

Comment & Analysis

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Cronin's spanner
in the works

Secrecy, impropriety and the failure of accountability coil around each other in a triple helix of misgovernance. Nowhere is that more clear than at Nkandla, where President Jacob Zuma's grotesque mansion complex lords it over the steep hills of KwaZulu-Natal.

And nowhere is a strategy of obfuscation more vigorously pursued than in the department of public works, where Minister Thulas Nxesi and his officials wield the National Key Points Act to block requests for financial and other information about the quarter-billion rand spent on the project, to threaten journalists who dig it up themselves and to shield the president from scrutiny.

Until now.

Nxesi's deputy, Jeremy Cronin, on Wednesday delivered a classic parliamentary skewering to opposition parties during the debate on the State of the Nation address. It was a fine debating chamber performance and it must have stung.

But the best bits were never heard in the National Assembly. They were in his prepared text, which had been distributed to journalists, and, although they were far off the Nxesi message, they were right on the money.

In his response to Zuma's speech, Mosiuoa Lekota had characterised the Act as "dastardly apartheid legislation", Cronin recalled, adding "he is probably right".

And he went further: "This Parliament does need to look at this anachronistic and problematic piece of legislation; it may well be unconstitutional."

And further still, referring to the "probably excessive and undoubtedly extremely costly security operational requirements".

In the written text, these comments are made en passant, by way of exposing what Cronin suggests is Lekota's hypocrisy in criticising the Act after doing nothing as defence minister to reform it. But the blow to the Congress of the People leader is glancing compared with the frontal assault on what has become a key tool of the secret state — and indeed on the excesses of the Nkandla project itself.

A "probably" here and a "may well be" there hardly cushion the impact. "As the current government, we are not running away from our responsibilities in this matter and we will not sweep abuse under the carpet," he concluded.

There is much speculation about why these comments did not make it into the final speech and the Democratic Alliance has called on him to clarify his position.

But the point is that he has since stood by the remarks.

Of course, the problem of the Key Points Act goes much deeper than Nkandla. As the freedom of information campaign group Right2Know recently showed, the use of the Act has increased 50% in the past half-decade.

There are almost certainly nastier things hiding under its skirts than a hilltop fortress.

Cronin surely knows this. Indeed, he may be more acutely aware of it than ever, now that he toils in the Augean stench of public works. It is worth asking whether he will again, as he did last year, vote for the Protection of State Information Bill, which could be used to similar effect.

The crisp point is that the whole edifice of the national development plan, so loudly trumpeted by Zuma and by the ANC, rests on a capable and accountable government.

Capable and accountable ministers of state, then, must stand for openness. No doubt that is what Cronin will say when the commissars come.

We will see if they listen.