

Business Day

Ghosts are feeding on SA's living taxpayers ...

BY ANTHONY BUTLER, 22 AUGUST 2014, 05:24

EVERY society and civilisation, across the entire span of human history, has believed in supernatural entities that must be pacified by the living. Only in South Africa, however, are they subsidised by taxpayers.

First, spectres drift through the membership systems of the African National Congress (ANC). A task team appointed by the ANC to investigate departures from candidate list guidelines in 2010 concluded that ghost members were actively nominating candidates at branch meetings. In some provinces, whole "phantom branches" were uncovered.

In the run-up to the ANC's Mangaung conference, wraiths and ghouls multiplied mysteriously in KwaZulu-Natal, where they were believed to have been summoned up by supporters of then ANC provincial chairman Dr Zweli Mkhize. (Note to subeditor: please check qualifications.) It is widely believed that such malign spirits can be pacified only by means of a ritual feeding of government tenders.

In provinces such as the Eastern Cape and North West, by contrast, ANC high priest Gwede Mantashe proclaimed that local phantoms had been raised up by a sinister "force for change". Such a demonic spirit, he argued, should refrain from tormenting the inhabitants of the material world.

Earlier this year, Mantashe was reported to have summoned up "spooks" from the crypt at Luthuli House. Their task was to screen the ranks of aspirant ANC MPs to ensure that "representatives of the undead" would not be elevated to the National Assembly. A visual inspection of the ranks of ANC MPs suggests that this project has not been entirely successful.

Second, a plague of ghosts has descended on the South African Social Security Agency (Sassa). So serious has this become that the agency has been forced to initiate biometric finger scanning and voice recognition systems to separate corporeal grant beneficiaries from their ghostly companions. Sassa Eastern Cape spokesman Luzuko Qina explained that the province was piloting verification methods to make sure that grants are not paid to a "ghost". All of the province's 3.6-million social grant recipients will soon be asked if they are actually alive.

Third, an initiative to drive out malign spirits has been launched this week by Higher Education Minister Dr Blade Nzimande. (Note to subeditor: please check whether sociology really counts.) According to the minister, the country has been overrun by "imposters". Observing that many ostensible "doctors" and "masters" did not in fact

exist at all, he urged employers in the public and private sector to report suspected cases to the police.

Fourth, it was alleged this week at the Port Elizabeth Commercial Crimes Court that Portia "Pankie" Sizani, wife of ANC chief whip Stone Sizani, defrauded the Department of Education of more than R1.2m in 2009 and 2010, while she was working as an early childhood development co-ordinator in Port Elizabeth. She allegedly summoned up "ghost teachers" in the Nelson Mandela Bay area, and these apparitions were allegedly paid salaries despite never materialising as teachers in their host schools.

Such troubling allegations may be merely the tip of an iceberg.

Financial and Fiscal Commission acting chairman and CEO Bongani Khumalo recently announced that the commission is partnering the Public Service Commission to investigate claims that most of the country's 1.3-million public servants cannot be proven to exist. This would help to explain why outcomes have been so poor in the health, education and social development sectors, despite an annual R450bn wage bill. Similar studies are being conducted by the Presidential Public Service Remuneration Review Commission and by the Independent Commission for the Remuneration of Public Office Bearers. Rumours have been circulating in Pretoria, however, that these commissions themselves may be entirely nebulous. "We are unable to confirm or deny their existence," a government spokesman told reporters this week. "It is believed that all of their actual work is undertaken by a small group of external consultants."

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