

THE ROAD TO 2 FEBRUARY 1990

By F W de Klerk

One of the recurrent questions regarding the transformation initiative that I announced on 2 February 1990, was why we did not do it earlier? If it was clearly the right thing to do in 1990, why not do it in 1980 or even in 1970? The answer is that time and circumstance – and not the decisions of political leaders – most often determine the pace of history. What then were the circumstances that set the pace of change in South Africa – and why was it possible for us to do in February 1990 what we could not have done earlier?

It is important to understand what the core concerns of white South Africans were.

The first was the right of white South Africans – and particularly Afrikaners – to national self-determination. Unlike any other settler group in Africa, the Afrikaners were a nation. They had their own language. The central theme of their history had been their wish above everything else to rule themselves – which had led them twice during the nineteenth century to defend their independence against Britain. How could this right to self-determination possibly be maintained in a one-man, one-vote dispensation? For white South Africans acceptance of a one-man, one-vote solution evoked very much the same fears and reaction that could be expected from Israelis were they ever asked to consign their fate to a one-man, one-vote election in the broader Middle East.

Secondly, former governments were worried about chaos. It was one thing to accept the necessity of a liberal democratic transformation, even if this meant the end of the dream of Afrikaner self-determination. It was entirely another thing to accept one-man, one-vote elections that would be held only once and that would open the gates to the kind of tyranny, economic collapse and chaos that had characterised the post independence experience of many African states.

Thirdly, former governments were deeply concerned about Communist influence in the ANC. Nearly all the members of the ANC's National Executive Committee were also members of the South African Communist Party. SACP cadres controlled key functions within the ANC alliance, including its armed wing Umkhonto we Sizwe. The SACP proposed a two-phased revolution – a national liberation phase that would include all forces opposed to apartheid during which the ANC would be the vanguard party; and a second 'democratic' liberation phase that would culminate, under the leadership of the SACP, in the achievement of the 'democratic' revolution and the establishment of a 'people's democracy'. Former NP governments did not feel that they were under any moral obligation to accept a one-man, one-vote process that would quickly lead to the demise of democracy and the establishment of a totalitarian communist regime – as had already happened in a number of neighbouring states. This was not a question of 'reds under beds'. The communist threat was very real. The contest between the free world and the Soviet bloc was taking place through third world liberation struggles. One of the main battlegrounds was southern Africa where South African forces had until as late as September 1987 been involved in large-scale battles with Cuban and Soviet-led forces in Angola.

These were all reasonable concerns that ensured that as late as 1986 70% of whites remained adamantly opposed to negotiations with the ANC.

What happened to change all this?

- The first factor was the government's realisation that 'separate development' had failed and held no prospect whatsoever of bringing about a just or workable solution. The partition of the country on which it was based was hopelessly inequitable – with the 78% black majority being allocated only 13 % of the land; the economy – and the supposedly white cities - were becoming more integrated with each year that passed; whites did not constitute a majority in any geographic region of the country; and the solution was vehemently rejected by a vast majority of blacks, coloureds and Asians.
- A critically important factor was the acceptance by all sides that there could be neither a military nor a revolutionary victory – and that continuing conflict would simply turn South African into a wasteland. The security forces had accepted this reality by the early 80s. The ANC did so only after the draconian 1986 state of emergency restored order in the country. Discreet contacts between the ANC – and Nelson Mandela - and the government from the mid 80s onwards tentatively began to explore possibilities for negotiated solutions.
- Sanctions were, of course, also a factor. By the mid-80s our economy was increasingly isolated and we had to deal with the crisis caused by the refusal of international banks in 1985 to roll over our short term loans. Sanctions caused enormous distortions in the economy and probably cost us 1.5% growth per annum. However, despite tightening sanctions and growing uncertainty, the economy actually grew at an annual rate of 2.7% between April 1986 and February 1989. Sanctions were often counter-productive. They increased support for the government – and hobbled two of the greatest forces for change – economic growth and exposure to the world.
- Economic growth of the 60s and 70s was a major change factor. Between 1970 and 1994 the black share of personal disposable income increased from 28.9% to almost 50%. Millions of black South Africans moved to the cities and improved their standard of living and education. By 1989 they had begun to occupy key positions in the industrial and commercial sectors. Increasingly they were becoming indispensable in the white-collar professions. By 1994 there were more black South Africans at university than whites.
- Similar changes were taking place in the Afrikaner community. In the decades following 1960 a whole generation of young Afrikaners moved from the working class to the middle class. They graduated from university and travelled abroad – and were inevitably influenced by global values. Their attitudes were increasingly determined by the more individualistic and liberal lifestyles to which they were exposed at the cinema, in the books they read and – after 1975 – on television. TV programmes – like the Bill Cosby show – gave them a view of black people that did not accord at all with the perceptions with which they had grown up. The new generation of university educated Afrikaners no longer shared the fiery nationalism of their parents and grandparents. By the early 'eighties they were becoming increasingly uncomfortable with many aspects of apartheid – and wanted the NP leadership to find some way of dismounting the tiger of growing black resentment without being devoured. By 1989 they were ripe for change.
- A further factor was the successful conclusion of a tripartite agreement in 1988 between South Africa, Cuba and Angola for the withdrawal of Cuban forces from Angola and for the implementation of UN resolution 435 for the independence of Namibia. The

negotiations with the Angolans and the Cubans and the subsequent successful implementation of the UN independence plan during 1989 reassured the government that it could secure its core interests through negotiations with its opponents.

- The final – and critically important - factor for change was the collapse of global communism in 1989. At a stroke, it removed the government's primary strategic concern. The demise of communism and the manifest success of the free market economies also meant that there was no longer any serious debate with regard to the economic policies that would be required to ensure economic growth in a future democratic South Africa.

By the end of 1989 history had opened a unique window of opportunity for us. We knew that the prospects for successful negotiations would never again be so favourable. So we did not hesitate. On 2 February 1990, less than five months after I became President, we jumped through the window – and landed ultimately - after many harrowing crises - in a far, far better country.