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**SPEECH BY FORMER PRESIDENT FW DE KLERK
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MARGARET THATCHER'S ROLE IN ASSISTING SOUTH AFRICA ON ITS ROAD TO TRANSFORMATION

It is a great pleasure for me to be able to address the Margaret Thatcher Centre Gala Dinner. After we both retired from politics Baroness Thatcher and I, and our spouses, met on several occasions and became friends. I would like to share with you my thoughts about the contribution that she made to the constitutional transformation of South Africa.

It is important to remember that when Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister in 1979 the country that we call South Africa was only 69 years old.

Like most African countries it was an artificial construction of European powers.

Modern South Africa was forged in the wars of conquest that the British fought in southern Africa during the 19th century against the three dominant peoples of the sub-continent - the Xhosas; the Zulus; and my people, the Afrikaners.

The Anglo-Boer War was by far the biggest of the 50 or so wars that Britain fought between the Napoleonic Wars and the First World War. It required the deployment of 430 000 British troops - compared with the 30 000 that were sent to the Crimea - and 65 000 that fought in the American War of Independence.

At the beginning of the 20th century Britain found itself in possession of an assortment of vexatious territories in Southern Africa - that one historian quipped it had acquired in 'a fit of absent-mindedness'. Its solution was to create a union or federations along the lines of the recently established federations in Canada and Australia. A National Convention was assembled in 1908 and reached agreement on a draft constitution which was adopted by the British Parliament in September 1909 as the *South Africa Act*.

On 31 May 1910 the Union of South Africa was born. Like so many other imperial creations in Africa its artificial borders encompassed widely different peoples with divergent interests. However, the *South Africa Act*, at the insistence of the white national groups, put whites firmly in control of the new country by making the white-elected Parliament sovereign.

For the next 40 years South Africa developed more or less along the lines of the other Commonwealth dominions.

There was, however, an enormous difference between South Africa and the other dominions. In Canada, Australia and New Zealand the indigenous populations were weak



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and soon became marginalised minorities. South Africa, by contrast, ruled over a large black majority with a relatively advanced culture, coherent political systems and strong sense of ethnic identity.

Until the mid-50s, in a continent that was still dominated by European powers, white minority rule in South Africa seemed unexceptional. In a world in which racial discrimination was still shockingly the rule rather than the exception, South Africa's segregation policies elicited little criticism.

Then, after World War II everything began to change.

A new norm of racial non-discrimination and national self-determination emerged from the rubble of the war that signalled the imminent end of colonialism in Africa and Asia.

The rejection of racial discrimination and the idea that nations should have the right to rule themselves were among of the greatest advances of mankind during the 20th century.

These ideas led quite quickly to the disintegration of the European empires in Asia and Africa. As Harold Macmillan pointed out to the South African Parliament in March 1960 the winds of change were blowing. The tide of imperialism was rapidly ebbing from the continent leaving South Africa increasingly stranded as the last white-ruled state in Africa.

During the 70s and 80s the ending of white rule in South Africa became one of the central goals of the international community. The United Nations created 28 committees, sub-committees, organisations and offices to prosecute its campaign against South Africa. In 1980 the UN General Assembly adopted no fewer than 60 resolutions that directly or indirectly condemned South Africa - comprising some 20% of all the resolutions adopted that year.

Newly independent African and Asian countries saw South Africa as a painful reminder of their subjugation by European powers. They also viewed the relationship between blacks and whites in South Africa as a reflection of their own relationship with the developed world. As Prime Minister Michael Manley of Jamaica put it "Apartheid in South Africa and the relationship between the First and Third worlds are two sides of the same coin."

Western countries - anxious to distance themselves from their own imperialist and racist past - joined in the growing chorus of condemnation.

South Africa presented an irresistible target: the crass segregation of apartheid; the denial of rights to the black majority; and what was perceived as the dour Calvinism of its leadership contributed to its image as the international bogeyman. It was an image that impelled a generation of young people in the West to join anti-Apartheid movements - despite the fact that by any objective measure there were many countries with far worse human rights and social development records than South Africa.



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A country's relations with South Africa became a test of international respectability. The easiest way to curry favour with the Third World was to join the international onslaught against South Africa. As Sir Andrew Woolcott, the Australian Ambassador to the United Nations told our UN Ambassador in 1981, Australia had consciously decided to play a leading role in the campaign against Rhodesia and South Africa to help promote its relations with South East Asia where it believed its future lay.

All of this was masterfully exploited by the Soviet Union which used the international campaign against South Africa to drive in wedges between Third World countries and the West. A prime example was its instigation of the 1973 *Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid*. In 1976, when the Convention came into force, 23 of the 31 signatories were, according to Freedom House, "not free". Six were partly free - and only two - were free. Ironically, South Africa had a better human rights score than 27 of the signatories. The 109 states that subsequently joined the Convention included none of the core democracies - not even staunch critics of South Africa like Sweden and Norway.

By the end of the 1970s the "brave little Boers" - who were so admired by Europe and America during the Anglo-Boer War - had become the most universally condemned people in the world.

We were on the wrong side of history.

History had placed us on the back of the tiger of white minority rule. We were faced with the unacceptable prospect that retention of our right to rule ourselves could be achieved only by denying the black majority's equally valid right to self-determination. We knew that this course would inevitably lead to a hopeless downward spiral of repression, injustice and conflict. And we admitted to ourselves the moral unacceptability of apartheid.

The world was demanding that we dismount the tiger - but we had three main concerns about the tiger-dismounting process:

- The first was how the right of white South Africans to self-determination could possibly be maintained in a one-man, one-vote dispensation? Were we - who had held the mightiest empire in the world at bay for three years in defence of our right to self-determination - now expected to withdraw apologetically from the stage of history? For us, a one-man, one-vote solution evoked the same fears that Israelis would have if they were ever to be asked to accept a one-man, one-vote election in a broader Middle East election.
- Secondly, we were deeply concerned about Communist influence in the ANC. Virtually all the members of the ANC's National Executive Committee were also members of the South African Communist Party. The SACP controlled key functions within the ANC alliance, including its armed wing. This was not a question of 'reds under beds'. The contest between the free world and the Soviet Bloc was taking place through Third World proxy wars. One of the main battlegrounds - where our armed forces had been



conducting a low-level war for 14 years - was Angola where the Soviets had deployed 50 000 Cuban troops.

- Thirdly, we were worried about chaos. It was one thing to accept a genuine democracy. It was entirely another to accept one-man, one-vote elections that would open the way to the kind of tyranny and chaos that had befallen many post-independence African states. By the mid-80s there had already been more than 80 coups in Africa and there were only a handful of democracies on the continent. Despite their sins, white South Africans had a functioning democracy that they feared might be eclipsed after a transition to majority rule.

These were all reasonable concerns - which were given very little recognition by most of the Western powers whose goal was to simply remove the vexatious question of South Africa from the international agenda as soon as possible.

By the late 70s it had become increasingly clear to the leadership of the National Party that we needed to find workable solutions to the challenges that confronted us.

In 1978 Prime Minister PW Botha launched a major reform programme declaring that whites would have to adapt or die. By 1986 he had repealed more than 100 apartheid laws and measures and had extended political rights to Coloured and Indian South Africans in a Tricameral Parliament.

The only impact that these very real reforms had on international opinion, and on the forces within South Africa that were opposed to the government, was to redouble demands for fundamental change. By then, the demand was no longer for reform - but for power.

In 1985 the situation seemed to be hopeless - but then things began to change:

- by 1987 the ANC, at the prompting of Nelson Mandela, began to accept that there would not be an armed revolutionary victory - that there would have to be negotiations.
- In October, 1987 our armed forces inflicted a crushing defeat on Soviet and Cuban-led Angolan forces at the battle of the Lomba River - in which we destroyed 93 Soviet-built tanks. This led to peace talks between South Africa, Angola and the Cubans the following year and the withdrawal of 50 000 Cuban troops from Angola.
- In 1989 we were able to implement the UN independence plan for Namibia. Namibia became independent with a proper democratic constitution that protected the rights of all its people and all its communities.
- In January, 1989, President Botha suffered a serious stroke and resigned as leader of the National Party. I was elected leader in his place by a parliamentary caucus that supported fundamental transformation.
- In November, 1989 the fall of the Berlin Wall signalled the collapse of Soviet Communism and the victory of liberal democracy and free market economics.



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We realised that the circumstances for successful constitutional negotiations would never again be so propitious. So on 2 February 1990 we leapt through the window of opportunity that history had suddenly thrown open.

I first met Margaret Thatcher in May 1989 three months after my election as leader of the National Party, and before I became President. She strongly encouraged me to press ahead with my plans for the constitutional transformation of South Africa. I was impressed by her qualities - including common sense; an aversion to political cant; enormous courage and dogged determination to proceed along the course that she had decided was right.

These qualities had led her into bitter confrontations at several Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings. When pressed to impose draconian sanctions on South Africa she had pointed out that the main victims of sanctions were black South Africans; that South Africa had adopted important reforms; that many of her Commonwealth critics were expanding their trade with South Africa - and that some of them had very poor human rights records themselves.

She was quite right: sanctions were, at best, a double-edged sword.

- The National Party used the threat of sanctions to rally voters to its cause in election after election. Sanctions, if anything, strengthened its hold on electoral power.
- Oil sanctions spurred South Africa to develop its advanced oil-from-coal process, which soon provided a significant part of its fuel requirements. We also acquired enormous oil reserves during the 60s which we gradually sold off in the 80s at a huge profit.
- The arms embargo forced South Africa to develop its own armaments industry which by the 80s had become one of the 10 largest in the world. By the mid-80s armaments had become one of South Africa 's most important exports.
- Disinvestment of foreign companies often led to the sale of their assets to local white South African managers at bargain prices. They continued to run the businesses profitably - but no longer had to implement the onerous Sullivan principles or codes demanded by the EU.
- Sanctions cost South Africa about 1.5% per annum in economic growth. This was also counter-productive since economic growth was one of the main engines for change in South Africa - as it has been throughout the world.
- Sanctions that cut off South Africans from access to foreign movies and academic associations were particularly stupid - since exposure to international influences was also a major change factor. The screening of the Bill Cosby Show on South African TV in the early 80s probably did more to change white racial attitudes than all of the sanctions combined.

Margaret Thatcher's great contribution was that she recognised the cant and hypocrisy involved in much of the sanctions' campaign and was fearless in her opposition to them.

Her opponents in the anti-apartheid movement and in the Commonwealth were incensed by her dogged opposition to sanctions. They had wanted an ANC victory as soon as possible and



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at any cost. However, an ANC victory before the mid-1980s could have been achieved only after a devastating racial war and, in all likelihood, would not have resulted in a genuine constitutional democracy - but in the imposition of a communist regime.

Margaret Thatcher understood this. Although she was a consistent critic of apartheid, she had no illusions about the challenges that we faced. She doggedly resisted demands for more sanctions and always gave me - and our negotiating partners - strong support for the achievement of a genuine non-racial constitutional democracy. Further sanctions would have substantially weakened those in favour of negotiations and would have strengthened white conservatives who were grimly prepared to resist foreign pressure to the bitter end.

Her approach - with the support of her friend President Reagan - helped to buy essential time for us to prepare the way for constitutional negotiations and for the transformation of South Africa.

The Constitution that we negotiated has served us well since 1994.

- We are a functioning constitutional democracy with independent courts.
- We have a free market system and we have once again rejoined the world.
- We have freedom of speech and outspoken independent media.
- Race relations are quite good.

We whites have managed to dismount the tiger of white minority rule - so far - without being devoured.

We are still confronted by serious challenges. South Africa never was - and never will be - an easy country. The difference is that now we are armed with an excellent Constitution and we share core goals with many black, coloured and Indian South Africans who are equally determined to defend the foundational values on which our new society has been established.

The difference is that we are now on the right side of history.

I am grateful to Margaret Thatcher for the role she played in supporting us on our historic path to the transformation of South Africa. I am saddened that the Conservative Party subsequently apologised for her opposition to sanctions. Once again, her critics were wrong - and in my opinion, as in so many other cases, the Lady has been proved right.