

A shattered promise?

By Mark D Young

In an unusual turn of events for South African politics, one of the National Party's ministers replied to an open letter I sent to him via the press shortly after President PW Botha neared the end of his tenure in the late 1980s.

In my letter, entitled "*A letter to the heir-apparent from one of the little people.*", I pointedly asked Mr FW de Klerk to please do something positive for the country.

Mr De Klerk obviously read the letter. To the astonishment of many, notably myself, he sent a reply to the newspaper. In it he stated, even before he had been confirmed as the next president, that:

"Whatever the future holds for me in terms of my influence and position, I promise to work for a South Africa of which we can all feel proud."

This interchange between the man shortly to command the most powerful economy and military machine in Africa, and to head the government of a country made a pariah for its unjust policies of oppression towards the majority of its citizens, and one of the little people was merely a cameo in the greater picture of world events at the time.

However, it marked a sea-change in approach to the governed by a Nationalist Party minister. He had listened. He had acknowledged that government exists because of, and for, the people of the country.

During his historic speech to parliament in 1990, the then President De Klerk kept the promise made to the little people in his reply. He announced the dawn of an era that promised normality. The release of Mr Mandela, the un-banning of black political parties and the removal of the state of emergency under which South Africans had lived for nearly a decade were moments of incredible import.

I was driving to Cape Town and was so pleasantly shocked by the words being broadcast that I missed a turn and landed up taking a 250km detour. This was a small matter given the elation I felt at us - South Africans of all groups and cultures - finally entering an era that promised a normality of sorts for all its citizens.

Knowing the political minefield that the then president would have needed to negotiate to make the announcements he did I was not only appreciative of his courage, but very impressed that he had - in effect - kept a promise made some two years previously in a very open manner via his reply to my letter.

As a keen observer of the political landscape, however, I must confess that the elation and sense of optimism that carried me through the passes of the northern Cape on that historic day, have muted and taken on a sense of despondency at the subsequent waste of the opportunity created that day by Mr De Klerk.

Many commentators and political figures have denigrated his tenure and actions as having been inevitable and the only thing he could do. Much debate can ensue in that regard but that will do little to change the fact that at the time the speech was made, South Africa had the skills, economic wealth and management know-how to ensure that its future could be brighter than even the most pessimistic of commentators would have imagined in the darkest days of apartheid rule.

While I cannot accept that the system Mr De Klerk inherited was equitable to all our citizens, it certainly had the administrators and public servants on hand to manage matters efficiently. Scaling-

up their activities to properly serve all South African citizens (as should have been the case all along), should have permitted the promise of the new freedoms to be realised for all by subsequent governments.

The Government of National Unity that emerged from the CODESA process seemed to hold this promise within the ideals which framed it. In the mid 1990s, therefore, it seemed that South Africa would, in fact, scorch into the future riding the proverbial (and frequently quoted) rainbow of skills and energies that made up its diversity.

The world celebrated with us, not only on that historic day of Mr De Klerk's speech, but as we apparently worked together to build a better future for all our citizens.

The legacy we have from that period, in my view, is, however, that the work begun by Mr De Klerk, Mr Mandela and others could not be sustained by euphoria alone. Indeed, our collective history has proven to be too riven to permit us to grab the spirit of reconciliation that flowed from that moment and to forge a new national identity and prosperity for all.

Certainly, the daily reality of their identity and circumstances has changed little for the poorest of our citizens - if at all - since those days. Much of that, I will concede, is inherent in the infrastructural realities that the new governments inherited. However, the greatest portion of the fault for that reality can be laid at the feet of our citizens as a whole.

Some may find this perplexing and harsh. How can we, as the little people, have any responsibility or account in what has transpired in our country since?

I believe it is because we all fell victim to the euphoria, the promises and the sloganeering of the times and forgot that the greatest responsibility of freedom is the duty to nurture and protect it.

We have been diverted from our goal through self-serving campaigns by various political parties and, sadly, by many poor examples of leadership. In addition, the one-upmanship displayed on a daily basis in offices, shops, universities and schools by every citizen that seeks to attack or bring-down a fellow citizen, rather than celebrating our differing views and celebrating our common humanity, is playing a role in the destruction of the opportunity we were given on that momentous day.

We are so busy cawing, clawing and screaming at one another - trying to force others to see our viewpoint - that we cannot see the wood for the statues. It is, perhaps, due to the very fact that our energies are turned inwardly onto one another that the current government is struggling to such a large degree to hold the strings together, let alone keep us all going in the same direction.

A government consists, in the final analysis, of little people. Each member is a human, just like we are. Each person, individually, is neither inherently evil nor bad. Each can be reached with a voice of reason and tolerance. Each has two ears and a single mouth. We need to learn to use these in proportion.

Shouting, vilifying and belittling others, be they next to us on a train, in the car alongside or on the green benches of parliament, will not serve to fulfill the promise of the opportunity released by President De Klerk in 1990.

Such behaviour, which, sadly, is increasing by the day, serves only to shatter the promise of that historic moment.

Perhaps it is fitting, on this 25th anniversary of one of the bravest parliamentary speeches ever, that we - the little people - make an honest effort to complete the job begun on that day.

We can do this, firstly, by celebrating our diverse nationhood. Thereafter, we need to consider what is best, overall, for all our citizens. Then, we need to do the right thing and work in our own environments to promote change and reconciliation. Everyone can do a bit.

Collectively, however, we need to hold the current government to account for its role in either promoting the promise offered by the new era ushered in by Mr De Klerk, or for shattering it.

All governments exist for the benefit, we are told, of the little people. When they raise their voices in the appropriate manner, the effect can be very powerful indeed.

Perhaps the most fitting celebration of the words contained within then President De Klerk's speech about the future we needed to construct will be to internalise them and to consider how we, as the little people, can help each other to bring about the ideals embodied therein.

If we acknowledge and assist one another, we, the little people can achieve great things. However, if we try and climb over each other and try and grab everything for ourselves, we will continue to abdicate our role in forging and building our country for the benefit of all and surrender it to expediency and short term benefit.

Make no mistake, history will judge us all harshly if we continue to shatter the promise we were given by thinking that building the ideal nation espoused in the words of Mr De Klerk in 1990 is somebody else's problem.

It is our collective responsibility to pass to our successors a healed, unified and prosperous nation that meets the ideal painted for us all 25 years ago.