

mental issues that constrain the sector.”

Wandile Sihlobo, chief economist of the Agricultural Business Chamber, says the agriculture and agri-processing masterplan should be the new minister’s starting point as it has wide buy-in and could deliver a 15% increase in the sector’s gross value added.

It should be paired with, among other things, the continuous release of state land to beneficiaries along with title deeds; decisive action over animal disease crises, which harm exports; and a strong focus on fixing water, road and rail infrastructure and other local government failures, without which the sector cannot succeed.

Elevating national literacy

Education experts have been warning for some time that if South Africa continues to ignore its illiteracy time bomb it is dooming children to ignorance, and the economy to failure. For not only is education the surest way out of poverty, but without adequate skills, the economy’s growth will forever remain capped.

It would be reasonable to expect the new DA minister of basic education, Siviwe Gwarube, the party’s former chief whip, to use the Western Cape education

A large cabinet filled with divergent viewpoints could very likely be a place to which any serious proposal for reform will go to die slowly as it is white-anted away through endless consultation and procrastination

Ann Bernstein

department’s approach, and its focus on raising reading levels, as her internal play-book.

After all, one of the DA’s election promises was to “triple the number of grade 4s who can read for meaning”. (About 81% of South Africa’s grade 4s cannot read for meaning, according to the most recent Progress in International Reading Literacy Study.)

Fortunately for Gwarube, studies in North West, the Eastern Cape and Limpopo have shown that it’s possible to achieve significant improvements in reading and maths in just two years with well-structured and well-funded programmes.

Based on this evidence, the Western Cape is rolling out similar programmes in grades 1-3 in all Afrikaans and Xhosa schools.

Gwarube would be well advised to undertake a granular national reading survey of all grade 1-4s as the basis for launching a national campaign to improve reading (and maths), accompanied by the introduction of national benchmark testing of pupils in grades 3, 6 and



Solly Malatsi: Communications & digital technologies minister

9, as the DA already does in the Western Cape.

However, she will need to tread carefully. Education could easily become the biggest policy battleground, with powerful teacher unions likely to try to sabotage the new minister at every turn if they feel their hegemony is threatened.

A long to-do list

Duncan McLeod, editor of TechCentral, notes that the department of communications has had at least 14 ministers in the past 30 years and has become “a dumping ground” for ineffective ANC cadres.

“The ICT sector will be hoping the DA’s Solly Malatsi brings some stability to the portfolio,” says McLeod. “Malatsi is a bit of an unknown quantity in the sector. He is young, too – just 38 – but this might be a good thing as this portfolio has been crying out for someone with technical nous, someone who has a deep understanding of the forces shaping the IT universe.”

Malatsi will have his plate full. He must fast-track the stalled process of rewriting the Electronic Communications Act (ECA) and the Broadcasting Act, neither of which is fit for purpose. And he’ll need to provide political guidance on Canal+’s bid to buy MultiChoice, which could be scuppered by strict foreign ownership restrictions in the ECA.

He will also have to lead a reconfiguration of several state-owned enterprises, including dealing with broadcast signal distributor Sentech, which could soon face an existential crisis as the world moves to internet streaming; the Post Office, currently in business rescue; and the SABC, which needs a new funding model.

“Figuring out what to do with the State

IT Agency, which has suffered from corruption and mismanagement for decades, is more difficult,” says McLeod, “but a clean-up of the agency’s board is probably a good place to start.”

And if that wasn’t enough, Malatsi will inherit the mismanaged digital migration project, which is 14 years past its original deadline for completion.

Deputies, schleputies

The DA has also been given six deputy minister positions. Holding these posts provides a way for the smaller GNU parties to have eyes in the room and act as a check on power, rather than being an opportunity to exercise real influence.

The exception would have been deputy minister of finance, had the DA’s Ashor Sarupen held the post alone. Instead, he becomes a second deputy minister alongside the incumbent, David Masondo.

Masondo has performed well as the political head of Ramaphosa’s flagship project, Operation Vulindlela, which is growing in stature as the government’s ace delivery unit. So, he is unlikely to cede this part of his portfolio to Sarupen, Helen Zille’s former chief of staff and a former DA chief whip.

But it seems equally unlikely that Sarupen will get responsibility for the giant Public Investment Corp, a state-owned entity with R2,548-trillion in assets under management, which currently falls under Masondo’s purview.

The question then is what will Sarupen actually be allowed to do?

For Steenhuisen the GNU is an opportunity for the DA to “introduce our track record of governance excellence, zero tolerance for corruption, and pragmatic policymaking at the highest level of government in our country”.

But he concedes that “none of this will be easy, and we must not get carried away by the significance of the moment. The truth is that the road ahead will be a difficult one”.

The reality is that while the DA has been given some relatively important appointments, it is going to face an uphill battle to turn this opportunity into growth and jobs at a time when the economy has stalled and the citizenry’s patience has worn exceedingly thin.

Bernstein puts it well: “The time for words and endless promises is over. This new cabinet – whatever its size – needs to agree on its priorities and an agenda for deepened and speedy economic reform. They have a country to fix and millions of people living in poverty and desperate for work.”

If the new cabinet can adopt this as its lodestar, then the fledgling GNU may yet succeed. It simply has to – the stakes are too high for it to fail South Africa now. **x**