

# The image of a reluctant watchdog

## State of the Nation 2005 – 2006

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### Review: Gerald Shaw

THIS IS the third in the now well-established series of annual reviews of the state of the nation and, as in previous years, it asks the hard questions frankly and identifies areas of critical concern.

Themes under discussion by a panel of researchers and academic experts include presidential targets and the state of delivery, parliament and its oversight role, black empowerment, the state of South Africa's

cities, the troubled state of South African soccer, and the state of mathematics and science education.

There is a particularly good and comprehensive discussion by Judith February of parliament's unhappy record of failure in crucial areas as a watchdog of executive government and public expenditure. February is a political analyst of the Parliamentary Information and Monitoring Service of the Institute of Democracy in South Africa. (Idasa).

She recalls that President Mbeki in his 2004 State of the Nation address challenged parliament to hold the executive government to account for the proper implementation of his programme for improved service delivery. She says that parliament has thus far declined to carve out an oversight role for itself adequately or successfully. And it has had to face up to a number of high profile breaches of its own code of ethics.

In the early years of ANC government parliament's portfolio committee system worked rather well, vastly improving on the Nationalist government's abysmal record of rubber-

stamping executive actions by committees dominated by NP majorities which meekly endorsed executive actions.

In recent years, however, the performance of the portfolio committees has been patchy. As the author recalls, the arms deal tested parliament's mettle for holding the executive to account – and it left the reputation of the once authoritative and effective Select Committee on Public Accounts (Scopa) badly tarnished. The arms deal tore Scopa apart. There was a series of heavy-handed interventions by the ANC whips office and, on one occasion, by Deputy President Zuma himself, which destroyed the non-partisan, independent role of the committee.

The respected Andrew Feinstein, head of the ANC group in Scopa, was replaced by an obscure ANC MP, Vincent Smith, who turned out to be what Judith February calls "an effective handmaiden of the ANC whips". The independent chairman of the committee was Gavin Woods, an IFP MP, who had been appointed in terms of a hallowed tradition in Commonwealth parliaments that

this office should always be held by a member of the opposition.

Woods was eventually driven to resign when the ANC majority of the committee, led by Vincent Smith, rammed through a report on the arms deal that was less than satisfactory and left several questions unanswered.

As February concludes: "Scopa is little heard from these days. Even the reports of a scandal involving the use of public funds by a state-owned corporation, Petro South Africa, appears not to have sparked any activity on the part of what was once, albeit briefly, a fiercely independent oversight grouping."

So it seems fair to conclude that as far as accountability is concerned we are back where we used to be in the bad old days.

This chapter also deals with the Travelgate scandal and notes that parliament, although it initiated the investigation, has done little since the arrest of the MPs to assure the public that it attaches much importance to the fact of fraudulent conduct by some of its members. There are still 26 MPs standing trial.

But lawyers are engaged in plea bargaining on behalf of their clients – a process which reinforces public cynicism and a view that double standards apply in the case of the rich and the political elite, she says.

February recalls press reports of backbench discontent that only backbenchers had been charged and that none of the party big-wigs – in the form of four cabinet ministers, two deputy ministers, two provincial premiers and some of parliament's senior office bearers had been charged.

Fears are also expressed in this chapter that parliament looks set to fall short again of performing its essential watchdog function in what has become known as the Oilgate scandal.

This collection of essays is much wider in scope than can be covered in this review. Suffice it to say that *State of the Nation 2005 – 2006* promises to be as valuable as its predecessors in stimulating debate about South Africa's policy options and the country's prospects of improving the lot of the impoverished majority of its citizens.