

Address by Local Government and Housing MEC Maite Nkoana-Mashabane at the Debate of the Premier's Address

16 February 2006

Honourable Speaker,
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Ladies and Gentlemen,

The philosopher Grecian once said that "the truth is generally seen, rarely heard". The Honourable Premier, in his Address, assisted us in sighting those truths, however, Mister Speaker; I believe it is appropriate that we also hear some of those truths.

The Honourable Premier mentioned a number of growth sectors in the Province, amongst others, the Tourism industry, the Agricultural services sector and the Mining sector – all of them key industries to the growth and development of our Province.

While we often hear the cacophony of the state of local government, we tend to forget that all these growth industries occur within the context of the respective jurisdictions of the municipalities in this Province. Such growth cannot occur without the confidence of a sound return on investment. Investors can take their money anywhere. It begs the question, why then do investors choose to put their monies in the jurisdictions of our municipalities? It is the investors that are saying to us that they have confidence in the administrations of our municipalities. They have the belief that while there may be challenges, those hurdles are not so insurmountable that their hard-earned funds will be lost in our localities. It is the investors that are saying to us that they have the confidence in the quality of our infrastructure to ensure a reasonable return on investment, even if there is more work that still needs to be done. Perhaps it is the honesty of their investment that is the best barometer of the State of Local Government in this Province.

I must, however, hasten to add that at no stage am I suggesting that we are anywhere near attaining the goals of developmental local government we all aspire towards. The challenges are many. The Honourable President in his State of the Nation Address, and the Honourable Premier in his State of the Province Address, have both identified the capacity gaps* in the respective municipal administrations as a primary obstacle in our capacity to implement policy.

We can pontificate about the reasons and causes of these gaps, but that will not take us anywhere. What must be considered are the measures taken to address these challenges? Indeed, Mister Speaker, we must all know, by now, about the objectives of Project Consolidate. The Project is a process and not an event. It is a journey with certain clear measurables. The effort of the Department of Local Government and Housing to address these challenges must be measured against the targets as set out in this Project and other programmes we are embarking upon to make our organisation more responsive to our people's needs. We are confident and certain that this Department has turned the corner for the best in this regard. We will report our progress more extensively in our forthcoming Budget Address.

But, even if we were to insist on applying a purely objective test there is still the resonance of a message that is consistent with the theme that the President so eloquently terms as the "the Age of Hope". To illustrate this, allow me to re-iterate what the Honourable Premier said. The statistics show that "in this financial year 75 % of our Municipalities were able to prepare and table their multi-year budgets within the stipulated timeframes as compared to only 50% in the previous financial year, 68% submitted their annual financial statements to the Office of the Auditor-General as compared to only 31% in the previous financial year and 61% of our Municipalities compiled their annual financial statements in-house compared to 31% in the previous year". Even an objective measure indicates that indeed the administrations of the respective municipalities are slowly but surely moving in the desired direction.

Much is said and written about the perceived dissatisfaction of the masses in the Councillors and the general quality of administration at local government level. If that be the case then one has to wonder as to why in a survey conducted by Markinor, it was found that 71% of those interviewed believed that government is doing well, while 72% were satisfied with social delivery. Perhaps the opinions of some in this august House are not necessarily representative of the views on whose behalf we claim to represent.

I have heard and considered the views of the Honourable Members Kekana and Holford. I note your concerns. It is indeed true that we face enormous challenges in the provision of Housing. But I do believe that some of the issues raised by the Honourable Members deserve specific attention.

As part of our overall political commitment to provide adequate housing, our Department is implementing a Cabinet decision to provide 40m squared houses as a provincial standard. The Department also offers to qualifying beneficiaries houses of 45m², 50m² and 55m² in size. Quite contrary to the assertion of the Honourable Kekana, this is a dramatic shift from what apartheid government provided to our people. This question of quality assurance is further supported by the recruitment of additional Project Managers and their deployment to projects at local municipalities. The Department of Local Government and Housing is also participating the Capacity Development Programme for emerging contractors managed by Department of Public Works.

Furthermore, Mister Speaker, the Department has opened a criminal case - and instituted a civil claim - against a contractor who fraudulently claimed some R4 million for work not done for our Department. A further claim was instituted against another contractor from whom R56 500.00 has already been recouped. Obviously those persons in the Department who colluded with these contractors have been found guilty and rightly dismissed.

On the question of informal settlement, I am certain that many will remember that the National Department of Housing, in its new Strategy of Breaking the New Ground in Housing delivery, and the Provincial Growth and Development Strategy have both prioritized the eradication of informal settlements and the provision of secure tenure for qualifying beneficiaries. Ours is a multi year phased programme aimed at correcting apartheid sprawl development settlement patterns through fostering integration in the cities and towns and broadening access to social and economic amenities.

In essence, Mister Speaker, I am compelled to submit that we have heard the clarion call from the Honourable Premier to combat corruption and we have heeded the call. We have acted and are still acting to ensure that those who cross the line are brought to book. The Report of the Task Team led by Advocate Mahlangu forms the basis of the criminal investigations that have now resulted in the criminal and civil actions that I have mentioned. The element of surprise is crucial in these types of investigations. We have therefore decided to act in a manner that would assist the police and not hamper them in their investigations. The Honourable Kekana can rest assured that we have the will to act and that our systems are beginning to make it increasingly difficult for acts of impropriety.

Incidentally, Mister Speaker, it is a general error to imagine that the loudest complainers for the public are the most anxious for its welfare. We have had droughts and we have had floods in this Province. It would have been reassuring to have felt the presence, and dare I say support, of the Honourable Kekana and Holford for the victims of these catastrophes. It would have been humane just to see them offer a bit of comfort to those victims. But their absence was ominous. Hence, I must confess that I am not certain whether their indignation in this debate is genuine or whether they have fallen victim to a virus that afflicts members of the opposition when an election is on the horizon. If only they were there to lend a hand, they would have been so much more credible.

Throughout the world, the strength of a democracy is judged by its ability to conduct free and fair elections. Our ability to do so in the forthcoming election depends significantly on the infrastructure of the municipalities themselves. The electoral officers are provided largely by the municipalities. Again the level of preparedness is astounding. The IEC has already done a sterling job – and all our congratulations must go to the hardworking Rev .Zwo Nevhutalu and his dedicated foot soldiers. The peaceful manner in which campaigning has been done thus far is a tribute to the level of political maturity in this Province and indeed, the entire country.

To give you an indication of the extent of the effort that is required in the forthcoming election the following statistics are sobering. There are a total of 5 277 candidates registered. Of that total, 2 684 are contesting the elections as PR Candidates while 2 593 are standing as Ward Candidates.

There are 2178 Voting Stations in the Province, 382 more than in the 2000 Elections. There are also 38 more wards introduced.

Through its voter education campaign, the IEC managed to reach 166 717 people directly through 1 906 workshops. More have received the message indirectly. And, finally, the IEC will be using 21 262 officials for the elections.

We wish the IEC all the luck and confirm our admiration and support for their incredible work. We also wish all the candidates best of luck. And we urge each and every one in the Province to go to the polls and vote for leaders who can make our communities better places for all of us to live in.

In conclusion, Mister Speaker pardon me for extrapolating from the Budget Speech of the Minister of Finance. He used a quotation that could not have better captured a philosophy that should underpin all our endeavours. Quoting one of Africa's best wordsmiths, Nigerian writer, Ben Okri, who once wrote:

"There are no joys without mountains having been climbed.
There are no joys without the nightmares that precede them and spring them into light..

The joys that spring from the challenges are profound. And the challenges will always be there. As long as there are human beings there will be challenges. Let no one speak (to me) of frontiers exhausted, all challenges met, all problems solved. There is always the joy of discovering, uncovering, and forging new forms, new ways ...

(Ben Okri, *A Way of Being Free*, 1997)

Our challenges are there -- and always will be. What will take us further into the Age of Hope is our commitment to tackling those challenges, all to the benefit of the most vulnerable members of our society.

I thank you