



FW de Klerk
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IS DIALOGUE EXCLUSIVE OR INCLUSIVE?

By Theuns Eloff: Executive Director, FW de Klerk Foundation

The eight Foundations' National Dialogue Initiative (NFDI) was successfully launched on 5 May in Johannesburg. The vast majority of the 300 people - from all walks of life and racial groups - who attended and participated in the group discussions, viewed it as successful. It was indeed a historic initiative and the spirit was one of shared and straightforward talk about our common future. The agenda of the future dialogues was determined by group discussions whereby topics that will be discussed nationwide over the next two years were identified. The next step is to have launch events at a provincial level.

The NFDI launch resulted in two coincidental reactions.

First, 40 EFF members (mostly young people), fuelled by a Tweet from one of their leaders that dialogue with FW de Klerk and his Foundation was unacceptable, stormed in after lunch after breaking through security. Initially they stood around because the NFDI was just dividing into small groups. The EFF members even accepted an invitation to form their own group and put their issues on the agenda. However, when they realised that their leader's Tweet did not command cooperation and dialogue but rather, disruption, they refused to give feedback on their discussion.

When the last speeches started, five EFF members stood on stage with placards. The last speaker of the day, Neeshan Balton of the Kathrada Foundation, criticised their placard ("De Klerk is a serial killer") at the beginning of his speech. The irony is that Balton is extremely critical of De Klerk and the NFDI, and that his Foundation has not yet made a decision to join, but he considered it unfair to single De Klerk out. His words were like a match to a powder keg. The EFF members became incensed and shouted that he had to sit, then stormed the stage and acted in an intimidating fashion. There was a slight reprieve when he left the stage, but when Marius Oosthuizen of GIBS - who initially sympathised with the youngsters - dared to criticise their behaviour, tensions flared anew. This time, bottles of water were thrown at the stage and some members again stormed the podium, even picking up chairs to throw. Some of the facilitators had to protect the speaker - which led to a struggle on the stage, with much pushing and shoving.

Eventually, Max Boqwana, CEO of the Mbeki Foundation, declared the meeting closed while EFF members continued to shout, sing and intimidate delegates. Conference delegates applauded Boqwana and left the hall, while the singing and shouting of the EFF continued.

The second reaction to the NFDI was in the media (and especially social media). There was more talk about the legitimacy of the participation of former president FW de Klerk and his Foundation in the dialogue process than about the success of the launch, or the value of dialogue. The argument is that as the last apartheid president, De Klerk did not have the moral right to participate in the dialogue or to criticise the current state of affairs. Eusebius McKaiser was at the forefront of the media campaign on this matter and, as ever, he was



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aggressive and prejudiced. Others also had negative comments, such as Rapule Tabane in *Beeld*. “De Klerk does not do it for me,” he wrote.

The events at the NFDI launch, and the debate afterwards, reminded me of one of my past experiences: facing the AWB in 1993 at the multi-party negotiations at Kempton Park. About 300 armed AWB members stormed the building in which the negotiations took place, broke through the SAPS cordon in front of the building’s glass facade and drove through with a Panzer. They then strolled into the negotiation venue and stood on tables, urinated, shouted, and sang.

Of course there are differences between these two incidents. 1993 was another time, with other circumstances. And the AWB was armed and inflicted physical damage to property.

It was the similarities that struck me. Both the AWB and the EFF were extremely prejudiced and intolerant. The AWB referred to Mandela the “terrorist”, the EFF to De Klerk the “murderer”. Both groups wanted to prevent opponents from talking and conducting dialogue. They wanted to prescribe who could be spoken to, and even wanted to prevent others from talking to each other. Both groups were extremely unruly and some even drunk. The violence, intimidation and incitement were the same. Both groups had a highly selective worldview and ideology - one white power, the other black power - and with strong racial undertones that were also present in #feesmustfall and #rhodesmustfall.

The key question today is whether dialogue is exclusive or inclusive? Does it help if only people who agree with each other talk about the future? Are the echo chambers that come from this preferable to gathering shared insight from participants that differ from each other? Can anyone who - according to the Freedom Charter and the Constitution - has joint ownership of the country, be excluded from the discussion about the future of the country? This is what the critics of FW de Klerk have to ask themselves. Nobody denies that De Klerk was the last apartheid president - but nobody can deny that he also started the process of finally dismantling apartheid. Even the ANC was caught unawares by his historical announcement on 2 February 1990. If he did not do that, and rather followed the advice of some of his generals, millions of people could have been further disadvantaged and thousands could have died. The fact is that FW de Klerk took a conscious and voluntary decision, on moral and practical grounds, to give up political power and to destroy apartheid in this way. No one can take that legacy away from him.

Groups and leaders who want to make dialogue exclusive, deny the past and endanger the future. I do not know if Mr Malema can ride a horse, but I want to tell him that his supporters acted exactly like Eugene Terreblanche's followers. And in keeping with Rapule Tabane's article in *Beeld* on Friday, I can say that “Julius Malema does not do it for me”. But unlike Tabane, I know that the EFF should not and must not be excluded from the national dialogue because of it.