

INSIDE PARLIAMENT

Tension simmers between government and its institutions

Six years after the first post-apartheid government was formed, many serious tensions still remain between the different levels of government and the institutions created to serve them.

Last Friday, for example, one could almost cut the tension in the air with a knife as the National Assembly's portfolio committee on finance bristled with anger after being presented with a document by the Financial and Fiscal Commission (FFC) on its recommendations on the division of revenue in the next three-year Budget cycle.

The problem was that the FFC document dealt mainly with the allocation of funds to the provinces for health, education and welfare on a costed norms basis.

Now that might not seem problematic, but in terms of our rather convoluted constitution the National Assembly is supposed to look after local government while the provinces are the responsibility of the National Council of Provinces (NCOP) — and beware anyone who mixes up those lines of accountability.

So the committee heard little or nothing about how the FFC envisaged recommending allocations to local government for such vital issues as the criminal justice system and economic activity. Without that information the committee could not feel it

was doing its job properly.

To its credit, the FFC said it had largely ignored local government because of the uncertainty about its shape and size after the pending local government elections. More attention would be paid to it next year after things had settled down.

During the meeting it became clear that the FFC had held extensive discussions with

the finance department about its recommendations, leaving the committee completely out of the loop of preparing for the next Medium Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF), or three-year Budget cycle.

That, said members, reduced the committee to a "talking forum", which was completely unacceptable. Remember, the committee has been fighting hard for a greater oversight role in the drawing up of MTEFs and budgets, and to be shown that it was being side-stepped once again was the last straw.

Many committee members were also upset that Murphy Morobe, the FFC chairman, did not turn up for the meeting. The FFC position was put by his deputy and senior officials.

Able as these officers might be, committee members felt the absence of Morobe showed a lack of respect for Parliament.

Barbara Hogan, the feisty chairman of the committee, got the full support of the committee when she said the time had come for a meeting with the finance department and FFC management to develop a set of protocols on how and when the FFC would relate to Parliament in such a way that gave due recognition of its role.

She was not altogether uncomplimentary.

She said the FFC's costed norms approach, which sets out to determine whether the provinces were adequately funded to provide certain set basic services to national norms and standards, would be a valuable analytical tool to ensure that government, at all levels,

LYNDA
LOXTON