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Macpherson 'under fire'

'Absolute lies', insists Steenhuisen, as sources say he is loath to take on 'friend' over backing of Expropriation Act

By THABO MOKONE and LIZEKA TANDWA

● Some members of the DA federal council are demanding that public works minister Dean Macpherson be censured for his support for the Expropriation Act, party sources said.

Six people in the DA criticised Macpherson this week after a meeting of the council, the party's highest decision-making body between national congresses.

After the DA adopted the resolution that objected to Macpherson's startling stance on expropriation, several prominent members of the DA federal council said they would push for action to be taken against him at the next federal council meetings, including at caucus level.

But Steenhuisen denied this had happened, saying the Sunday Times was being fed "absolute lies".

Macpherson declined to comment, saying he was not at the meeting on Monday and party rules forbade discussing such meetings in the media anyway.

Macpherson raised eyebrows last month when, during a panel discussion at the Nampo farmers gathering, he appeared to contradict the DA position on the act. He said the clause providing for "nil compensation" had been weaponised by politicians, and that the Expropriation Act was an improvement on equivalent apartheid-era legislation.

Those who attacked him following the Monday meeting said the DA believed in "just and equitable compensation" in cases of land expropriation, and was challenging the entire act in the courts, the sources said.

The sources said a Gauteng delegation to the federal council meeting led by provincial



Minister of public works & infrastructure Dean Macpherson, above, and minister of agriculture John Steenhuisen.



leader Solly Msimanga tabled a resolution reaffirming the DA position on the Expropriation Act.

The resolution was adopted unanimously, with the support of council chair Helen Zille, which was seen as a putdown of Macpherson.

The resolution states among other things that the DA "rejects the notion of 'nil compensation' as established by the Expropriation Act as well as the limitations placed by the act on the rights of private property owners in contesting the terms of expropriation in court".

The sources said council members wanted Steenhuisen to issue a public reprimand of Macpherson "at the very least".

Macpherson and Steenhuisen, both from KwaZulu-Natal, are close allies.

"This is where the fundamental problem lies," one person who was at the meeting on Monday said.

"It's because of his proximity to John that he's not being disciplined. If it was anybody else they would have been disciplined. We have seen people making controversial comments in the past and the party threw the book at them."

This source said Steenhuisen had failed to show the necessary leadership by not acting against Macpherson.

A DA insider sympathetic to Steenhuisen acknowledged that Macpherson's remarks

"present a reputational risk" to the party but said no formal complaint had been filed.

"If people want action it becomes a misconduct issue, which must be filed with Helen's office for her to consult with the federal legal commission [the DA disciplinary body]. So, nobody has yet done that. The leader does not necessarily deal with disciplinary issues."

Another person said Steenhuisen and Zille had a duty to clarify the DA's position on expropriation.

"We are heading to [municipal] elections next year and you could see the vultures circling soon after Dean made those ridiculous comments," this source said.

"If we flip-flop on such an important position, we will see another 2019 where the FF+ took a chunk of our votes. We told John that he needs to put his house in order."

"Some of these ministers are so happy to rub shoulders with the president, they forget why they are there. People can be reshuffled. The party will not suffer due to individuals and that was made clear," this insider said.

Two ANC members of the government of national unity cabinet said Macpherson's Nampo comments, coming on the eve of President Cyril Ramaphosa's trip to the White House, had come as a relief to the party.

They said Ramaphosa's team had harboured some anxiety over the inclusion in the delegation of Steenhuisen, given that the Expropriation Act is one of US President Donald Trump's pet hates.

"The act was a thorn between us and the DA and we were worried what Steenhuisen would say when we met with Trump on the subject," one of the ANC ministers said.

"What we have come to learn is that DA ministers are more measured and tend to reach a compromise that works for both parties. Dean's statement – to an audience of farmers and the agricultural industry, mind you – showed we are not that far apart and gave us some relief that John would not stray from the government's position in Washington."