

Behind closed doors, MPs get serious

19/2/17

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The living room of Parliament is filled with hostility, rebellion and white-shirted bullies, but the dysfunction has not yet split over into all the rooms in the house.

This week, at least 45 committee meetings were held over three mornings in rooms across the labyrinth of corridors on multiple floors of the parliamentary buildings.

The relatively calm atmosphere in these smaller rooms is striking in contrast to the National Assembly. It is in these regular committee meetings - most of which are not televised live - that the nitty-gritty of parliamentary business takes place. And, generally speaking, depending on the will and skill of the chairperson, members exchange ideas and show at least a modicum of respect for each other.

While members of the Economic Freedom Fighters were absent from the National Assembly during the two-day debate and president's reply this week after being forcibly removed last Thursday, they did not abscond completely.

Rana Mokoena, for instance, pitched up for important work on Tuesday as a member of the ad hoc committee that has been set up to investigate the SABC, which is chaired by the no-nonsense Vincent Smith.

The following day, Renelwe Mashabela attended the rural development and land reform portfolio committee meeting that was deliberating the Extension of Security of Tenure Amendment Bill.

While some high-profile work done by these committees makes it into the public domain, a lot of relevant but often tedious work takes place without a fuss; the MPs quietly knuckling down to business.

On Wednesday, I popped in to the higher education committee on the first floor of the Old Assembly, where the National Student Financial Aid Scheme had just updated members about the student application process.

I took the lift to the 4th floor to catch up with the defence and military veterans committee before lunch.

The department's General Mogorosi Ledwaba was revealing a turnaround strategy to fast-track the long overdue revamp of 1 Military Hospital in Pretoria after his unit intervened to take over the project from the public works department, which, by all accounts, has been doing an Mandela-like sloppy job. I chuckled when the row of decorated senior military officers dutifully obeyed an instruction from the chairperson to remain seated afterwards so the committee could complete its mundane housekeeping agenda undisturbed.

Down the corridor, Professor Malegapuru Makgoba, the health ombudsman, was briefing the health committee about the shameful Life Esidimeni tragedy.

On the ground floor of 120 Plein Street, the water affairs and sanitation committee had resolved to call the department's minister, Nomvula Mokonyane, to account on the reported financial collapse of the department.

Committee efforts to ensure the executive doesn't act with impunity often fizzle out. However, at least a handful of committee chairs manage to boomerang pressure to toe the line from Luthuli House, unlike presiding officers in the National Assembly, who have allowed President Jacob Zuma to wriggle free from accountability.

Imagine if Smith presided over the National Assembly during the state of the nation address, or if it was Yvonne "Pinky" Phosa, who chairs the Standing Committee on Appropriations, or Yunus Carrim, the chair of the Standing Committee on Finance, or Joan Rubbs, the chair of the portfolio committee on trade and industry. These impressive MPs are not pussyfooting around their responsibility to serve the public.

A lot is going on at Parliament that is invisible to the public eye. It is easy to get lost in the funk of the parliamentary madness in the National Assembly.

Parliament is seriously compromised, but pockets of excellence remain amid the wrangle over the survival of the president of the country.

Heard is Media24's parliamentary editor