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There's a continuum of cognitive dissonance in South Africa. It starts with blind positivity – the belief, all evidence aside, that gross governance failures can be ameliorated by good intentions and lip service. A commission of inquiry, if you will. Then there's wilful blindness: if a CEO reports corruption and no politician is there to hear it, did it even happen?

And then there's the ANC, the Marie Antoinette of political parties, which believes the precarity of life in South Africa is an unfortunate consequence of living here, rather than something it has the agency to change.

Take Hammanskraal. At the time the FM went to print, at least 15 residents had died of cholera, amid 41 cases countrywide.

Unsurprisingly, a troika of ANC politicians were parachuted in, among them Gauteng health MEC Nomantu Nkomo-Ralehoko. She helpfully suggested that residents should “wash their hands with soap”.

It was very on-brand for the ANC; after all, what organisation has turned washing one's hands of responsibility into a fine art quite as adeptly as it has?

The ANC will, of course, tell you that water and sanitation is a local government competency – and therefore up to the DA. And it would be partly right, since a 2019 South African Human Rights Commission probe found the water there to be undrinkable.

But the Hammanskraal issue dates to 2005, when flags were raised around water treatment. That puts the problem squarely in ANC territory. As do broader governance failures: according to News24, residents in Parys blame the cholera outbreak there not just on poor water, but also on poverty (they can't afford to buy water), and power cuts that prevent them from boiling it.

It's admirable that the powers-that-be are

setting up a task team to manage the issue. But we shouldn't allow that to overshadow the issue of responsibility. It's particularly galling coming on top of reports of official profligacy, revealed in all its glory this past week by public works & infrastructure minister Sihle Zikalala in response to questions from former DA MP Cilliers Brink.

Just 50km from Hammanskraal, in Waterkloof Ridge, Zikalala's department forked out R54,000 for a curtain rail at a minister's home, according to the weekend papers. The government can't guarantee potable water, but it *can* cough up R3.4m to maintain swimming pools and water features. While sitting in the dark, taxpayers have paid R454,000 for the installation of a generator at one ministerial residence. And there's the R43m for free electricity, (cholera-) free water and free municipal services for ministers from 2020 to 2022.

Zikalala is horrified. Shocked even. The costs, he says, “smack of mischief by service providers” – as if his department doesn't sign off on such expenditure.

It “puts a stain on public representatives” and, the real kicker: “All of us as government abhor any excessive conduct with taxpayers' money, especially at this time when we are deploying resources to core services.” Like on the provision of clean water, for example.

This is South Africa: people are dying of an eminently preventable waterborne disease; children are falling into pit latrines; unemployment is at 33%; Eskom cannot keep the lights on; the economy is tanking; the rand is in such a trough even Nomvula Mokonyane couldn't pick it up; and we're cosying up to a despot accused of war crimes.

At this rate, it will be just a few short years before South Africa's politicians, corpulent on a diet of venality and crass insensitivity, gaze out on a wasteland that was once seeded with hope. ✘