her "own meaning, (being) best placed to apprehend their own truth, or truths." Necessarily therefore, our response to the challenge to eradicate the legacy of racism is wrong to seek to uplift the Africans as a national group. Rather we should seek to change the lot of the individual African, unique in himself or herself.

And since there are no classes, only individuals, the workers are also wrong to have combined in trade unions.

All this is the "celebration of individualism" and an attempt to create a society in which "individuals...shoulder their burdens and exercise their rights alone", of which Will Hutton writes. I do not know what will happen to the Hon Leon when he wakes up one day and discovers that there are individual Africans who belong to the African national group, that there are individual workers who belong to the working class, and that there are individual capitalists who belong to the capitalist class, and that each of these has all along been combining to act together exactly because they shared common interests as "racially defined groups, or for that matter (as) classes", and did not believe the Hon Leon when he told them they were merely "individuals with a unique outlook on the world, who construct their own meaning and who are best placed to apprehend their own truth, or truths."

To understand better our response to the liberal ideology propagated by the DA, the Honourable Members may also find it useful to have a look at what we said in 1999, in our response to the State of the Nation Address after the 1999 elections.

In another speech on June 10, the Hon Tony Leon said: "the consensus the ANC calls for, which is a consensus on the programme of transformation, fundamentally misses the point - indeed, subverts the spirit if not the letter - of democracy."

I am happy to say that, as reflected in the Debate in this House yesterday, the majority of our people disagree with this point of view. They are determined to join hands fundamentally to transform our country into a true non-racial, non-sexist and prosperous democracy, in which the racist legacy of the past would have ceased to define us as "Africans, Coloureds, Indians and Whites", giving all of us the possibility to be "merely South African".

The millions of our people would deeply appreciate the contribution of the Honourable Members to this outcome, as I would.

Thank you.