

Just plain wrong

The behaviour of virtually everybody in Parliament during the State of the Nation speech was just plain wrong.

- It was wrong of Pres Zuma to let the Nkandla issue fester and get worse and not deal with it. He owes the nation a clean-up and closure of this case. Period.
- It is wrong of the ANC not to use its power to put the Nkandla issue to bed. They also owe the nation a clean-up and closure.
- It was wrong of whoever installed the jamming device to do so, and to think they would get away with it in this modern day and age. They owe us the respect of not doing such utterly stupid things, bound to be uncovered and embarrass all.
- It was wrong of the “White Shirts” to remove every single member of the EFF from the House, not just the three ordered by the Speaker to leave the House. They owe us respect for elected members of Parliament whose freedom of speech is guaranteed by the Constitution.
- It was wrong of the Speaker to try and fudge the existence of the jamming device and say she will ask the secretary of Parliament to investigate the issue. She owes us the respect of not spinning us cock-and-bull stories. She was no doubt part of the planning on this issue and must have known what was going on. This incident and her subsequent “cockroach” remarks over the weekend further undermine her suitability as Speaker.
- Likewise it was wrong of the Chair of the NCOP (who co-chaired the State of the Nation session with the Speaker) to pretend that she did not know whether the “White Shirts” included members of the SAPS or not. Does she want us to believe she was really not part of the planning of the whole White Shirts arrangement, thus not knowing who they were?

BUT ALSO

- It was wrong of the EFF to blatantly disregard the Speaker and act as if Parliamentary rules are not applicable to them. When you sit in Parliament and enjoy the privileges and healthy salaries of Parliament, you play by the rules of Parliament. They owe us respect for Parliament.
- It was wrong of the Opposition parties NOT to condemn the lawless behaviour of the EFF stronger. They may support the EFF on the issue of Nkandla (correctly so), but how will they react if next time the EFF shouts “when are you giving a house to the poor” or “when are you nationalising a mine” in defiance of all rules?

Ordinary hardworking South Africans

How much damage was done by this wholesale wrong behaviour on all sides was brought home to me by a quiet-spoken, about-50-year-old Coloured man, who runs the shuttle service in Bloemfontein which transport me between the airport and campus when I go and lecture at the University of the Free State. “Spencer” (not his real name) built up this transport business over the last 20 years or so and operates a fleet of vehicles in Bloemfontein, Kimberley and surrounds.

From the business he built himself a house now worth close to R2 million, he said. He also has a second property which he rents out as student accommodation. He now wants to expand his business to the new Witwatersrand of SA, the mines of the Northern Cape. But the “night of the White shirts” made him waver.

The day after SONA he took me back to the airport, drove slower than normal and started a conversation about the incident and “should I take my money out of the country”. We talked through the issues and I am sure he will carry on doing what he is good at – build, expand and run a not-so-little transport business. But the mere fact that we had the conversation tells us how much damage Parliament has done.

A day later in Johannesburg I listened to a young 26-year-old-woman who proudly accumulated savings in the few years she has been working, discussing whether she should move her savings offshore. Again, the question and where it came from, show how much damage has been done.

These ordinary hardworking South Africans are entitled to have their confidence built by Parliament and the political parties represented there; not to have it undermined and sabotaged.

What now?

This is the 3rd incident of disruption caused by the EFF and indirectly Nkandla, the first being on 21 August and the second on 13 November last year. It will certainly not be the last.

From the above list of “what was wrong” it is clear what must be put right; and I am not going to repeat it. The interesting thing now will be to watch whether these things are indeed put right. Will there be a strong enough push-back from society at large to force these things to be put right? Certainly, the public reaction since Thursday evening has been unanimous – fierce disapproval. Even the ANC has condemned the use of jamming devices in the House, and so has the Human Rights Commission.

The political writer De Tocqueville wrote about “habits of the heart” – the rules by which societies conduct their affairs. SA is still very much in a phase of developing those “habits of the heart”. The upside possibility of the State of the Nation fiasco is that we may come away from it with stronger rules on how parliament should function; that we develop stronger “habits of the heart”. The downside possibility is that there may be no response and that the destructive pattern of 21 August, 13 November and now 12 February 2015 is just repeated; that the bad habits of the heart are simply reinforced. If I was a betting man, I would put money on the upside. No predictions, just betting. We will see over the next few months.