IT WAS THE FAMOUS John F Kennedy who said that it is not the wealth of a nation that builds roads, but the roads that build the wealth of a nation. Engineering students, in their painful passion for essay-writing, have since then agonised over associations between government, infrastructure and the socio-economic development of a nation. It is well known that the great powers in history depended on their transportation infrastructure for economic development – Rome to manoeuvre its armies and commerce, and Britain (via its reliance on the ocean) to open cultural and foreign (albeit colonial) trade between what is now the commonwealth countries, and so on.

Build a road between two communities and this opens links and nodes for interaction and mutually beneficial trade. The positive relationship between engineering infrastructure and the improvement of a nation’s economy is undeniable. As an aside, another interesting point to ponder is the establishment of trade and capitalism wherever missionaries were posted. The connection between western religion and democracy and capitalism makes for provoking and stimulating debate, but we will leave that for another time.

The National Planning Commission (NPC) under the very able leadership of Minister Trevor Manuel, who happens to have his foundations in civil engineering, revealed its National Development Plan (NDP) for public comment and discussion in November last year. The commissioners entrusted to draft the plan included four engineering practitioners (no wonder the plan is a good one). The macro goal of the plan seeks to transform the lives of the poorest South Africans and to ensure that equal opportunity is available for all South Africans in the next 20 years.

The document is expressed in a 440-page compilation with poor page numbering (the engineers were not involved here), but is neatly summarised in its 40-page overview at the beginning. It highlights nine challenges facing post-apartheid South Africa, namely unemployment, low standard of education (these two are closely related), poorly managed infrastructure, exclusion, our resource intensive economy, a failing public health system, poor public service, corruption and the lack of societal cohesion. The plan proposes to re-write the story of South Africa by addressing nine key development goals – creating jobs, improving infrastructure, transitioning into a green economy, transforming urban and rural spaces, improving education, providing quality healthcare, building a capable state, fighting corruption and uniting the nation.

While engineering, and particularly civil engineering, cuts across all nine development goals, five of the nine require the direct involvement of engineers. So it appears then that circumstances are encouraging tender relations between engineers and government again – to set aside differences and sing off the same hymn sheet. Does the South African government know what engineers do, and more importantly, do South African engineers know what our government does?

The NDP consistently calls for the joint participation of all South Africans to make the dream come true – to make the shift from passive citizenry to active champions in the evolution of our economy. In my opinion this is an absolute requirement. Sitting on the periphery, not participating, and aspiring economic freedom for mahala, is simply not going to work. However, while the private sector, organised society and the general public engage with the NDP, the role of government is fundamental if the brilliant work expressed in the NDP is to be achieved.

Leadership – let us contemplate this for a moment. To bring into alignment the winds of diversity in South Africa, and to focus on the achievement of the NDP’s common purpose, we need charismatic and pioneering leadership, leading from the front. The NDP acknowledges that the “plan is only as credible as its delivery mechanism is viable”. The achievement of the NDP rests largely on the shoulders of an informed, organised and intelligent government service – a professionalised government organisation that knows what its people want and how to deliver it. The Apple Company comes to mind.

The appointment of appropriately qualified people installed in correct positions, and not political friends, is crucial. When it comes to engineering service delivery we must have competent, experienced, registered professionals running the show and making the decisions – or people die, and a nation suffers. The government sector needs to separate the political agenda from technical work – let the engineers get on with it. We are not going to achieve this plan if we still have mamparas identifying and managing multibillion rand service delivery projects and managing the overall procurement processes.

Think. Plan. Act. Throughout history this has been the philosophical mantra of the conquering man. These are the main nodal stops in the pipeline of accomplishment. And the greatest of these is Act.