

UNREVISED HANSARD

JOINT SITTING

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PROCEEDINGS AT JOINT SITTING

Members of the National Assembly and the National Council of Provinces assembled in the Nieuwmeester Dome at 14:00.

The Speaker took the Chair and requested members to observe a moment of silence for prayers or meditation.

REPLY BY THE PRESIDENT TO DEBATE ON STATE-OF-THE-NATION

ADDRESS

The PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC: Speaker of the National Assembly, Ms Thoko Didiza, Chairperson of the National Council of Provinces, Ms Refilwe Mtshweni-Tsipane, Deputy President Paul Mashatile, premiers of various provinces here present, Ministers and Deputy Ministers, representatives of the South African Local Government Association, Salga, and hon members, I wish to thank the hon members for their contributions to the debate on the state of the nation.

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I welcome in particular those contributions that sought to enrich our common understanding of the work that we need to do to drive more rapid and inclusive growth, to create employment and to bring an end to poverty. I recognise those speakers and thank them for their valuable contributions. [Applause.]

I would like that when we debate the state of the nation, yes, we should be critical – as we should as members of this august body that represents our people – but also bring forward good suggestions and proposals that will be able to take our mission forward. Some speakers held firm to the denialism and distortions demanded by their party positions.

This debate illustrated the dangers of retreating to corners, isolating ourselves in ideological, cultural, racial and linguistic enclaves and hardly ever engaging beyond our immediate circles. [Applause.] This is not conducive to nation-building in a situation like ours at this point in time, where diverse people live side by side in our beautiful country.

This is what makes the forthcoming national dialogue so important. South Africans, informed by their different lived

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experiences, can discuss the many challenges facing our nation and develop common solutions. This is what I would have wanted to see coming out of this debate.

As South Africans we have sat around the negotiating table and forged agreements under much more trying and fraught circumstances. The journey we are embarking upon now through the national dialogue will result in concrete processes to become a more united and stronger South Africa in the face of many political, social and economic challenges that we face, both globally and locally.

The debate also saw the expression of divergent views on various matters by parties that make up the Government of National Unity, GNU. Sometimes these views were expressed robustly and at times directly and harshly.

It is to be expected that the 10 political parties that make up the GNU, with their very different perspectives and ideological views, will not always agree and will sometimes feel the need on platforms such as this to talk to their different constituencies.

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Despite these differences, these political parties are working well together in the GNU – whether people like it or not.

[Applause.] We are finding ways of mediating our differences and we remain focused on the actions that we are all committed to undertake.

It is this that gives me confidence that the GNU that I lead will continue to promote stability and serve the interest of South Africa, in accordance with our Statement of Intent that we all signed up to and the Medium-Term Development Plan.

It is encouraging that a great many of the contributions in the debate appreciated the progress we have made as a country over the last 30 years. Those who may well have been tempted to say vaguest things such as no progress has been made and nothing has been done, knew down deep in their hearts that they are talking to the wind. [Applause.]

This progress is owned by the people of South Africa – and let me be clear – it is not owned by any individual. Even the great Nelson Mandela, the father of our democracy and nation, never for one minute claimed that he had freed the people of South Africa. Even as people might have tried to lionise him,

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he always said that we did it together as the people of South Africa, and that is what we should do. [Applause.]

This South Africa has been built by its own people who have sought to change their lives. They have entrusted the stewardship of this process to all of us and not just to some of us or to one of us.

Many of the speakers in the debate acknowledged the real challenges we face today and recognised the work that is underway to address these challenges. They said that the nation we want to build must be fundamentally different from the country that we once were.

Even those who may well have been opposed to the foundational document of our Constitution, the Freedom Charter, now pleasingly embrace it, talk to it and quote it. That shows the growing political maturity in our country that we are embracing the change that our forebearers dreamed of 70 years ago.

We are the first to acknowledge that we have not yet achieved a number of aspirations set out in the Freedom Charter, but it

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is dishonest to say that no significant progress has been made.

A number of speakers during this debate spoke about the land question, which I have in the past characterised as the original sin that was committed against the people of our country. Describing the Natives Land Act of 1913, Solomon T Plaatje described it as an insidious law that rendered black people pariahs in the land of their birth. It is this Natives Land Act that plunged millions of South Africans into poverty and deprivation, whose impact endures to this day.

Despite the terrible deed that was perpetrated against black South Africans here in the City of Cape Town, along the foothills of Table Mountain lies a potent symbol of hope, change and progress. Just a few kilometres up the hill from our Parliament is District Six. It is here that one of the most painful chapters in the history of this country took place nearly 60 years ago.

In 1968, the apartheid regime began demolishing District Six to make way for a whites-only suburb. More than 60 000 people

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were forcibly removed and families were torn apart – an entire community and way of life was destroyed.

Over the course of two decades, the apartheid government forcibly removed more than 3,5 million people in District Six, Sophiatown, Marabastad, Cato Manor, Kroonstad, Nelspruit and many other places across the country. It was one of the largest mass removals of people in modern history.

There are some in this House today who have memories of their families being forcibly removed from their land. There are millions more across the country who still experience the after effects of this monstrous crime. The people of this country know the pain of forced removals. That is why we will never allow forced removals again in this country. [Applause.]

That is why we have a Constitution that prohibits the arbitrary deprivation of property. That is why we have a Constitution that requires just and equitable compensation to be paid in the event of expropriation for a public purpose or in the public interest where applicable.

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Our experience of forced removals also explains the constitutional requirement that the state must take reasonable measures, within its available resources, to foster conditions which enable citizens to gain access to land on an equitable basis.

Today, District Six rings with the sounds of families who have been returned and are returning to the land that was taken from them. Yet, like the transformation of our society, the process of restitution is not complete; it is an ongoing process. There is still much that needs to be done to heal the divisions of the past.

I reflect on this because it is part of our history, not only because issues of land and redress have featured prominently in this debate, but also because understanding this past, that many would like to forget, is vital to understanding the nation that we are working to build today.

At this important moment in our country and in our world, we must ask ourselves what kind of a nation we want to be.

Surely, we do not want a nation which is separated by race, language, income and geography. We want a nation in which all

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people enjoy equal worth and equal opportunity. We want a nation in which the rule of law is protected and upheld. We want a dynamic and growing economy in which small businesses can emerge, grow and expand.

It is my firm and enduring belief that all of us as South Africans and fellow citizens of this beautiful country are bound together by our history and our present, and we want the same thing for the people of this country.

We have toiled long and hard to build a nation united in its diversity. We are firmly committed to the fundamental principle that South Africa belongs to all who live in it. We are also firmly committed to a society that is non-racial and non-sexist. We want to live together in peace, harmony and equality. We want to see our country succeed and grow.

We must not allow others to define or divide us. At a time like this we need to stand united as a nation, particularly now when we are facing a harsh global wind. This is not the time for any of us to rush off to foreign lands to lay complaints about issues that we can solve ourselves here in

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this country. [Applause.] We need South African solutions to South African problems.

While there are many diverse and different voices in our country, we must strive to convey a common message. We must say to our people and to the world that we are committed to work together to build a society in which all South Africans are free and equal – to build a nation that works for all. Together we should be better at being weavers and builders to build a nation, working alongside each other.

This is what the programme of the Government of National Unity is about, and we will not be diverted from the path that we have set out. I would like to repeat, we will not be bullied by anyone in the country or outside from our intent to work together. [Applause.]

As a country, this is a moment of continuity and change. It is also a moment of unity, faced with the challenges that we now face even globally and continentally. This is the time when we must unite and speak and act as one as a nation.

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It is a moment of continuity because we are building on the substantial advances made over 30 years of democracy and we are taking forward the far-reaching reforms that we embarked on in the previous administration.

While some speakers have sought to claim the progress that is being made and the reforms that are now being implemented as new developments and their own makings, we nevertheless welcome the fact that they have embraced these initiatives and are working to ensure they succeed – whether they claim to be the mothers or the fathers – we are working and moving forward. [Applause.]

The structural reforms initiated under Operation Vulindlela are well underway, led by the Presidency and executed through the intergovernmental co-operation together with National Treasury. We will move with even greater urgency and determination to ensure that these changes, reforms and advances forward are implemented.

Working with our partners – business, labour and community-bases organisations – we are making considerable progress towards resolving challenges in our ports and rail, and in

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laying the ground for an energy secure future, we are introducing competition and dynamism. These reforms are not incidental; they are key to improving the business operating environment, to attracting new investment and to creating jobs.

This is also a time of change. Not only has the composition of government changed, but there is a clear commitment to accelerate growth and transformation and to shift the trajectory of our economy. There is a determination to be innovative, creative and to come up with new solutions to problems and challenges, to expand programmes that work and have an impact and to end or redirect programmes that don't work. As we do so, we are building on the work that has been done in previous years, not discarding it.

There has been much debate about the laws that were passed in the previous Parliament and the policy and legislative agenda of this administration. It is important to understand the powers and responsibilities of the President when it comes to assenting to legislation passed by Parliament. [Applause.]

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We should be proud of our legislative architecture and process, which subjects every draft Bill to several layers of debate, consideration, scrutiny and public consultation. This process draws on the views of experts, collective wisdom of Members of Parliament and let me repeat, the collective wisdom of Members of Parliament ... [Applause.]

Now, here is a reservoir of wisdom. Some may think that one side is wiser than the other, but when I look at all of you, I say you are wise men and women – act like that as well.

[Applause.]

We should be proud that we are a democracy that is governed by a thorough process of approving our laws and not the arbitrary whims of a ruler. The Constitution is very clear: “The President must assent to a Bill passed by Parliament unless the President has reservations about its constitutionality”.

The Constitution does not permit that the act of assent by the President be subject to negotiation or to the terms of an agreement between parties. [Applause.] The President must ultimately make a determination in line with the Constitution.

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As we said in the state of the nation and as many speakers have emphasised in this debate, what we want above all is an economy that is growing, inclusive and sustainable. We will work with all willing partners, mobilise whatever human, financial and other resources necessary to achieve that objective. We will do the detailed work and the heavy lifting and harness our country's considerable competitive advantages to drive growth and job creation.

Last year the World Economic Forum ranked South Africa as the leading tourism destination on the continent, citing factors such as our business environment, information technology and tourism infrastructure and services. Sometimes we downplay all these endowments. We are attracting new visitors to our shores and improving our visa regime as we heard.

Beyond South Africa's natural splendour and endowments, we have a vast and highly diversified agricultural sector that is a substantial contributor to our country's gross domestic product, GDP and rising.

Farmers, both black and white, are the lifeblood of our economy as they feed the nation. Supporting the growth of

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agriculture is key to our goal of inclusive growth and to creating jobs in every part of our country.

We are resolving the challenges in our logistics system that have constrained the growth of the sector, and we are expanding markets for South Africa's various products – agricultural manufactured and otherwise – as well as abundant natural resources in our mining industry and many others.

South Africa has advanced manufacturing capacity. We have skills, experience and know-how that we need to harness, not only to develop existing industries, but also to establish new industries. That is how a number of countries are growing. This is at the heart of our industrial policy. It is part of our just transition to a low carbon economy and a climate resilient society.

We will put these capabilities to work to build industries in areas such as green hydrogen, electric vehicles and renewable energy. We have great endowments in this regard. We will seize the opportunities to rapidly change in new technology to build a digital economy, a digital state and a digital society. I have often said that when it comes to digitisation, our people

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are far ahead of us, and we need to follow in their toe to ensure that as a government we give them those enablers and capabilities that they desire.

The industrialisation drive is underpinned by significant new investment in infrastructure. We spoke about the various commitments and investments that we are making. The infrastructure drive is gaining momentum thanks to innovations such as Infrastructure SA and the Infrastructure Fund, and the manner in which we are now beginning to find new ways of funding infrastructure.

These efforts will be accelerated as a result of the changes introduced by National Treasury to encourage greater public-private partnership in infrastructure. Even as we do so, it is worth pointing out that public sector infrastructure investment is on the rise for a second consecutive year. As we were reminded in the debate, the focus on new infrastructure development must be accompanied by maintenance and upgrading of existing infrastructure. As we develop new infrastructure, alongside that we must begin to put together budgets to maintain those infrastructure facilities that we build.

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Strengthening provincial and local economies is critical for inclusion in terms of the economy. Through the District Development Model, we are working to strengthen local economic development so that our municipalities become the centre of economic growth and development and be well placed to play an important role in economic growth and provide services to our people.

During this debate, we have heard from the premiers of our various provinces who were here present about the vital work underway in various provinces to stimulate provincial economic activity, attract higher levels of investment and create jobs. Just listening to the work that is being done in the provinces gave a clear impression that indeed our country is on the move on a number of fronts. I want to applaud our premiers for the work that they are doing. [Applause.]

We have said that infrastructure development is the flywheel of economic activity, and we are witnessing these multiplier effects on provincial GDP, local businesses and communities. We welcome the massive infrastructure investment in several provinces covering projects such as roads, housing, bulk water systems and other infrastructure. Not only will these projects

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vastly improve the delivery of basic services, but they are also going to support economic growth and job creation in those provinces.

The visits by the national executive, that is Cabinet, to our various provinces have shown great benefit and opportunities for synergy. We have been able to share best practice and give support to our provinces on a number of issues that they are dealing with.

Leveraging of public-private partnerships for infrastructure build in all provinces is proving to be highly effective in terms of pooling resources, sharing expertise and delivering mass infrastructure at scale. It was a joy to hear how provinces themselves are beginning to co-operate to build massive infrastructure facilities where one province and another meet to say let us build this road, train or whatever in a co-operative manner.

We are seeing high impact financial inflows into our provinces in mining, renewable energy, auto manufacturing, agriculture, manufacturing, tourism and other key sectors. This is a

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demonstration of ongoing confidence of domestic and international investors in these centres of economic activity.

When our provinces hold their own investment conferences or summits, I know for sure that through those efforts they are able to attract investors, both local and international, who make commitments that are advancing the prospects of economic growth in those provinces. Our provinces, provincial leaders, premiers and MECs are really becoming effective and once again I applaud them for the wonderful work that they are doing.

[Applause.]

For investment to grow there must be a razor-sharp focus on improving the capacity of local government to deliver essential services that are critical to business activity, be they water, electricity or logistical infrastructure. Strong municipalities are needed to achieve strong local economies.

We welcome the commitment of our premiers to prioritise municipal governance and capacity building, and to support the financial sustainability of municipalities in their provinces. Clean water, proper sanitation, reliable electricity, effective waste management and well-maintained municipal

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infrastructure isn't just good for communities, it is also good for business and for municipalities to get good revenue. It reassures potential investors that are exploring investment opportunities in provinces.

We welcome the initiative taken by many of these provinces to hold local investment conferences, as I said. We call on our respective premiers to direct the same focus and energy towards local development of townships, small towns and village economies.

We have seen, for example, how the potential of rural and eco-tourism has been effectively harnessed by several provinces to support job creation, poverty eradication, small business development and community ownership of tourism resources and facilities. It is this way of involving our people through various entities, be they traditional leaders, community-based organisations or co-operatives, that we will be able to make greater progress.

By leveraging their respective competitive economic advantages, our provinces are perfectly positioned to power growth, turning every metro, city, town and village into a

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hive of economic activity. National government will stand in support of the various efforts that our provinces will make in this direction.

As several speakers said, we need to continue working with our traditional leaders as they continue to play an important role in development. We are seeing an improvement in the growing co-operation between traditional leaders and local councils. We want to see more integration and more collaboration between our traditional leaders and our local government entities.

A number of members spoke about the importance of education as a great instrument of transformation. We welcome the suggestions and proposals that were put forward during this debate. Education is at the heart of inclusive economic growth, job creation and social upliftment.

The World Bank recently released a report on South Africa's economic performance and prospects for the medium term. The report highlighted the role of education in strengthening our country's human capital in pursuit of economic and social development.

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Democratic South Africa inherited a legacy of Bantu Education as we all know, and we have been steadily working to transform the education landscape and provide decent, quality basic education for all. We are working to build an education system that produces the skills needed by the economy. This means, among other things, that our children must have a strong literacy and numeracy base from the earliest years. That is why we have laid so much emphasis on Early Childhood Development to improve the learning outcomes of our children in the foundational phase.

We concur with the sentiment expressed during this debate that technical and vocational training must be strengthened if we are to develop the skills pipeline needed for the vast majority of our people in a changing world of work.

We are committed to the development of entrepreneurship as a pathway to employment. We must work to dispel the mindset that self-employment is only a route for those who cannot be absorbed by the formal economy. [Applause.] That is an important thing to also focus on.

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Compared to the rest of the continent, we must admit that our country's rate of entrepreneurship is at a low level and this must change. A thriving small business and co-operative sector is key to inclusive economic growth.

We welcome the ongoing efforts of the Department of Small Business Development to develop township and rural economies and enterprises, and the goal of creating a good number of new medium and small enterprises by 2030.

We want a society that takes care of those in need. If we drive economic growth and the creation of jobs, we are strengthening the social protection provided to poor and unemployed in our country.

Despite severe financial constraints, we continue to implement pro-poor policies to uplift society's most vulnerable in the form of social grants, school feeding schemes and free basic services for the poor. This is not just about tackling poverty and improving the quality of life of South Africans, it is about reducing inequality, giving every person a fair chance and investing in our people and enabling them to realise their potential.

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What has also been clear in this debate is that we all want a country that is transformed, and that has shed the heavy burden of its past. There is a broad consensus across the political spectrum and indeed across society on the principle of non-racialism.

Our empowerment and transformation programmes recognise that to build a truly non-racial society we must narrow inequality and redress the harmful legacy of apartheid. That is why we remain committed to the programmes that will enhance transforming – whether people like it or not, that is the route we must take. [Applause.]

We will not relent in our drive to expand the participation of black and young South Africans in various sectors of our economy. We will ensure that the Transformation Fund, that a number of people spoke about, some critically and some in favour, achieves its objective of providing financial and nonfinancial support to black-owned enterprises to ensure their meaningful participation in the economy. If we want transformation, this is one of the key routes that we must take.

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I would say to those who are opposed to it to sit back and think it through and ask themselves how else are we going to foster transformation if the government is not going to take deliberate steps to make sure that we deal with the legacy of the past. [Applause.]

For instance, sometimes people say yes you have restituted land to people, but that land has gone fallow; it is not being utilised. Then they say that is because you never gave assistance – financial support or otherwise. However, when we want to set up a transformation fund, the very same people are the ones who are against it. How is that possible? We must be serious about transformation and advancing the interest of those who were adversely affected by apartheid. [Applause.]

These policies are about eradicating the differences that still exist in our society, not entrenching them. They are about empowering those who have been disempowered deliberately and protecting the rights of all.

Later today we will gather at Air Force Base Swartkop in Pretoria to receive the remains of 14 South African soldiers who lost their lives in the eastern DRC. We will pay tribute

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to our fallen soldiers and honour their contribution to the struggle for peace on the African continent.

Much has been said in this House and in the debate in the National Assembly earlier in the week about the deployment of the South African National Defence Force, SANDF, in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, DRC. It is a debate that is welcome and necessary because South Africa's role in peace keeping missions is fundamental to the pursuit of peace, stability and development in our own country, in the region where our country is located and in our continent.

The decision to deploy our armed forces is not taken lightly, particularly when that deployment may put our defence force members in harm's way.

While South Africa has contributed to the Southern African Development Community, SADC, mission in the DRC, we have always maintained that an inclusive negotiated resolution is required to achieving lasting peace in the region. We therefore welcome the outcome of the joint summit which was really historic in that it brought together SADC and the east African community over the weekend, where we agreed that

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direct negotiations and dialogue must resume between all state and non-state parties, including the M23.

As South Africa we insisted that non-state parties must also be included and that M23, which has now invaded and taken over Goma, must also be part of this negotiation and dialogue. During that discussion we were able to put forward our own experience as a nation that to bring the horror of apartheid to an end, it was incumbent on all of us to include state parties and non-state parties in the negotiation. In the end that is what finally led to the settlement of the apartheid horror. We were able to share that with our colleagues and compatriots at the summit and the message did sink in. going forward we are now going to see a dialogue that is going to involve state and non-state parties in an effort to bring an end to that conflict.

The outcomes from the joint summit are in confidence building measures towards a sustainable peace, which will finally lead to the drawdown of the SADC troops. As South Africa, we will do whatever is within our means to support the peace effort so that this conflict will finally end, and the people of the region will finally know peace.

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This weekend I will be travelling to Addis Ababa in Ethiopia for the 38th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the African Union. The AU has designated the theme for 2025 as 'Justice for Africans and People of African Descent through Reparations'.

South Africa and Ghana have been nominated to champion this theme. We will focus on actively engaging the African diaspora to foster meaningful connections and encourage investment in our countries. This initiative is about more than reparations; it is a powerful call for unity, empowerment and the upliftment of our continent. Together we will forge a resilient continent where hope thrives, allowing people of African descent to reconnect meaningfully with their continent.

We live in times of great uncertainty, impacted by geopolitical events unfolding way beyond our shores. Closer to home we have considerable challenges to overcome if we are to build a country of freedom, true equality and shared prosperity for all.

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This, in my view, is a time of opportunity and hope. The Government of National Unity represents the best of that hope. We have demonstrated that we are prepared to put our political differences aside and work for the common good of all South Africans. We have decided that we are not going to sit on the sidelines and make noise; we have decided that we are going to fold our sleeves and get right into the centre of what needs to be done.

This government remains united in pursuit of a South Africa that improves the material prospects of every South African man, woman and child. We are committed to upholding our hard-won democracy. We are also committed to expanding the frontiers of opportunity for all South Africans. As we do so, we are guided by, as I have said, our Constitution, the Bill of Rights and the rule of law.

As we rise from this debate, I am convinced that despite our differences, we share a common desire for a South Africa that belongs to all who live in it. From what I have heard in this debate, this desire is shared by all sides of this House. To me that is heartening because it is this vision of a nation that works for all.

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Even those who were critical of what is being done in government were also united in saying that we do need a vision that is going to take this country forward. They were able to put proposals and criticism forward. Let me say as I close, the proposals and criticisms that you have put forward are taken seriously.

I will certainly be spending a considerable amount of time going through your speeches and seeing what is best that we can draw from what was said here to take South Africa forward. So, let us all unite to take this country forward and work hard for the people who elected us to come here. Thank you very much for your participation in the debate. [Applause.]

Debate concluded.

The Joint Sitting adjourned at 14:55.