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Enquiries: James de Villiers 082 766 0276

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FULL SPEECH

MINISTER MACPHERSON: REBUILDING A CAPABLE STATE AND RESTORING ACCOUNTABILITY IN PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE

(Note to editors: The following address was delivered by the Minister of Public Works & Infrastructure, Dean Macpherson, at a gathering of the Cape Town Press Club in the Cape Town City Centre on Thursday, 5 February, 2026).

- Public Works & Infrastructure Minister Dean Macpherson reflected on the institutional dysfunction and governance failures he encountered upon entering office in July 2024, arguing that rebuilding state capacity is the essential precondition for infrastructure delivery, accountability and public trust.
- He outlined the government's efforts to reform the built environment sector, confront organised criminality such as the construction mafia, and restore consequence management — citing the Independent Development Trust as a case study of how hollowed-out institutions resist reform when oversight is enforced.
- The Minister also reflected on the leadership of John Steenhuisen, highlighting his decision to prioritise responsibility in government, his role in guiding the Democratic Alliance into national government, and the importance of leaders who are willing to confront institutional resistance and be judged on outcomes rather than rhetoric.

Thank you for inviting me to join you this afternoon.

I often wondered how long it would take for you to invite me, but I'm glad that today we have finally answered that question.

In this room, you are used to people standing at a lectern and telling you what the government is doing.

Today I want to do something slightly different.

I want to tell you what government looks like from the inside when you arrive with a mandate to fix things, and you discover - very quickly - that the biggest obstacle is not always policy, budgets, or even politics.

It is the machinery of the state itself.

When I was appointed Minister of Public Works and Infrastructure on 3 July 2024, I walked into a portfolio that should be one of the most practical, measurable, 'get-things-done' parts of government.

We build.

We maintain.

We manage public assets.

We create the conditions for investment.

We turn plans into bricks, pipes, cables, roofs, classrooms, clinics, police stations, courts, and offices that work.

And yet what I found when I arrived was a department - and a wider built-environment sector - where the basics had been allowed to decay for years.

Not only in headline scandals, but in the daily dysfunction that turns every instruction into a negotiation, every deadline into a suggestion, and every crisis into somebody else's problem.

I found a system where people could ignore requests without consequence - where instructions could be "noted" and quietly parked, and where urgency was treated as a personal preference rather than a public obligation.

Where those who wanted things to remain exactly as they were had tools available to them: delay, diversion, endless process, selective compliance, and the simple tactic of going slow until the political moment passes and the person demanding answers gives up.

Often it sits in a workflow, in an unanswered email, in an IT system that never gets fixed, in a procurement process that never ends, and in vacancies that stay vacant for years - until accountability becomes blurred and failure becomes normal.

And when you arrive and say you are going to change this, you quickly hear the same message, in different forms: it cannot be done.

They say it quietly in corridors.

They say it politely in meetings.

They say it indirectly, by giving you half the information and waiting to see whether you notice.

And they say it loudly, through surrogates, when you start pulling at threads that lead to entrenched interests.

They told me it was impossible to fix the Independent Development Trust.

They told me it was impossible to take on the Construction Mafia.

They told me it was impossible to fix the State's leasing portfolio and end the inflated prices we have been paying.

They told me it was impossible to enforce accountability in a procurement system that has been used - for years - not to build for the public, but to feed networks that profit from chaos.

And they told me something else: that if you push too hard, you will be set up to fail.

That is the real test of reform in government.

Not whether you can speak convincingly about change - but whether you keep pushing when the system pushes back.

Public Works and Infrastructure touches almost every department.

If a police station is unsafe, we are involved.

If a court is falling apart, we are involved.

If a lease is inflated, we are involved.

And because we sit at the centre of so many projects and contracts, we sit at the centre of temptation.

Procurement corruption is not a side issue in this sector.

It becomes a business model for people who have learned how to extract from the state.

And the cost is not only money.

It is time stolen, services stolen, trust stolen - and capacity stolen, because the more dysfunction becomes normal, the more capable people leave, and the more the state becomes dependent on a cycle it cannot control.

So, what does dysfunction look like in practice?

It looks like an office - such as in my very own office, when I first arrived - where the internet does not work reliably, and people shrug because it has been that way for months or years.

It looks like systems that do not speak to one another, so data is inconsistent, and project information is incomplete - and you cannot answer basic questions like: how many projects are we building, what stage are they at, and who is accountable?

It looks like procurement timelines are treated as elastic, maintenance backlogs are treated as inevitable, and an organisational culture where the person who demands delivery is treated as a troublemaker rather than someone doing their job.

It also looks like vacancies - not just an HR problem, but a delivery problem.

Vacancies are how institutional memory disappears, and how responsibility becomes blurred, because when everyone is "acting", nobody is accountable.

And when that is the environment, the consequences do not stay inside the government.

They spill onto the ground.

A clear example is the construction mafia.

For years, criminal elements were allowed to disrupt sites, demand bribes, and escape consequence.

The longer the state hesitated, the more emboldened they became - and the more they expanded: larger projects, more regions, and deeper intimidation.

The construction mafia is not a myth.

It is not a slogan.

It is not an excuse for poor delivery.

If you want a simple definition of state weakness, it is a construction site being shut down by extortionists while the state debates which form must be completed before action can be taken.

So, what was our strategy?

It begins with a basic principle: the state must be capable of doing the basics - and willing to act decisively when the basics are undermined.

That is why we have pursued a national programme of action that is not built on speeches, but on systems: accountability, blacklisting of defaulting contractors, fixing cashflow constraints, digitising tracking, reforming procurement through war rooms, strengthening audit outcomes, and professionalising the built environment within the public sector.

These are not abstract reforms.

These are interventions with consequences attached, agreed with provincial counterparts, because you cannot solve a national construction problem in silos.

We are now building a system where an underperforming contractor does not fail in one province and reappear in another under a new name; where project budgets are protected so sites do not stall because money is diverted midstream; where we can see which projects are off track and why; where procurement is monitored actively rather than discovered after it has gone wrong; and, where audit findings are dealt with as they emerge - not after the damage is done.

But even the best plan will fail if you do not confront the culture that made the plan necessary in the first place.

And that brings me to the Independent Development Trust, the IDT.

If you want one of the clearest examples of how the machinery of the state can fail, where poor governance is overlooked, and dysfunction is allowed to continue, you can look no further than the IDT.

It became a microcosm of what happens when accountability is resisted, and consequence is absent.

The IDT is meant to be one of the most important delivery arms of the state in the social infrastructure space.

Schools, clinics, police stations - this is the infrastructure that determines whether people experience government as a promise or as an absence.

But by the time I entered office, the IDT had become a symbol of governance collapse: weak controls, compromised procurement, and resistance to oversight.

And when we insisted on restoring accountability, the system did what hollowed-out institutions often do: it fought back.

That fightback looks like routine non-cooperation dressed up as a technicality: requests for documents surrounding the now infamous R800 million Oxygen Plant tender were met with summaries lacking substance, without supporting records; critical minutes and procurement information not provided when asked for; shifting positions: one day insisting everything is compliant, the next day expressing sudden "concern" once public pressure grows.

It looks like boards becoming inquorate and then failing to fill vacancies even when their own governance instruments require it.

It looks like a refusal to cooperate, or at best a disregard for oversight.

And when oversight persists, it looks like something even uglier: coordinated disinformation.

Once we insisted on an independent investigation - because the IDT could not credibly investigate itself - the response was not simply institutional engagement.

It became a campaign designed to intimidate, distract, racialise, and delegitimise: fake call logs, fabricated voice notes, bot-driven narratives, opportunists amplifying noise.

It is difficult to see this up close and still believe that state capture ended neatly.

State capture hollowed out institutions and controls - and when you try to rebuild them, the people who benefited do not step aside.

They resist.

And this is why I raise both the construction mafia and the IDT today.

They are different problems, but they share the same root: a state that, for too long, did not enforce its own rules, did not defend honest contractors, did not protect project managers, and did not impose consequences when the system was abused.

When institutions are hollowed out, organised criminality fills the vacuum.

When institutions work, that vacuum closes.

So rebuilding institutions is not a nice-to-have.

It is the foundation of being able to build anything at all.

It means dealing with the uncomfortable parts: the people who ignore instructions; the officials who go slow; the resistance that hides behind “process”; the internal sabotage that is subtle enough to deny but obvious enough to feel.

It also means backing the many public servants who want the system to work and have been stuck for years watching dysfunction become normal.

It is those patriotic public servants who are often too scared to act, because they have been victimised and abused too many times in the past, and have get-things-done lacked the political support to push through reform.

Therefore, they deserve IT systems that work, procurement systems that are efficient, and a culture where decisions are made and implemented.

Because when the state functions, criminal elements have fewer entry points.

When the state functions, communities get their schools and clinics.

When the state functions, contractors get paid on time and work continues without stoppages that inflate costs.

And when the state functions, the public can judge us on outcomes rather than excuses.

The department is about to take a radical approach in how it deals with its burgeoning portfolio of assets in land and buildings.

We are no longer prepared to accept that they will sit idly by in a branch that cannot deliver the real reform to turn assets into generational wealth.

There is no reason that our R148 billion portfolio should not be a R1 trillion property fund that generates return for the state, cuts unnecessary leases and drives construction and development.

And we are planning to do that with advanced work completed already to get this off the ground.

Now, let me bring this closer to the political moment we are in.

Over the past two days, South Africans have been reflecting on another announcement - not about procurement or infrastructure, but about leadership and public service.

John Steenhuisen has announced that he will not be available for re-election as leader of the Democratic Alliance.

I want to speak about John today in my capacity as a member of the Democratic Alliance and Chairperson of KwaZulu-Natal because the story of rebuilding a capable state cannot be told honestly without acknowledging the kind of leadership it takes to step from opposition politics into the machinery of the state - and still insist on outcomes.

John has chosen to focus his full attention on his responsibilities as Minister of Agriculture at a moment when the country is facing a serious foot-and-mouth disease crisis - one that threatens farmers, jobs, exports, and food security.

That decision matters because it speaks to a larger truth: when you enter government, you stop being measured by campaigning, and you start being measured by outcomes.

And outcomes are delivered by forcing systems to work.

John knows what it means to be told, "Minister, it can't be done."

He knows what it means to be warned that the bureaucracy will outlast you if you are not careful.

And he knows what it means to inherit problems that were not ignored for weeks or months, but for years - until they become a national emergency.

So, when John says he wants to focus on that crisis now, he is doing what serious public servants do: taking responsibility for the job in front of him, rather than the comfort of internal politics.

And I want to say something else about John, because tributes can become generic if we allow them to.

John helped build a modern opposition party into a national force capable not only of campaigning, but of governing.

He led the DA through a period where coalition politics became a permanent feature, and where the idea of entering national government shifted from speculation to reality.

He picked up our party when, in 2019, News24 declared it was “the death of the DA”.

He helped shape what became known as the Moonshot Pact - the belief that like-minded parties could coordinate to change the national trajectory, keep populists out of power, and offer voters a credible alternative.

And after the election, he helped steer the DA into national government for the first time, with all the complexity that entails.

It is also easier to protect your brand by staying outside and criticising.

But there comes a moment when the country needs people willing to step into responsibility, even when the terrain is unfamiliar, and the risks are real.

That is what John did.

And what followed has been the unglamorous work of governing: negotiating, pushing back, insisting on accountability, and proving that participation in government can be used to protect people rather than punish them.

None of what we have achieved in government this far would've been possible without him.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Politics can be lonely.

Government can be even lonelier, because you quickly learn the system does not work simply because you have a title.

You need allies who share your appetite for hard work, who understand the difference between performance and delivery, and who will stand with you when the system pushes back.

John has been that kind of leader.

But John is more than just a leader to many of us; he is a friend who is loyal, and that is almost an impossibility to find in politics.

Harry Truman once said: “If you want a friend in politics, get a dog.”

Well, Harry was wrong because John Steenhuisen proves that you can have friends in politics and he has been that friend for nearly 20 years to me.

He also did something that almost no leaders ever do, he groomed, promoted and supported a generation of young people in this party to lead the party long after he stepped down.

People like Siviwe Gwarube, Bax Nodada, Solly Malatsi, Chris Pappas, Cilliers Brink, Geordin Hill Lewis and myself.

His eyes has always been on the future.

And maybe government can learn something from John.

Build strong institutions and invest in people that last beyond you.

That the greatest gift in public service is not what you can get for yourself, but what you can give to others.

And that's a bright future.

And finally, John's legacy will be guaranteed in the history books of South Africa because he was the first leader in our history to take us into national government.

He has delivered on his promises to the party and the people of South Africa.

Indeed, it is mission accomplished, John.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me return to where I began.

I came into office and found dysfunction - a state that, in many areas, had become comfortable with underperformance; a system that could be made to go slowly; institutions weakened by years of poor governance and captured incentives.

And I found people - inside and outside the state - who profit from that dysfunction, whether through corruption, extortion, or the soft corruption of inertia.

But I also found something else: a deep reservoir of public frustration, and a deep desire for a state that works.

South Africans are tired of excuses.

They are tired of abandoned projects and delayed delivery.

So, our task is not only to build projects.

Our task is to rebuild institutions: to rebuild capability, consequence, and the discipline of delivery.

That is what we are doing in Public Works and Infrastructure.

We are putting accountability at the centre.

We are strengthening the systems that make delivery possible.

And we are confronting those who profit from chaos - whether they sit in procurement processes or at construction site gates.

Will it be easy? No.

Will it be quick? No.

But we are not here to be popular with those who benefit from dysfunction.

We are here to deliver.

And to John Steenhuisen, I want to say: thank you.

Thank you for your leadership in building a party capable of governing and rebuilding the state.

Thank you for stepping into national responsibility when it would have been easier to stay outside and criticise.

And thank you for reminding South Africa, by your decision this week, that leadership is not clinging to a title - it is choosing the work that matters most when the country needs it.

South Africa can be built.

South Africa can be maintained.

South Africa can be run properly.

But only if we are willing to do the hard work of rebuilding the state - system by system, institution by institution, culture by culture - until the people who profit from dysfunction no longer have a place to hide.

Thank you.

Enquiries:

James De Villiers

Spokesperson to the Minister

082 766 0276