

Great expectations: Pres. PW Botha's Rubicon speech of 1985

Hermann Giliomee
Department of History
University of Stellenbosch

*The law of the Roman republic prohibited its generals from crossing with an army the Rubicon river between the Roman province of Cisalpine Gaul to the north and Italy proper to the south. The law thus protected the republic from internal military threat. When Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon with his army in 49 BC to make his way to Rome, he broke that law and made armed conflict inevitable. He reputedly uttered the phrase: *alea iacta est* ("the die is cast")*

Wikipedia

Here is an infallible rule: a prince who is not himself wise cannot be well advised, unless he happens to put himself in the hands of one individual who looks after all his affairs and is an extremely shrewd man.

Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 127

Samevatting

Die toespraak wat Pres. PW Botha op 15 Augustus 1985 voor die kongres van die Nasionale Party (NP) van Natal gehou het, word algemeen erken as een van die keerpunte in die geskiedenis van die NP-regering. Daar is verwag dat die president in sy toespraak verreikende hervormings sou aankondig, wat die regering in staat sou stel om die skaakmat in onderhandelings met swart leiers en internasionale isolasie te deurbreek. Botha se toespraak is egter wyd baie negatief ontvang. Vorige artikels beklemtoon sy persoonlikheid as 'n verklaring of blameer die "onrealistiese verwagtings" wat RF (Pik) Botha, Minister van Buitelandse Sake, gewek het. Hierdie artikel probeer die gebeure rondom die toespraak verklaar deur die gebeure twee weke voor die toespraak te ontlee, bestaande interpretasies van pres. Botha se optrede te heroorweeg, en moontlikhede te ondersoek wat tot dusver nog nie oorweeg is nie.

Introduction

President PW Botha's speech on 15 August 1985 to the National Party (NP) of Natal was the turning point at which white rule in South Africa failed to turn. Botha was expected to use the speech, broadcast to a huge international audience, to turn around the South African crisis that had worsened after the outbreak of uprisings in the townships in September 1984. Spurning the expectations of bold reforms, Botha projected himself as the uncompromising leader of a white minority determined to fight to the end for its survival. The speech triggered a massive outflow of capital and intensified sanctions against South Africa. A line in Botha's speech, "Today we have crossed the Rubicon", promptly became the object of scorn and ridicule.

Today it is still a major question why Botha refused to give a speech that the world would have considered as a true crossing of the Rubicon. A journalist recently speculated that Botha's courage deserted him at the last moment,¹ while two historians attribute Botha's Rubicon speech to the "evolutionary regression" of his character.² FW de Klerk,³ Botha's successor, and Andreas van Wyk, Director General of Constitutional Development and Planning at the time of the Rubicon speech,⁴ both believe that he was irked by the high expectations raised by RF (Pik) Botha, Minister of Foreign Affairs, in a visit to Europe a week before the speech. Robin Renwick, British ambassador to South Africa, maintains that the security chiefs had persuaded the president to enforce the status quo with strict security measures.⁵ Anton Rupert speculated that a critical intervention was a threat by De Klerk, Transvaal NP leader at the time, to withdraw his party from the NP's parliamentary caucus.⁶

This article reviews the existing explanations for Botha's stand and adds another two. One is that Pik Botha, in briefing American, British and German diplomats on the pending speech, presented a package of reforms that the cabinet had recommended to the president as a *fait accompli* in order to force his hand. Another interpretation is that Pres. Botha had accepted the package, but decided to spread the announcement of it over the four NP provincial

1 C Naudé, "Walg-video beklemtoon behoefte aan leierskap", *Die Burger*, 4 March 2008.

2 LA Barnard en JA Stemmet, "PW Botha's Rubicon Speech of 15 August 1985", *Journal for Contemporary History*, 27(1), 2002, pp. 119-35.

3 FW de Klerk, *Die laaste trek – en 'n nuwe begin* (Cape Town, Human and Rousseau, 1998), p. 121; CA Crocker, *High Noon in Southern Africa* (New York, Norton, 1992), p. 275.

4 A van Wyk, "Chris Heunis: Onderskatte voorloper van hervorming", *Die Burger*, 4 February 2006.

5 R Renwick, *Unconventional Diplomacy in Southern Africa* (London, Macmillan, 1997), p. 110.

6 E Domisse, *Anton Rupert: 'n Lewensverhaal* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2005), p. 369.

congresses. The alternative interpretation is that Botha was shocked by the groundswell of sanctions his speech had triggered and then announced the entire package in an attempt to salvage the situation.

A feared leader

PW Botha, who became Prime Minister in 1978, was strongly influenced by the Westminster-style of politics that characterized the political system from 1910 to the end of the 1980s. Politics was a matter of the winner-takes-all, demolishing the opposition rather than building alliances and consensus. A pragmatist rather than a reformer, he saw his challenge as strengthening the Afrikaner-dominated state through a slow but steady process of deracialisation. He was determined to make Afrikaner control more broadly based rather than introduce a liberal democracy.

Botha's political ideology consisted of three main elements. The first was that racial and ethnic groups formed the building blocs of the political and social system, and that there could be no interracial democratic competition.⁷ Another core belief was that Afrikaner leadership alone could bring about orderly change. He knew full well that the Afrikaners would lose most by ceding control over the state. Hence the government had to retain their trust in every move it made. He told two biographers: "We must not yield our leadership. You can only lead when you make it possible for people to trust you."⁸

Having started his career as a party organizer, he kept a close watch on the swings in the white electorate and among Afrikaner voters in particular. He was acutely aware that reform was eroding his Afrikaner base. The proportion of Afrikaners supporting the NP dropped from 85 per cent in the 1977 election to the low 60s in the early 1980s. In the early 1990s it would drop to approximately 50 per cent.

Thirdly, Botha believed that the Soviet Union, using surrogates in the Third World in its rivalry with the United States, caused most conflicts in the world. He even suspected it of pursuing a master plan for bringing South Africa, with all its mineral riches, under Soviet control. In his view it was not

⁷ K van Wyk and D Geldenhuys, *Die Groepsgebod in PW Botha se politieke oortuigings* (Johannesburg, Randse Afrikaanse Universiteit, 1987), p. 47.

⁸ D de Villiers and J de Villiers, *PW* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 1984), p. 367.

apartheid that in the first place was causing the conflict in South Africa, but Communists who had infiltrated black political organisations and the African National Congress (ANC) in particular.⁹ In 1977, when he was Minister of Defence, his department published a White Paper spelling out the belief that South Africa faced a “total onslaught” in virtually every area of society. He turned the State Security Council (SCC) into the main body where security issues were discussed.

A stroke kept secret

Within his first three years in office Pres. Botha imposed his authority over the party and the government. Ambassador Renwick noted that Botha was “prone to furious rages” and that “his ministers were terrified of him.” Through eruptions of his fierce temper, he intimidated any challenger.¹⁰ In 1982 or 1983 Botha apparently suffered a stroke, after which his outbursts of temper became worse. This stroke was probably a precursor of the one he suffered in 1989. In the earlier stroke he was rushed to hospital in secret following the rupture of a cerebral blood vessel. Neurologists who studied the scan after this episode remark that such a lesion is often accompanied by a lessening of the inhibition of traits such as outbursts of temper. Another symptom that may occur is a suppression of some sensory stimuli, as, for instance, in the left visual field. This was reported in Botha, who failed to notice stimuli in the peripheral visual field on his left side.¹¹

Yet Botha continued to do his work effectively.¹² He came well prepared to any meeting, but did not exert power like a Hendrik Verwoerd through intellectual domination or like a John Vorster, who always sought consensus at the expense of bold moves. His power was more direct and personal; he was a straight talker, tough, brutal, overpowering and, at times, thuggish, vindictive and petty. He was far from convinced of the need for fundamental political reform that would bring the black community into a common system. He opposed not only some of the proposals for reforms, but also being sucked by

9 C Alden, *Apartheid's last stand: The rise and fall of the South African security state* (London, Macmillan, 1996), pp. 41-50.

10 R Renwick, *Unconventional diplomacy*, p. 114.

11 Interviews, two neurologists who studied the scan by H Giliomee, 20 March 2008. Except where otherwise indicated, all interviews cited were conducted by the author and all e-mail communications were addressed to him. Copies are lodged in the library of University of Stellenbosch.

12 Interview, J Roux (Roux had specialised in clinical psychology), 30 November 2007.

stealth into reforms he rejected. According to Magnus Malan, he would crush any person who was not open with him but tried to bypass him.¹³

Jannie Roux, Director-General in his office and cabinet secretary, sums up Botha's hold on power succinctly: "He was not afraid of taking decisions and he disliked long discussions in cabinet. He looked people straight in the eyes and told them just what he thought. He had no secret agenda and never pulled any punches."¹⁴ After a visit to the country in 1983, Perez du Cuellar, UN Secretary General, remarked: "Two world leaders have made a big impression on me: China's Deng Xiao-Ping and South Africa's PW Botha. They understand power."¹⁵

Confronting the black challenge

Botha was fully aware of the fact that the NP's support was ominously on the wane, with the government unable to suppress the revolt in the black townships that broke out in September 1984. Between September 1984 and mid-1985 the image of government had deteriorated rather than improved in a ratio of roughly 40 to 25 per cent.¹⁶ The electorate showed strong opposition to the political incorporation of blacks. A 1987 poll revealed that only a quarter of Afrikaners and a third of English speakers agreed with a fourth chamber for blacks. A mere three per cent of Afrikaners and eleven per cent of English speakers wanted a single mixed Parliament with the majority in control.¹⁷

By the mid-1980s the military leadership had little doubt that South Africa faced a revolutionary challenge. In August 1985 the SCC discussed a document stating that the UDF and its affiliates were directly and indirectly promoting the goals of the ANC and the South African Communist Party. They were trying to create "free zones" and "no-go areas" and make the country ungovernable. At a meeting of the SSC, held on 18 July 1985, twelve principles were listed for countering "the revolutionary onslaught." They included the need for government to retain the political initiative, to improve the life of the population and to re-impose its authority. Principle number 8

13 Interview, M Malan, (Minister of Defence), 9 February 2008.

14 Interview, J Roux, 30 January 2008.

15 A Ries and E Dommissie, *Leierstryd* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 1990), p. 45.

16 L Schlemmer, "Message received: Now let us face these realities", *Sunday Times*, 18 August 1985.

17 "Market and Media Research poll of 1988", H Giliomee and L Schlemmer, *From Apartheid to nation-building* (Cape Town, Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 156.

reads: “A government’s goal should not only be to exterminate insurrectionists but also to eradicate their influence over the people.”¹⁸

A bold reformer in many ways, Botha was at his wits’ end in confronting the issue of black rights. On more than one occasion he challenged his cabinet: “Is there anyone among you who believe we can overcome this crisis without having to fight?”¹⁹ No one dared to reply. But if Botha was willing to fight, he did not know how to fight, except through repression. Only two alternatives existed to his government drifting ever further into a state of indecision and vacillation. The one was to re-unite Afrikanerdom and prepare for a prolonged state of siege; the other was to try to split the ANC. The one was as difficult as the other. The Conservative Party was itself split between a faction prepared to enter a struggle to the bitter end and those wishing to negotiate a deal with blacks that left whites a substantial degree of “self-determination”. All that united the CP was its undying hatred of Botha, who precipitated the NP split in 1982 by humiliating Andries Treurnicht, who served in his cabinet.²⁰

Fighting the ANC had become considerably more difficult after the organisation had in the late 1970s adopted the North Vietnamese model of avoiding direct military conflict in favour of mass popular campaigns and struggles. The leadership of the ANC in exile was still determined to pursue a strategy of weakening the state until it was forced to negotiate for the transfer of power. Enjoying large-scale support from the Soviet Union, it had little interest in negotiations before that point had arrived. “The government could have negotiated with the ANC in the mid-1980s if it really wanted to do so”, Magnus Malan recounts, “but the ANC could not. Why would it take the chance?”²¹

In retrospect it is clear that if the ANC had rejected a government offer to enter into open-ended negotiations in 1985 or 1986, it would have found it much more difficult to attain the moral high ground in the Western world that it did a few years later. But this is conjecture. The only conceivable circumstances in which the ANC would split was a government offer to negotiate without the condition that it forswears violence. Botha could never bring himself to make such an offer.

18 Institute of Contemporary History (ICH), University of Free State, Gerrit Viljoen papers, Extraordinary meeting of the State Security Council, 18 July 1985; Circular to Members, August 1985.

19 Interview, RF Botha (Former Minister of Foreign Affairs)/H Giliomee, 30 November 2007.

20 Interview, JH (Kooos) van der Merwe (MP for the Conservative Party), 3 April 2008.

21 Interview, M Malan, 9 February 2008; RF Botha, 30 November 2007.

The security forces did not favour negotiations with the ANC. Johan van der Merwe, who was head of the security police in the mid-1980s, recounts: "Electorally the NP would have committed suicide to start negotiations with the ANC."²² The memory of the ANC bomb in Church Street, Pretoria killing 18 people was still fresh. At its Kabwe conference, held in June 1985, the ANC decided to attack soft targets as well as hard targets and to make the country ungovernable. The Cold War was still a reality. Ronald Reagan and Mikhael Gorbachev had not yet met at Reykjavik for mould-breaking talks and the Berlin Wall had not yet fallen. The presence of a large number of Cuban troops in Angola, the dominance of Communists in the ANC decision-making structures, the increasing use of ANC symbols in the mass protests of the mid-1980s all created a situation where the government would have found it very difficult to justify to its constituency negotiations with the ANC. It was only towards the end of the decade, when the popular uprising had largely been crushed, that NP leaders came to consider it as an option.

The Machiavellians of Pretoria

Pres. Botha was much more of a modernizing technocrat than John Vorster, his predecessor. He appointed Chris Heunis as Minister of Constitutional Development and Planning and allowed him to appoint experts from the universities to facilitate reform. In the first phase Heunis made extensive use of Prof. Ben Vosloo, Professor of Political Science and Public Administration at the University of Stellenbosch, to help conceptualise a Tricameral Parliament. He also recruited to his staff Ig Rautenbach and Rassie Malherbe, law professors from the Rand Afrikaans University, and Willie Breytenbach, a political scientist in Botha's office.

In the second phase, starting at the end of 1984, Heunis appointed a prominent legal scholar, Andreas van Wyk, as Director-General of his department. Joh van Tonder, a contemporary of De Klerk as a student in Potchefstroom and later professor of Political Science, became chief director of constitutional planning, and Fanie Cloete, an ex-student of Vosloo and Van Wyk and an academic authority on public administration, a director of constitutional planning.

²² E-mail: J van der Merwe (MP for the Conservative Party)/H Giliomee, 24 March 2008.

In the place of the bureaucrats there were now scholars who had studied the advisers of rulers and governments since the late Renaissance in Europe on how to reform in the face of stiff resistance. Given Botha's reluctance to accommodate blacks in a single political system, the reformists in the Department of Constitutional Development and Planning followed what Cloete called a strategy based on the ideas of Niccolo Machiavelli (1469 – 1527). He had grappled with the task of building a state in northern Italy strong enough to impose its authority on a hopelessly divided society. This is a challenge that countless regimes have faced in history. For instance, during the 1960s Brazilian elites, living under the dictatorship of President Getulio Vargas, declared that they wanted the government "to make the revolution before the people do."²³

Reform by stealth

In his study *The Prince* Machiavelli warned that a precarious moment arrived when a ruler embarked on reform with the common good in mind. He risked making enemies of "all those who prospered under the old order", while gaining only lukewarm support "from those who would prosper under the new."²⁴ To succeed, he must first concentrate all power in himself. He may be compelled to use violence and other "reprehensible actions", but "their effects" may justify such steps. It is the ruler who uses violence "to spoil things" that is blameworthy, not the man who uses it to mend them.

Thus for Machiavelli the key question is not whether the prince's actions meet the standards of Christian morality; it is whether he takes appropriate action in cases where he was "compelled [*necessitato*] to act without mercy, without humanity, and without religion."²⁵ He warns against the prince lending his ears to different advisers with different agendas. The ideal was for him to listen to a single, astute adviser.

For the Pretoria reformists the two main contemporary academic authorities were Samuel Huntington, a Harvard political scientist, and Arend Lijphart, a Dutch political scientist based at the University of California, San Diego.

23 S Huntington, *Political order in changing societies* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1968), p. 359.

24 N Machiavelli, *The prince* (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1961), p. 51.

25 N Machiavelli, *The discourses*, (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1970), p.132; JM Coetzee, *Diary of a bad year* (London, Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 18 citing *The Discourses*, sections 20, 23.

Although some label him an “ultra-Machiavellian”,²⁶ Huntington uses as his main example the Fabian Society in London during the 1880s and 1890s. The Fabians desired to build representative democracy and reformist socialism through gradual, piecemeal, evolutionary change.²⁷

For Huntington there are two possible reform strategies. One is for the reformer to make known all his goals at an early time and then try to achieve most of them (he calls this the *blitzkrieg* approach). The alternative is that of the Fabian strategy, which he describes as “the foot in the door approach of concealing aims, separating the reforms from each other, and pushing for only one change at a time.”²⁸

As a guest of the Department of Foreign Affairs, Huntington visited South Africa in 1981 and addressed a conference where Heunis also spoke. Here he warned that at some point in the following decade or two a combination of challenges would make it very difficult for the white minority to hold on to power. “Revolutionary violence does not have to be successful to be effective. It simply has to cause sufficient trouble to cause divisions among the dominant group over the ways to deal with it.”²⁹

Huntington in South Africa

To avert a situation where a government loses the initiative, Huntington proposes combining the *blitzkrieg* and the Fabian approaches. Power must be concentrated in the hands of the government, which at all times had to retain the initiative. The reform package has to be broken up into distinct elements, which then have to be introduced separately. New allies must be sought for each stage of the reform process, culminating in a grand reform coalition of the NP leadership, moderate blacks, business leaders and key managers in the civil service and semi-state corporations. Most of the work of winning support for reforms had to take place in secret.

Applying this technique to South Africa was not without major problems. Both Pres. Botha and Heunis were Cape-based politicians who had a fairly good knowledge and even an emotional tie with the coloured community.

26 D O'Meara, *Forty lost years: The Apartheid state and the politics of the National Party, 1948 – 1994* (Athens, Ohio University Press, 1996), p. 263.

27 V Bogdanor (ed.) *The Blackwell encyclopaedia of Social Science* (London, Blackwell, 1991), p. 267.

28 S Huntington, *Political Order ...*, pp. 346-347.

29 S Huntington, “Reform and Stability in a Modernizing, Multi-Ethnic Society”, *Politikon*, 8, 1981, p. 11.

However, neither knew blacks well nor had any idea of the increasing hold the African National Congress and its internal ally, the United Democratic Front, had acquired over the better educated blacks, coloured people and Indians.

Pres. Botha also had to face the fact that he was accountable to his party, which insisted that the removal of blacks from the political system was the surest way to secure white political survival. He lacked the free hand of a Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran, or the military-based dictators of Latin America. Heunis and his advisers and Pik Botha and his senior staff were all ready to apply the approaches of Machiavelli and Huntington, but Pres. Botha listened not only to them but also to the “securocrats”, particularly Magnus Malan, the Minister of Defence, Pieter van der Westhuizen, chief of the SCC’s secretariat, and to Niel Barnard, head of the National Intelligence Service. Also influential was Jack Viviers, a journalist who had been seconded from the *Nasionale Pers* group to Botha’s office as his chief communications adviser.

In the absence of commonly agreed principles or priorities, Heunis and his advisers fell back on delicately steering and prodding the debate to a point where the president could buy into their proposals. The situation calls to mind Huntington’s observation: “The problem for the reformer is not to overwhelm a single opponent [in this case Botha] with an exhaustive set of demands but to minimize his opposition by an apparently very limited set of demands.”³⁰ Alternatively, the proponents of substantial reform had to secure agreement for some abstract principles, hoping the President and the conservative faction of the cabinet would not discover their concrete implications until it was too late.

Heunis considered himself as a political leader who, as he called it, “shifted boundaries”, by using ambiguous wording for ambivalent proposals. “‘Got that one past them’, [Heunis] once chortled after a speech by Pres. Botha had announced a fairly significant shift in policy in such a way as to have escaped the attention of the Conservative Party.”³¹

The ex-academics in his department backed Heunis to the hilt. Fanie Cloete, one of the ex-academics in the Department of Constitutional Development and Planning, formulated the strategy as follows: “We had to get the politicians to make piecemeal concessions on principles in order to achieve greater openness or flexibility and afterwards to provide concrete details and

³⁰ S Huntington, *Political order...*, p. 347.

³¹ B Pottinger, *The imperial presidency: PW Botha – The first ten years* (Johannesburg, Southern, 1988), p. 82.

to make sure that the new principles were irreversible. This process, however, slowed down as the decision on the key principle, namely power-sharing with blacks, approached.”³²

Their best case for far-reaching reform was to develop the argument, backed by hard data, that the white power base was inexorably weakening. The white proportion of the population was steadily shrinking, the economy was stagnating and international pressure was growing. Joh van Tonder recounts: “We showered them with data. We got experts from other departments and from the business sector. We even coached them what to say.” The name of the game was incrementalism – to engineer a common political system step by step, preferably by forcing the conservatives to accept the implications of abstract principles they had accepted or the rhetoric they had used without grasping the practical implications. P.W. Botha once complained: “I only later realised what some of the things you have made me say actually mean.”³³

Pres Botha's support was based on three pillars: the NP constituency across South Africa, the NP of the Cape Province, of which he was long the leader, and the military. The messages he received from these sources of support were not always consistent. By mid-1985 he had not yet made up his mind between intensified repression and reform. It was indeed an open question whether major political reform was advisable in the unstable environment of the mid-1980s. Many townships were out of control and the trade unions were beginning to challenge the political order.

In similar vein Botha told Parliament: “There is clear evidence that the vast majority of the [black urban] areas support the government's action to maintain order and are themselves beginning to oppose the elements of crime and violence that are thwarting efforts to improve the quality of life and participation in political processes.”³⁴ Genl. Malan and senior military officers believed that improving the living conditions in the townships and the black schools would go a long way towards persuading blacks not to press for a government dominated by the majority. Had Botha read Machiavelli, he could have quoted back at the reformists a passage in *The Discourses*: “[The prince] will find that a small section of the populace desire to be free in order

32 Interview, F Cloete (Official, Dept. of Constitutional Development), 20 December 2007.

33 Interview, J van Tonder (Official, Constitutional Development), 11 January 2008.

34 Republic of South Africa, *Parliamentary debates*, 25 January 1985, Col. 6, (Government Printer, Pretoria, 1985).

to obtain authority over others, but that the vast bulk of those who demand freedom, desire but to live in security.”³⁵

If Machiavelli and Huntington suggested a method for bringing about reform by stealth and cunning, Arend Lijphart proposed a constitutional formula. Since the early 1970s scholars working on South African politics had been advocating “moving away from the Westminster model”, by which was meant a simple form of majority rule where the winner takes all. As an alternative, Lijphart proposed consociationalism, a term that he later replaced with power-sharing. He used it in his book *Power-sharing in South Africa*, published in 1985 just when the debate within government about bringing whites and blacks into a common system had started. The key idea was limiting the largest party’s power. Mechanisms included a grand coalition in which parties are represented in proportion to their vote, concurrent majorities and federalism. His essential power-sharing requirement is the existence of groups or parties formed on the principle of free association. In fairness to Lijphart, it must be said that all the existing and subsequent constitutional plans of the South African government in the 1980s violated this principle.

In 1978 the PFP accepted a new set of constitutional proposals. It favoured a genuine consociational approach, providing for free association of people and communities, and a power-sharing cabinet with its head appointing members proportional to the strength of the relevant parties.³⁶ The PFP leader, Van Zyl Slabbert, in a book co-authored by David Welsh, emphasized power-sharing “among groups” as an alternative to “simple majoritarianism”, which, it argued, has failed to produce a democratic outcome in any deeply divided society.³⁷ All parties with a minimum of 10 or 15 per cent of the vote would be entitled to representation in cabinet and there would also be a minority veto.

“Power-sharing” in a Tricameral Parliament

Between 1977 and 1982 the government took a crucial step away from apartheid by conceding that there could only be only one sovereign parliament in which people other than whites could also be represented. The original idea

35 N Machiavelli, *The discourses*, p. 156.

36 A Lijphart, *Power-sharing in South Africa* (Berkeley, Institute of International Studies, 1985), p. 67.

37 F van Zyl Slabbert and D Welsh, *South Africa’s options* (Cape Town, David Philip, 1979), pp. 67, 133.

of three separate Parliaments was replaced by that of a single Parliament for whites, coloured people and Indians. The Tricameral Parliament, introduced in 1984, gave representatives of whites, coloured people and Indians, each in their own chamber, jurisdiction to administer their "own affairs". "General affairs" would be discussed in joint committees of the three houses and joint sessions of Parliament. Consensus was the goal, but the deadlock-breaking proposals all favoured the white ruling party. There was to be common debate about "general affairs" and bills could be delayed, but there was no way in which the majority white party could be outvoted in the joint sessions.

The government and its supporters in the Afrikaans press called this the "politics of consultation and joint decision-making", but it is more appropriate to call it "sharing power without losing control". Like Pres. Botha, Heunis saw firm control of the state by a fairly unified Afrikanerdom as the stable centre of South Africa. An Afrikaner leadership was seen as the only one that can both enjoy the trust of the "core ethnic group" and successfully direct all the technocratic skills and abilities that serve the material welfare of everyone in the country.³⁸

There was a marked ambivalence in the way the government attempted to sell the new Parliament. To the more *verligte* voters it stated that including the coloureds and Indians in a common system was simply "a step in the right direction", leading to the incorporation of blacks as well. In campaigning for a Yes vote in the 1983 referendum on the constitution, Botha called it "a new basis for national unity upon which reform along evolutionary lines in a stable environment could take place."³⁹

"Dividing" and "Sharing power"

But to its more conservative supporters the NP leadership projected the Tricameral Parliament as an effective way of shoring up white power. It maintained that blacks would be accommodated separately through the homelands system and the soon to be introduced new system of black local authorities. The NP's chief information officer wrote to Andries Treurnicht, leader of the right-wing faction of the party that rejected the plan: "I would like to know your view on the idea that we at any price have got to associate

38 H Giliomee, "The Botha quest: Sharing power without losing control", *Leadership SA*, 2 (2), 1983, pp. 27-35.

39 D de Villiers and J de Villiers, *PW*, pp. 210-211.

the coloureds, as a bloc of 2.5 million, with the whites in order to broaden our own power base, and not surrender them to the 'black-power' situation."⁴⁰

To give the plan a measure of respectability the NP had to compromise on its core principle of "white self-determination". As NP leader Botha warned from the start that a white power monopoly was outdated, but he advocated the division, not the sharing, of power. In a well-publicized speech in Upington in July 1979 he said: "I reject mixed political parties and power-sharing because it is Prog policy."⁴¹ When Alex Boraine, a member of the Progressive Federal Party (or Progs for short), asked him two years later if he believed in power-sharing, he told him not to talk nonsense.⁴²

Now, with the NP having accepted a single Parliament for whites, coloured people and Indians, Botha could no longer duck the question whether the Tricameral Parliament entailed power-sharing. When Parliament opened in January 1982, tensions between the followers of Botha and the right wing under Treurnicht had reached fever pitch.

A system with a heavy price

On 22 February Botha summoned a special cabinet meeting. After an extensive debate he stated that the government accepted power-sharing, but that this should not conjure up "too many ghosts". The government used the term quite differently from the Progressive Federal Party, the official opposition. While the Progs did so in the context of a unitary state and a liberal democracy, the NP refused to emasculate "white self-determination".⁴³ But the genie was out of the bottle. This was the first time an NP leader had used the term power-sharing.⁴⁴

Treurnicht had remained quiet in the special cabinet meeting, but in the NP caucus meeting of 24 February he threw down the gauntlet by denouncing Botha's acceptance of power-sharing as "collaboration with Prog policy". Suddenly open revolt loomed large. Fanie Botha, a senior cabinet minister, moved a motion of confidence in Botha as chief leader and his right to formulate policy. When Treurnicht and 21 other members walked out, one

40 A Ries and E Dommissie, *Broedertwis* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 1982), p. 112.

41 *Die Burger*, 29 July 1979.

42 *Die Burger*, 27 August 1981.

43 *Die Burger*, 23 February 1982.

44 A Ries and E Dommissie, *Broedertwis*, p. 115.

of them, JH (Koos) van der Merwe, told journalists waiting outside: "I have done with the Prog PW Botha".⁴⁵ The Conservative Party, which would soon be formed under Treurnicht's leadership, would attract close to half of the Afrikaner support over the next ten years.

To rub salt in the NP's wounds, John Vorster, the previous prime minister, said in a statement that he could not fault Treurnicht's rejection of power-sharing and his actions. Significantly, it was the speculation that he would announce power-sharing with blacks in his "Rubicon speech", held four and a half years later, that would ignite Botha's notoriously short fuse, prompting him to abort the original plan for the speech. He would not repeat the mortal sin in the eyes of nationalists of splitting the party and the *volk*.

What Botha and Heunis failed to realise was that the government was paying a heavy price for bringing the coloureds and Indians into the system: it had virtually no credibility among blacks when it tried to incorporate them. Heunis, the same man who would in 1985 try to open negotiations with blacks, gave a categorical assurance in 1982 that blacks would not be part of a new dispensation. "If blacks were to become part [and with accepting a new system], the protection of minorities would disappear... This is an issue that is non-negotiable."⁴⁶

The Tricameral Parliament sent a powerful negative message to blacks: they remained foreigners in their own country. They had to be satisfied with voting for governments in their respective homelands and accept a new system of black local authorities. To add to the combustible elements, the black local authorities, elected in 1984 on polls with a low voter turnout, were almost designed to precipitate an explosion. They would enjoy almost all the powers of their white counterparts, but were left without a viable revenue base. Few township residents owned property, with the result that the revenue that could be raised by rates was extremely limited. Many residents had indeed stopped paying house rents and the charges for water and electricity. Undeterred, the new councils sharply increased the price of rent and electricity.

In September 1984 riots broke out in the black townships of the Vaal Triangle, south-east of Johannesburg. The United Democratic Front (UDF), which was closely linked to the ANC, spearheaded the protests. They quickly spread to other parts of the country and would continue unabated for the next nine

⁴⁵ E-mail: JH van der Merwe (MP for the Conservative Party)/H Giliomee (Researcher), 6 April 2008.

⁴⁶ *Die Burger*, 21 August 1982.

months. On 20 July 1985 the government declared a state of emergency in 38 of the 254 magisterial districts. Two days later the ANC leader, Oliver Tambo, issued a call for the masses to make South Africa ungovernable. Abroad the proclamation of a state of emergency was seen as “the last attempt by a politically doomed and morally bankrupt regime to stave off the retribution that waited.”⁴⁷

The noose of international censure and sanctions tightened. Credit ratings dropped sharply. Several European countries recalled their ambassadors from South Africa. Increasingly, investors and foreign governments felt that only radical reforms would stave off the crisis.

The Special Cabinet Committee (SCC)

In 1983 the government established a Special Cabinet Committee (SCC) to investigate closer co-operation between the RSA government and governments of the independent and non-independent homelands. For the handful of cabinet ministers serving on it the SCC would become the key forum for debating black political rights. FW de Klerk considered his membership of the SCC to be as important as his membership of the cabinet or his leadership of Transvaal.⁴⁸

All the cabinet divisions were reflected here. On the one side there were the reformists (Chris Heunis, Pik Botha, and Barend du Plessis, Minister of Finance) and on the other side the conservatives who were sceptical about proposals for power-sharing (De Klerk, Louis le Grange, Minister of Police, and Gerrit Viljoen, Minister of Education and Training). What was even more important was the fact that every contender for the presidency once P.W Botha left office was a member of the committee. To a large extent the future leadership race was to be decided here.

Three contenders for the presidency

Chris Heunis, the chairman, spoke with words pouring out in a torrent, often leaving his listeners suspended in bewilderment in trying to catch the

⁴⁷ *South African International Quarterly*, 16 (2), 1985, p. 111.

⁴⁸ FW de Klerk, *Die laaste trek...*, p. 118.

argument. De Klerk described him as someone “whose brain worked faster than his tongue”.⁴⁹ The academics that worked for him found him accessible and often more than a match for them in debate. Andreas van Wyk describes him as the most *verligte* as well as one of the most intelligent members of the cabinet. “Intellectually and emotionally he was far more convinced of the need for change than the theatrical Pik Botha, the vacillating Kobie Coetsee and the still reserved FW de Klerk.”⁵⁰ But Heunis as a reformer was hamstrung by his strong emotional dependence on his political mentor and leader, PW Botha, who dominated the relationship. Botha was reluctant to walk the road of political rights for blacks, but until the Rubicon speech Heunis believed that he could take Botha along.⁵¹

Pik Botha was undoubtedly the most consistent reformist voice in government since the mid-1970s. He was a career diplomat from 1953 to 1970, when he became Minister of Foreign Affairs. He knew better than any of his colleagues how dangerously in conflict with world opinion South Africa was. The government's star performer on television, he was confident of winning the electorate over to far-reaching reforms. One poll after the other showed him to be the whites' popular choice to succeed PW Botha. While Pik Botha indeed identified genuinely with Afrikaner history, his choice to remain an NP member was purely strategic. In many ways he remained the diplomat, not the foreign minister. “I am not the South African government”, he told a startled American diplomat in 1981.⁵² Chris Heunis was fond of referring to him as the *foreign* minister.⁵³

The third key member of the SCC was De Klerk. With his seat in Vereeniging far from safe, he knew that any brash move could mean defeat and the possible end of his career. As someone with his eyes firmly on the NP leadership, he positioned himself carefully in the middle of the conservative and *verligte* wings of the party. Unlike Heunis, who pushed for the extension of general affairs in the Tricameral Parliament, he pleaded for extending the principle of “own affairs” as far as possible.⁵⁴ He rejected a fourth chamber for blacks, pointing out that the NP only accepted the Tricameral Parliament because the numbers favoured the whites.

49 FW de Klerk, *Die laaste trek...*, p. 138.

50 AH van Wyk, “Chris Heunis”, “Chris Heunis: Onderskatte voorloper”, *Die Burger*, 4 Februarie 2006.

51 Interview, AH van Wyk (Director-General, Constitutional Development), 6 May 2008.

52 CA Crocker, *High Noon*, p. 115.

53 Interview, RF Botha, 30 November 2007.

54 Interview, J van Tonder, 11 January 2008.

According to Fanie Cloete and Joh van Tonder, who both sat in on SCC meetings, De Klerk wanted a “constellation of states”, where representatives of the independent and non-independent homelands should meet with the NP government to take decisions without any votes being taken. Cloete states: “FW de Klerk was one of the most consistent, rational, goal-oriented politicians I have ever met. But the framework was a very conservative value system. His core values were order, discipline, own affairs and communal self-interest.” The ethnic group enjoying “self-determination” trumped all other principles.⁵⁵ Van Tonder agrees: “By 1985 and 1986 De Klerk was still sticking firmly to the fundamental NP policy position of separate nations with separate statehoods.”⁵⁶

But there was also another reason why De Klerk disagreed with Heunis. He intensely disliked reform by stealth and the obfuscation it entailed. He would later remark that he and Gerrit Viljoen were often the only SCC members who grasped what Heunis was driving at. De Klerk insisted that the reform proposals should be presented in unambiguous terms and that their logical consequences be thought through and clearly spelled out. Later Stoffel van der Merwe, a *verligte* cabinet member, remarked that once De Klerk had made clear the implications, “everyone shied away from their proposals.” He was then considered a “spoiler”.⁵⁷ Yet De Klerk’s strategy also was the classic one used by conservatives or what Huntington calls “stand-patters.” By forcing the reformists to spell out their intentions, they could stop reform in its tracks.

When President Botha opened Parliament on 25 January 1985, the ex-academics in the Department of Constitutional Development and Planning wrote the passages dealing with political reform. The speech carefully balanced the re-affirmation of existing government policy with proposals for reform. Structures had to be created for black communities outside the homelands through which they could themselves decide on their own affairs up to the highest level. The same bodies could co-operate with the RSA government and homeland structures on matters of common interest. A “national council” of representatives of the government and non-independent homelands and of other black communities would be established to advise on matters of common concern.

55 Interview, F Cloete, 20 December 2008.

56 Interview, J van Tonder, 11 January 2008.

57 FW de Klerk, *Die laaste trek...*, p. 119.

Although lip service was still paid to the idea of independence for the “self-governing” homelands, the new constitutional goal was to balance co-operate by all groups on matters of common concern with “self-determination” for each population group on their “own affairs”. The question of black citizenship would be reviewed. Also significant was the granting of full property rights to blacks in areas where they qualified for leasehold rights.⁵⁸

In the first few months of 1985 Heunis proceeded on two tracks. The one was along confederal lines, which was the only option to which Pres. Botha was committed. He proposed to homeland leaders that they and government leaders work together on common issues. He hoped to widen the net to include those African leaders operating outside government structures.⁵⁹ Black leaders inside the system showed little interest. Mangosuthu Buthelezi, the one with the most credibility, had been rebuffed when the government paid scant attention to the Buthelezi Commission, which in 1981 proposed a power-sharing government for an integrated KwaZulu-Natal province. Buthelezi, who had no interest in a confederation, now demanded a statement of intent before any negotiations. Black leaders increasingly insisted that Nelson Mandela and other ANC leaders had to be released before talks could begin.

Realising the futility of the confederal option, Heunis and his officials also tried to develop a more integrated system. In March 1985 he and his senior officials met at Warmbad in Transvaal and formulated a package of proposals. At the end of July Heunis submitted the package to the SCC, which approved it.⁶⁰

A month earlier Heunis had reported to the president that he could not make progress in getting black leaders to participate in the constitutional forum. Botha now offered to hold a meeting of the extended cabinet to discuss ways in which the government's position could be made more attractive. This meeting took place on 2 August in Pretoria in a building called the Old Sterrewag (Old Observatory), which served as a conference facility for Military Intelligence. The intention was that Botha would announce the decisions taken here to the congress of the Natal NP in Durban, which he was to open on 15 August.

58 Republic of South Africa, *Parliamentary debates*, 25 January 1985, Cols. 11-16.

59 C Alden, *Apartheid's last stand*, pp. 199-201.

60 Interview, W Breytenbach (Official, Constitutional Development)/H Giliomee (Researcher), 20 November 2007; Interview, AH van Wyk, 7 May 2008.

According to Daan Prinsloo, Botha's biographer who worked closely with him on the book and ordered his papers after his retirement, the parameters laid down by the President were quite clear: "own affairs" had to stay, "one man one vote" had to be rejected, and the black communities had to be accommodated in a different way from that of coloured people and Indians.⁶¹

That meant a confederal model consisting of the Tricameral Parliament, the homelands and perhaps some black city states as subsidiaries. At the head would be a confederal cabinet to which homeland leaders could be appointed. Botha firmly rejected the idea of elected black representatives for multiracial bodies. The furthest he would go was the appointment in 1986 of blacks, coloureds and Indians on the executive council of bodies in local and provincial government.⁶² Dawie de Villiers, a cabinet minister, stated: "Botha often said the government could enter into negotiations with blacks but his bottom line was clear: there will be no surrender of power."⁶³

What happened at the Sterrewag on 2 August is still shrouded in mystery. Those interviewed for this article agree that it was a low-key meeting with little participation from the floor. It was clearly more a party political meeting than a cabinet meeting. Some even described it as a team-building exercise. Since it was well known that Pres. Botha disliked extended discussions in cabinet, ministers who had to present a controversial reform initiative often cleared it with him before a cabinet meeting. Heunis clearly had followed this route and had received Botha's nod. With the package having been cleared by the SCC, none of the members challenged Heunis's presentation. Pres. Botha said little.

Immediately after the meeting the President wrote identical letters to Chancellor Kohl of Germany and Prime Minister Thatcher of Britain that breakthrough proposals had been made to him at Sterrewag, to which he was giving serious consideration.⁶⁴ Seven months later, when divisions were paralysing his cabinet, he looked back to the discussion at Sterrewag. According to the cabinet minutes, he said that the big problem was the accommodation of the black community and he also stressed that he was not in favour of one man, one vote in a unitary or federal state. He continued: "The [SCC] had made all sorts of inputs into his [Durban] speech, which had created

61 D Prinsloo, *Stem uit die wildernis*, p. 211.

62 Interview with D Prinsloo, 30 January 2008.

63 Interview with J Roux, 6 May, 2008; Interview with Dawie de Villiers, 6 May 2008.

64 D Prinsloo, *Stem uit die wildernis*, p. 309.

confusion.” He almost plaintively asked: “I thought on August 2 [at the Sterrewag] that we had clarity, but I do not think we have it anymore. Because you want me to say we stand for a unitary South Africa, you allow me to say it, you write it in my speeches, and I accept it, but what do we mean by that?”⁶⁵

Three accounts of Sterrewag participants exist. The first is a recorded interview with Chris Heunis by his son some twenty years after the event. According to him, the main decision was to include blacks in the cabinet, in anticipation of the outcome of negotiations over the constitutional accommodation of blacks.⁶⁶ Asked whether that meant the unbanning of the ANC and the release of Mandela, he replied: “Not at that stage, but it would inevitably lead to that. Once you admit that they have to be included in cabinet, you also admit they are part of the South African citizenry and have the right to be part of government”.⁶⁷ The proposals by Heunis also included the possibility of allowing the independent homelands to request their reincorporation into the RSA, but his department did not consider that a priority.⁶⁸

De Klerk gives the narrowest interpretation of the decisions. According to him the meeting took certain decisions to enable Heunis to embark on a new initiative in negotiations with blacks. They were: the six non-independent homelands would “not necessarily” be expected to progress to independence; blacks outside the independent homelands would become South African citizens; and negotiations would take place with them on how they would be accommodated in a new constitution, including getting a say in decision making on all levels of government where their interests were involved. Black representation in the President’s Council would be considered. De Klerk describes the Sterrewag decisions as the end of the whole ideology of grand apartheid and as an initiative that had the potential of persuading the world that real change was underway.⁶⁹

If De Klerk’s interpretation was the most restrictive, that of Pik Botha could be considered as a maximalist interpretation. At meetings a few days later with representatives of Western leaders he stated that at Sterrewag some far-reaching “recommendations” were made to Pres. Botha for his consideration. They

65 Verbatim extract from cabinet minutes, published in *Sunday Times*. 28 August 1994.

66 J Heunis, *Die Binnekring* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2007) p. 78.

67 Interview, C Heunis/Jan (the son of C Heunis), 2005.

68 Interview, AH van Wyk, 9 May 2008.

69 FW De Klerk, *Die laaste trek*, p.120.

included the political involvement of blacks at the highest level, citizenship for all South Africans, the concept of a single territory for the whole of South Africa, and negotiations with “responsible” black leaders on an open agenda. According to Botha, the meeting’s resolutions constituted a single stream of sweeping change.⁷⁰

A report in the *Sunday Times* of 11 August, clearly based on an informed source, reiterated the Foreign Minister’s interpretation. It stated that the following was decided: South Africa would become a single constitutional unit again, the cabinet would be expanded to include black leaders, who initially would be the homeland leaders, negotiations would be take place with the true leaders, and influx control would be abolished.⁷¹ This maximalist approach stressed the reintegration of South Africa into a single unit, which would symbolically signal the end of apartheid, while the minimalist approach of De Klerk still tried to keep some blacks out.

In the speech Pres. Botha would give at the Natal congress two weeks later, he would announce only some of the proposals. However, if his speeches at all four provincial congresses held in August and September are taken into account, he accepted (or would come to accept) virtually the entire package proposed by Heunis. Before discussing the Rubicon speech it is necessary to look briefly at Botha’s speeches at the other three provincial congresses, which took place after the Natal congress. Here Botha proposed substantial reforms of NP policy. They were: the reincorporation of the homelands; negotiations, which included the issues of Nelson Mandela’s release and the unbanning of the ANC; and the expansion of the cabinet to include black leaders.

As regards the first of the three issues, it is clear that Pik Botha, the minister who dealt with the independent homelands, was almost on his own in pushing hard for their re-incorporation. He had become exasperated with the financial profligacy of their governments. The Transkei had threatened to plunder the Transkei government pension fund if the South African government curbed overspending, and Lennox Sebe of the Ciskei had bought a snowplough for the local airport after a visit to Germany. Early in 1985 Botha asked the legal advisers of his department to prepare the necessary legislation to make it possible for the independent homelands to apply for re-incorporation into the RSA. He visited the leaders of the independent homelands and advised them

⁷⁰ D Prinsloo, *Stem uit die wildernis*, p.1362.

⁷¹ *Sunday Times*, 11 August 1985.

that a policy change was in the pipeline in terms of which these homelands would be allowed to apply for their re-incorporation into the constitutional framework of the RSA. Making their citizens once again South African citizens would remove one of the major grievances arising from the apartheid policy.⁷²

By trying to force this issue, Botha incurred the displeasure of Heunis's department, which did not consider it a priority.⁷³ Yet Pres. Botha used the Free State congress to announce that his government was prepared to restore South African citizenship to all those blacks resident in "white South Africa" who had lost it on account of the granting of independence to some homelands. At the Cape NP congress he went further. He stated that his government was committed to an undivided South Africa based on the principles of one state, a common citizenship and universal franchise for all, but within structures that South Africans themselves would choose.⁷⁴

Secondly, there was the issue of negotiations with credible black leaders on the issue of black representation in cabinet. Van Zyl Slabbert, leader of the official opposition, remembers an exchange early in August at a meeting of a special parliamentary committee under the chairmanship of Heunis. Here Slabbert said: "The government talks of negotiations, but are you going to talk with genuinely representative leaders or are you going to choose the leaders with whom you wish to negotiate", to which Heunis replied: "We shall get to that". On his way to the meeting Slabbert ran into Pik Botha, who said: "Big things are coming. You must help us."⁷⁵

Pik Botha was also busy on the issue of the release of Nelson Mandela. Early in 1985 Pres. Botha had made an offer to Mandela to free him should he renounce violence, but Mandela rejected this. Sensing that Mandela held what he called a "veto power" on both his release and future all-party negotiations, Pik Botha tried to get Mandela to foreswear violence "if only by implication". He hit on the idea of getting the leaders of the independent homelands and Buthelezi to give an assurance to the President that Mandela would not resort to violence and would respect the law. Pik Botha later wrote: "Ek onthou dat die id e PW geval het"⁷⁶ (I remember that PW liked the idea"). But this is

72 Interview, RF Botha, 30 November 2007.

73 Interview, AH van Wyk, 6 May 2008.

74 D Prinsloo, *Stem uit die wildernis*, p. 215.

75 Interview, F van Zyl Slabbert, 1 August 2007.

76 *Beeld*, 22 June 2007.

stretching it a bit. The brutal way in which Pres. Botha rejected the demand for Mandela's unconditional release in his Rubicon speech leads one to conclude the Foreign Minister had assumed too much. It is also unlikely that Mandela would have approved of this plan.

At the Transvaal congress Pres. Botha committed himself to talks with the ANC provided it foreswore violence and detached itself from the South African Communist Party. "If the ANC makes such an announcement, they could come back to South Africa tomorrow. We shall not act against them. We shall negotiate with them."⁷⁷

The most important issue for Heunis was that of black representation in cabinet. This was the so-called "power-sharing" part, which both Heunis and Pik Botha realised had to be carefully handled in view of the storm the use of the term had caused in 1982. In an interview with his son, Jan, who was a constitutional adviser to the government in the 1980s, he called the inclusion of blacks in cabinet the key element missing from the Rubicon speech, adding that the President later announced it at the Cape congress.⁷⁸ Here Botha said that all groups and communities within the geographical boundaries of the RSA would get political representation at the highest level of government, but without one group dominating the other. On this occasion Botha also rejected apartheid if it meant the domination of one group over the other, and the exclusion of any group from decision-making and discrimination on the basis of race.

Taking into account the announcements at all the provincial congresses, the *Sunday Times* report of 11 August, which spoke of the establishment of a single constitutional unit and the appointment of black leaders to cabinet as a first step to real negotiations, was not far off the mark.

Hence there was good reason for reformists like Heunis and Pik Botha to be very satisfied with outcome of the Sterrewag meeting. Dave Steward, a senior Foreign Affairs official who would accompany his minister on the trip to Europe a week later, recounts that after the meeting there was great excitement. There was a general feeling that at last the government had managed to extricate itself from the political deadlock in which it was caught. It was his impression that there was common acceptance of the idea that whites and blacks would share a common constitutional destiny, and that white and black leaders

⁷⁷ For a discussion of Botha's speeches at the party congresses see D Prinsloo, *Stem uit die wildernis*, pp. 211-215.

⁷⁸ Interview, CH Heunis/J Heunis, 2005.

would jointly make decisions on matters of common concern, while leaving it to the different communities to decide on their own affairs. There was also consensus that white and black leaders would soon meet to negotiate a system that would give constitutional expression to this idea.⁷⁹

Carl von Hirschberg, Deputy Director-General of the Department of Foreign Affairs, recounts: "When I met Pik in his office after the Sterrewag meeting, he was bursting with enthusiasm. He could hardly contain himself. It was his account of the policy changes agreed to at the meeting that I used in the draft I prepared as an input for PW Botha's Durban speech. It is my clear impression that PW had agreed to these changes, so I was not particularly concerned that he might reject them."⁸⁰

Von Hirschberg was not part of the Foreign Minister's inner circle. His colleagues regarded him as essentially a level-headed person who would not collaborate on something based on a misinterpretation or wishful thinking. He remarked recently: "I called for transcripts of all four speeches of the president at the end of the provincial congresses and analysed them with a fine tooth-comb. Sentences, even phrases lending themselves to more positive interpretation, I highlighted and extensively redrafted. I was surprised at the end of the process how much positive material the speeches had hidden in them. I used this material liberally in drafting replies to the letters that poured into the Presidency from Heads of Government like Thatcher, Kohl, Mitterand, Reagan and others. These were all referred to the Foreign Minister, who submitted replies for the President's signature. It is interesting that the President never once altered a single word in the replies. With each wave of responses and replies, we were able to extend the boundaries of Government policy."⁸¹

Von Hirschberg remarked twenty-three years later: "With the benefit of hindsight, it is a great pity that the proposed changes were so sensationalised before the Durban speech. PW Botha was an enigma if ever there was one. He was indeed a reformer - vide the positive elements hidden in his four speeches that we have already referred to; and his acceptance of the drafts we sent to him in reply to the letters from Heads of Government. They all contained some extension of Government policy."⁸²

79 Interview, D Steward (Senior Foreign Affairs Official)/H Giliomee, 21 April 2008.

80 E-mail: C von Hirschberg (Deputy Director General, Foreign Affairs)/H Giliomee, 20 April 2008.

81 E-mail: C von Hirschberg/H Giliomee, 28 April 2008.

82 E-mail: C von Hirschberg, 30 April 2008.

Pres. Botha had indeed moved far, or was nudged to move far. Opening Parliament in January 1985, he accepted the permanence only of those blacks settled in the “white areas”; at the Cape congress early in September he had come to accept one citizenship in a single South Africa with universal franchise. Peter Sullivan, a senior political reporter, wrote after the latter event of the President’s “great courage”.⁸³ On the face of it the Machiavellians in Pretoria had made enormous progress.

The key question is: why did the President not announce the full package in his Rubicon speech? There are opposite views on this. One view is that Botha cared and understood little about the outside world and was acting purely from a party political perspective in spreading the announcement over the four congresses. Doing so would avoid creating the impression that he was favouring one provincial party over the other. Also, a message spread out over two months would limit the shock to his more conservative supporters.⁸⁴

The other possibility is that Botha did not realise at Sterrewag where the reformers were leading him. Magnus Malan recounts people in his circle saying that it would take at least five years for the NP government to persuade the electorate to accept the Sterrewag recommendations.⁸⁵ Botha ripped the heart out of the respective inputs of Heunis and Pik Botha, not realising the enormous damage the speech would do to, given the expectations that had built up. He would announce the rest of the Heunis package at the other congresses in order to salvage the situation. But the damage had been done and neither he nor his government would get any credit for what were in fact bold moves.⁸⁶

From Sterrewag to Vienna

To inform the leaders of South Africa’s main trading partners of the imminent new policy direction that the president would announce, Pik Botha flew to Europe. On 8 and 9 August he met separately with emissaries of the British, US and German leaders. He made it clear in a subsequent report to Pres.

83 *Sunday Star*, 6 October 1985.

84 Interview, AH van Wyk, 7 May 2008; P Sullivan, “Why PW jibbed at his rubicon”, *Sunday Star*, 6 October 1985.

85 Interview, M Malan, 8 February 2008.

86 This view is held by F van Zyl Slabbert and a senior NP leader.

Botha that, while he had mentioned the Sterrewag recommendations, he also emphasised that the President was still considering them.

At a meeting in Vienna he met with Robert MacFarlane of the US National Security Council, Chester Crocker, US Assistant Secretary of State for Africa, and Herman Nickel, who would soon become US Ambassador to South Africa. He stated that the recommendations included “the political involvement of blacks at the highest level, citizenship for all South Africans and the concept of a single territory for the whole of South Africa.”⁸⁷ The Foreign Minister also explained the government’s position with respect to the release of Nelson Mandela and the factors complicating that. (Three days after the meeting he denied that he had said that Mandela would be released unconditionally.)

Speaking in San Francisco the day after the Rubicon speech, Crocker stated that Botha’s message “contained the stated hope of drawing black leaders into negotiations about the sharing of political power.”⁸⁸ However, in his memoirs, published seven years later, Crocker left an unflattering account of Botha’s briefing in Vienna: “Pik Botha was at his Thespian best, walking out on limbs far beyond the zone of safety to persuade us that his president was on the verge of momentous announcements. We learned of plans for bold reform steps, new formulas on constitutional moves, and further thinking relative to the release of Mandela.”⁸⁹

In Vienna Botha also met Ewan Ferguson, a senior official from the Foreign Office and special representative of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Here he spoke of proposals for “co-responsibility for decisions on the highest level that affect the entire country, one citizenship, and one undivided South African territory.” He added that because of “sensitivities in South Africa” terms like “power-sharing or a unitary state” had to be avoided. There would be no constitutional blueprint in Botha’s speech, only guidelines that had to be worked out further by leaders. After the Vienna meetings Botha travelled to Frankfurt to meet the representatives of Chancellor Kohl.

Dave Steward, a senior Foreign Affairs official who accompanied Botha on the visit, recounts that while Botha spoke of “big plans”, he did not go beyond presenting them as “strong recommendations” He stressed that the

87 *Stem uit die wildernis*, p. 1362.

88 *The Star*, 22 September 1985.

89 CA Crocker, *High noon*, p. 275.

final decision was the President's prerogative.⁹⁰ Werner Scholtz, a South African diplomat who attended the briefings, recounts: "Pik Botha spoke with great enthusiasm and several times said: Gentleman, we are crossing the rubicon". Pik Botha presented the proposals as virtually the final draft of the president's speech. The representatives of the Western powers believed Pik Botha because they thought he spoke with his president's full blessing and had cleared everything. It simply was inconceivable that he would try to sell reform proposals that were still half-baked recommendations as important policy shifts."⁹¹ Neil van Heerden, a senior Foreign Affairs official who briefed regional African leaders in advance, sums it up as follows: "Pik Botha would definitely try to extract the maximum political and diplomatic advantage from the Sterrewag recommendations, but he would certainly not lie or deliberately mislead."⁹² But Pres. Botha's speech was such a communications disaster that the US officials felt that they had been misled.

After the disaster of the Rubicon speech much of the discussion revolved around the question of whether Pik Botha had "over-promised" in these meetings. De Klerk mentions that it is not clear what angered Pres. Botha most: the fervid media speculation after the Sterrewag meeting or "too much enthusiasm" from Pik Botha in selling the decisions abroad.⁹³ Botha had received permission from his President to inform representatives of Western leaders in Vienna and Frankfurt of the important speech they could expect. By then the President already had received the Foreign Affairs input for his speech, which spoke of common decision-making on all levels in a single constitutional unit and a formula for bringing about Mandela's release. The Foreign Minister was clearly hopeful (but not certain) that these points would be included in the President's speech. The emissaries of the Western leaders whom Pik Botha met in Europe in all probability interpreted his briefing as a clear sign that the South African government was poised to announce the end of apartheid and to set the stage for all-party negotiations.⁹⁴

When Pik Botha flew out to Europe, he did not know whether his President had accepted the input from his department into the speech that he was to give at the Natal congress. He was undoubtedly encouraged by the fact that the President had kept quiet at Sterrewag and was prepared to consider the far-

90 Interview, D Steward, 21 April 2008.

91 E-mail: W Scholtz (Diplomat stationed in Vienna), 15 April 2008; 23 July 2008.

92 Interview, N van Heerden (Senior Foreign Affairs Official), 6 May 2008.

93 FW de Klerk, *Die laaste trek*, p. 121.

94 E-mail: D Prinsloo (Writer/Researcher)/H Giliomee (Researcher), 16 March 2008.

reaching recommendations made to him. He had reason to be confident that Western governments would give strong backing to these policy initiatives if he presented the decisions and recommendations as part of a single package.

Pres. Botha, on the other hand, probably thought that he had clearly spelled out the framework in which he would consider any political reform: the appointment of some homeland leaders to the cabinet in a confederal form of government; the continued exclusion of the independent homelands from the constitutional framework of the RSA; and the rejection of elections based on a common electoral roll.⁹⁵ To those whom Pik Botha briefed in Vienna and Frankfurt this would not signify much more than a warmed-up version of apartheid. Clearly the apparent unanimity at the Sterrewag meeting obscured major disagreements.

Why did Pik Botha put such a positive spin on a speech that his President had not yet made? An important reason could be that the Foreign Minister felt that urgent steps were needed to prevent an imminent escalation of sanctions. Given South Africa's poor credibility, his intention was simply to make sure that Western governments understood how bold the moves actually were, thus preventing them from being dismissed as mere "steps in the right direction."

There is also another possibility. Pik Botha knew that the President had not yet made up his mind and that there was still a strong body of conservatives who would have hesitated to speak up at the Sterrewag meeting. They would rather mobilize opposition to the recommendations in private meetings with, or messages to, the President before the Natal congress. According to this perspective, the foreign minister used his meetings on 8 and 9 August in Europe not only to stave off further sanctions, but also to put pressure on the President to accept the recommendations as he interpreted them.

Drafting a fateful speech

After the Sterrewag meeting Pres. Botha requested Chris Heunis, Pik Botha and Barend du Plessis to submit inputs for his speech on behalf of their respective departments. For Constitutional Development and Planning it was particularly important that a picture be conveyed of a government that had

⁹⁵ E-mail: D Prinsloo, 16 March 2008.

abandoned old-style white arrogance and that it was intent on searching for solutions through negotiations in good faith with recognised black leaders.⁹⁶

The Department of Constitutional Development and Planning's input committed the government to restore the citizenship of all blacks, including those living in the independent homelands. It would negotiate with black leaders about black participation at all levels of decision making, including the highest level, where their interests were affected. It pledged government to recognise black human dignity, eradicate all forms of discrimination, find democratic solutions and create equal opportunities.⁹⁷

Heunis was scheduled to give a speech in Stellenbosch on the day after the President's speech, but he cancelled it at the last minute. This draft speech is the best indication of the spirit in which his department wanted the speech to be given. It expresses the desire of government to negotiate with black leaders on the question of black participation in the decision-making processes. Conflicting aspirations and demands had to be reconciled and there should be no non-negotiable positions. There should be a search for common interests and a desire to remedy the legitimate grievances of blacks.

Pik Botha, together with of his two senior officials, Carl von Hirschberg and Marc Burger, worked on the departmental input for the speech. Written with a rhetorical flair rare in official documents, the input tried to assuage white fears, meet black demands and satisfy foreign expectations. It started out with the assumption that it was the South African enemies that had rejected peaceful negotiation because it would lead to "joint responsibility for peace and progress." The challenge to South Africa was "to build a better future out of [differences in] cultures, values, and languages, which are demonstrably real in our heterogeneous society."

The government intended to do so in two ways. First, by "negotiation between leaders ... in which there will be give and take." Second, by departing in the negotiations from the basis that "we are all human beings, created by the same God" and that all were endowed with the "inalienable human rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of human happiness."

It also gave the assurance to the government's supporters that it would never surrender to outside demands. "South African problems will be solved by

⁹⁶ Interview, AH van Wyk, 7 July 2007.

⁹⁷ A Botha, "Notes on the Heunis papers", Institute for Contemporary Archives, Bloemfontein, 16 January 2007; J Heunis, *Binnekring*, pp. 84-85.

South Africans and not by foreigners.” The solution was to be found in “co-operation and co-responsibility” by means of a system that acknowledged the “right of each and everyone to share in the decisions which shape his destiny.” It rejected a numbers-based approach with a “winner-takes-all” outcome. Instead it proposed a system based on “population groups”. These groups would have to take responsibility for decision-making at all levels of Government in matters of common concern without domination of one population group over another.”

The Government and the “black leadership” would negotiate the structures for this group-based approach. The government would not “prescribe who the leaders of the black people are.” It would consider Nelson Mandela’s release if it received satisfactory indications from respected black leaders or himself that he would conduct himself in a law-abiding manner.

On the issue of a common South African citizenship for all, it stated that the government respected the independence of the “independent national states”. However, if these governments should decide in the interests of their peoples “to negotiate with the South African government on the conferment of South African citizenship on their citizens” they would be welcome to do so.

The input also addressed the vexed issue of the political violence that was sweeping the urban areas. It implicitly acknowledged the role of apartheid by emphasising the government’s commitment to address legitimate grievances and to abolish all discrimination on the basis of colour or race. “Any reduction of violence will be matched by action on the part of the Government to lift the State of Emergency.”

It ends with a ringing declaration.. “The implementation of the principles I have stated can have far-reaching effects on us all. I believe that we are today crossing the Rubicon. There can be no turning back. We now have a manifesto for the future of our country.”⁹⁸ Von Hirschberg recalls that after he took the Foreign Affairs input for the President’s to the airport where he met the Minister of Foreign Affairs on his return from his trip to Europe. Here Pik Botha phoned the President and then inserted the Rubicon phrase in the speech.⁹⁹

98 “The State President’s Durban Manifesto”. This document, which was not signed and not dated, was the formal input from the Department of Foreign Affairs for the President’s speech. A copy is lodged in the library of the University of Stellenbosch. Pik Botha discussed this document in detail in “’n Feitelike resensie van J Heunis se ‘Die binnekring’”, *Beeld*, 21 June 2007.

99 Interview, C Von Hirschberg, 22 July 2008.

Apart from the reference to Mandela, the inputs from Foreign Affairs and Constitutional Development did not differ much. Between the meeting in Vienna and the speech on 15 August media speculation both in South Africa and abroad reached a frenzy. *Time* magazine described it as the “most important announcement since the Dutch settlers arrived in South Africa 300 years ago”. *Newsweek* wrote that promised reforms may be the best, if not the last, chance for eventual harmony among the races of South Africa.” A few days before the Natal congress Gerrit Viljoen, the minister responsible for black affairs, told an audience of Afrikaans women that “the future position of whites would be radically different from the present and that the country’s youth would have to be prepared for drastic changes.”¹⁰⁰ He was probably referring to future prospects in a general way, but his words simply increased the excitement. Even *Die Burger*, which rarely deviated from the Botha line, wrote of major changes that were likely to be announced until it received word of Botha’s furious state of mind. It promptly published a cartoon depicting “anti- South African forces” pumping up expectations.¹⁰¹

On 10 August Pres. Botha decided to deviate from the original intention to put across a strong and consistent reformist message. In retirement, PW Botha told a journalist that Pik Botha had deliberately inflated international expectations in order to embarrass him. “That was his game, that’s why he does not come here.”¹⁰² But there is no evidence for this. Prinsloo’s biography of Botha states that a report by a senior journalist, Tos Wentzel, in the *Weekend Argus* of 10 August provided “the catalyst” for Botha to discard most of their initial inputs. The journalist later revealed that his anonymous source was an academic who had just left Heunis’s department to take up a university post. Wentzel wrote that the President would announce far-reaching changes in his speech and speculated that “the government was trying to find a power-sharing formula with blacks without stating this too openly for fear of a right-wing revolt.”¹⁰³ (He subsequently told Prinsloo that he protected his source by referring to the Foreign Minister’s “over-selling” in Vienna.)

The orthodoxy today among NP insiders today is that the president abruptly changed his mind when news reached him that Pik Botha “over-promised” in briefing emissaries of the main Western leaders. Ters Ehlers, his private secretary and aide-de-camp, who worked closely with him during these days, disputes

100 D Prinsloo, *Stem uit die wildernis*, pp. 346-347.

101 *Die Burger*, 14 August 1985.

102 P Waldmeir, *Anatomy of a miracle* (New York, Vintage, 1997), p. 54.

103 *Weekend Argus*, 10 August 1985.

this. He is adamant that the president did not once mention his foreign minister in giving the reasons for deciding to make his own speech, as he called it.¹⁰⁴

According to Ehlers, the president said to him: "I am not going to let people like Chet Crocker prescribe to me the kind of speech I must make."¹⁰⁵ Botha had never forgiven the USA for not coming to South Africa's assistance in Angola in 1975, as some CIA agents apparently promised it would do. On a personal level he disliked Crocker keenly. Clearly Botha he had soon come to regret not speaking out at Sterrewag, when the far-reaching recommendations were discussed. The word "Prog" speech or "a Crocker type of speech" must not be taken literally. These were the terms in which he indicated that he refused to cross the Sterrewag bridge of black political accommodation.

To this must be added the frenzy of press speculation that threatened to discredit any reform initiative. In the first part of the speech Pres. Botha would give, he warned about the deleterious consequences of this kind of politics. (Ironically Pik Botha strongly emphasized the importance of the reforms to prevent them from being dismissed as mere tinkering with the apartheid system.)

There also was a real threat that the speculation could jeopardize future negotiations. He had just received a letter from Margaret Thatcher, his strongest supporter among Western leaders, in which she suggested: "We should exchange our ideas as far in advance of your announcement as possible and preferably without attracting attention."¹⁰⁶ It also possible that Heunis had conveyed to him his unhappiness about all the loose talk about power-sharing, since that it could undercut his strategy for negotiations. At that stage Heunis was only concerned with making his opening move, namely inviting homeland leaders to serve in the cabinet.¹⁰⁷

Finally there was the factor of Botha's character and his style of leadership. Here he was still busy contemplating his response to the recommendations

104 Interview, T Ehlers/H Giliomee, 7 June 2008. On 9 August 1985 the *New York Times* published a report under the heading: "US and South Africa Aides meet in Vienna over 'serious situation'". It stated that White House and State Department officials disclosed information about the confidential meeting only after persistent questioning by journalists. Pik Botha, however, dismisses the possibility that this could have prompted the president to decide on a hard line speech rather than to appear to act under American pressure. He points it that the president did not take serious notice of what appeared in foreign papers. In newspapers in South Africa reported on his visit to Europe for which he has received the president's permission.. (Interview, 10 June 2008).

105 Interview, T Ehlers, 7 June 2008.

106 D Prinsloo, *Stem uit die wildernis*, p. 346.

107 B Pottinger, *The imperial presidency: PW Botha; The first ten years* (Johannesburg, Southern, 1988), p. 330.

of the Sterrewag meeting, but the press had already announced them as his decisions. “Power-sharing” touched a particularly raw nerve, because it was the very same word that caused the NP to split in 1982 on the much less weighty issue of coloured and Indian participation.¹⁰⁸ His entire career was directed at preventing blacks gaining first a foothold and then control over government.

The stakes for the country were incredibly high, but Botha was not the kind of leader who could be pressurised into a course of action about which he had doubts. It is possible that he felt trapped by the snares that the Machiavellians had prepared and now decided to cut loose and reassert his authority and control. He never understood how vulnerable to foreign pressure his government and the country’s economy had become. He decided to lash out, regardless of the consequences, and to re-establish his dominance in policy making.

In the late afternoon of Saturday the 10th Botha told Heunis that he was not prepared to give the “Prog speech” that he had prepared for him. Heunis replied that it was not a Prog speech, but a draft that reflected the decisions taken at Sterrewag.¹⁰⁹

On 13 August there was an indication that the reformers’ plans were going awry. The President corrected Stephen Solarz, a visiting US congressman who, on the basis of an interview with Pik Botha, stated that South Africa was now committed to a unitary state: “No, no he could not have said it because it is not so ... Not a unitary state” (Solarz probably misunderstood Pik Botha, who probably referred to the independent homelands being reintegrated into the RSA). On 14 August Botha summoned some cabinet members to a meeting.

De Klerk would state later:

That morning PW Botha demanded to know who was involved in providing inputs for the speech. He picked up all the inputs and threw them on the table.

He then said:

I will not make that speech. I shall make my own speech.¹¹⁰

108 D Prinsloo, *Stem uit die wildernis*, p. 343.

109 J Heunis, *Binnekring*, p. 82; Interview, Chris Heunis/J Heunis, 2005.

110 *Beeld*, 12 November 2007.

The President then read a speech that was compiled by Daan Prinsloo, an official in his office. It drew on some of the material in the inputs submitted by Pik Botha, Heunis and Barend du Plessis, and added some introductory comments about the danger of expectations that had been raised too high.

The cabinet was stunned, according to every ex-cabinet minister interviewed for this article. A devastated Heunis felt that his department's proposal had been gutted. To cap it all, he felt humiliated by being forced to listen to the amended speech. He later told his son: "We sat there like a bunch of little children, listening to him reading his speech to us. No one protested, in fact everyone nodded in agreement."¹¹¹

The speech Botha gave on 15 August was screened live to a world audience of more than two hundred million. Instead of a heroic leader renouncing apartheid and reaching out to blacks, they saw "an old president's twisted, hectoring image", making it difficult to listen to what he said.¹¹² "Don't push us too far", he warned at one point with a wagging finger, confirming the stereotype of the ugly, irredeemable Afrikaner.

As regards the speech itself, Botha announced reforms that at other times would have been recognised as major policy shifts. Influx control was on its way out. Independence for some black peoples was part of the solution, but those who refuse it "will remain part of the South Africa nation, are South African citizens and should be accommodated within political institutions within the boundaries of the RSA". Structures would be established where all the South African communities would attain the goal of "co-responsibility and participation."¹¹³

This, in effect, meant the collapse of one of the core ideas of apartheid: the government now considered at least some blacks as full members of the citizenry, enjoying "legitimate rights". At the same time, he ruled out almost everything that listeners to the broadcast in Western Europe or the USA would have understood as a democracy. He rejected both majority rule and "one-man-one-vote" and turned down even a compromise solution like a black chamber in Parliament. That left preciously few alternatives. To listeners not versed in the NP reform rhetoric, it was a major mystery how Botha could

111 Interview, C Heunis/J Heunis, 2005.

112 P Waldmeir, *Anatomy of a miracle*, p. 54.

113 Verbatim text, Speech, NP Information Service, 15 August 1985.

call the speech the crossing of the Rubicon and a “manifesto for a new South Africa.”

Dave Steward, who would become Pres. FW de Klerk’s main communications adviser, sums it up well: “PW Botha showed an absolute lack of understanding of modern political communication. Instead of addressing his real audience of hundreds of millions of TV viewers in the West, he addressed the NP faithful. Instead of language that his real audience could understand, he used the rough and tumble idiom of South African political meetings. Instead of a short, well rehearsed statement containing the message he wanted to convey, he delivered a long, rambling speech.”¹¹⁴

There were two particularly disastrous parts. The one was the rejection of the plea for the unconditional release of Nelson Mandela. He denounced Mandela and his comrades in arms who had tried to overthrow the state in the early 1960s and made it appear as if they were solely motivated by communist convictions. There was no reference to legitimate grievances and he presented no evidence that Mandela was indeed a communist.¹¹⁵

The other very negative part was the rejection of a statement of intent, which Buthelezi, the major internal black leader, insisted on as a prerequisite for negotiations. He sought an assurance that the negotiations would be about “power-sharing” and not about structures where blacks would merely be consulted. Quite incomprehensibly, Botha linked the demand to what he termed a “wish to destroy orderly government.”¹¹⁶ Refusing to free Mandela unconditionally or to make a statement of intent, Botha drove Buthelezi and the ANC leaders into each other’s arms in rejecting negotiations with his government.

Pik Botha was forced to pick up the pieces. He called it “a speech with which I definitely could live”¹¹⁷ and told a press conference that Pres. Botha considered it as “one of the most historical occasions”, adding: “I agree”.¹¹⁸ Years later he remembered the press conference as “one of the most difficult tasks of his life”, staying that “I tried to persuade the media that the [reformist]

114 E-mail: D Steward (Foreign Affairs Official)/H Giliomee, 3 May 2008.

115 Verbatim text, Speech, NP Information Service, 15 August 1985.

116 L Schlemmer, “Message received”, *Sunday Times*, 18 August 1985.

117 D Prinsloo, *Stem uit die wildernis*, p. 345.

118 *The Citizen*, 17 August 1985.

elements on which we all waited were hidden under all the aggression and *kragdadigheid* (forcefulness)."¹¹⁹

The foreign press immediately fingered the foreign minister as the man who created false expectations. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that in his meetings ten days earlier with British, German and American diplomats he led them to believe that his president would announce important steps such as "dismantling apartheid, abolishing rural tribal homelands, freeing imprisoned black nationalist leader Nelson Mandela and lifting the month-old state of emergency." In addition, there would be other major concessions in the speech: the acceptance of millions of urban blacks as permanent city dwellers and the possibility of South African citizenship to residents of the non-independent homelands."¹²⁰

Oliver Tambo, the president of the ANC, almost certainly enjoyed one of his best days in office. His response, issued in Lusaka, spoke of "a ruling group who could not help show itself for what it is – a clique of diehard racists, hidebound reactionaries and bloodthirsty, fascist braggarts who will heed nobody but themselves." It continued that rather than release and talk to "the genuine leaders of our people", Botha promised to negotiate with his "salaried employees." The time had come for the Western world to "abandon all pretence that it has any say in influencing South Africa other than through the imposition of sanctions. South Africa has crossed her Rubicon."¹²¹

Even before Rubicon South Africa was in deep financial trouble. The country was always strongly dependent on foreign investment for growth. But a decline in investor confidence in gold and growing political uncertainty resulted in a serious weakening of confidence. Between 1980 and 1985 direct foreign investment in South Africa as a proportion of total foreign liabilities slumped from 46 per cent to 25 per cent, while the percentage share of portfolio investment declined from 19 per cent to 13 per cent. By contrast, the share of short-term loans surged ahead from 18 per cent of the total to 39 per cent.¹²² Patty Waldmeir, a correspondent of the London *Financial Times* remarked that the perception of foreign investors was "South Africa was unstable and small, unstable countries, unlike large

119 Cited by W Jordaan, *Beeld*, 19 August 2005.

120 *Los Angeles Times*, 18 August 1985.

121 ANC response to PW Botha's Rubicon speech, 16 August 1985, <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/pr/1980s/pr850816.html>, as accessed on 31 May 2008.

122 CH Feinstein, *An economic history of South Africa* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 228-229.

ones, do not borrow money.”¹²³ It was because South Africa had become so vulnerable that the Rubicon speech was such an unmitigated disaster.

The Western reaction was swift and severe. Chase Manhattan bank, one of South Africa’s main short-term lenders, had already decided on 31 July to stop rolling over loans to South African lenders, but did not announce this. It was, as an executive of Chase remarked later, not the bank’s intention to facilitate change in South Africa. “We felt that the risk attached to political unrest and economic stability had become too high for our investors.”¹²⁴ After the Rubicon speech Chase Manhattan announced that it would no longer roll over loans to South Africa, and other banks followed suit quickly. With two thirds of its foreign debt short term, South Africa was forced to default and declare a unilateral moratorium on foreign debt. These debts were later rescheduled, but South Africa’s ability to raise foreign loans had received a mortal blow.

The rand fell sharply, capital fled the country and markets were forced to close. South Africa faced an escalation of sanctions. In late August 1985 the US Congress passed the Comprehensive Anti-apartheid Act, which banned new investment and loans, withdrew landing rights and severely curbed imports of coal, uranium, iron and steel. The European Community and Commonwealth also imposed a variety of milder sanctions. South African whites were never more isolated. Gerhard de Kock, Governor of the Reserve Bank, would remark half in jest that the speech cost the country billions of rands – at a rate of few million rand per word.¹²⁵ But even a well-packaged, eloquent speech in the place of the Rubicon speech would not have dispelled the serious doubts about the country’s growth prospects.

Although the reforms announced in the NP’s four provincial congresses amounted to a major policy shift, the government’s political credibility had received an almost fatal blow in Durban. The British Ambassador, Robin Renwick, described it as a turning point.¹²⁶ The Rubicon speech signals the day when the Botha government unmistakably lost both the initiative and its credibility. In terms of security it could still hold the ring, but politically, economically and diplomatically it would not recover.

123 P Waldmeir, *Anatomy of a miracle*, p.56.

124 H Giliomee, “Surrender without defeat”, *SA Institute of Race Relations Topical Papers*, 1997.

125 FW de Klerk, *Die laaste trek*, p. 123.

126 R Renwick, *Unconventional diplomacy*, p. 110.

What would have happened if Botha had made a speech that the international community interpreted as a decisive step to abandon apartheid and negotiate a democratic dispensation with credible black leaders? Everything depended on the concrete steps that would follow. In retrospect it is clear that the best course for the government was not to pursue a national deal, but a series of regional power-sharing deals along the lines proposed in 1981 by the Buthelezi Commission for KwaZulu-Natal. Such Multi-racial governments with considerable autonomy had the potential of becoming counterweights to the ANC. The government's failure to make a courageous political move meant that increasingly it would have only one option left: to try to strike a deal with the ANC. And it because it continued to fritter away time and opportunities, the outside world, including the West, would soon insist that the only equitable solution in South Africa was one that the ANC endorsed.

Conclusion

A recent article analysing successful governance reforms singles out three variables as of critical importance. They are: a strong and consistent commitment among the politicians at the helm, a high level of technical capacity and some degree of isolation from societal interests, and the opportunity to use incremental approaches with cumulative benefits.¹²⁷ As far as the first variable was concerned, the NP leaders, with the exception of Pik Botha and Chris Heunis, were not committed to substantial reform. The NP was beholden to a constituency that had not been persuaded of the need for substantial reform.

As for the second variable, there was a reasonable technical capacity, particularly in the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Department of Constitutional Development and Planning, but Pres. Botha made his decisions mainly with an eye to white party politics. Accordingly the officials of these departments had to use the strategy of incremental reform in which the acceptance of broad, non-racial principles was the crucial first step.

A very bold leader who had made up his mind could have embarked on a new road after the Sterrewag meeting. Pres. Botha, however, was profoundly sceptical about incorporating blacks into the political system. To complicate the matter even further he was being asked to approve a momentous change

¹²⁷ M Robinson, "The politics of successful governance reforms: Lessons of design and implementation", *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, 45 (4), 2007, pp. 521-548.

at a time of large scale disturbances. He had failed to speak up at the meeting of his cabinet two weeks before the Rubicon meeting where far-reaching recommendations were made, and probably was taken aback by the frenzy of media speculation. Feeling trapped, he offered to people in his inner circle two unconvincing reasons (a report in the *Cape Argus* and a refusal to satisfy Chester Crocker) for not wanting to give a speech that reflected the spirit of the Sterrewag meeting. In his Rubicon speech that he gave in Durban he resorted to the style he was familiar with: the confrontational and abrasive one suitable for a NP congress but repulsive to Western audiences. In the end, Botha's Rubicon speech was a disaster in failing to meet the high expectations. FW de Klerk had learnt the lessons of the Rubicon debacle well when took the world by almost complete surprise in making his famous speech of 2 February 1990.

To end the article with an exercise in counter-factual speculation. Looking back on the speech recently, De Klerk remarked that Botha destroyed all the credibility that the cabinet's plan for the Rubicon speech may have yielded. "Maggie Thatcher and other Western leaders world wide were waiting for a speech that would break the mould. The speech turned out to be a heavy setback."¹²⁸

South African history may have taken quite a different direction had the respective inputs of Constitutional Development and Foreign Affairs been used fully. Such a speech should have received enthusiastic endorsement by the conservative leaders who were in power at the time in Britain, the USA and Germany. The anti-South African lobby abroad would have received a body blow. Already weakened by the recent Nkomati Accord, the ANC exile would have been plunged in a major crisis. The chances are very good that the movement would have split, with a section breaking away in desperate attempt to negotiate a compromise settlement with the South African government. If such a settlement had been agreed on, Moscow, beset by major financial troubles, may well have withdrawn its support for the intransigent section of the ANC. The South African government could have released Mandela without any fears of prolonged political turmoil. South Africa would have become an example of prosperous power-sharing system.

This is mere speculation and things may have turned out quite differently. But it is a useful exercise to imagine what could have been. As the great Dutch

128 *Beeld*, 12 November 2007.

historian Johan Huizenga wrote:

The historian must constantly put himself at a point in the past at which the known factors will seem to permit different outcomes. If he speaks of Salamis, then it must be as if the Persians might still win; if he speaks of the coup d'état of Brumaire, then it must remain to be seen if Bonaparte will be ignominiously repulsed.¹²⁹

As it happened, it was Botha, or rather his reputation as reformer, that was repulsed. But there was nothing inevitable about South Africa's future course of history until a few days before his momentous speech.

¹²⁹ Niall Ferguson, *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (London, Picador, 1997), p. 1.