

Zuma's audit report

City Press, Pg 7, 17/02/2013

President's speech wasn't so much an address as a say-by-numbers statement



Ferial Haffajee

If the nation were a school, President Jacob Zuma would score well on his annual report card – as City Press reported last week, he has achieved decent progress on 85% of the promises he made last year.

But South Africa is not a school. It's a nation, and the occasion demanded an address, not an audit or a report.

It also required a greater choice of topics to focus us on those things that are crucial. The annual event's format needs a rethink.

Former president Thabo Mbeki, who had a managerial bent, turned the annual address into a report card. The format supported his intellectualism, but it's a format lost on Zuma, who is more comfortable with less staged narratives. Now that he is in his second term and less beholden to special interests, he has the freedom to shape his own agenda.

So it was surprising he lost the opportunity to promote the idea of the National Development Plan as a rallying point for the nation through the speech, because his writers made it sound like a report card. Tick. Tick. Tick.

Thus infrastructure may be a series of projects, but the president's core message to his nation should put it all together into a big picture of progress, as set out in the national plan.

The narrative of the plan is of a nation on the move and of the series of tough steps needed to get there. If the plan is to take centre stage, it needs to be massaged into policy and strategy far more forcefully.

But despite the ill-fitting structure of the speech, Zuma had good news to report.

If you look carefully, South Africa is being reshaped. Hundreds of thousands of people are being connected to the electricity grid while a green economy is beginning to show its first shoots.

You can't have helped noticing the solar geysers atop half-a-million RDP houses. In the three Capes as well as in the Free State, 28 projects in wind, solar and small hydro technologies suggest we may secure a different energy future.

Two new universities, in Kimberley and Nelspruit, respectively, will soon have sod-turning ceremonies. And new rail lines are criss-crossing South Africa with a nascent rail-building industry getting an early shunt.

There has been real movement over the past year in getting the infrastructure drive into gear.

And last week's parade of the allegedly ill-gotten bling of Shauwn and Sbu Mpisane of Durban was a symbol of a promised crackdown on corruption.

The action against the couple was part of a dossier of 34 proclamations Zuma has signed since 2009 to attempt to deal with corruption, which often feels ingrained and unbeatable. In the past financial year, Zuma reported, 107 officials working in the criminal justice system

were convicted on various charges.

But this is also where the happy narrative of the Zuma administration begins to wear thin.

After all, the president himself is embroiled in Nkandlagate, the shorthand for a splurge of R243 million on his private estate.

While that spending is at the centre of a massive clean-up campaign by Zuma's securocrats, it sat, for me, like the elephant in the room in Parliament on Thursday night.

How could the president not

reference the Nkandla issue at all? Perhaps because it is so indefensible, or perhaps because it matters little when you are in a secure second term. Nkandla will curdle the president's second term, but not end it.

I felt, in the end, that President Zuma also did not grasp several other important nettles, perhaps because when you present a report card, you have to get in at least a line from every ministry.

The national plan is cogent on the impact of cadre deployment and militant teacher unionism, on an effective state and on the

quality of public education.

Making teaching an essential service (that is, banning strikes and disruptions in teaching) was finessed into a sentence – that teachers are essential to education.

And he held out the prospect of bigger salaries for teachers while replacing his two-year-old motto that teachers should be in school, on time, teaching, with a new quote from the national plan: "We want to see an improvement in attitudes, posture and outcomes."

On youth employment, the same thing happened. It has

been kicked to Nedlac, the forum where government, labour, business and communities will seek solutions.

There will be no wage subsidy as initially contemplated, and even resolved at the ANC's conference in December.

President Jacob Zuma's term has been characterised by a search for consensus and appeasement rather than effective and directed leadership. While his second term offers him the space to be direct and demanding, he defaulted to the comfort zone of consensus in this year's address.

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