

“TO FAIL TO PLAN IS TO PLAN TO FAIL!”

Peter Henriot

A lot of people are asking these days, when Zambia is doing so well in many things, why it is failing in many other, even more important, things. Having just hosted a “Smart Partnership” meeting that saw plenty of praise heaped upon what is currently happening in this country, we might be tempted to ignore some very serious issues. But ignore problems we can’t, even in the face of some successes.

Yes, the new mines tax regime may add some much needed revenue for Government expenditures (hopefully not simply on increased salaries for the highest officials!). And yes, expanded foreign direct investment may mean new jobs available for local people (hopefully with good wages and conditions!). And yes, provision of more free ARVS to those infected with HIV and AIDS may extend the lives of our mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers (hopefully when joined with good nutrition and appropriate medical tests!).

But we can also ask why the development of human resources is not being adequately met (closure yet again of UNZA!). Or why a national fuel shortage again looms on the horizon (already lack of diesel in many stations!). Or why the ups and downs of the Kwacha is not being paid serious attention to (great losses being incurred by exporters!). Or why such great uncertainty continues to exist over what comes next in relationship to the highest office in the land (possible presidential elections...).

Would it be helpful in addressing these questions if we asked whether good plans were being made or were already in place to address these four very serious issues – and many other such issues that others might suggest? Because surely we should remember the old axiom, “To fail to plan is to plan to fail!”

UNZA CLOSURE

I’m not privy to all the intricacies of negotiations between the various UNZA unions and the management of the University and the Minister of Education. We can hope that these negotiations are indeed continuing, even if the students have been sent home on a “recess” that could possibly last longer than the projected three weeks.

As I stood on the Great East Road on Tuesday evening last week and watched a few unruly students – very few, surely no more than 20 or 30 – hurl stones at passing vehicles, I thought to myself, “Oh no, not again!” Surely the Minister of Education – himself a former UNZA administrator – must realise that you simply can’t dilly-dally with negotiations and settlement of contracts and expect peace and quiet.

To announce that negotiations over already settled contracts would have to be re-opened was simply to pour petrol on already simmering fires. Promises not kept are potentially very dangerous, almost invitations to unrest and turmoil. What kind of planning has been going on for the past many months to avoid such a dangerous situation? What kind of planning is even now going on to settle the current dispute and get on with the task of assuring that Zambia has a good source of engineers, teachers, medical staff, agriculturalists, development workers, etc., to meet the country’s needs? And what sort of planning will go in the future to avoid continual repetition of such unnecessary confrontations?

If in fact there has been a serious and consistent fault of poor planning, should someone in the Ministry of Education – high or low – be asked to resign?

FUEL SHORTAGE

Driving out of Kabwe on last Saturday evening, I stopped to get some diesel only to be informed with a matter of fact expression, “Sorry, no diesel in all Kabwe stations!” And then to be told that this probably would soon be a nationwide situation! Well, I don’t know how true the latter prediction is about a nation-wide situation, but the Kabwe situation was certainly true! And why?

Surely the Minister of Energy might be expected to explain why his recent assurances that closure of the Indeni refinery and tardy off-loads in the Dar-es-Salaam harbour would really have no dire effect at all on the

country's supply of fuel. Have there been contingency plans in place and why might they be failing? Are there future plans being made so that this constantly repeating shortage does not continue year after year, with dire consequences on the economy?

If in fact there has been a serious and consistent fault of poor planning, should someone in the Ministry of Energy and Water Development – high or low – be asked to resign?

KWACHA APPRECIATION

A few years ago, Zambia experienced a significant appreciation in our local currency, the Kwacha. This certainly had an impact on economic development, as even the Government's expectation of foreign aid had to be re-examined because US dollars could buy even fewer Kwacha! When the Kwacha then depreciated from around K3000/USD to around K4000/USD, there were some signs of relief in many Government and business circles. But then from the start of 2008, another round of appreciation has set in (tempered only temporarily by the condition of the President?)

But are appreciation and its impact on some key sectors of the economy something that figures into any plans of the Ministry of Finance and National Planning and the Bank of Zambia? What plans are in place to cushion the shock, for example, on the horticultural export industry? What are the plans for adjustments in expectations of foreign assistance coming into the 2009 budget? And the plans to meet the exchange rate implications on contraction of any new debt?

If in fact there has been a serious and consistent fault of poor planning, should someone in the Ministry of Finance and National Planning and/or the Bank of Zambia – high or low – be asked to resign?

PRESIDENTIAL SUCCESSION

My last point is obviously very serious and must be approached with due respect and caution. Prayers for recovery are a clear response to the sad condition of President Mwanawasa. But they are not sufficient, since no country can move forward without plans to take possible actions to secure clear constitutional action for presidential succession should that be necessary. Rejection of publicly addressing these plans on the grounds that it would be culturally offensive is certainly questionable. The issue here is not a person but a presidency, not an individual but an institution.

There is need for open, sensitive and sensible planning for the contingency that President Mwanawasa may not take up fully his office duties in the near future. Plans may need to be made for a major national election within a very short timeframe. Plans for a peaceful political transition should be in place if this step is necessary.

If in fact there has been a serious and consistent fault of poor planning, should someone – high or low – be asked to resign?

Planning in any of these four areas, or any other key area, must go forward intelligently and courageously. Remember, "To fail to plan is to plan to fail!"

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