

Changing gears in the debate on top politicians and their cars

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A FEW months after the Vukuzakhe contractors donated a R1m Mercedes-Benz to Transport Minister Sibusiso Ndebele, Higher Education and Training Minister Blade Nzimande has re-ignited the debate about high-profile politicians and their cars.

The South African Communist Party (SACP) and Nzimande's department have defended the purchase of Nzimande's BMW, while the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) has criticised the "unnecessary expenditure". The department has been at pains to explain that it "was concerned by the high costs of renting a vehicle and decided that one should be purchased". The R1,1m price tag is contextualised by emphasising that it was a

showroom vehicle obtained at a "discount price". The SACP supports the purchase of the BMW on safety and security grounds. Presumably safety and security in this context refers to the general protection offered by ABS brakes and airbags, and not protection against the risk of hijacking.

And it is emphasised by all that the transaction was in line with departmental policy. This argument is reminiscent of that used by Ndebele, who, on receiving a donated car, initially relied on clause 4.2 of the executive code of ethics, which states that "when a member, in the course of the member's duties, has received or has been offered a gift with a value of more than R1 000, the member must request permission from the president to retain or accept the gift". The fact that his gift was a thousand times more expensive than the cut-

off amount never presented a problem, and after consultation with President Jacob Zuma, who advised him to follow the procedures stipulated (a bit of a circular argument, because the procedures stipulated that he should consult the president), he "nevertheless" decided to return the gift.

Few people will deny it is nice to drive an expensive car if someone else is paying. But the reliance on policies to justify this gift is indicative of a reluctance to engage with the ethical issues at stake. Compliance does not necessarily demonstrate ethical behaviour, and therefore a review of the policies is only a part of addressing the issue. A review of the executive code of ethics is perhaps more necessary than a review of the vehicle procurement policy. The code addresses conflicts of interest and clear guidelines are required — for

instance, from an ethical perspective, a R1m gift from a potential supplier is more problematic than one from the taxpayer.

Austerity measures being considered by the government might force all ministers to buy "modest" cars of half a million rands, rather than splashing out at the top end of the scale. But perhaps there is a need for more flexibility and an emphasis on the values that underpin the government's commitment to equality, transformation and the fight against poverty.

The current policy states that ministers are entitled to a vehicle equivalent in value to 70% of their annual salary. Consider what would happen if this limit was retained or only slightly reduced, but complemented with strict environmental impact and safety requirements as well as a clause that would allow ministers to donate the difference between the upper limit

and the actual cost of the vehicle to a scholarship fund for students. Ministers would still be able to buy a comfortable (and safe) car that few people can afford, while contributing millions of rands of taxpayers' money to society.

Ndebele lamented the fact that the focus on his car created an unwelcome distraction from his portfolio. This is true. People should guard against focusing on such (ethical) issues for too long. A race to the bottom to see who can drive the cheapest car will certainly be counterproductive as well. The sooner we can move the focus from the price tag of a minister's car to the performance of his or her department, the better it will be for the country.

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