

The Day De Klerk Changed the Course of History

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One of the questions I am invariably asked in international interviews is whether a Damascene conversion led me to initiate the changes that I announced on February 2, 1990. At the root of the question lie somewhat simplistic views of the development of government policy before 1994.

The whole period between 1948 and 1994 is generally regarded as “the era of apartheid” which is seen as an undifferentiated time of white racial domination, repression and exploitation. Accordingly, the only explanation for the 180-degree volte-face of February 2, 1990, is that it must have been the result of some kind of quasi-religious epiphany.

In fact there were enormous developments in National Party policy between 1948 and 1994. The first decade – under prime ministers Malan and Strydom – was a period of undisguised white domination, characterised by rigid segregation and pervasive paternalism. It is shocking to recall this now. However, it is equally shocking to note that the attitudes involved were not so different from those that then still prevailed in the European colonial empires and in the southern states of the US.

The period between 1958 and 1978, under prime ministers Verwoerd and Vorster, was characterised by the implementation of “separate development” the idea that we could somehow unscramble the South African omelette and create a commonwealth of southern African states, all working happily in harmony and co-prosperity.

One of the problems with the Verwoerdian ideology was that it allocated less than 14 percent of the country to more than 70 percent of the people. Another was that the economy was becoming more integrated with every year that passed.

The most serious was that the ideology was firmly rejected by the vast majority of the people involved.

Sometimes the illusion of a solution is worse than no solution at all. We had wasted 20 years building Bantustan capitals and developing states, most of which never really had a chance of viability, when we should have been working on solutions that might have succeeded. Even worse, unscrambling the omelette involved the harsh displacement of millions of ordinary people and the disruption of their lives on an almost industrial scale.

The third phase was the period of reform under President PW Botha, who clearly understood the need to “adapt or die”. Black South Africans and the international community were shouting that the government should dismount the tiger of white domination on which history and circumstance had placed it.

Botha responded that one should dismount the tiger very gingerly, one foot at a time – with as much military firepower as one could muster. The first foot was bringing coloured and Asian South Africans into the parliamentary system by means of the consociational tricameral constitution of 1983, while dispensing with the most obnoxious apartheid legislation.

By 1986, coloureds and Asians theoretically enjoyed equal rights with whites, far-reaching labour reforms had been introduced, and more than 100 discriminatory laws (including the hated pass laws) had been repealed.

The crucial process of lowering the second foot to the ground – the question of black political rights – was referred to the President’s Council, which considered in vain all sorts of extensions of the consociational approach.

The reforms unleashed a revolution driven by rising expectations. As De Tocqueville observed, “the most perilous moment for a reforming government is when it seeks to mend its ways. Patiently endured for so long as it seemed beyond redress, a grievance comes to appear intolerable once the possibility of removing it crosses men’s minds”.

The result was widespread unrest that by the end of 1985 had brought about a collapse of international confidence in the ability of the South African government to control the situation. South Africa was faced with a dire economic crisis as the rand collapsed and foreign banks refused to roll over short-term international loans. Order was restored only after the imposition of the draconian 1986 state of emergency. In the winter of 1986 there appeared to be very little hope.

However, there was hope. During the latter part of the reform period, the National Party government accepted that its policies had led to a dead-end street and to manifest injustice. It also accepted the need for a solution based on the principle that all South Africans, irrespective of their race, would share a common constitutional destiny. Ironically, this seismic policy shift was first announced in Botha’s Rubicon speech on August 15, 1985. It appears at the bottom of page 12 in a passage in which he states: “Should any of the black national states therefore prefer not to accept independence, such states or communities will remain part of the South African nation, are South African citizens and should be accommodated within political institutions within the boundaries of South Africa.”

Unfortunately, the speech was so badly communicated that hardly anyone noticed that Botha had announced the end of “grand apartheid”.

A year later, in August 1986, the National Party Congress in Durban adopted a new policy approach based on the fundamental principles of one united South Africa; one person, one vote; the eradication of all forms of racial discrimination; and the effective protection of minorities against domination.

The party fought the 1987 election on this platform and won with a clear, but reduced, majority.

By the time I was elected party leader on February 2, 1989, the movement towards fundamental change had gathered momentum. In my first speech in Parliament after my election, I said: “Our goal is a new South Africa; a totally changed South Africa; a South Africa which has rid itself of the antagonism of the past; a South Africa free of domination or

oppression in whatever form...”

We went on to fight the 1989 election on an unambiguous platform of fundamental reform. After our victory I said that “the main issue was not whether all South Africans should be accommodated in future elections, but how this should be done”.

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February 2, 1990, was not an epiphany or Damascene conversion, it was the culmination of a long and tortuous search for a solution to the vexatious questions that had divided South Africans for generations.

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