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REFORM WITHOUT COMPASSION CANNOT SUCCEED

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It is almost 18 months since Pres de Klerk made his momen^tous speech in Parliament. But for at least the last six months the reform process - with the dual purpose to abolish apartheid and to create a new (and hopefully democratic) political dispensation - is seriously off course and can soon end up in a (permanent?) cul-de-sac. A naive acceptance of the government's propaganda about its alleged breakthrough, can prove to be a dangerous deception. It is clearly not too early to busy ourselves with serious diagnoses and soul-searching of what went wrong with the seemingly promising transition strategy announced at the beginning of 1990.

Could it be that the so-called transition strategy was a too hastily and ill-conceived strategy and therefore doomed to fail? Or was it a well-thought-out and brilliantly executed masterplan to disrupt the liberation movements, to "normalise" South Africa's international relationships and to regain sufficient legitimacy to perpetuate the white power monopoly - both in the political and economic arenas?

In explaining his government's transition strategy, Pres De Klerk often told his audiences during his foreign tours that South Africa will soon reach the point where the process of constitutional negotiations and the attainment of a high economic growth rate would prove to be mutually reinforcing processes. It will be very fortunate if we can reach the point where we have succeeded to put both these processes in full motion and can experience the reinforcing influence of constitutional negotiations on economic growth and vice versa. But before we can reach this desired interaction, it will be necessary to get both constitutional negotiations and economic growth, so to speak, on the road. But there's the rub!

It is of no avail for Pres de Klerk to emphasize a thousand times how important it is that negotiations should commence as soon as possible, while not doing what is needed for creating an atmosphere conducive for negotiations. It is equally of no avail for the Minister of Finance to emphasize a thousand times the importance of a high growth rate, while the government is also not doing what is needed for creating a climate promotive to growth. In his Budget speech the Minister said it was the specific purpose of the Budget to create such a climate. But an analysis of the Budget and other policy measures made it clear that the government has a very restricted and superficial conception of what it will take - especially in the field of social reform - to create the atmosphere of mutual trust and social stability necessary to get both the processes of constitutional negotiations and economic growth on the road.

We have reached a point in the attempted transitional process where it has become rather obvious that neither political reform nor economic revival can succeed if both are not preceded by a rather comprehensive programme of social reform and poverty relief with the specific purpose of creating an atmosphere of social stability and mutual trust.

Unfortunately it seems as if the government completely underestimates both the symbolic and material value of comprehensive social reform to change hostile perceptions and to restore trust, confidence and social stability. Consequently the government's approach has attained a legalistic and mechanistic character deprived of the necessary compassion and human touch. It is rather sad that in the important debate about the trade-off between "efficiency and equity" the government is inclined only to emphasize efficiency, while the liberation movements are mainly concerned with equity while displaying a serious lack of efficiency. The government should know better and realise that longterm efficiency is not attainable without compassion.

When the government announced its intention to abolish apartheid, this abolishment was not intended to be an isolated event. It

was supposed to be an important opportunity not only to terminate a horrible system, but also to implement a policy of social upliftment to relieve the terrible suffering of the poorest third of the total population on whose shoulders the apartheid system has put - directly and indirectly - an almost unbearable burden.

The abolishment of apartheid should have happened in such a humane way and in such a spirit of generosity, that it could have been a joyful occasion of rejoicement and festivities with prayers of thanksgiving at special services in every church and denomination. It should have been a high power symbolic occasion where it would have been possible for Mr Mandela and other leaders to praise and to thank the government for its humanity and its repentance.

Unfortunately the government has blown the golden opportunity. It is removing the so-called last pillars of apartheid from the statute books in an atmosphere of growing animosity between the government and the liberation movements. The accusation that the legalistic manner in which the last pillars are removed is nothing but a clever and "efficient" ploy to privatise apartheid and to continue white power and privileges, is not without merit. To implement a policy of land reform without a land redistribution policy to compensate for the deprivation caused by the Land Act over a period of 78 years, is a farce.

Pres De Klerk's stubborn unwillingness to acknowledge the truth about the exploitative and immoral nature of apartheid and to make a confession of guilt, is inexcusable. Is this unwillingness due to a lack of understanding or a deliberate stubbornness to defend the vested interests of his bourgeois constituency? To think that it will be possible to build the mutual trust and the social stability necessary to create an atmosphere conducive to negotiations and economic growth without a preparedness to show repentance for apartheid, is not only highly unrealistic but also an indication of hard-heartedness on the side of the government.

How on earth can anyone deny the deliberate exploitative and

immoral nature of apartheid? The NP government uses all kinds of arguments to build a collective ^(white) conscience about the alleged moral justification for apartheid. Why is the NP not now prepared to partake in a campaign to build a collective (white) conscience about the worldwide acknowledged immoral character of apartheid?

Before we can hope to experience the benefits of negotiations and economic revival, we should take full cognisance of the devastating effects apartheid and sanctions are still exerting on the lives of the majority of the black population and especially on the 15 million living in abject poverty. Since 1974 South Africa is experiencing creeping poverty. Given the power structures institutionalised in our political and economic systems, the greater part of this "creeping poverty" has been "shifted" on the lower half of the black population.

Without compassion with the harsh fate of these poverty-stricken victims of apartheid, the government's reform policy cannot succeed. The time for a confession of guilt by the government for its apartheid misdeeds and for a commitment towards (reasonable) restitution is long overdue.

What we need is a comprehensive War on Poverty programme. As soon as the organisational framework can be created, the government should spend at least R10 billion annually on such a War on Poverty programme and present it as part and parcel of Restitution.

We should not underestimate the material nor the symbolic potential of such a programme.

It will bring highly needed relief for the millions living in desperate poverty. It can convince the liberation movements about the sincerity of the government's reform intentions. It can end the spiral of violence - at least the part that is poverty-related. It can offer an opportunity to Pres De Klerk not only to inform, but also to educate, the mainly white taxpayers about the inevitable consequences of reform and repentance.

But, above all, it can prove to be invaluable to build the mutual trust and the social stability that may prove to be inevitable ^(or a sine quo non) for success with constitutional negotiations and economic revival over the long run.