

Speech to be delivered by Dr Z. J. de Beer

at the Opening of the Codesa Conference

World Trade Centre, Johannesburg.

Friday, 20 December 1991

When this Democratic Party was founded less than three years ago, we never dreamed that we would so soon be attending the Convention for a Democratic South Africa. We pay tribute to all who have made it possible.

All of us here present share our love of justice, and of this land and its people. We share more: we share our faith in the ability of men and women of goodwill to achieve peace and prosperity.

Our task is to write the constitution which will enable those who come after us to be proud citizens of a free South Africa commanding respect in the community of nations.

We are deeply conscious that we have to approach this task not writing as it were on a clean slate, but dealing with a human society which is the product of centuries of wrong. Much is rightly said of the terrible harm that was done in the name of apartheid: but we dare not pretend that injustice began in 1948. The distortions caused by race and sex discrimination have been present for centuries. Their impact is there for all to see in the life of our people today.

It is necessary but not sufficient for us to close the book on yesterday's society and say: "from tomorrow we shall do justice, and there will be equal opportunities". We must do more than this, and achieve all that can be achieved to repair the damage of the past. Yet we must tell truth to ourselves and the world, and say that our ability to achieve a perfect society is limited by the extent of our resources, human and material - just as is that of every other society in the world. Having looked fearlessly at the facts, we must follow the shortest road towards perfection, in the knowledge that we may never reach it, but in the determination that we shall strive towards it with each year and with each day that passes.

As we face our monumental task, we ask: "from where will the force,



the strength and the drive come to achieve it?" Ultimately, the power to save lives and print books and build cities and grow food and sail the seas and work below the earth and fly to the moon has come from the wish of ordinary people for a better life - for themselves, their families and their fellows. Ultimately, the efforts made have been made by individuals, each following his or her own path to a desired destiny. That which sets people free to use their powers in the improvement of life maximises achievement: that which seeks to coerce and compel human beings who were born free is not only wicked in itself but also destructive of potential human progress. We all should believe in the immense creative force of a free human person, and we should all fear the damaging potential of one frustrated in the exercise of personal freedom. As I say that I think of those in this place today whose freedom was taken from them and who none the less found the strength and nobility to surmount that assault upon their characters, and I salute them: and I believe they will agree when I say that personal freedom must always be a primary aim of government.

If the liberty of the people is a great good, then it is necessary to do all that can be done to limit and constrain the power of governments to interfere with that liberty. We need always to remember that rights reside in the people. The people lend certain of these rights to government for it to exercise in the interests of good administration: but government can never validly possess them, only steal them if it is unjust and authoritarian. One of the great tasks Codesa must fulfil is to produce a constitution which prevents abuse of power by government..

In this connection I wish to refer to the cataclysmic events that have taken place in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union during these last years. I spoke this week to a woman of sophistication - not a South African - who had recently visited Saint Petersburg, and moved among private people. She spoke of two things: the very high quality of the people, well-educated and intellectually capable; and the bitter resentment they feel against