

Having stolen from us, they stand up and lie in chorus

The diversion of R206m to one man's home improvements is theft



Mondli Makhanya

AUTHOR and academic Njabulo Ndebele wrote a searing essay about lies in last weekend's City Press. The essay, "Lying to be Human", spoke about the normalisation of lying in society and the relationship between oppression, stealing and lying. The essay spoke of such things as how the oppressed had to invent lies to get days off work to attend family commitments, and how stealing from the oppressor race became a heroic Robin Hood act.

"Stealing has carved a special place for itself in South Africa. It joined lying as co-mediator between the powerful and powerless: the rich who have and the poor who do not have. Stealing and lying become a principle of social and political interaction when lying is used for something beyond itself: to justify stealing as a form of social and political activism. This kind of lying glorified stealing and accorded it something close to heroic legitimacy," Ndebele wrote.

One can fully understand the circumstances that drove the poor and marginalised to lie and steal in our warped past. But how do you find moral justification for stealing and lying when it is the wealthy and the powerful who steal from the poor? And when this lying and stealing is done by those who purport to have liberated the poor from the yoke of oppression and who, supposedly, have the best interests of the people at heart?

Having just read the Ndebele piece on Sunday, I watched with great incredulity as ministers, governing party hacks and

government officials tripped over each other to justify the effective theft of R206-million from the public purse for the purposes of upgrading President Jacob Zuma's Nkandla compound.

Shortly after Public Works Minister Thulas Nxesi and other ministers spoke in the hallowed precinct of parliament, the governing party's spin machine went into overdrive. The word "vindication" was chanted as often as Rhema congregants clap hands.

The report, we were told over and over, was a vindication of Zuma's claim in parliament that no public money had been used to build his houses. It was a vindication of the charge that he had been unfairly targeted by supposed "enemies of the revolution". It was a vindication of the government's insistence that the media was building a mountain out of an Nkandla molehill. Even the political party that, laughingly, has the word

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"communist" in its name came out in defence of this theft from the poor.

Yes, "theft" may be a strong word to use. But how else do you describe the diversion of a quarter of a billion rands to the upgrading of one person's home when, as we learnt this week, 12 million people sleep hungry every night in South Africa?

What word do you use to describe the moral depravity that says it is OK to spend money in this fashion when overcrowded schools cannot afford to hire teachers and terminally sick people lie on hospital floors?

True, R206-million will not solve all these problems. But it sure could go some distance. It may be simplistic to calculate the number of houses or classrooms that could have been built or the number of months filled for that amount of money, but it is a practical way of showing how

the poor have been spat in the eye by those who govern them.

A greater worry and greater insult are the amateurish lies spun to justify the expenditure. Again, this lowly newspaperman accepts that "lies" is a strong word to use. We could be polite and say "wool pulled over eyes", "misled", "spun" or some other polite terminology. But when we are told that no public money was used on Zuma's home, we are being lied to.

The tellers of the lie want us to differentiate between the four walls of the home and the fancy (and totally unnecessary) gadgetry and architectural paraphernalia on the property.

Their truth is that Zuma and his family paid for the four walls that house them. The real truth is that the compound is one single development. The fence, the football fields, the clinic, the helipad and all the other Hugh Hefner toys in that village are one. And the South African public is paying R206-million.

The other lie is the attempt to make South Africa believe it was some lowly, renegade officials who pushed the price tag up to R206-million, that Pretoria knew nothing at all. Accepting for a moment that this is indeed the case — and I seriously doubt it — then it is a lie by omission. It means Pretoria did not want to know. They did not want to know because it would have been inconvenient to intervene and deprive the big man of his comforts.

If indeed the R206-million price tag was the result of collusion between junior officials and contractors, what would have been an officially acceptable amount of expenditure on Zuma's private home? Would it be R175-million, R150-million, R100-million, R50-million, or R25-million?

I suppose we will only know when the lying is over.

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