



**MINISTRY  
HIGHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA**

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**SPEECH BY BUTI MANAMELA, MINISTER OF  
HIGHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING DURING THE  
SONA DEBATE SPEECH, 17 FEBRUARY 2026,  
PARLIAMENT**

President, Speaker and Honourable Members

I want to congratulate Honourable Des Van Rooyen, whom I once played tennis with. The last time former President Zuma gave him a task as Minister of Finance, it was merely a weekend special.

Then followed a brief one-night stand as MK Party Chief Whip. Although your opposition politics is about as unreliable as your backhand in tennis, Honourable Van Rooyen, they are still better than those of Judge Hlophe, and long may you continue opening for the MK Party.

The last time I spoke on this podium, Minister Steenhuisen was simply Honourable John Steenhuisen — cooking for himself delicious, healthy meals and minding his own business.

Today, he is being useful, running around the country dealing with foot-and-mouth disease. I agree with you, Minister Steenhuisen, that we cannot afford complacency, and that through the leadership of the ANC in the GNU - to quote an old friend of mine “you are cruising nicely”.

You may claim the easy victories; we will allow that as long as you do not season them with a little lie. For us, the GNU is not about competition, but about submitting to

the collective responsibility of government. This is your government too. And unlike the Vryheid's Front, who keep one foot in the GNU and another ready to skip when things get difficult, you are within your rights to claim its victories.

This is the nature of politics in South Africa, fluid, dramatic, and occasionally, if one listens to the Honourable Leader of the EFF, who seems uncertain whether he wants to kiss or kill the President, deeply confusing. What must not be confusing, however, is the difference between noise and work, between performance and governance, between slogans and solutions, and between sophistry and action.

It is from that standpoint that I rise to support the State of the Nation

Address delivered by the President — a SONA grounded not in sophistry, but in action, coordination and delivery.

Let me begin where the pain is real and immediate.

On the evening of the State of the Nation Address, I left this Chamber not to rush to television studios or issue press statements, but to meet students from CPUT who were protesting outside Parliament about the quality of their accommodation. They were anxious, angry, exhausted, and uncertain.

Working together with the police, student leaders and university management, we were informed that the last of those students will walk into better beds tomorrow.

We have also been in contact this morning with the Vice-Chancellors of UCT and DUT, who were engaging students protesting peacefully, and they have committed to restoring teaching and learning as soon as possible.

Our Department, together with student organisations, vice-chancellors and college principals, is working around the clock. Within a short space of time, we will announce measures to ensure that students with historic debt are

accommodated so that they are not financially excluded from completing their studies.

So when some ask, “Where is government?” the answer is simple: sometimes government is not on social media, Honourable Lonzi; sometimes government is in the corridor at midnight, fixing problems. Student accommodation remains one of the most urgent challenges in the post-school system. We face a shortfall of close to 200 000 beds.

We will not resolve this challenge through bricks and mortar alone.

That is why we are expanding access through a combination of physical infrastructure and digital expansion. Many universities are already rolling out digital and blended programmes, and this work must accelerate. Similarly, plans are afoot to digitise CET and TVET curricula through the National Online Learning System, allowing us to absorb the demand created by the

success of basic education and our growing Grade 12 cohort.

At the same time, we must significantly improve the quality of distance education, particularly at UNISA, whose more than 350 000 students constitute the backbone of our post-school system. Digital and distance expansion must enhance learning outcomes, not merely inflate enrolment numbers.

Our universities are under undeniable pressure, yet they have worked hard to accommodate as many students as possible. To address this pressure, we are already in active discussions with the Minister of Finance on the sustainability of university funding, efficiency, long-term infrastructure planning, and student accommodation as a binding constraint on access. This includes accelerating work on new and specialised universities, including the University of Science and Technology. At the same time, we are engaging the Department of Public Works and Infrastructure to release state land and unlock blended financing models to support the construction of new universities and TVET colleges, in line with the

President's instruction. This is not abstract ambition. This is not sophistry. It is coordinated state action.

Yes, we acknowledge the challenge of youth unemployment, with NEETs being the hardest hit at 3.4 million. Unlike Honourable Van Rooyen, we in Higher Education have a plan. We will position CET and TVET colleges as the primary institutions to serve this cohort. CET colleges, through the National Senior Certificate for Adults, will provide young people with life skills digital, financial and

functional literacy as well as modular vocational skills such as bricklaying, motor mechanics, welding, cooking, sewing and related trades, linking them to work opportunities or further study.

We welcome the restoration of the 40% mandatory grant to

employers and will work with NEDLAC to fast-track implementation. This will undoubtedly increase industry

participation. We will commence consultations on the reform and rationalisation of SETAs.

In the meantime, I have instructed SETA CEOs and Chairpersons to coordinate shared services and learning programmes through Strategic High-Impact Programmes. SETAs must be central to the skills revolution. We no longer want PowerPoint presentations, we want evidence. If you say you trained young people, tell us how many, where, at what cost, and how many are now employed.

We want programmes such as the CATHSSETA–McDonald’s partnership, where approximately 5 000 young people were trained and absorbed into employment. Or the infrastructure that all the

SETA's, such as the ETDP, W&R, Construction, CHIETA and others who have invested five and half billion in TVET and CET

infrastructure to better our skills. These are the programmes we will

scale. And we will be ambitious.

Your instruction on TVET colleges is unambiguous: occupational trades leading to employment, modern workshops in partnership with industry, quality lecturers, and effective workplace-integrated

learning must define the future of TVETs. We will mobilise all

resources, partnerships and energy towards full implementation of the

dual-system, already demonstrated through Centres of Specialisation. We will present further detail, not sophistry during the

Department's Budget Vote.

As Clement of Alexandria observed, Honourable Van Rooyen, sophistry is a powerful art that makes false opinions appear true only in words alone. When rhetoric is not guided by philosophy or action, it becomes dangerous to all. And yours, honourable Van Rooyen, is dangerous sophistry. Discrediting the President's intent while opposing every practical step taken to realise it, without solutions. Sophistry is you declaring that your party has readiness to govern, while failing to govern oneself.

How does a party without a constitution propose to govern a constitutional democracy? Sophistry. With MPs coming and going weekly, and with Parliament constantly introducing itself to new MK Party Members, how is stability assured?

A party where relatives substitute for one another like royalty, and where Nkandla ensures the batteries remote-control from Nkandla remain charged, cannot present itself as a serious alternative to the

ANC. How do you govern a country when you cannot even be a credible opposition? President, coordination is not incompetence. Planning is not paralysis, and shouting is not governance.

Some believe that if they shout their sophistry loudly enough, reality will surrender. But they blame you for believing in boring things: plans, budgets, engineers, timelines, and students actually sleeping in

beds. President, they say you presented dreams and promises. You may be

constrained by resources, but never allow ambition to constrain you.

This was a SONA of action, of deliverables, and of timelines. Even if we fail, in building new cities, and connecting people through speed trains, or the vision you hold dearly of making the life of every south

African better, we will never be blamed for being ambitious.

As some are interested in noise.

We are interested in progress.

Let me tell you, before I drop the mic, that some ears in this house are

too small for complexity, for patience and for work — but governing

a country, unlike playing tennis, requires all three.

The debate may be yours.

The action is ours.

Thank you.