

**MANDELA: HE WHO REDUCED THE COMPLEXITY OF
TRANSITION AND MADE ITS REWARDS ACCESSIBLE TO
SOUTH AFRICANS**

Before the speech of de Klerk and the release of Mandela, there were a plethora of theories about change in South Africa: the one more convoluted and complex than the other. The common theme in most of them was that some form of violent revolutionary transition was inevitable.

And suddenly, there they sat around a table: White and Black, capitalists and communists, nationalists and liberals talking the country out of its past in to the future of a liberal democratic constitution. It is in this transition that Mandela played an indispensable role. The enduring thrust of his contribution was reconciliation: between white and black, between revolutionary and non-revolutionary, between the National Security Management System and the rights of ordinary South Africans, between East and West and foreigners and indigenous South Africans.

It is not as if he had no grasps of the difficulties of delivery that lay ahead, but he knew almost instinctively, if those difficulties had the remotest chance of being tackled, they had to be preceded by reconciliation.

Two incidents stand out that encapsulates this approach of his, one profound and one humorous. The profound incident happened on the day of his inauguration as the first Democratically Elected President in South Africa in 1994, I was standing on the steps of the Union Building watching General George Meiring waiting for

President Mandela to arrive in his official car. The car arrived, stopped and Mandela got out. General Meiring stiffened his back, clicked his heels and gave a very formal salute. Mandela smiled and offered his hand for a handshake and together they walked up the steps with Mering leading the way. Mandela gave a gentle conciliatory speech and was cheered to the hilt: And then a squadron of Jets flew over in salute. That, for me was when the "New South Africa" was born.

The second incident happened quite a few years later. The YPO, (Young Presidents Organization), an international body of young businessmen who had to be head of their company before they were forty years old, held their annual meeting at the Mount Nelson Hotel in Cape Town. President Mandela was to be the Breakfast Speaker. (I was there because I had to speak some time after him). He gave a mild, inoffensive overview of the economic challenges facing South Africa and role business, local and international, could play in tackling them. Their came question time.

A Y.P.O. wife; attractive; immaculately dressed and almost overcome by the importance of the occasion, minced up to the microphone and said: "Mr President, is there anything that you would still like to achieve, that you haven't achieved?" He looked at her with a smile on his face and said: "Well madam, my father had five wives. He was a polygamist. When I look at you, I envy my father." This was said spontaneously and without pre-meditation, and she strutted, flattered back to her seat. Of course the audience cracked up.

But again, in that reply he had managed to make the complexity of our transition accessible to, in this case, foreigners. South Africa is not an uncomplicated industrial society. It has huge differences in rural/urban population, but also the tension between traditionalism and modernity. That is why he could be humorous without being sexist. In America polygamy would be tantamount to promiscuity and a joke about it could cost you a million votes on polling day.

Whether profound or humorous, Nelson Mandela could charm the milk out of your coffee any day of the week.

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