

Only one party makes Parliament work for the people – John Steenhuisen - Politicsweb 5 December 2019

DA 2019 Parliamentary Review: Only one party makes Parliament work for the people

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It gives me great pleasure to present to you a review of the Democratic Alliance's performance in Parliament in 2019 – a year in which the DA once again punched above its weight in carrying out its constitutional duty to hold the Executive to account.

The role of Parliament is twofold: It must pass legislation and it must hold the executive to account by conducting effective oversight. Much of this oversight function is achieved through parliamentary questions, and when you look at the numbers it is clear that only one party takes this crucial responsibility seriously. Of all the questions submitted in the National Assembly since the start of the 6th Parliament, 70% came from the DA. That's over a thousand of the 1482 questions asked to members of the Executive.

The numbers also reveal that many departments of this ANC government don't respect the oversight role of Parliament as they continue to leave parliamentary questions unanswered. The worst offenders here are the Departments of Health, Mineral Resources & Energy, Employment & Labour, Public Enterprises and Social Development – all having answered less than 50% of the questions put to them.

Every single one of these questions relates to an issue that profoundly affects South Africans – from crime and policing to outstanding Eskom debt, and from the cost of NHI pilots to the eye-watering amounts of money spent on maintaining the lifestyles of current and former presidents and their families.

We ask these questions not to embarrass the ANC government, but to expose the truth around these issues so that remedial action can be taken to avoid further missteps and waste of precious resources. This is crucial for transparency so that South Africans are aware of the successes and failures of government and can, in turn, hold the government to account at the ballot box.

If it hadn't been for DA questions in Parliament, South Africans wouldn't have known that by September this year, 76% of police stations had no rape kits for victims, or that the number of police reservists has declined by 86% since 2010. Thanks to DA questions, our country also knows that the ANC government spends R30 billion a year paying the salaries of millionaire managers in the public sector, and it has spent R60 million since 2016 on the lifestyles of former presidents, their deputies and their spouses.

When it comes to oral questions and replies, 2019 had some deeply revealing moments. Most notorious was Deputy President Mabuza's answer when asked to take a stand against human rights abuses elsewhere in Africa, and particularly against the LGBTQI+ community. "Let's be decent and keep our mouths shut," was his shameful reply.

But the DA's work in Parliament wasn't only limited to oversight questions. We drove some of the biggest and most important issues in the National Assembly this year, including the fight against the unworkable and unaffordable NHI, as well as the fight against the proposed Expropriation Without Compensation. We led the fight for rape kits in every police station and we are still leading the charge for the removal of the failed Public Protector.

It is thanks to the DA's hard work and persistence that Parliament finally adopted rules for the removal of Chapter 9 Institution heads earlier this week. This will stand as an important moment in the fight for accountability and giving Parliament back its watchdog teeth so that it can fulfil its Constitutional mandate.

If we are serious about strengthening Parliament’s oversight powers – and particularly oversight over South Africa’s number one citizen – it is crucial that we establish a Standing Committee on the Presidency next year. It is the only department without such an oversight mechanism and, as we saw in the two terms of Jacob Zuma, this lack of accountability can have disastrous ramifications.

The DA also tabled crucial Private Members Bills in Parliament this year, which included Natasha Mazzone’s Independent Electricity Management Operator Bill (IEMO) and Alf Lees’s Public Finance Management Amendment Bill. Other DA bills awaiting certification before they can be tabled include the General Intelligence Laws Amendment Bill (GILAB) and the Red Tape Reduction Bill.

And it is not only in the National Assembly where the DA shone in 2019. Our hard work in the National Council of Provinces also set the standard. While the ANC was slow off the mark in getting the work of the 6th Parliament underway in the NCOP, the DA wasted no time in its role as opposition. We submitted over 200 written questions to ministers, shone a light on severe service delivery failures in ANC municipalities during provincial week and even succeeded in getting the ANC to adopt a motion of ours recognising our good governance record.

It is telling that the ANC in Parliament rejected all of the DA’s budget proposals this year that would have redirected billions of rands from wasteful programmes and vanity projects towards critical services. Our budget-neutral adjustments would have freed up an extra R2 billion for policing, R1.5 billion for basic education and R3.4 billion for healthcare, to name but a few.

The ANC’s stubborn inability to recognise and support good ideas from across the aisle has once again exacted a heavy price from poor South Africans. Instead of redirecting budget towards these critical areas, the ANC government cut billions of rands in funding for basic services – most notably from education and healthcare – in order to continue inflating the public sector wage bill and bailing out failing SOEs.

It is equally telling that the ANC could not bring itself to change the allocation of a staggering R1.85 billion to VIP security, this despite countless debates and committee meetings on the subject. While ordinary South Africans suffer at the hands of criminals and have to be content with one officer for every 369 citizens, each individual VIP who is looked after by the Presidential Protection Unit has 81 personnel at his or her service.

These are the kinds of injustices the DA will continue to fight in Parliament until this government either has no choice but to act, or the people of South Africa have no choice but to elect a better government.

Next year we will build on the successes we achieved in 2019. And we will redouble our efforts to restore the dignity and respect for the institution of Parliament, and re-establish it as the number one tool for accountability in our democracy.

Issued by John Steenhuisen, Democratic Alliance Leader, 5 December 2019