



The

FW de Klerk Foundation

Continuing the miracle into South Africa's second decade

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The Demise of the New National Party

Article written by F W de Klerk.

The decision of the NNP Federal Council last weekend to join the ANC signals the end of a party that dominated South African politics for much of the past century.

The National Party reflected its times and the history in which it had its roots. After its establishment in 1914 – at a time when nationalism was rampant throughout the world – it was a vehicle for Afrikaner nationalism. When it came to power again after the 1948 election – in a world that was still characterised by imperialism, racism and paternalism – its policies were overtly racist and paternalistic. After the European empires were disbanded during the ‘fifties and ‘sixties it found itself increasingly out of step with the rest of mankind. It struggled desperately and unsuccessfully to find some way in which it could maintain the right of Afrikaners and white South Africans to self-determination while accommodating the equally legitimate demands of other South Africans for full political rights. Finally, during the late eighties, in a period that witnessed the collapse of the Soviet empire and a new blossoming of political and economic freedom, the National Party initiated a reform process that brought freedom to all South Africa's peoples.

In 1992 National Party opened its membership to South Africans of all races. It emerged from the 1994 election with more than 20% of the vote as the party with the most diverse racial support – and as the majority party among South Africa's three main minority communities.

In the 1999 election the New National Party tried to build on its multiracial base by positioning itself in the political centre and by adopting a more conciliatory approach to the ruling ANC. Unfortunately, its existing support base wanted much more vigorous criticism of the government and more aggressive promotion of minority interests. In the event, the NNP was outflanked on the right by the Democratic Party and lost almost two thirds of its support. Subsequently it entered into a brief and unsuccessful partnership with the DP in the Democratic Alliance. When the partnership failed in recrimination and distrust it established a co-operative relationship with the ANC.

It fought the recent election on the platform that more could be achieved by co-operating with the ANC within the framework of government than by opposing ineffectually from the sidelines. The NNP lost a further three quarters of its remaining support – on the one hand because of widespread and persistent perceptions of unacceptable opportunism on the side of its leadership and on the other apparently because its supporters rightly or wrongly rejected its co-operative approach. Ironically, the party that began its existence and ruled the country as the advocate of exclusive ethnic interests has been eclipsed politically because it chose instead to base its policies on a broad multiethnic and cooperative platform. Even more ironically, the New National Party is about to be engulfed by the ANC which its predecessor had traditionally regarded as its most implacable enemy.

The demise of the New National Party has left a gap in the political spectrum that is normally filled by centre-right parties. Many South Africans – particularly from minority communities – are searching for a party that will effectively – but not stridently – articulate their concerns;

that will work constructively to address the challenges facing the country; and that will promote a vision of a multiracial democracy that recognises the rich diversity and equality of all its communities. They feel that it is impossible for them to support the ANC's tripartite alliance because of policies and approaches that they believe constitute a potential threat to their individual and communal interests. On the other hand, although they may value the DA's forthright opposition role and its uncompromising stance on the protection of individual freedom – they nevertheless feel uncomfortable with aspects of the party's typically liberal approach, particularly with regard to cultural concerns, community rights and traditional values.

During its 90-year existence the National Party committed many grave injustices. Apartheid regulated, repressed, dispossessed, uprooted and humiliated millions of black, coloured and Indian South Africans for almost four decades. At the same time – and although it is not politically correct to say so – there were also many positive developments. During this period South Africa developed into by far the most advanced country in Africa at a time when much of the rest of continent descended into tyranny and economic collapse. Also, whether others wish to acknowledge it or not, all South Africans made substantial (but never sufficient) socio-economic progress. Perhaps, most importantly, the National Party held the line until the circumstances and the balance of forces were propitious for the conclusion of a constitutional settlement that would have a reasonable chance of guaranteeing the rights and freedom of all South Africans. It is not at all certain that an earlier settlement before the collapse of the Soviet Union would have led to a genuinely democratic outcome or that any initiative much before 1986 would have enjoyed the necessary support from the white electorate. Finally, the National Party made a courageous and indispensable contribution to the establishment of constitutional democracy in South Africa. In a historically unprecedented act it surrendered power and the right of white South Africans to untrammelled self-determination. With the support of two-thirds of the white electorate it placed the future protection of their fundamental rights in the guarantees contained in the democratic constitution that they had collectively negotiated with their fellow South Africans.

Those who supported and led the National Party were also people of their time and circumstances. They included many men and women of great principle and character who wrestled as best they could with the enormous challenges that confronted them and their people. In retrospect, they were often inclined to be short-sighted and insensitive. Nevertheless, they included many men and women whom I respected and admired. I would like to recognise the contribution that they made in their own way and within the frame of reference of their times to their people and to South Africa.

To former supporters of the NP and the NNP I should like to say this: your greatest hour was the contribution that you made to the creation of our constitutional democracy. Whatever choice you decide to make in the future – whether it is within the ANC, the DA or some other party – I would urge you to remain true to the principles that inspire the new South Africa and to support the constitution that is the foundation, the best hope and the guarantor of the future freedom and happiness of all our people.

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