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# 60 minutes to revive a nation

Fiona Forde asked a cross-section of South Africans to watch Mbeki with her

**N**ot once, not twice, but six times throughout yesterday's State of the Nation address, President Thabo Mbeki recalled the words of 2004, the tenth anniversary of the end of apartheid, when the people were building a country "defined by a common dream".

Three years later, and halfway through his second term as state leader, Mbeki acknowledged that South Africa has a problem. "We are not there yet," he said. Building our country is a shared responsibility. "So let us roll up our sleeves and get down to work."

Much road has already been covered: The economy is growing at 4.5%. Black people are steadily advancing in the economy, hundreds of thousands of jobs have been created, and there's more to follow with the 2010 World Cup. And South Africa is one of the few countries that spends less on military budgets than it does on water and sanitation. A fact that earned the speaker his first round of applause (the first of 27, to be precise, for the record!)

But there's part of the "dream" that's still ugly and repulsive. There's crime, 8-million people who are still without drinkable water. Capacity at local government isn't good.

If anyone can relate to the ugly and the repulsive side of society, it's Alison Botha. In 1994 she became famous for all the wrong reasons when she was raped, stabbed repeatedly, disembowelled and left for dead. She is one of five high-profile people we asked to tune in to this year's State of the Nation address.

"I can't help but wonder if this is just more empty promises. Is [Mbeki] just telling us what we want to hear?" was Alison's initial verdict on Mbeki's speech. That said, "I do agree with him that the fight against crime is not just up to the government. Of course they can lead by example, but I think that instead of standing on the sidelines, we need to find our role in society and a way to contribute."

However, 47-million South Africans are a lot of people, and leadership is imperative, in the view of Lionel Stein, the executive

of the Gauteng Community Policing Forum Board. "My only concern about the speech is that we didn't get the political message we were looking for. That the political will is there to tackle crime."

What Mbeki did deliver, however, was a promise to increase the current 150 000-strong South African Police Service to 180 000 within three years. "That's way too little," said Botha. "What he needs to be telling us is that he'll double the force overnight."

The other commitment on the part of government to fight crime is an overhaul of the country's forensic laboratories. "But that is too little too late," said Alison. "We're so far behind that any improvement in that area would be a step in the right direction, but not near good enough. Even in my case, the guys got out on bail because there was no access to the record of a previous offence. A promise like that is long overdue, more than anything else."

"Say what you like," said Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert, "we've come a long way from the famous interview of a few weeks ago when rampant crime was just a perception in the president's view." The former politician, now a political consultant, is not known for lavishing praise on the incumbent leader, but yesterday's speech went down well in the books of the former head of the Progressive Federal Party.

"There was a certain sense of humility about him, and I found that encouraging," said Slabbert. "We didn't get the usual aggressiveness, hostility or sarcasm he likes to indulge in. He was sober, reflective almost. He recognised that we have a problem which we have to address. He played the statesman, and addressed all the major issues, including crime, capacity and the skills deficit."

"He acknowledged the problem of Aids, and coming from his, that's quite an acknowledgment. We have a problem in education, and he acknowledged it. If you sat and listened, there was definitely a lot of substance to it. This speech definitely gets more of a plus than a minus."

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However the dean of education at the University of Pretoria, Jonathan Jansen, couldn't disagree more. "It seemed like a little bit on everything and substance on nothing. And if you look at my field, education, it said so little, took up so little space in his (14-page) speech, it completely understates the seriousness of the education crisis. But that could be said of almost everything he talked about, from housing to public works and health.

"For example, he said we've increased the number of non-fee-paying schools. Do you know how incredibly contested that is and how it's not working in a lot of schools because they don't get replacement funds?

"We've just had the matric results, in which one-third of the students failed. How on earth can one not say something serious about that in a State of the Nation address? The state of the nation is under threat because of the underperformance of the education system. We've reached a crisis point. There are too few performing students and a crippling skills deficit."

But why would he talk of a crisis when we aren't there yet, asked Jonathan Faull, political researcher at the Institute for Democracy in South Africa. "There was a whole lot of emphasis on addressing the problems of state capacity and organisational efficiency within the public service. And that marks an important shift in the political discourse from an unquestioning optimism to a much more balanced assessment of where we are.

"This was a far cry from the relaxed 'we've got it under control' approach that we've come close to in the past."