



**FW de Klerk**  
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## **FW DE KLERK RECEIVES THE *PRAESES ELIT* AWARD FROM TRINITY COLLEGE, DUBLIN**

Former President FW de Klerk was presented with the prestigious *Praeses Elit* award from the Law Society of Trinity College, Dublin on 18 January 2017. The award was established by Mary Robinson, the former President of Ireland, to honour people who have advanced legal discourse through excellence of advocacy and commitment to causes.

In his acceptance speech, De Klerk discussed the acceptance of non-racialism and non-discrimination as one of the most important advances in social and political attitudes during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

He also discussed the impact that these new norms had had on South Africa which had found itself “stranded and floundering in the continent’s last pool of white rule”.

South Africa was on the wrong side of history. According to De Klerk “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 that this course would inevitably lead to a hopeless downward spiral of repression, injustice and conflict.”

At the end of the 1980s the acceptance by all parties that there could not be an armed or revolutionary outcome and the collapse of Soviet Communism opened a window of opportunity for comprehensive constitutional negotiations.

South Africa’s new Constitution accepted equality and non-racialism as foundational values and prohibited unfair discrimination on a number of grounds, including race and gender. However, in 2004 the Constitutional Court had ruled that any discriminatory measures to advance equality were automatically fair. Now, the ANC’s approach of demographic representivity was leading to a situation in which “the prospects of individual South Africans would once again be determined not by the content of their character - as Martin Luther King put it - but by the colour of their skin.”

Societies were also encountering increasing tensions between cultural and religious freedom on the one hand and norms of non-discrimination on the other. The West was wrestling with the question of how it should deal with religious and cultural practices that openly clashed with the core values of equality, freedom and non-discrimination.

De Klerk concluded that despite these challenges, the world was a much better place today than it had been a hundred years ago. “Undoubtedly, one of our greatest achievements has been our acceptance of the equality of all human beings regardless of race, gender, class or religion and the rejection of unfair discrimination on any of these grounds”.



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He warned that “following the remarkable and disturbing developments of 2016 in Britain, Europe and the United States the challenge for all people of goodwill” would be “to defend and build on these ideals”.

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