

Boers at war

By Fred Bridgland
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He might have been laughing as he said it, but Archbishop Desmond Tutu wasn't joking when he said that South Africa had become a crazy country.

On the one hand, he said, look at Pretoria. There, the trial of 22 extreme right-wingers known as the "Boer Force" has heard about their plan to breed a new white super-race and reinstate white rule. When the Nobel Peace Prize winner mentioned this to journalists in Cape Town last week, the response was laughter rather than shock and horror.

On the other hand, he continued, look at the demise of the National Party. During its 50-year reign it created apartheid, banned the ANC (African National Congress) and imprisoned Nelson Mandela after narrowly failing to have him hanged. Now, however, it has decided to become ... part of the ANC.

That inspired further widespread laughter – but also scorn and ridicule, especially for the party leader, Marthinus van Schalkwyk. A former military intelligence operative in the apartheid era, he managed to secure ANC cabinet posts for himself and a few close lieutenants before dissolving the party.

For South Africa's last white president, FW de Klerk, the National Party's decision was a step too far. On Friday he turned on his former party for merging with its one-time enemy and renounced his membership.

It was a dramatic moment in South African history. Not quite as dramatic, perhaps, as the 1902 Peace of Vereeniging, which ended the Boer War between Britain and the Afrikaners for control of South Africa; but indicative, nevertheless, of a sea change in South African politics, the hammering of another huge nail into the coffin of apartheid .

The shape of the political landscape has changed mightily. The ANC now holds 286 of the 400 seats in the national assembly – a far cry from the 1950s, when Helen Suzman was the lone liberal, anti-apartheid voice in the old whites-only parliament. Yet one thing hasn't changed: it is still up to Suzman's successor to keep the opposition banner flying.

Tony Leon now holds Suzman's old seat in the Johannesburg suburb of Houghton, and her position as leader of the opposition. At 47, the man in charge of the liberal Democratic Alliance party is the most articulate and perhaps the most feisty politician in South Africa

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today. The party he inherited from Suzman at the first all-race general election in 1994 won only seven seats. In the last election, in April this year, the electorate returned 50 DA MPs, representative of all the so-called Rainbow Nation's races.

Leon and his team are working in difficult circumstances. Van Schalkwyk said his reason for fleeing to his ANC government post (as minister for tourism and the environment) was the fact that Westminster-style confrontational politics is unsuitable for Africa and that it is necessary to reach consensus behind closed doors under the ANC umbrella. Leon, however, is distinctly unimpressed with such thinking. "I'm all for civil discourse," he told me. "But this idea that Africa can only handle consensus politics is the most nonsensical, self-serving argument I've ever heard. Its basis is that somehow Africans can't deal with democracy.

"Van Schalkwyk's unprincipled surrender, the saving of a few scalps from a failed party, strengthens the possibility of a one-party state. That's what we'll have – a kind of desertification of South African politics – if we don't have a strong and growing opposition."

Parliamentary confrontations between Leon and Thabo Mbeki, the South African president and leader of the ANC, are sure to be increasingly acrimonious, especially now that members of the National Party are on the ANC front bench. Mbeki and Leon neither like each other nor have much respect for each other. Leon castigates Mbeki for his reluctance to stand up to President Robert Mugabe in neighbouring Zimbabwe; for his doubts that Aids is caused by HIV; and for economic policies that he says have hugely enriched a black elite but left more than 40% of the population unemployed.

Such relentless criticism irritates Mbeki and enrages ANC hardliners, and Leon comes in for a constant barrage of abuse from the ANC. Some of it is blatantly racist, for Leon has the disadvantage of being white and Jewish in a supposedly non-racist but black majority democracy which tilts strongly against Israel in the Middle East dispute.

Despite having a black deputy leader, Joe Seremane, who was imprisoned as an ANC activist with Mandela on Robben Island, the DA remains a mainly white party – and Leon is aware of this. "We've got to keep expanding into the black population," he said. "South African politics remains very racially defined at the moment."

Leon accuses Mbeki of "re-racialising" South African politics with a raft of black empowerment and affirmative action laws that discriminate against young whites who weren't even old enough to vote during the apartheid era. "We have the hope that we can create a non-racial society," he said. "Our legacy – all those of any colour who fought against apartheid – depends upon it. If not, after the huge process we've been through, we're in deep trouble.

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“I think that all this new discriminatory legislation is doing a lot of damage to our country. It is empowering an already empowered elite, turning a few black millionaires into black billionaires. It is not economically sustainable.”

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