

MPS DRAGGING THEIR FEET -  
WHEELS ARE TURNING BUT WE  
ARE GOING BACKWARDS:  
OUTA 2021 REPORT ON  
PARLIAMENTARY OVERSIGHT IN  
SOUTH AFRICA



# ADVOCACY BRIEF 5: CONSTITUENCY ENGAGEMENT

## **Purpose:**

The purpose of this Advocacy Brief is to provide a succinct overview of the section Constituency Engagement in the 2021 Report on Parliamentary Oversight in South Africa as presented by OUTA.

## **Background:**

In 2019, OUTA completed its first oversight report. That report reviewed the performance of the 5th Parliament, attempting to evaluate whether Portfolio Committees in the National Assembly addressed the issue of state capture.

Further, OUTA compiled an affidavit and submitted it to the Zondo Commission of Inquiry into State Capture, motivated by our professional conviction that measurable and impactful Parliamentary oversight is often lacking in South Africa.

In 2020, OUTA completed its second oversight report entitled "MPs Asleep at the Wheel". One key finding of concern was that MPs appeared to rely solely on the very departments that they are supposed to oversee for information.

# CONSTITUENCY ENGAGEMENT

Increased ability to watch parliamentary proceedings is not equivalent to increased public participation. The public can only participate if MPs engage with their constituencies. Political Party Funding is extremely relevant in this case. Surely, this funding must provide for constituency engagement by the representatives with their communities. If it does not, then that means funding is funnelled to cover salaries, rent, events and other undesirable expenses. Taxation should result in transparent outcomes. There is a fine balance to be struck between engaging with members within one's constituency and holding one's colleagues in Cabinet to account.

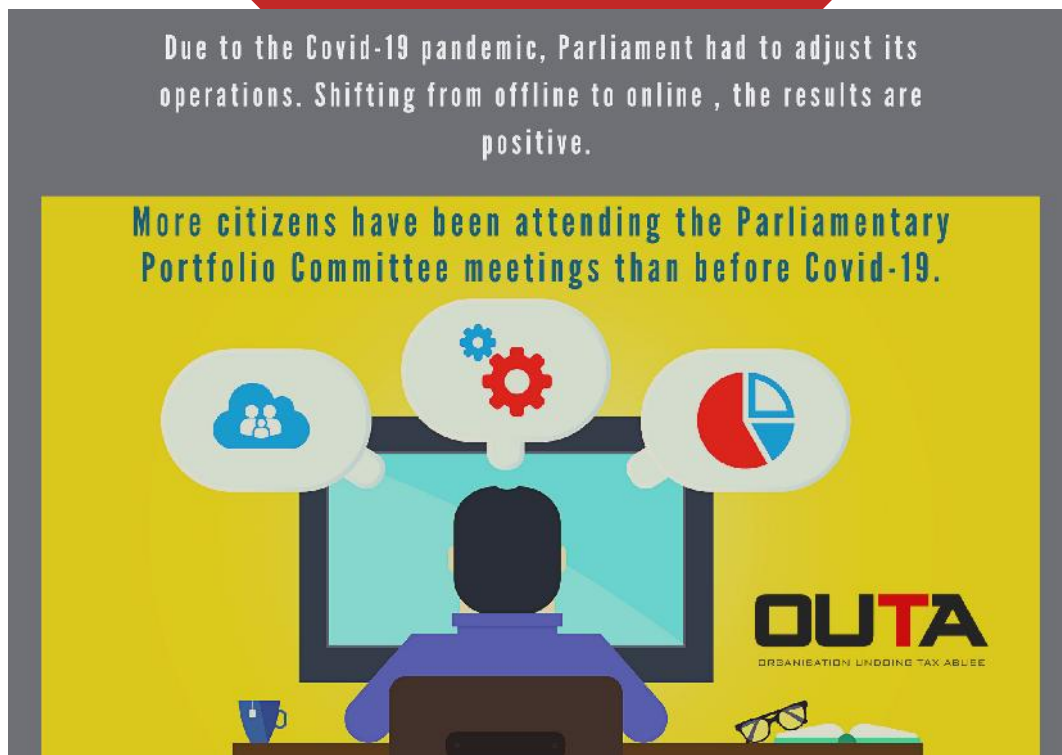
## POLITICAL PARTY FUNDING TRANSPARENCY

OUTA recently released a report on the amount of money that Parliament distributes to political parties, seemingly without worrying about that they do with it. The report exposes how represented political parties (those with seats in Parliament and the Provincial Legislatures) have over the years voted themselves billions of rand in subsidies from public funds. This is in addition to the widely known and constitutionally authorised Represented Political Party Fund managed by the Electoral Commission. OUTA has calculated that the total subsidies to these parties are running at about R1.4 billion a year, and that in the 13 years since 2009/10 has cost taxpayers about R13.882 billion. The Constitution intends state funding to enhance multi-party democracy, but the manipulation of huge amounts of additional funding for unclear purposes by the very institutions required to safeguard democracy – the national Parliament and the Provincial Legislatures – effectively undermines the election of candidates from new parties, thus entrenching the current parties in power and disadvantaging any new parties.

## ON-SITE CONSTITUENCY ENGAGEMENT

There is a concerning trend that MPs appear to be in their constituencies for longer periods of time, and their Parliamentary programme has consequently been curtailed considerably in 2021. Given that this is an election year, and as MPs are operating virtually, they are in their constituencies permanently. The concerning conclusion might be drawn that MPs are more focused on ensuring that their political party does well at the polls than in ensuring that their colleagues in Cabinet are held to account. 2021 is not a national election year and these MPs posts are not at risk. This is a local elections year, a completely different sphere of government.





## KEY MESSAGES

This year, possibly due to the introduction of virtual committee meetings, there have been more committee meetings during the recess than usual – most apparently catching up on unfinished work. However, there is little transparency over the constituency work done during these times, or on the use of public resources funding it. Instead, the public must rely on the honesty and work ethic of individual MPs. It is essential to strengthen transparency and accountability of this funding, and for critical public discussions around its size and value to be held regularly.

## CHALLENGES

OUTA intends to continue searching for documentation on how this money has been spent, primarily through Promotion of Access to Information Act applications, and to assess what value the public has received from this spending. We also compare this funding to other important state funded projects, which are in many cases continually underfunded capital expenses, as this illustrates government's spending priorities.

## GENERAL EXPECTATIONS

There are expectations of parliament, which include:

- Representation of the public's interests
- Politicians and MPs must be active citizens themselves
- MPs must uphold the highest moral code and act with integrity
- MPs must oversee the executive



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