



MEDIA STATEMENT

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NSI launches Statecraft 2026 - An international congress exploring the machinery of democracy

Public administration is only boring... until it fails.

Johannesburg - The New South Institute is proud to announce the launch of Statecraft 2026 – an International Congress on Democracy and Public Institutions. Statecraft is **a new international gathering** that will bring together leading policymakers, public servants, academics, institutional leaders and governance practitioners in Johannesburg from 22–23 September 2026.

"Democracy does not survive on elections alone," says Ivor Chipkin, Director of the New South Institute. "It depends on something far less visible: the machinery that transforms political decisions into functioning schools, reliable infrastructure, effective healthcare, responsive municipalities, sound public finances and institutions that citizens can trust. That machinery is public administration."

Often dismissed as bureaucracy, public administration is, in reality, the engine room of democracy. It is the system that turns political decisions into practical outcomes and the reason the Congress has adopted the campaign theme, The Machinery of Democracy, together with its central message: Public administration is only boring... until it fails.

Why Statecraft?

The Congress has deliberately been named Statecraft.

Statecraft is the art and practice of governing well. While politics determines who governs, statecraft determines how governments govern. It is about building capable institutions, strengthening public administration and developing ethical leadership that enables governments to deliver consistently, fairly and effectively.

Simply put, statecraft is the skill of making democracy work.



Statecraft 2026 comes at a pivotal moment for South Africa.

Following the passage of the Public Service Amendment Act 9 of 2025, the national conversation is shifting from why public sector reform is necessary to how meaningful reform can be successfully implemented. For more than a decade, the New South Institute has examined why public institutions succeed, why they fail and what meaningful reform requires in practice. Statecraft 2026 is the next step in that work.

Unlike traditional conferences centred on presentations and prepared speeches, Statecraft 2026 has been **designed as a working congress focused on implementation**. International practitioners, senior public officials, researchers and institutional leaders will compare international experience, examine practical reform challenges and engage in frank discussions about what genuinely strengthens public institutions, what prevents reform from succeeding and what lessons can be applied across different democratic contexts.

Some of the most pressing issues facing democratic governance today, including the appointment process for senior public officials, protecting the independence of the civil service, governing state-owned enterprises, leadership development, urban governance, public participation, political accountability and the future of democratic institutions will be explored during the congress.

The programme brings together internationally recognised speakers and practitioners from South Africa, South Korea, Chile, Slovakia, Nigeria, Tanzania, Serbia and beyond, offering comparative perspectives from countries that have grappled with many of the same institutional challenges facing South Africa. **Keynote speaker Professor Pan Suk Kim**, internationally recognised for helping to design and implement South Korea's landmark civil service reforms, will share practical lessons from one of the world's most significant public sector reform journeys.

Chipkin says the purpose of the Congress is to bring together people prepared to have honest conversations about what works, what doesn't and what it will take to build public institutions that citizens can trust.

"If we want stronger democracies, we have to build stronger institutions."

Over two days, delegates will examine not only why institutions fail, but what it takes to build institutions that are resilient, ethical and capable of delivering for citizens.

Elections determine who governs. Public administration determines whether democracy delivers.



Registration for the Congress is now open. To register, please click [here](#). For further information on the speakers, programme and panel discussions across the two days, please visit the Congress website [here](#).

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