

‘Ghost’ pupil scam leads to R28m lesson destined to repeat itself

THE REVELATION that 100 000 “ghost” pupils have existed in the Eastern Cape for a considerable period of time will not come as a particular surprise to those accustomed to the “haunted” nature of the public service, generally, in the province.

In cinematic terms, we would have already seen the premiere of *The Haunted Province* as far back as the late 1990s and the sequels, *The Return of the Haunted Province* and, no doubt, *The Revenge of the Haunted Province*, while *Empty Desks in the Haunted Province* would now surely go into production.

It’s a terrifyingly simple scam. The principal of a school creates the names of fictitious pupils with the result that the total number of students at the institution increases to the level where he/she qualifies for a higher salary because of the additional numbers.

To add to the credibility of this fiction, the non-existent pupils are marked present or absent as if they



were answering their names at a roll call, the result being that a simple tallying of the numbers on the class registers would prove that the principal was entitled to be remunerated at that specific notch. This filching from the public purse has been going on since 1994 and, one suspects, in the former Transkei homeland even before that, such was the shambolic state of financial management there.

There has very probably been a conspiracy of silence among other members of staff because had the real numbers been revealed, some would almost certainly have faced the prospect of being transferred or

perhaps, even worse, been declared redundant.

From the very start in 1994 there were also “ghost” workers whose salaries were paid into accounts controlled by what one might call their “handlers” and, of course, there were the supernumeraries, staff in excess of complement, some of whom still exist nearly 20 years later.

This situation probably would have continued had it not been for the decision to recruit the services of Statistics South Africa to conduct a headcount to verify the physical existence of each and every pupil.

The results, made public last week, revealed there were as many as 100 000 “ghosts” in schools across the province. The R28 million verification exercise found that while registration figures provided by schools at the beginning of the year suggested that 1 881 404 pupils had been enrolled, the real tally after the physical headcount was 1 787 700.

The extent of the fraud was such that it appears fictitious students were even given marks for internal examinations at the end of each year and promoted – and then conveniently dropped out of the system at some point and replaced by yet another “ghost” pupil.

The Education Department pointed out that some principals had been caught in the past and had been punished but, clearly, the problem was simply too enormous for a department battling with its own dysfunctional administration to deal with in a holistic way.

It cited the example of one school in Port Elizabeth where the principal and six other teachers were charged.

The teachers testified against the principal who was dismissed, while they received sanctions of a final written warning and fines.

In fairness, the current state of the department is a marked improvement following the intervention by national

government that has produced results, at least as far as the financial management of the department is concerned.

After a string of disclaimers and adverse audit opinions it achieved a qualified report for 2012/13.

Given the history, that is quite a significant achievement.

The DA’s Edmund van Vuuren contends that as a result of the 100 000 “ghost” pupils, about 3 000 more teachers are employed by the department than were required.

If those salaries had been trimmed from the departmental budget, more funds would have been available for school infrastructure, for example.

Despite the fanfare with which it was announced that a new school was being delivered in the Eastern Cape every week, Basic Education Minister Angie Motshekga acknowledged last week in reply to a question that there were still 462, mainly mud,

“inappropriate structures” in the province – and this did not include buildings that were partially built of mud.

Also slipped in last week was the fact that the “one-school-a-week” programme only applied during term time, which reduces the number by 13 or more.

The additional funds saved as a result of employing fewer teachers could have been used to build at least some additional schools and so reduce what remains a horrific number of mud edifices, especially when one considers that it is almost a decade since the government first gave a commitment to address this problem – almost a generation of schoolchildren.

The real question now is what action is going to be taken against those teachers who are prima facie guilty of fraud by accessing higher salaries through “cooking class lists”.

The money paid to those principals who inflated pupil

numbers must be recovered even if it is only to pay the R28m owed to StatsSA for the verification process.

Those found guilty must surely face severe sanction and, if the Port Elizabeth case is anything to judge by, it is highly likely that other teachers would willingly testify in exchange for a lesser punishment.

Sadtu has already expressed strong objection to the department’s announcement that 5 024 fewer posts will be available next year – take away the estimated 3 000 who should not be employed and it is 2 024 – and has threatened action, which probably means a strike at some point.

It will, unfortunately, be all too easy for the two issues to become conflated, with the result that no action will be taken against the offenders and, at the risk of being archly cynical, StatsSA will earn another R28m in a few years’ time.

Keeping up with the neighbours

Namibia and South Africa's political dynamics are markedly similar, not least in the risks that come with ruling elites having a virtual monopoly on power, writes **Peter Fabricius**

WHETHER it’s through conscious imitation, revolutionary solidarity, mere contagion by proximity or just the result of similar historical and current circumstances, Namibian ruling party politics track those of South Africa in some important respects.

Or vice versa, Namibians would probably assert, reminding South Africans that they had their first democratic elections four years before South Africa did.

The similarities are underscored – and perhaps exaggerated – by the fact that the two countries are on the same basic electoral cycle, with Namibia also going into elections next year.

Like South Africa, and in fact more so, Namibia is a de facto one-party state. At the last elections in 2009 the South West African People’s Organisation (Swapo) won almost 75 percent of the vote (compared to just under 66 percent for the ANC) and the Namibian opposition is even weaker and more splintered than South Africa’s.

And so – even more so than in South Africa – the focus of political analysis is on divisions within Swapo rather than on opposition from outside the party. Swapo is also a “broad church” accommodating a wide spectrum of political ideology, from moderate technocrats to leftwing radicals. And also, like South Africa’s ANC, the pragmatic moderates are in control, which means that Swapo governs Namibia significantly to the right of its party mandate and rhetoric. And that creates tensions in the party.

At its five-yearly elective congress last December Swapo re-elected Hage Geingob as deputy president of the party and prime minister of the country.

This came as a surprise to some observers who had expected the moderate and internationalist Geingob to be ousted by then-justice



MOVING UP: Nambian prime minister Hage Geingob

minister Pendukeni Iivula-Ithana or the more radical Jerry Ekandjo. Not least because Geingob is not an Oshiwambo, the ethnic group which has dominated Swapo to date, providing all of its leaders.

Swapo’s youth league, perhaps predictably, backed Ekandjo. In the end Geingob saw them off, though with just over half the vote.

The election of Geingob effectively anointed him to succeed Swapo and national president Hifikepunye Pohamba, who must stand down before next year’s elections when he will have served his constitutionally limited two terms.

Geingob has been busy consolidating his power since then in what one Namibian academic called a “grand shuffle”, moving his supporters into key positions.

But the victory of the moderates has inevitably inflamed the left and youth league secretary-general Elijah Ngurare was particularly vocal and public in criticising the party leadership (like his South African counterpart Julius Malema). He also emulated Malema



LAST TERM: Namibian Herero women walk past an election poster of Namibian president and Swapo leader Hifikepunye Pohamba.

PICTURE: AP

by extolling the virtues of Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe and his Zanu-PF party, and urging his own leaders to follow them in nationalising land and business. The Swapo Youth League even insisted on publicly characterising a traffic accident involving its candidate Ekandjo as an assassination attempt.

In June this year, Pohamba and Geingob called a meeting of Swapo’s central committee (yes and it also still has a politburo) to try to silence Ngurare, hoping to get him suspended from the party. They

didn’t get quite that far but did manage to shut him up, at least temporarily, by extracting a rather grovelling apology.

Though Geingob has, on the face of it, been anointed as Pohamba’s successor, the political establishment is by no means sure he will succeed. For one thing he is not well. This week he issued a statement confirming that he had suffered bleeding on the brain but had fully recovered. Dark rumours are also circulating in Windhoek that the tribal and ideological resentment against Geingob is so

fierce that something else might befall him before the elections that are expected to be held towards the end of the year.

On the other hand his demise could be quite legitimate and purely political, as Swapo, in this respect unlike the ANC, has a provision that the party must confer again shortly before the elections, to confirm his candidacy. That ought to be a formality, but might not be, or so the political gossip goes.

Above all, what Swapo shares with the ANC is the sense which both evoke that their political

tolerance may run only as far as it will not threaten their hold on power. In a briefing to visiting African and Finnish journalists in Windhoek on October 7, Graham Hopwood, executive director of the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) noted that the media freedom advocacy group Reporters Without Borders had ranked Namibia the 19th-freest country in the world for media, first in Africa and beating even the US and UK.

It is also true that Namibia consistently ranks high in global indices of political and civil

freedoms more generally, for example being one of the handful of African countries always rated as “free” (rather than “partly free” or “not free”) by Freedom House.

Yet Hopwood also identified several significant shortcomings in media freedom, not least the lack of any constitutionally or legally guaranteed access to public information and a government prepared to resort to a 1947 law (ie, dating back to the era of South Africa’s control of the country) to deny the public what should be relatively innocuous information, such as the report of the Delimitation Commission which investigated provincial boundaries.

Hopwood believes Swapo’s virtual monopoly on power has been good for the country in one important respect – it has contributed to political stability. But the downside is that it has made Swapo complacent and arrogant and so it has not addressed vital national problems such as poverty and unemployment.

And corruption is rising. And authoritarian legislation is beginning to creep into a parliament which rubber stamps it without question. Hopwood sees the possibility of Swapo losing a little ground in next year’s elections, if not to the weak opposition, then to apathy.

And if it does start losing support, he wonders if its highly rated political tolerance will start to slip away and whether, for example, a threatened state-controlled media council to regulate the press might not be pushed through parliament. All of this sounds familiar. If the neighbouring ruling parties are exchanging notes, so should others.

● *Fabricius is the foreign editor of Independent Newspapers. This article first appeared on the Institute of Security Studies’ website at <http://www.issafrica.org/iss-today>*

Development paradigm that protects life-supporting wild nature

JOHN YELD

AS LITTLE as a decade ago, the idea would have been unthinkable: tourists from Africa travelling to Europe to watch wildlife and experience wild places.

But the highly developed and industrialised northern continent is indeed becoming wilder. Now, its own “charismatic megafauna” – the equivalent of Africa’s famous “Big Five” – like bears, wolves, beavers, bison, deer and vultures are making a comeback, both through formal reintroductions and the reclaiming of traditional habitats as a result of depopulation of rural areas and the aggressive expansion of its protected area network.

And with a highly ambitious “vision” already in place for a European continent where, by 2023, “the last wilderness areas are protected and where wildlife, natural processes and biodiversity are allowed the space and freedom to come back and shape our land and seascapes as they did for millions of

years”, new ecotourism and wildlife adventure opportunities are opening here that are likely to become extremely popular, including for Africans.

This startling (at least to outsiders’ eyes) development was one of the many positive initiatives highlighted at the 10th World Wilderness Congress – WILD10 – in the historic Spanish city of Salamanca last week.

The congress, the world’s longest-running international, public environmental forum, was initiated in 1977 through an idea for an *indabakulu* (a great gathering) by Zulu game guard the late Magqubu Ntombela and his friend and protege Ian Player, who had together popularised wilderness trails in the Imfolozi game reserve in the late 1960s and early 70s.

At this year’s 10th *indabakulu*, more than 1 000 delegates from some 60 countries came together to celebrate successes, plot new strategies and learn from mistakes in their shared quest to value and

protect wild nature.

The results were summarised in a “Statement from Salamanca”, the preamble of which sets out the motivation for its call to action: “To create a society that understands that human health and prosperity are dependent upon wild nature. Such a society respects both a decent standard of human living and the role, rights, and values of wild nature, because the two are inextricably linked. To do this, our work involves changing the development paradigm that regards nature as a storehouse to be looted for short-term gain, to one that integrates a new imperative to protect the life-supporting services – and the beauty, mystery and magic – of wild nature.”

It was a call also articulated by internationally acclaimed oceanographer (“Her Royal Deepness”) Dr Sylvia Earle, who told the closing session that while humans might be the planet’s nightmare, they could also be its biggest hope.

“We now have the tools and knowledge, the evidence, to show what’s happening. We have to protect what remains in the natural world. It’s what keeps us alive. If the Earth is at risk, we are at risk,” she said.

The congress was under no illusions about the huge global challenges still facing humanity, and some of the biggest are spelled out in its statement – like the failure to slow biodiversity loss, the annual destruction of at least 10 million hectares of tropical forests, climate change, the warming and acidification of the oceans, the over-exploitation of fish stocks, and the projected increase in the planet’s human population from seven billion to about 9.5 billion by 2050.

“We may be approaching a global ‘state-shift’ more profound even than the end of the last ice age. The rural poor who depend on ecosystems for their livelihoods will suffer most, but all will suffer from the erosion of natural life support systems,” it warns.

Several initiatives aimed at meeting these challenges were launched at the congress.

One was CoalitionWILD – a movement of young people under 30 dedicated to creating a wilder world and set up as a social media platform to initiate change. Another was WILD Cities, a coalition of “green” cities around the world that promoted and valued wild places within urban boundaries. While Cape Town was not represented at Salamanca, it is in line for an invitation to join this initiative.

Vance Martin, president of host organisation The WILD Foundation and co-chair of WILD10, said the gathering had met at “a very appropriate time. We know the problems; the focus now needs to be on solutions”.

“Not only has WILD10 produced good conservation outcomes, practical and realistic, we’ve generated a sense of hope, inspiration and co-operation – the very elements our world needs to have a new relationship with nature

and between nations.”

One of the highlights of the plenary session was an address by Dr Ian McCallum of Cape Town, the psychiatrist, former Springbok rugby player, poet, wilderness guide and conservationist, whose epic *Tracks of Giants* journey across the southern African subcontinent with fellow conservationist Ian Michler last year to promote environmental awareness had been undertaken as a commitment made at WILD9.

Pointing out that their journey had literally followed the tracks of giants – traditional migratory routes of African elephants – McCallum noted that elephants were “keystone species”.

“Keystone is an architectural term for that wedge-shaped stone that holds the arch together; that is integral to the whole of that particular structure. Certainly in Africa, elephants are keystone species – they are integral to the well-being of hundreds of other creatures. We understand that if you take an elephant out of the equation,

countless other species will suffer:

“So here is the question: are human beings a keystone species? Well, the answer is categorically ‘No’. If every single human being had to disappear off the face of this planet today, the Earth would breathe a sigh of relief. Believe it or not, there are only a handful of macro-organisms that would miss us when we leave. And you know, I feel rather sad about that, because I think there’s something wrong.”

But McCallum also pointed out there’d been environmental leaders at all 10 WILD congresses who’d accepted the challenges of protecting wilderness.

“These are our keystone individuals who are prepared to be a voice for wild animals and wild places and, in their own way, for the wild part of the human psyche. And you know what? Those keystone individuals are in the audience today. We must act immediately to keep intact Earth’s remaining wilderness.”

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