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NOW THE PARTY IS OVER, THE REAL WORK BEGINS

If 1990-91 was the party, then 1992 was the hangover. Hangovers are necessary, particularly the really bad ones. They help us approach the coming festivities and celebrations with great caution and more respect for the morning after.

But who would deny us a little bit of celebration after the February 2nd 1990 announcement and the release of Nelson Mandela. It was a magic time for South Africa after so many years of Apartheid, revolt, repression and deadlock. We felt as if we were two steps away from Camelot. Always a sign of a good party.

Politically speaking, if South Africa continues to approach the transition like a party; we must prepare for many more bad hangovers. Put differently, if our political leadership continues to underestimate the complexity of the process of transition that it has subjected South Africa to, conflicts will multiply, the crisis will deepen and democracy will become more and more remote in this part of the world.

It was good that we signed the Groote Schuur and Pretoria Minutes, the National Peace Accord and the CODESA Declaration of Intent, if only simply to learn how inadequate they were. This is really what we discovered in 1992. What were the lessons we learned from their shortcomings?

- Accords, treaties, pacts between leaders have to be translated and communicated to supporters otherwise they cannot deliver. The public must understand what is being bargained on their behalf.
- Hidden agenda politics become worse than useless if parties try to negotiate new rules for the political game. Too often the government behaved as if a trick here or there would get a critical mass of political support on its side and it could go it alone. Too often the ANC behaved as if political transition was a great morality play where it deserved to be winner and everybody should accept the legitimacy of its claim. Too often Inkatha indulged in petulant spoiling tactics to state its claim to be part of the process. What passed for negotiations was nothing but moral upmanship, outbidding and scapegoating. The celebrations started turning mean and incoherent as they sometimes do in the early hours of the morning.
- No party can afford to ignore the pivotal role of the civil service in guaranteeing the success of transition. Not only does it concentrate bureaucratic expertise and experience but it is finally responsible for whatever administrative continuity and stability we are to have. If there is corruption, willful undermining of the goals of transition, even deliberate destabilization of the negotiation process, then parties

simply waste their time in bargaining out eloquent agreements in smoke-filled rooms.

Too long the government behaved as if the civil service was its private toy. Too long the ANC thought it could govern without it, as if the military and police would simply evaporate if the ANC won the elections. Too long Inkatha acted as if it could create its own civil service and bargain from an independent infrastructure (an illusion under which most of the so-called independent homelands labour.)

- Perhaps the most important lesson we may have learned in 1992 is that the well being of the economy is pivotal for the success of whatever follows a negotiated transition. More important, that the economy is not something that can be put on ice until the transition is over, but that its well being is dependent on how transition occurs. In other words, the duties of politicians and their supporters have a direct bearing on the economy. Maybe we had to experience mass action to understand this rather obvious point.
- Equally important was the growing realization between bargaining parties that you cannot negotiate transition without accepting responsibility for managing its outcome. The government wished to maintain control while giving its opponents responsibility; its opponents wanted control while leaving responsibility to the government. In the process very little happened except that all parties kicked for touch when confronted with difficult problems. This was particularly so in the area of controlling violence.

There are many other lessons that percolated to the surface of political life in 1992, although it is not quite clear at this stage how well they have been learned: that transition is not only about the restructuring of economic opportunity and addressing the problems of inequality and poverty; that negotiations are not only confined to the national level but to the regional, metropolitan and local levels as well; that the lower level negotiations are intimately related to the resurgence and growth of an autonomous and strong civil society.

As we start 1993 there are small encouraging signs that the hangover is subsiding and a new sobriety filled with more humility and realism is taking hold. There is a renewed commitment to push the process of transition toward a shared responsibility for managing it in the form of an interim government. There is an acceptance of the need to sanitize the military and the police, subject them to civilian control and make them serviceable to a multi-party outcome of transition.

There is publicly stated commitment to growth and fiscal discipline in the economy. The unions have become more concerned about job security than wage increases. There is growing acceptance of the advisory and monitoring role of the international community. There is a scaling down of festive mass mobilization and pointless mass action.

So, things are looking a bit brighter and better for 1993. Of course, there is some renewed militancy and radicalization in the left and right wings – in a sense they both feed on one another – who are still in the party mood. Their real hangover is yet to come.