

Citizens deserve a housing policy that creates lasting change

By **Emma Louise Powell MP** – DA Deputy Shadow Minister for Human Settlements, Water and Sanitation

Madam Chairperson, on 11 March 2017, while working in local government, I awoke to a frantic call informing me that a devastating fire had broken out in Hout Bay and was ripping through the informal settlement of Imizamo Yethu.

I arrived 20 minutes later to scenes that I can only describe as tragedy. Helicopters rounded the mountains in dangerous winds, while fire fighters traversed the steep terrain trying to extinguish the fire where the winds were spreading it west.

As we navigated our way up through the settlement to meet officials, we were passed by men and women hurrying down the mountain to safety, carrying on their backs their last remaining possessions - mattresses, couches, suitcases of clothes – stealing their resolve to get down that hill and away from the fire that had already swallowed whole their homes. Children, some dazed, lost and confused, others screaming hysterically as they ran after their terrified mothers barefoot. And as we approached the top of settlement where the fire had first started, the acrid smell of burning bodies permeated the soot filled sky.

3 people died that day; over 2 000 homes of some our nation's poorest people were destroyed, and 10 000 people were displaced.

The Honourable Minister will remember that fire well, because she visited the recovery operation once in coming days. It was of course the last the City heard from or saw of her in dealing with the crisis.

Informal settlement fires are not unique to Cape Town and its strong winds. For the 2017 reporting period, 5283 informal dwelling fires were recorded across South Africa. The value of this loss carried by already cash strapped municipalities equated to more than 179 million rand.

Madam Chairperson, no one should have to live in an informal dwelling with the constant threat of losing their home to fire.

Sadly, according to National Treasury, more than 13% of South Africans live in informal homes. Rapid urbanisation is making it increasingly difficult to address existing backlogs let alone respond to new demands. The vast majority of municipalities do not even have up to date inventories of their informal settlements, which makes understanding the magnitude of informality almost impossible.

There is something fundamentally wrong with a system in which millions of people do not have their most fundamental need for permanent shelter met because the state and economy have failed them.

Madam Chair, it is abundantly clear that the problems with the ruling party's current approach are numerous.

South Africa's housing allocation system is unable to cope with the complexity of migration across provinces, and the outstanding backlog on the housing data base is rousing an ever-increasing tide of frustration, resulting in violent riots across our country.

The informal sale of RDP houses means that desperate South Africans are selling their homes on the informal market to fund their basic living costs, and then again end up living in back yards or zinc structures built on inhabitable land such as wetlands and flood basins – prone to flooding and fire.

The ANC's commitment to political expediency and populism has meant that calls by desperate Municipalities for legislative amendments to the Prevention of Illegal Evictions Act have been ignored, resulting in greenfield sites obtained for formal development being illegally invaded before even basic earthworks can be completed, once more perpetuating the cycle of informality.

The sluggish pace of land reform, combined with wholesale government corruption has meant that land intended for development has not been forthcoming – and in response to the slow pace of reform, our ruling elite has sought to obscure their failures with populist calls for expropriation without compensation.

In the face of this ever-shifting landscape, our national legislation on the issue of housing remains archaic, expensive, and frankly, the most fundamental hinderance to executing real and lasting change.

And juxtaposing this crisis in bitter irony is an air that has for years been thick with promises of reform – the National Development Plan, the Breaking New Ground Programme, Thuma Mina, the so called New Dawn - but on the ground we are yet to see those reforms materialise into genuine change.

Instead, the country's leaders have the audacity to stand at this very podium and make lofty statements about great dreams of smart cities and bullet trains – while the people of our land languish in the dust of our leader's apathy.

Honourable Members, we as legislators sit in this house entrusted with the last remaining rubble of our Nations hope, and we are charged with seeking out honest, evidence-based solutions that will finally turn the tides on the poverty of our people.

The Democratic Alliance (DA) will not stand by in silence and watch our great nation reduced to a begging bowl.

As a result of the need for change it is the DA that has worked most studiously to develop an innovative housing policy.

The DA recognises that after years of corruption the state resources to give every family a house do not exist. The Department of Human Settlements needs to move away from building free standing structures and instead build compact, environmentally friendly developments, close to economic

opportunities, using the latest building methodologies the open market can offer.

Under a DA housing policy, National treasury would implement tighter regulations on the expenditure of the Urban Settlements Development Grant to ensure that this money is used to alleviate the housing backlog.

A DA Housing policy would provide vouchers to qualifying beneficiaries allowing them to build their own homes on government-provided service sites; and, social housing units in mixed income developments would be made available by leveraging bulk rights to ensure developers add at least 25% additional low-cost units on all new developments.

Madam Chair, what is clear is that the DA has already developed solutions to address the housing crisis.

If the ANC could only look past their cheap political expediency and invoke their imaginations to envisage a different way doing things, they may begin to see the incredible power that good policy can wield in the lives of desperate South Africans.

In finding these solutions we must remember that the decisions we take today, will shape tomorrow's future.

I urge the leaders in this house to urgently seek innovative ways of bringing about change, instead of seeking innovative ways to pocket it.

The clock is ticking and it's five minutes to midnight.

I thank you.