

Budget Votes Debate: MPs hurry to unblock government bottlenecks before parliamentary recess

By Marianne Merten • 18 May 2018

The Budget vote whirl is on at Parliament to meet the statutory deadline for the adoption of South Africa's R1.7-trillion Budget. There is also the two-month recess, dubbed "extended constituency period", from June that will see MPs hitting the ground in communities until mid-August. The 2019 election looms large, and the parliamentary calendar is under pressure. While the legislative programme can be put on the backburner – Cabinet has already been told that if a draft Bill is not at Parliament by month's end it wouldn't be dealt with in 2018 – there's no such leeway with the Budget. It wasn't the most auspicious start to week two of the Budget vote debates – the putrid smell of faeces hung over much of Parliament Avenue, and in some parliamentary corridors, on Monday after a sewer burst. But by Tuesday morning it was back to smelling, if not quite like roses, then definitely much, much better. And it was just in time for the arrival of the brigades of power suits that usually accompany ministers either because they are senior officials, ministerial staff or guests. With anything between three to nine Budget votes a day, many running simultaneously, over approximately three weeks – the Presidency and Parliament get their own days next week – the national legislature buzzes during this time. The Budget vote cocktails and la-di-da functions have long fallen by the wayside because of belt tightening, haircuts or, as it's officially known, cost

containment measures, but departments haul out banners, put up displays of goodies produced by projects under their control, and lay out documents, usually difficult to obtain.

Unlike many MPs, who are already talking about handover reports, not returning after the election and a general end-of-term-itis, the ministers are putting on a good show. It's the last year of the five-year term before the next election in 2019, so the upbeatness of big announcements of a new administration may just be a little worn down. But it's also a few months into the new "new dawn" presidency, so it's not an option not talking anti-corruption, cleaning up and initiating new initiatives to try to unblock those governance bottlenecks.

With officials echoing the ministers' every word at the pre-Budget vote media briefings – "As the minister said", "Like the minister mentioned" – and many sharply snapping out of their seats on the ministerial arrival, or departure, the protocol obsession of government is on full display.

The exception? Correctional Services National Commissioner Arthur Fraser, who on Thursday bucked the trend of directors-general sitting alongside their ministers and deputy ministers when facing journalist in those pre-Budget vote briefings. Once a spy, always a spy; actually having to answer for one's job might be uncomfortable for Fraser. He had been spotted milling outside Parliament's Imbizo Centre, the venue for these briefings, but then had his minister apologise for his absence inside.

"We were trying to check if he was able to finalise some last-minute urgent matters," said Justice and Correctional Services Minister Michael Masutha.

Amid all this, funky themes abound.

“Transport, together moving South Africa into a new dawn”, “Human resource development and 4th industrial revolution”, “Building the 4th industrial revolution army” and “Advancing the Legacy of Mama Albertina Sisulu through people-centred science and technology”.

There may have been earlier hullabalooos like Social Development Minister Susan Shabangu telling MPs the annual performance plan by her predecessor Bathabile Dlamini was inadequate – never mind the controversies around social grant payment providers – but by the time Shabangu was at the podium for her budget vote address, crinkles were ironed out.

“Our programmes are structured to ensure South Africans, are protected against vulnerability through provision of a comprehensive, integrated and sustainable development services,” she said.

There was not a word on nuclear in Energy Minister Jeff Radebe’s speech, although at an earlier briefing he did not rule it out of South Africa’s energy mix. Instead Radebe returned to his South African Communist Party (SACP) roots, saying:

“Lenin is remembered for many things he has done and said, but one he is usually forgotten for is that he espoused that socialism is Soviet power plus electrification. This statement remains true to this day...”

Home Affairs Minister Malusi Gigaba hauled out all the stops with a series of events, including the handover of the one-millionth smart card and the announcement of a move to the Automated Biometric Identification System, capturing finger prints, irises and even palm prints. It was made possible through “the valuable support” of the

justice, crime prevention and security cluster and the SAPS, said Gigaba:

“With the new system, Home Affairs will address also the specific requirements of sister departments in the cluster and those of other organs of state.”

Questions must be asked about police requirements for searching citizens’ fingerprints, the involvement of a private sector company in all this, and what considerations have been made to protect citizens’ private personal data.

Meanwhile, Labour Minister Mildred Oliphant couldn’t help herself.

“At the risk of sounding like I am bragging, the ANC government has indeed delivered on the call in the Freedom Charter that... there shall be a national minimum wage,” she told MPs in her budget speech. Of course, that national minimum wage has missed the deadline for its implementation, 1 May 2018 or Workers’ Day, as was announced officially in 2017. The proposed R20 per hour, but R18 per hour for farmworkers, R15 for domestic workers and R11 for those working in public employment programmes, is steeped in controversy, particularly over how the Labour Department has conducted itself, while even government has acknowledged it as just a start towards a living wage. But it wasn’t all nice words to tell the good story.

Courtesy of Co-operative Governance Minister Zweli Mkhize the names of the 87 dysfunctional municipalities, or roughly a third of all in South Africa, are known. The question is now what to do about it.

Arising from Public Enterprises Minister Pravin Gordhan’s pre-Budget briefing, it is known that his director-general Mogokare Seleke is on his way out. That Public Works no longer has a permanent director-

general also became clear during the pre-Budget vote briefing. Veteran civil servant Mziwonke Dlabantu, recruited as director-general by Public Works Minister Thulas Nxesi in his first stint in the portfolio to implement the anti-corruption turn-around strategy, had been “elbowed out”, as one insider put it, while Nkosinathi Nhleko held the portfolio for a few months. In the Public Service and Administration budget vote it emerged that 2,704 civil servants still did business with the state, worth R8-billion, in contravention of the public service regulations in place since August 2016. In her pre-Budget vote briefing Public Service and Administration Minister Ayanda Dlodlo publicly confirmed what’s long been said privately in the corridors of power: there are civil servants determined to make money off government who refuse promotion into senior management ranks, where financial disclosures are mandatory.

“There are public servants who don’t care to be promoted to be into the SMS (senior management) because it’s easier not to be detected.”

It’s another spin to State Capture, and one that could be harder to root out as government has an at best lacklustre track record of disciplinary proceedings, or acting against powerful interests, including trade unions.

Although Parliament has the right to amend, or even reject, a budget, that’s unlikely as the ANC will use its numbers to ensure the Budget is adopted.

The pattern in the Budget vote debate 2018 follows those of previous years. The ANC speakers all support the Budget votes even if the party’s MPs expressed deep concerns during the Budget briefing cycle ahead of the vote debates. The DA takes to the podium to criticise and

electioneer by touting its good governance record, even if that means having to dodge political barbs over the debacle to remove Cape Town Mayor Patricia de Lille, and the city's hyper-inflated water, electricity and rates bills. The EFF rejects all Budget votes, with the exception of the Office of the Chief Justice.

But the real stamina session will be on 25 May when the House votes on all of the 40 budgets presented. It's political speed-speeching. Once this non-negotiable standing item on the parliamentary calendar is ticked off, MPs depart for that so-called extended constituency period – with the looming 2019 elections at the top of their minds. **DM**