

▼ ED'S LETTER



The Emperor's New Clothes is a short story written in the 1800s by renowned Danish author Hans Christian Andersen – famous for his fairy tales – about two weavers who promise an emperor a new outfit that is invisible to those who are unfit for their positions, stupid, or incompetent. When the emperor parades before his subjects in his new clothes, no one dares say that they don't see any clothes, until a child cries out, "the emperor has no clothes!"

The similarities between that tale and the story of South Africa's new visa regulations are obvious. For 'Emperor' see Minister of Home Affairs Malusi Gigaba, who has driven the implementation of the new regulations, which require all visitors to South Africa to present themselves, in person, for biometric visa data collection, regardless of whether or not the country they are travelling from has a visa processing centre, as well as the requirement for all travelling minors going into and out of South Africa to carry an unabridged birth certificate.

I would imagine that the minions in and around the home affairs ministry are towing the party line and not daring to point out to the minister that these new regulations have the potential to cripple South Africa's tourism industry – a bit like the emperor's terrified subjects.

But where this story is significantly different from that penned by Andersen centuries ago, is that Gigaba has more than a single child crying out and pointing out the obvious. In fact, he has an entire industry begging and pleading for him to review his policy, along with a plea for engagement, in an attempt to salvage a potentially disastrous move for South African tourism.

The Tourism Business Council of South Africa is the latest industry body to speak up, following in the footsteps of the likes of ASATA – the travel agents' body – and SATSA – the tour operators' organisation. In late June the TBCSA released the findings of its impact assessment study on the new immigration regulations, conducted by Grant Thornton.

A key finding of the report included the assertion that in 2014 South Africa's tourism industry lost direct spend of up to R886 million (\$71m) due to the changed immigration regulations. The study estimated that in 2015, the number of 'lost' foreign tourists is likely to increase to 100,000, with an estimated direct tourism spend of R1,4 billion (\$112m).

And before you think that this is just a South African problem, think again, because of this country's status as an African hub and starting point for so much travel onto the continent. South Africa's neighbours and fellow African countries will also suffer, and the effects are set to be felt well beyond South Africa's borders.

So, if you get the opportunity, shout it from the rooftops: "the emperor has no clothes!" ■

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