

DIRCO should be a key player in facilitating trade, investment and economic growth in South Africa

By Darren Bergman MP – DA Shadow Minister of International Relations and Cooperation

Introduction

Honourable Members, the time has come to ask ourselves some tough questions. Are we the masters of our destiny or are we doomed to repeat the same mistakes as the dark past we came from?

Ever asked yourself about the value we are getting as a country from our BRICS membership?

Has South Africa not been reduced to playing second fiddle to countries such as China and Russia?

South Africa is trying so hard to move away from its colonial past, would it not be fatal for the country to land in the same trap as before?

Current situation

The problem is that we send off mixed signals, to the extent that there is communication discord between the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) and the Executive.

South Africa has just come out of a devastating Zuma administration, which our current President rightfully described as wasted years. We watched in dismay as international fugitives wanted by the International Criminal Court, such as the Sudan's deposed dictator, Omar al-Bashir, were assisted by organs of state to exit the country in violation of our international obligations. We witnessed the assault of a South African citizen on our soil, but the state bent over backwards to protect the perpetrator instead of the victim. We were constantly bombarded with reports about allegations of smuggling by our diplomatic staff.

Honourable members, we cannot allow this assault on our image as a country to continue.

Our inconsistency in defending human rights abroad is unacceptable. We only seem to raise our voice on human rights abuse when the offending country is not one of our so-called 'friends'. We enter the UN security council with a string of illogical voting patterns that seem to be more about an appeasement to our allies than a firm stand for a cause.

Hope

Honourable Minister, I appeal to you to allow DIRCO to do its job without undue interference from other arms of government. Oftentimes, DIRCO has been called upon time and again to clean up the mess caused by politicians. It is time that the DIRCO committee is given space to conduct its oversight role unhindered on all the Department's functions. What South Africa needs is a predictable and logical international engagement framework that will guide our diplomatic personnel on what is expected of them. Diplomatic staff must know that there are consequences for deviating from the set code of conduct.

Members of the executive must be made to understand that message discipline is a key requirement to successful engagement with our international partners. The era of burdening DIRCO staff with

cleaning up the mess caused by motormouths in the Executive should be a thing of the past. Just as we need stability in the country, we also need stability in our interaction with our international partners and allies.

The DA offer

A DA government would review all our current missions with a view to measuring their contribution to South Africa's development, whether in increasing bilateral trade or increasing tourism receipts to our shores. Any mission that does not measure up will either be closed or downgraded. South Africa's interests, and not political considerations, will inform our approach to diplomatic engagements with the rest of the world.

Our role in the AU will be to facilitate the deepening of democratic practice, consolidation of the recently signed inter-Africa free trade agreement, infrastructure development and value addition of our natural resources.

We will be unwavering in our condemnation of human rights abuses, wherever they may be. Even as we try to live in the letter and spirit of our Bill of Rights, at home, we should fight for the same privilege for oppressed people around the world.

Our approach to ongoing raging conflicts across the world should be guided by a firm commitment to justice and the defence of human rights. We should leverage on our internationally acknowledged conflict resolution reputation to advocate for peace and protection of vulnerable people. It is time that South Africa occupies its rightful role as a beacon of hope for the oppressed.

Conclusion

Honourable members, a back to basic approach in our engagement with international partners will bring us back on track to fulfil the vision set by our democracy's greatest statesmen, Nelson Mandela.

Let us take a deliberate decision today to refocus the role of DIRCO and ensure that it prioritises key drivers of change in South Africa, namely trade and investment.

Honourable Minister, the ball is in your court to ensure that DIRCO becomes a key driver of change both locally and internationally. It is up to you to position South Africa as a key global player and a country that is ready and open for business.

I thank you.