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**SPEECH BY FORMER PRESIDENT FW DE KLERK
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THE FIRST QUARTER CENTURY

It is a great pleasure once again to address the Cape Town Press Club.

In the course of my speech I shall endeavour to revisit the remarkable process that culminated 25 years ago in the fundamental constitutional transformation of South Africa.

I shall examine how we have fared since then in advancing the values on which our Constitution and our new society have been founded. And, on the eve of critically important national elections in May this year, I shall briefly assess our prospects for the next 25 years.

Now, 25 years later, we South Africans are inclined to forget our historic achievement in successfully managing the fundamental transformation of our society from rule by the white national minority to genuine non-racial constitutional democracy.

Indeed, in the darkest days of 1985 such a prospect seemed to be quite impossible.

Many South Africans and most international observers believed that South Africa was descending inexorably into a catastrophic racial war.

- Widespread civil unrest throughout the country was threatening to make many of our communities ungovernable.
- Scenes of chaos and mayhem were being broadcast nightly on international TV and were eroding whatever confidence still existed in the South African government's ability to maintain control.
- The country was internationally reviled; it was increasingly isolated and threatened by sanctions; and, following the refusal of international banks to roll over our short-term loans, was facing bankruptcy.
- The SADF was involved in escalating conflict in southern Angola with surrogate forces of the Soviet Union that saw Southern Africa as a principal area of contestation in its global struggle against the West.

Let me make it clear to critics of our transformation process that had we not taken the actions that we initiated in February 1990 we would have continued down the 1985 road to a catastrophic racial war; to the destruction of our economy; and to a very bleak future for all our people.

And then after 1985 - slowly but surely - the situation began to improve.



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- Following the restoration of order throughout the country, the ANC - led initially by Nelson Mandela from his prison cell in Cape Town - began to accept that the problems of South Africa could be resolved only through negotiations. They knew that escalating conflict would simply result in the destruction of the country and of any possibility to build a new non-racial society. The government had already reached a similar conclusion.
- After the SADF's crushing victory at the Battle of the Lomba River in October 1987 - the Soviet Union - now intent on Perestroika and Glasnost - abandoned support for any further military adventures in Southern Africa. It exerted pressure on Angola and Cuba to reach an agreement with South Africa. The result was the conclusion of the tripartite agreement of 1988 that included the withdrawal of Cuban forces from Angola in conjunction with the implementation of the UN's independence process in Namibia.
- The successful process in Namibia - in terms of which the territory gained independence with a proper democratic constitution - that is still in place - reassured South Africans that fundamental rights could be protected by strongly entrenched constitutional agreements.
- Finally, the collapse of the Soviet Union - symbolised by the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 - helped to address the government's deep concern regarding the influence of the South African Communist Party - backed up by the resources of the Soviet Union - over the ANC.

We realised that the circumstances would never again be so propitious for constitutional negotiations as they were at the beginning of 1990. The longer we waited to initiate negotiations the more this temporary advantage would inexorably slip away from us. And so, on 2 February 1990, I rose in Parliament to make the announcements that would change South Africa forever.

Any reform process - let alone the kind of fundamental transformation that we undertook - is fraught with risk and difficulty. As Niccolò Machiavelli observed "...there is nothing more difficult to carry out nor more doubtful of success nor more dangerous to handle than to initiate a new order of things."

In the mid-1980s my friend Mikhail Gorbachev embarked on his programme to reform communism under the slogans of Perestroika and Glasnost. His initiative changed his country and the world forever - but not in the manner that he had envisaged or intended. He wanted to reform communism - not to replace it with some other system. He lost control of the process and was relegated to the sidelines as a spectator of the subsequent collapse of communism and of the Soviet Union.

We South Africans, working together despite our fundamental differences, managed to keep control of our own transformation process. The 1996 Constitution ticked virtually all of the boxes that CODESA had set itself in the Declaration of Intent at the commencement of the negotiations - including:



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- the supremacy of the Constitution;
- an independent, non-racial and impartial Judiciary;
- multi-party democracy;
- the separation of powers;
- acknowledgement of South Africa's diversity of languages, cultures and religions; and
- an entrenched and justiciable Bill of Rights.

However, as the Duke of Wellington observed after the Battle of Waterloo: "it was ... the nearest run thing you ever saw in your life."

We experienced numerous serious crises and challenges:

- faceless violence perpetrated by extremists on all sides who were opposed to a negotiated settlement;
- the Boipatong massacre and the ANC's subsequent withdrawal from CODESA;
- the ill-fated ANC march on Bisho;
- the Record of Understanding of 26 September 1992 and the decision of the IFP and other parties to boycott the negotiations;
- Judge Goldstone's discovery in November 1992 of continuing illegal activities by elements in Military Intelligence;
- the assassination of Chris Hani on 10 April 1993;
- the AWB assault on the World Trade Centre;
- the Bophuthatswana crisis; and
- the IFP's refusal until the very last minute to participate in the elections.

Despite all these crises we managed to reach agreement in December 1993 on an Interim Constitution and to hold our first truly universal national election on 27 April.

This was a remarkable achievement by any standard. It was, perhaps, one of the greatest and most successful change management processes anywhere in the world at any time in history.

It could not have been achieved without the support of all our communities and of all our principal political parties.

It was a victory for all those black, coloured and Indian South Africans who had struggled for so long for freedom, for non-racialism and for full political rights. But it was also a victory for the great majority of white South Africans who had sought for so long to extricate themselves from the impossible position in which history and they themselves had placed them.



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It could not have been achieved if, in the March 1992 referendum, 69% of the white electorate had not supported the continuation of constitutional negotiations that they knew would result in their loss of controlling power.

It is accordingly a pity that South Africa's great constitutional transformation is now depicted as an untrammelled victory for some - and as a total defeat for others.

I certainly did not regard it as such.

10 of May 1994 - the day of Nelson Mandela's inauguration - was one of the most fulfilling days of my life - even though it meant the end of my own presidency. I believed that I was handing power - not to Nelson Mandela and the ANC - but to a new constitutional dispensation that would protect the reasonable rights of all South Africans.

I believed that I had helped to achieve nearly all the goals that I had set out in my speech of 2 February 1990 and that the negotiating parties had endorsed in the Declaration of Intent.

The essence of these endeavours was ultimately distilled in the founding values in Section 1 of our 1996 Constitution. Every South African should know them by heart. They include:

- human dignity, the achievement of equality and the advancement of human rights and freedoms;
- non-racialism and non-sexism;
- supremacy of the Constitution and the Rule of Law; and
- a genuine multi-party system of democratic government, to ensure accountability, responsiveness and openness.

Now, 25 years later, we have to admit that we have a very checkered record in the success that we have achieved in living up to those values:

We have indeed succeeded in removing apartheid - which was the most egregious breach of the human dignity of the great majority of South Africans. By the time that we handed power to our new constitutional dispensation we had successfully repealed all the remaining apartheid laws.

However, what human dignity do the 40% of our population who are unemployed - or the millions of young people who have been failed by our education system - have in practice?

We have failed dismally to achieve equality. South Africa is a more unequal society than it was in 1994 - and to our shame is now the most unequal country in the world. Inequality has also grown within all our communities. Levels of inequality within the black community are almost as high as they are in the country as a whole. The FW de Klerk Foundation will be dealing in greater detail with the inequality crisis at our annual conference next week.



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We have succeeded in advancing the human rights and freedoms of most South Africans. These rights have been promoted and upheld by civil society organisations, sometimes by the Human Rights Commission and consistently by our courts.

However, some rights - particularly those relating the language and culture - have been seriously diluted or ignored.

- English is fast becoming the sole *de facto* official language of the country;
- the right to education at public institutions in the language of choice is under enormous pressure;
- Afrikaans is unlikely to survive as a language of tuition at our public universities; and
- our highest court has stigmatised Afrikaans as a language of “discrimination, oppression and systematic humiliation of others” - as though languages can be the bearers of the faults of their speakers - and despite the fact that a majority of Afrikaans-speakers were themselves victims of apartheid.

Even more troubling was the 2016 judgement of one of our Constitutional Court judges that “cultural traditions rooted in the racist past” “belong in the dustbins of history where they ought to be buried.” This led two of his fellow judges to draw the implication that “any reliance by white South Africans, particularly white Afrikaner people, on a cultural tradition founded in history, finds no recognition in the Constitution...” This is devastating.

If you deprive people of their history and their right to culture you are inexorably also depriving them of their right to human dignity - and, indeed, to humanity.

In contrast, we have done quite well with non-sexism. Women enjoy formal equality and the ANC has done well in moving toward equal representation of women in Parliament and in State institutions. However, the other side of the coin is unacceptable gender violence and rape statistics that are among the worst in the world.

Perhaps our proudest achievement is that the Constitution does remain the supreme law of the land. Our Courts - led by the Constitutional Court - have consistently upheld the Rule of Law and have frequently struck down unconstitutional laws or executive actions.

And - as we will once again witness in May - we continue to be a functioning multi-party democracy. We hold free elections. We enjoy freedom of expression. We have rigorous and open political discourse. We have an independent electoral commission and we respect the outcome of elections. These are all very considerable achievements in a world in which democracy is increasingly under threat.

Perhaps our greatest failure - after our very poor record on equality - is our failure to promote non-racialism.



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It is a matter of the deepest regret that, in my opinion, South Africa can no longer be regarded as a non-racial society. Indeed, it is probably once again one of the most racially dirigiste societies in the world - a society in which the prospects of individuals are once again increasingly determined by the colour of their skin - rather than the content of their character.

We are observing a disturbing escalation of aggressive racial rhetoric punctuated by ugly incidents - such as the recent victimisation of a young teacher in Schweizer-Reneke and the invasion of a primary school by an angry mob.

There is no balance in the manner in which racist remarks and incidents are judged: foolish and unacceptable racist remarks by white non-entities - not intended for public dissemination - are treated far more harshly than incendiary remarks made in public by political leaders openly calling for racial violence.

Our government has virtually abandoned the great tradition of promoting racial reconciliation that was exemplified by Nelson Mandela. Instead, it now consistently pumps out negative stereotypes of white South Africans

- whom it labels with 'original sin';
- whom, in some statements, it evidently does not regard as part of "our people";
- whom it says are not "the rightful owners" of land to which they hold legal title;
- whom it blames for all of the continuing problems of the country; and
- to whom it refers as 'colonialists' - as aliens who do not really belong in South Africa.

It is extremely dangerous when governments and political leaders in multi-cultural societies begin to propagate such stereotypes - particularly when the propagators often believe them with incandescent intensity.

Such attitudes create space for even more radical elements to sweep up racial tensions and increase the danger of a serious racial incident - with all the dreadful and irreparable consequences that would ensue.

All this constitutes an enormous threat to the non-racial constitutional democracy that all of us established 25 years ago.

So where does that leave us now? What are the prospects for the coming election - and beyond that for the next 25 years?

Firstly, we are extremely fortunate that Cyril Ramaphosa emerged as leader of the ANC at NASREC in December 2017 - and not the candidate of the Zumaites.

I believe that he is sincere in his efforts to restore the integrity of State institutions and SOEs after many of them were captured by his predecessor and his Gupta cronies. The



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revelations of the Zondo Commission are daily astounding us with new exposures of the brazen corruption that was at the heart of the last administration.

The very fact that we have institutions that can fearlessly expose corruption in the highest echelons of government is in itself a cause for confidence in the future. However, the key test will be the degree to which the truths now being exposed in the Zondo Commission and others will have consequences for the perpetrators.

It is essential that President Ramaphosa should succeed in restoring the integrity of the National Prosecuting Authority; the South Africa Revenue Service; the intelligence services; the Police, SOEs and other State institutions.

But this will not be easy. The President must still stamp his authority on the institutions of his party which are still heavily influenced by the culture of his predecessor.

The outcome of this struggle within the ANC will probably have much more significance than the outcome of May's election. If President Ramaphosa wins and is able to succeed with his efforts to restore the integrity of government institutions - I am reasonably confident about the future.

The other *sine qua non* is that he should take concerted action to end South Africa's slide into new forms of racism and should resume Nelson Mandela's proud tradition of promoting national reconciliation.

And for the next 25 years?

I believe that our long-term success will be determined by our ability to promote the values in section 1 of our Constitution - with particular emphasis on equality and non-racialism. If we can do this - and if we can simply follow the examples of so many other successful states in promoting economic growth - the future will be positive for all South Africans and for all our communities.

On one thing I agree with President Ramaphosa: South Africa today - with all its manifold failings - is still a much better place than it was before 1994 - and an infinitely better place than it would have been had we not transformed our society.

But we should not forget that this new society was the achievement of all of us working together. It was a victory for all of us who believe in the values in section 1 of our Constitution - and a defeat for all of those who opposed - and continue to oppose - those values.

We South Africans should never forget what we were able to accomplish when we work together. In my Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech in December 1993 I said that our achievement brought to mind a poem by one of our greatest poets, NP van Wyk Louw - in which he had written:



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*“O wye en droewe land, alleen onder die groot suidersterre - sal nooit ‘n hoë blydschap kom deur jou stil droefenis?...
Sal nooit ‘n magtige skoonheid kom oor jou soos die haelwit somewolke wat uitbloeï oor jou donker berge, en nooit in jou ‘n daad geskied wat opklink oor die aarde en die jare in hul onmag terg...”*

Freely translated it means:

*“Oh wide and woeful land, alone beneath the great southern stars - will soaring joy ne’er arise above your silent grief?”
“Will ne’er a mighty beauty rise above you, like the hail-white summer clouds that billow o’er your brooding peaks and in you, ne’er a deed be wrought that over the earth resounds and mocks the ages in their impotence?”*

What we South Africans did 25 years ago was such a deed - a deed resounding over the earth - a deed of peace and hope.

We should never forget it.