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THE ROAD TO 2 FEBRUARY 1990

By FW de Klerk

The road to 2 February 1990 can be traced back to the creation of the Union of South Africa in 1910.

In 1909 Britain decided to establish a union of its principal colonies in southern Africa along the lines of the successful federations that it had set up in Australia and Canada. The difference was that in the other dominions the white populations greatly outnumbered the indigenous peoples - while in South Africa they comprised less than 25% of the total population.

Nevertheless, in keeping with the colonial approach of the times, Britain gave white South Africans a monopoly of power in the newly established Union. It was an arrangement that, in a rapidly changing world, would eventually prove to be untenable.

For the next 40 years South Africa developed along the lines of the other Commonwealth dominions. Until the mid-fifties, 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, South Africa's segregation policies elicited little criticism.

However, the world and Africa were changing.

As the tide of imperialism ebbed from Africa, South Africa found itself floundering in the last pool of white rule. We were glaringly out of step with the new international norms of non-discrimination, equality and self-determination that had been articulated in the 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

On 3 February 1960 Prime Minister Harold Macmillan told the South African Parliament that *"...the wind of change is blowing through this continent, and whether we like it or not, this growth of national consciousness is a political fact"*. In the same speech he gave recognition to the nationhood of white South Africans: *"...here in Africa you have yourselves created a free nation. A new nation. Indeed, in the history of our times yours will be recorded as the first of the African nationalists"*.

The next 30 years were dominated by escalating confrontation between what Macmillan had described as this "new" and "free" European-descended nation, on the one hand, and the rising tide of black national consciousness on the other.

Between 1960 and 1989 South Africa entered a vortex of deepening isolation and escalating conflict.

By the mid-1980s we found ourselves on the back of an increasingly angry and fractious black tiger.



The world was shouting at us to dismount - which we dearly wanted to do. However, we had profound existential fears about the tiger-dismounting process:

- Firstly, how would we be able to maintain our right to national self-determination for which we had struggled for more than 150 years? We felt just as strongly about our right to rule ourselves as any other nation. What assurance was there that, having surrendered power, we would be treated fairly by a majority with genuine grievances about the manner in which it had been treated in the past?
- Secondly, how could we be sure that one-man, one-vote would not lead to the chaos, tyranny and economic decline that had characterised the decolonisation process in so many other parts of Africa? Post-independence Africa was littered with torn-up constitutions. By the mid-1980s there had already been more than 80 coups in Africa and there were only two or three genuine democracies.
- Finally, we were worried about the possibility of a communist take-over. Throughout the 70s and the 80s virtually all the members of the ANC's National Executive Committee were also members of the SA Communist Party. The SACP controlled the ANC's armed wing and supported a two-phase revolution that would culminate in communist rule.

We searched desperately for solutions.

During the 1960s and 1970s we tried territorial partition - but it was a complete failure: our attempt to unscramble the South African omelette proved to be impossible and led to even greater injustice.

We tried reform:

- In the early 1980s we extended trade union rights to all workers;
- In 1983 we attempted to include the Coloured and Indian minorities in the same polity as whites;
- By 1986 we had repealed more than 100 apartheid laws and measures;
- In 1988 we extended substantial powers to black municipalities; and
- Throughout the 80s we searched for power-sharing models that could accommodate the political rights of black South Africans without threatening those of our minorities.

However, these reforms simply poured petrol on already inflamed expectations: the battle cry of the ANC was not "Reform!" - it was "Amandla!" - and "Amandla" means "Power"!

Nevertheless, South Africa was already changing. Rapid economic growth during the 1960s and 1970s was impacting economic relationships and political opinions:

- Black disposable income rose from 29% in 1960 to almost 50% in 1994;
- By 1994 more than 200 000 black youths were matriculating - more than three times the number of whites - and there were more black students at university than whites;



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- A whole generation of young Afrikaners had moved into the middle class. They no longer shared the fiery nationalism of their parents; they were going to university and were exposed to international influences: as a result, they were becoming increasingly uncomfortable with apartheid.

At the end of the 1980s history opened a window of opportunity for change:

- By 1987 both the ANC and the government had accepted that there would have to be negotiations.
- The decisive South African victory at the Battle of the Lomba River in Southern Angola in October 1987 was a turning point. President Gorbachev pulled the plug on Soviet and Cuban military intervention in southern Africa and instructed the Cubans and Angolans to reach an agreement with South Africa.
- The ensuing Tripartite Agreement of 1988 led to the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola and to the successful implementation of the UN independence plan for Namibia.
- In February 1989, in a surprise move, PW Botha resigned as leader of the National Party. I was elected in his place by a National Party caucus that clearly wanted change.
- 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.

Some right-wingers thought that we could cling to power indefinitely. Others wanted us to carve out a white homeland somewhere in the country. Still others, wanted us to hold out for a white veto in a new multi-racial government. None of these approaches stood the slightest chance of being acceptable to the great majority of South Africans - or to the international community.

Let me be clear: if we had not reached a settlement as soon as possible after the collapse of the Soviet Union the balance of forces would have inexorably - and quite quickly - shifted against us. With each passing year we would have been less able to secure our core interests - which is exactly what happened to Ian Smith in Rhodesia.

Just as 2 February 1990 was not the result of a Damascus conversion - neither was it forced on us by the ANC, by sanctions or any other external factors.

We were motivated overwhelmingly by our own conviction that that a successful future could be constructed only on the foundations of justice for all South Africans. We accepted that we had a moral duty to get rid of the policies that had brought so much injustice and suffering to so many people over so many years. In the end, it was we ourselves who repealed the last vestiges of apartheid legislation.

We realised - on this basis - that the circumstances for successful negotiations would never again be so favorable. So, on 2 February 1990, we opened the way to constitutional negotiations. We leapt through the window of opportunity that had been blown open by the winds of change from Eastern Europe.



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It was 30 years, less one day, after Harold Macmillan's Winds of Change speech.

***First published on Netwerk24 in Afrikaans**