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THE WINDS OF CHANGE MARK II *

State President FW de Klerk's opening address to Parliament is remarkable in several respects. Coming as it did in the wake of breathtaking events in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe it takes on special salience. Perestroika and Glasnost came south. Not only did President de Klerk recognise the gathering forces of change from within, but also those in the world which are likely to sweep through the hills and plains of South Africa and the region. Informing the speech is a strong desire for readmission to the world and a recognition that apartheid has become obsolete. Thus, the speech will to some extent shape the future pattern of foreign relations, as well as the character of the transition to a new domestic order, the end of which we know not yet.

A close analysis of the speech reveals a carefully stage-managed event that tried to balance both continuity and change. The former, continuity, includes: the strand of non-interference by the international community in South Africa's domestic affairs; the primacy of law and order and of non-violence in transition; and the definition of human rights to include the rights of 'collectives' and 'nations', as well as those of individuals.

Elements of change are encapsulated in the notion that South Africa cannot go it alone in the world; the explicit recognition of the primacy of human rights as the basis for any future legitimate polity; and a preference for negotiation as the preferred mechanism to resolve the wasteful conflict in South Africa.

The contents of the speech are interesting and significant for the following reasons:

- a) An explicit recognition that the prevailing Zeitgeist in the world demands democratic and limited government.
- b) The notion that South Africa has a pivotal role to play in the reconstruction of the region. This in turn is premised on the view that the new international system has created space for middle and regional powers, such as South Africa.

* President de Klerk's speech came 30 years (almost to the day) after the prophetic 'Winds of Change' speech of former British Prime Minister, Harold MacMillan, to the South African Parliament.

- c) The acknowledgement that the restoration of natural rights, notably in the form of a justiciable Bill of Rights, constitutes the essence of a democratic polity.
- d) The view that political and constitutional reforms are intimately related to social-economic reform.
- e) The preference for liberalisation as a necessary condition for democratisation.
- f) The acceptance that nationhood in South Africa should be inclusive rather than exclusive.
- g) A willingness to redefine the territorial boundaries of the State - notably, with the possible reincorporation of the TBVC states.
- h) An attempt to address some of the conditions advanced by the African National Congress (ANC) - most recently, in the Harare Declaration of August 1989 - as well as those of the international community, aimed at improving the climate for negotiations. Significantly, President de Klerk did not announce the lifting of the State of Emergency, the release of Mr. Nelson Mandela and all other political detainees, or the withdrawal of troops from the townships (although he committed himself to effecting the first two as soon as possible).

It is precisely these latter conditions which will have to be met before the climate for negotiations will be fully propitious. Understandably, therefore, reaction from the ANC, PAC and the MDM was decidedly cautious, even though they welcomed the steps taken so far.

Eastern Europe writ large

Before reflecting on domestic and international reaction to the speech, the East European parallel needs to be further explored. Like the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, South Africa embarked on reform for some surprisingly similar reasons: the unnerving prospect of economic decline; a discredited and bankrupt ideology; the burden of a bloated and inefficient bureaucracy; low levels of political legitimacy; and a desire to rejoin the world.

The parallels between President de Klerk's version of renewal (Boerestroika) and that of President Gorbachev of the Soviet Union can hardly escape an astute observer. Both reflect a primacy of liberalisation as opposed to democratisation. Both desire re-admission to the world and access to investment and technology. Both favour regime-induced reform (top-down) rather than mass (bottom-up) change (such as has happened in some East European states). Both reject external involvement in the process. Both are attempting to restructure authoritarian regimes. Both are trying to resurrect civil society.

Reaction: Domestic and International

Predictably, reaction from the mandarins within the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary right wing was hostile. Their world of certainty and monopoly power is collapsing. The critical question

relates to their capacity for counter-mobilisation within the security and bureaucratic structures of the state.

International reaction was generally favourable, with the governments of the United States, the United Kingdom, the Federal Republic of Germany and the Vatican - among others - viewing it as positive and at least "a step in the right direction". A review of policies on South Africa can be expected, especially after the release of Mr Nelson Mandela and fulfilment of the previously mentioned outstanding conditions. Sanctions policies are unlikely to be substantially changed in the near term, although they will be re-examined.

Reaction from the other principal parties - notably the ANC and the PAC - was more critical. ANC President Oliver Tambo indicated that at best Mr de Klerk's announcements enhanced a climate conducive to negotiation. He remained "gravely concerned", however, that certain political prisoners would not be released and expressed concern that the state of emergency had not been lifted in its entirety and that the practice of detention without trial was to continue. He also called for the immediate and unconditional release of Mr Nelson Mandela and reaffirmed that the external leadership of the ANC wanted to have a say in the circumstances of his release, eg in regard to his security.

The United Democratic Front (UDF), a key party within the Mass Democratic Movement (MDM), welcomed the speech, but likewise insisted on fulfilment of all the conditions contained in the Harare Declaration.

The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) viewed it as "courageous", but in terms of the expectations of the majority of South Africans, it "fell short of what was needed".

Executive President of the PAC, Mr Zeph Mothopeng, demanded the repeal of the 1913 and 1936 Land Acts and reiterated that the military wing of the PAC, the Azanian Peoples Liberation Army (APLA), would continue with the "armed struggle".

Cautious endorsement came from luminaries Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Dr Alan Boesak and from Dr Beyers Naude. Mangosuthu Buthelezi, the Reverend Alan Hendrikse and other "in-system" opposition were enthusiastic in their support.

Positive reaction also came from the Secretary General of the United Nations, the European Commission, President Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia (elder statesman and leader of the Frontline States) and the French, Dutch and Canadian governments. A guardedly positive response also came from the Soviet Union.

Implications

In considering the implications of President de Klerk's opening of Parliament speech, these can be grouped under the rubrics of domestic, regional and international.

The more salient domestic implications are likely to include:

- * Tactical and strategic reassessments on the part of the ANC and PAC.
- * Political realignment, as the different political formations seek coalition partners.
- * A limiting of the political space of the Democratic Party.
- * Attempts by the white right wing parties to counter-mobilise and to protest against the new direction of the governing party.
- * The further abolition of statutory race classifications.
- * The release of political energy which in turn could entail increased political risks.

Regionally, there is the prospect that South Africa's relations with its neighbours may improve, especially if a regional summit can be organised and if the politics of destabilisation has now clearly been discontinued.

Internationally, there is hope for the gradual lifting of sanctions. (It is unlikely that any new sanctions would be introduced in the US Congress.) Sanctions will continue to depend principally on what happens inside South Africa, especially over the next few months. South Africa may improve its standing with the international financial community. Its economy may again become more centrally part of the world economy. Whatever its implications and contradictions, de Klerk has, unlike his predecessor, shown personal courage in taking South Africa onto the road of change and hope ...

JAN SMUTS HOUSE
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