

500 Words on the History of CODESA

CODESA is now a fact: it exists. It may succeed or fail: but no history book of the future can ignore it.

Where should one start in telling the story?

I believe that people will date it from 2nd February 1990, the day of President de Klerk's astonishing speech at the opening of Parliament where he gave to the world the vision of a negotiated future based upon equal rights for all South Africans.

Of course, historians who write that CODESA was born that day will be over simplifying; but some over simplification is inseparable from the recording of human activity. Professor Willem de Klerk has written a book about his brother, in which he devotes a chapter to the various and quite different factors which brought F W de Klerk to say what he said on that February day. He records, for example, that the activities and arguments of a wide range of South African individuals and organisations over years played a part. He notes how it became clear that the South African economy would collapse under the blows which it was suffering as the result of apartheid. He shows how the growing isolation of the country in the world made it imperative to act. Professor de Klerk's book may have suffered somewhat from its hasty compilation, but I believe that more scholarly writers of the future will draw on it heavily.

It is true to say that in circles more liberal than that of the National Party before De Klerk, the concept of a negotiated future had been around for years. Wherever one went, one heard the concept proposed and debated; but the question was always: "How do we get from here to there?" Once the President of South Africa had committed himself, there was more optimism, but there were still questions about the procedures to be followed.

At the beginning, a great deal depended upon the personal chemistry between President de Klerk and (then) Deputy President of the ANC, Nelson Mandela. Direct personal talks between the two men were soon followed by broader, but still balanced discussions between the two organisations. Obstacles to negotiation were identified - among them the need to free political prisoners and for exiles to return and, over a fairly long period eliminated. Bilateral talks involving all sorts of political parties and organisations took place.

It must be recorded that for many months, the occurrence of violent conflict presented a considerable stumbling block. In particular, for a time the ANC found it impossible to throw itself into the negotiating process.

During 1991, revelations were made about payments from government sources to the Inkatha organisation, to be used for political rallies which would be described as anti-ANC politics. This set of events changed the attitude of the ANC; they now said that

it was absolutely essential to get the negotiating process moving so that they and other political actors outside the National Party could be in a position to monitor and where necessary put a stop to this kind of activity. Whatever may have occurred behind the scenes, it was from this time on that the process gained momentum.

Talks between the ANC and the National Party clearly became quite intensive but other organisations were certainly not ignored. Through a process of bilateral conversations, ideas were tested and shaped and finally we came, on 29th and 30th November, to the astonishingly successful Preparatory Committee meeting.

The National Party and the ANC both deserve great credit. Apart from the two leaders, the name of Gerrit Viljoen, Roelf Meyer, Cyril Ramaphosa and Mahomed Valli Moosa, among others, will be honoured. Newer organisations also played their part. As this is written, CODESA is the hope for everybody's future.