

SA needs a minister of economic growth with long-term vision

● *We could use a big thinker capable of bold action to solve the country's enormous challenges*

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Much has been said about ministers in past cabinets and our present unity government leadership. At best, they are showered with unsolicited advice; at worst, they are subjected to unhelpful rants. But a question that is seldom asked is whether they can dream.

Our economy is in a fragile recovery, with some progress made in addressing key challenges. Yet as business leaders we must ask ourselves: are we doing enough?

The mining sector, a cornerstone of our national development, has long been a vital contributor to the economy, the fiscus and employment. But like the broader economy it is now crippled by issues such as electricity shortages, rampant crime and dysfunctional logistics.

Specific challenges also plague the sector, such as policy incoherence and vulnerability to climate change. As it stands, the sector is barely keeping afloat, with at least 20,000 jobs at risk in mining alone, and three to four times that number in related supply chains and services.

The situation is dire, with exploration investment having dwindled to a fifth of what it was in 2006. Yet if we are to dream it is not simply the

preservation of existing jobs that should concern us, but the jobs that could be created if we got things right.

The global energy transition presents an enormous opportunity for our mining sector to be a key driver of economic growth. SA is rich in the raw materials the world needs, but we are not doing enough to leverage this advantage. We must be bold, innovative and ready to change.

SA does not have a dedicated economic growth minister, but it should. The department of trade, industry & competition is too bogged down by bureaucracy, and while the National Treasury is seen as the thought leader on economic policy, it lacks the tools to be a true growth driver.

A minister's role is not to be a technical expert or to handle the day-to-day operations of their department. It is to lead, to make difficult decisions and to dream big. This requires a long-term vision, not for the next electoral cycle but for the next 15 years.

It is not just about achieving higher growth statistics; it is about building a sustainable

future where a larger tax base funds better healthcare and education for our children. In 15 years SA must be a competitive and agile player in the global economy.

A minister who dreams this big would have to think audaciously and plan backwards. One figure who exemplified this approach was Hendrik van der Bijl, SA's greatest industrialist.

He founded Eskom, Iscor and the Industrial Development Corporation, and his vision was not just for the present but for the future of SA. He understood that building infrastructure – both physical and institutional – was key to national development.

In the same way an economic growth minister could focus on building the infrastructure and institutions that will allow the private sector to flourish. This includes getting the basics right: healthcare, security, education, electricity and logistics.

The structural challenges we face are immense. Unemployment remains more than 40%, and future risks such as artificial intelligence and

climate change loom large. In the face of these challenges ministers must think bigger.

Van der Bijl once said he had been criticised for the size of the projects he took on, but on reflection he believed he had not thought big enough. This is the mindset our ministers need today. The complexity of our challenges is enormous, and it will require big thinking and bold action to solve them.

I am fortunate in my position as president of Business Unity SA and as the Business for SA executive lead for logistics to work with many big thinkers in business who understand the scale of what needs to be done to support growth and create jobs. There are dreamers in the public sector, too, but they are exceptions, not the rule.

Our partnership with the government is essential precisely because there are people on both sides who grasp the magnitude of the task at hand. The reforms in logistics and electricity are moving in the right direction, but the complexity of these sectors cannot be underestimated. We cannot afford to repeat the mistakes made in electricity

reform, where the challenges were not fully appreciated until years later.

As a minister for growth I would need to think several steps ahead, surrounding myself with experts who understand the intricate nature of the reforms needed to unlock growth. Engineers, in particular, play a key role in driving this kind of progress, as they have the mindset to unpick complexity and build for the future.

Looking ahead, we must also plan for scale. SA's population will grow by at least 10-million over the next 15 years, and we must plan for that growth. In logistics, we should be preparing for a system that can handle 250-million tonnes of freight – far more than the 210-million tonnes we managed at our peak. The same goes for electricity, where the demand will increase as the energy transition unfolds.

The key lesson here is that growth will bring new constraints, and we must prepare for them now. This means not only addressing our current crises but also ensuring that we are ready for the future.

I believe that the right policies are already on the table. What is lacking is the capacity to implement them.

As minister for growth my focus would be on building that capacity, not on launching new plans or action lists.

Van der Bijl once said the optimism of an engineer never left him. This is the kind of optimism we need in our country today. We must carry on, even in the face of overwhelming challenges. And as we dream big about the future of SA we must never lose sight of the ultimate goal: reducing poverty and creating a better life for all.

● Mgojo is president of Business Unity SA.

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