



MINISTRY  
PUBLIC SERVICE AND ADMINISTRATION  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

*From the desk of*

**Deputy Minister Pinky Kekana**

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## **Vil-Nkomo Lecture**

*SAAPAM 23<sup>rd</sup> Annual Conference*

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*Fellow South Africans in Public Service and Administration*

Thank you for this honour of delivering this year's lecture, honouring Professor Sibusiso Vil Nkomo, a model public servant, and the inaugural Public Service Commissioner of a free South Africa, appointed by President Nelson Mandela in 1994. Prof Vil Nkomo would go on to shape the government architecture that has won praise all across the world, shifting us from Apartheid into the Rainbow nation we became known as 30 years ago.

As we reflect on these 30 years since the end of apartheid, this moment calls on us to not only celebrate our progress but also to confront the complexities of our past, navigate the challenges of our present, and chart a path for our future.

The struggle for liberation was not merely a political battle; it was a profound assertion of human dignity and a collective yearning for justice.

Figures like Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo, Govan Mbeki, Charlotte Maxeke, and countless unsung heroes, exemplified a spirit of perseverance that continues to inspire us, even today.

THREE decades since the dawn of democracy in South Africa.

30 years since that monumental moment marked the beginning of a new era of freedom, equality, and justice for all.

We have achieved much in social transformation, human rights and democratic freedoms.

But, in these victories, we still continue to face the challenges of deep inequalities, obscene corruption, high unemployment, complete service delivery failures, and unwavering distrust in public institutions.

Our society is deeply polarized, with frustrations boiling over in protests and movements calling for accountability and transformation.

***Fellow South Africans, we are a nation at a crossroads!!!***

We have one foot rooted in the legacy of our past, and the other stepping into a future we have to continuously strive to build back better.

The 1994 watershed elections have brought us all the way to May 29<sup>th</sup> this year, another watershed elections that led to establishment of a government of national unity (GNU), where our government is not just

seen as, but actually dependent on embracing diversity through non-racialism and non-sexism, promoting stability, driving inclusion, and building a cadre of professional public servants.

To achieve this unmitigated success, we must focus on what is the heart and soul of every functional state, and that is the public servant, the people of our country who rise each day dedicated to the delivery of services, the maintenance of law and order, and the implementation of policies that strengthens society and elevates our nation on the global stage.

Public service should not be merely a job; it is a calling.

Public servants are the custodians of our democracy.

We are entrusted with the greatest responsibility of a nation.

What bigger honour is there, than to be chosen to serve our people. But, most public servants don't see themselves like that.

They see the greatest rugby team of all time run out onto the field, and don't identify with them, yet we are the same, chosen to serve our country.

And so, we must reimagine ourselves as public servants, to reinvigorate our public service. Every day that we serve our country is an opportunity for greatness, because what better platform do we have than an entire nation to be proud of us.

But, it means making big changes.

It means we have to be intentional in everything we do, big and small, and we have to lead by example.

Let us imagine for a moment that we are those rugby players in a world cup match every day, with a camera zooming in on every drop of sweat, every move we make, and every play we play.

It means placing ethics, competence, and accountability at the centre of who we are every day, so that it becomes the institutionalised culture of government itself.

The time has come, fellow public servants when it is not enough just to fill a position —we must fill it with passion, commitment, talent, qualifications, and most importantly, dedication to national interest.

If we do not move away from cronyism and nepotism, it will be moved for us, like we were moved to a GNU, forcing us to embrace a meritocracy that prioritizes the best minds and skills for the task of nation-building, and so I have 1 question for you: are you the best of the best?

As we chart our course for the next 30 years, do we each have what it takes?

Because it's not today that we are building for, it's a future-capable state that is resilient and adaptive enough to face the uncertainties of tomorrow - and the answer lies in good governance, today.

If public service is the engine of government, then good governance is the fuel that powers it.

Good governance is not merely the absence of corruption; it is the presence of transparent, effective, and inclusive decision-making.

It ensures that the government operates in the best interests of its citizens, promotes the rule of law, and encourages participation from all sectors of society.

As this new 7th administration grapples with the weight of expectations 30 years in the making, we must recognise firstly that it is a task laden with complexity of undoing and redoing, unlearning and relearning.

It is balancing the legacy of apartheid and institutionalised patriarchy, with the demands of a diverse and dynamic youth majority society, in a new age driven by technology and over-information.

Corruption scandals and governance failures have eroded public trust, and the quest for effective administration has become increasingly vital.

When it is said, “Now is Africa’s time”, it also means, that we have the single honour as governments of Africa to show up and lead the changes we need to. It means being a public servant is a point of pride, a thing of aspiration and inspiration.

It starts with engaging in an honest dialogue about the kind of South Africa we aspire to build under this new GNU. We have to reimagine our government and ourselves, and it involves making certain shifts both physical and mental.

There are 4 main areas that I see as an opportunity to shift for the future:

1. **Human Capital Development:** Our nation of people are our greatest asset. To build a future-capable state, we must invest heavily in education, skills development, and innovation. We must prepare our youth for the jobs of tomorrow, embrace technology, and foster a culture of lifelong learning. A skilled and educated population is the foundation of any successful state.

As the public servants who work in these specific spaces of human capital development, you have the power to transform the lives of our people and ultimately the power to change the future of our country – the greatest power ever to be bestowed on anyone, is this.

2. **Economic Transformation and Inclusion:** Economic growth is meaningless if it is not inclusive. Let me say that again - Economic growth is meaningless if it is not inclusive.

We must work to close the gap between the rich and the poor, address structural and social inequalities, and create an economy that benefits all South Africans. This requires bold policies that support entrepreneurship, industrialization, and sustainable development.

It also means tackling unemployment, particularly among young people, with innovative job creation strategies and support for entrepreneurship.

The world is completely different now to 30 years ago, and will be even more different by 2030, so why are we still using the same policies to change the future of South Africa.

The public servants in economic spaces, you have the power to change the world, by changing South Africa's economic positioning in it.

- 3. Sustainable Development and Climate Resilience:** Climate change is one of the defining challenges of our time. Without a planet, everything else matters not.

South Africa, with its unique biodiversity and natural resources, is both vulnerable to, and responsible for, addressing environmental challenges, not just for ourselves, but for the whole continent, in many ways, starting with transitioning to a greener economy, investing in renewable energy, and ensuring that development is sustainable.

A future-capable state is one that balances economic growth with environmental stewardship. So, it's not just the public servants in environmental spaces that can make a difference,

if we all look at our own behaviours that either add to environmental sustainability or subtract from it, this is a great place to start.

4. **Promoting Social Cohesion:** Building a united socially cohesive South Africa requires a commitment to understanding and embracing our diversity.

Initiatives that promote dialogue, reconciliation, and cultural exchange can help bridge the divides that persist in our society. Seeing people as South African first, before we see race, class, gender, religion is a good place to start.

Our unconscious bias is what is holding us back, and the ones that will change everything are the public servants who serve South Africans, not the ones who serve their own biases.

In conclusion, our history is a source of pain, yes, but it is also a reservoir of incomparable strength.

We have learnt that progress is possible when there is collective effort of every South African, because the work of nation-building is never complete and it has no preference of gender, race, colour or creed.

It only asks for our South Africanism.

This small country at the bottom of the world has inspired the world before. In a world of turmoil, we can do so again, we can choose to



be a South Africa that stands as a beacon of hope and progress for the world.

This is OUR time.

This is YOUR time.

Take it.

Thank you.