



RESPONSE

February 12, 2010

The State of the Nation Address

The general opinion, outside the ANC, of President Zuma's speech last night was summed-up in the Cape Times this morning as 'flat and uninspiring'. According to Business Day, the speech 'neither matched the historic occasion, nor gave a businesslike outline of plans.' While opposition politicians were predictably critical of the lack of specificity and the absence of detail as to how the various plans and commitments were to be implemented, the response of Minister Trevor Manuel was particularly interesting. When asked on television immediately after the speech whether he felt inspired, Manuel described it as 'workmanlike', and reflective of a government that knew very well what its direction was, what its deficiencies were, and what needed to be done to remedy them.

If the speech was intended to set out government's intentions for the coming year and more, then Manuel's assessment was probably fair. In the annual 'Queen's Speech' at the opening of Parliament at Westminster, the monarch traditionally lists what 'her' government plans to do by way of legislation and policy in the approaching year. That speech is never inspiring, and like President Zuma's, it resembles more of a shopping-list of intentions and commitments.

What seems particularly to have disappointed many South Africans, though, is Zuma's failure to acknowledge what is perceived to be a lack of clarity and unity at the highest levels of the governing party and of government itself; and to say what he intends to do about it. The patent ideological tensions between the ANC Youth League and various cabinet ministers, for example, received no comment. Likewise, the open rivalry between the backers of the present secretary general of the ANC, Gwede Mantashe, and those who wish to see him replaced by the former youth leader, Fikile Mbalula, was ignored.

Ordinary citizens, let alone commentators, are fully conscious that such rivalries lend themselves to empire-building, lobbying, grandstanding, and all kinds of political machinations; but certainly not to the simple task of getting on with running the country and delivering social goods. Zuma's tendency to overlook the simple fact that the crew on board the ship of state appears too often to be rowing in different directions raises serious questions about his fitness as Captain.

In the coming days and weeks cabinet ministers will flesh out the plans and targets announced in very broad terms by Zuma. It will be necessary and instructive to observe just how much detail they are able to provide, and how they intend to move from intention to implementation. If they do indeed set out measurable, practicable and affordable goals, and tell us exactly how they will achieve them, then much of the vagueness of Zuma's speech will be accepted and excused. An example of such a goal was given with regard to education, where it was announced that literacy and numeracy would be assessed, and 'independently moderated' at grades 3, 6 and 9. In addition, Zuma promised that daily lesson plans for teachers, and workbooks for students, would be made available in all 11 languages; and that all 27 000 state schools would be audited by department officials. This is the kind of specificity that allows people to gauge a government's degree of success or failure.

In this context it is also encouraging to note the emphasis placed on performance monitoring and evaluation at the highest level. Ministers will be required to sign 'delivery agreements' with the President, outlining 'what is to be done, how, by whom, within what time period and using what measurements and resources.'

But most instructive, ultimately, will be to compare last night's speech with the one that will be given this time next year. Will next year's edition contain a 'report back' on the progress made in meeting the 2010 speech's commitments? Or will it, like yesterday's, look almost exclusively forward, telling us more about what the State of the Nation is intended to be, rather than what it actually is?

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