

Resolving P.W. Botha's 1985 Rubicon riddle

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Abstract

President P.W. Botha's notorious "Rubicon" speech on 15 August 1985 at the National Party Congress in Durban was probably one of the most significant speeches in the history of South Africa. It was supposed to break the political and military deadlock between the apartheid government and the banned liberation movements, notably the ANC. Botha was widely expected to announce new policies that could possibly have ended the political conflict in the country. However, that did not happen. Instead the speech was a total fiasco. Until now, one could only speculate why this was so. Original correspondence between P.W. Botha and ministers Pik Botha and Chris Heunis and a secret, verbatim transcript of the notorious preparatory 'Sterrewag' (Pretoria Astronomical Observatory) meeting of 2 August 1985, now confirm that the South African government and P.W. Botha were not ready for such policy breakthrough announcements and had never planned to make them.

Keywords: Rubicon speech; Sterrewag; black political reform; power sharing; constitutional development.

Opsomming

President P.W. Botha se berugte Rubicon toespraak op 15 Augustus 1985 by die Nasionale Partykongres in Durban, was seker een van die mees verreikende toesprake in die Suid-Afrikaanse geskiedenis. Dit was veronderstel om die politieke en militêre dooiepoint wat op daardie stadium tussen die apartheidsregering en die verbanne ANC bestaan het, te deurbreek deur nuwe beleidsrigtings aan te kondig wat potensieel tot die einde van die politieke konflik in die land sou kon lei. Dit het egter nie gebeur nie. Die toespraak was intendeel 'n totale fiasco. Sover kon net gespekuleer word waarom nie. Oorspronklike korrespondensie tussen P.W. Botha en ministers Pik Botha en Chris Heunis, en 'n geheime, ongeredigeerde verbatim transkripsie van die netso berugte voorbereidende Sterrewagvergadering in Pretoria, bevestig dat die Suid-Afrikaanse regering en die president nie gereed was vir sulke deurbraakgewende beleidsaankondigings nie, en dit nooit beplan het nie.

Sleutelwoorde: Rubicon toespraak; Sterrewag; swart politieke hervorming; magsdeling; swart staatkundige ontwikkeling.

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Introduction

In Durban on 15 August 1985, P.W. Botha, then president of apartheid South Africa, delivered probably one of the most significant speeches in the country’s history. It is generally referred to as the Rubicon speech because he ended it by stating explicitly that South Africa had “crossed the Rubicon” with its domestic political policies. The speech had been anticipated to break the political and military deadlock that existed at the time between the apartheid government and the banned African National Congress (ANC). He was widely expected to announce new policies that could potentially have ended the political conflict in the country. This did not happen.

Instead the speech was a total fiasco, both domestically and internationally. Expectations in the public media in the run-up to Botha’s Rubicon speech, were high that he would announce at least the principle of political power-sharing with black¹ individuals in the country, as well as the release of Nelson Mandela after 27 years in prison. However, the expectation that P.W. Botha would announce these dramatic changes in 1985 has now, with the benefit of new evidence, been proven totally unrealistic. The main reasons for this miscalculation have thus far been a lack of reliable data and a reliance on speculation.² However, in the first months of 2019, previously unseen evidence was discovered, emerged which makes it possible to resolve the most important outstanding puzzles about what led to that disastrous event and why.

This article is the result of the re-discovery of original internal state documents about the run-up to the Rubicon speech, found at the Archive of Contemporary Affairs (ARCA) at the University of the Free State.³ These include the original written input by ministers Chris Heunis and Pik Botha for P.W. Botha’s notorious Rubicon speech. These documents have not been made known previously in the public domain. They include the original correspondence between Heunis and P.W. Botha about how it was hoped to resolve the political deadlock on the future of political participation of black South Africans.

An even more important source of information for this article was the unexpected discovery of the unedited transcript of a daylong brainstorming session of P.W. Botha and his extended cabinet, held on 2 August 1985 in a secret military intelligence complex in the Astronomical Observatory at Fort Klapperkop in Pretoria (hereafter referred to as the Sterrewag). The existence of this crucial document of 133 pages, with P.W. Botha’s handwritten annotations, was discovered by accident in

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1. The term “black” is used in this article to refer to African people and does not include individuals officially classified during the apartheid era as Indians or coloured people.
 2. See, for example, H. Giliomee, *Die Laaste Afrikanerleiers* (Tafelberg, Kaapstad, 2012), p 195; J. Heunis, *Die Binnekring* (Jonathan Ball, Kaapstad, 2007), p 83.
 3. The logistical and research assistance of Ms Carlien Scholtz of the Archive of Contemporary Affairs, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein (hereafter ARCA), in the preparation of this article is gratefully acknowledged.

an obscure file together with another handwritten instruction by the president that it should not be distributed.⁴

Senior National Party (NP) ministers F.W. de Klerk, Barend du Plessis and Adriaan Vlok denied any knowledge of the existence of this transcript during interviews the author conducted with them in Pretoria in April 2019. Even P.W. Botha's speechwriter/biographer was unaware of its existence.⁵ Clearly, the proceedings of the meeting were taped by P.W. Botha without informing the participants. These important documents about the background to the Rubicon speech confirm several new conclusions about this strategically important event in South Africa's history.

The article analyses and assesses the causal linkages between the South African president's 25 January 1985 political transformation principles; their re-consideration in the Sterrewag meeting of 2 August 1985; their controversial interpretation by the main Sterrewag participants afterwards, and their eventual communication in the Rubicon speech on 15 August 1985. These events impacted significantly on the future political direction of South Africa in subsequent years.

Background to the Sterrewag meeting

A small but significant political breakthrough in the rigid application of the NP's apartheid policies in South Africa, occurred in 1976 when the white minority NP government accepted a recommendation by a commission of enquiry into the political position of the coloured community in the country,⁶ that a satisfactory form of direct representation be established in the exclusively white parliament at that time, for coloured South Africans. This decision led later (in 1983) to the establishment of the so-called tricameral parliament in which only white, coloured and Indian South Africans participated (in separate legislative assemblies), but which remained *de facto* under the control of the white minority in the country.⁷

In the early 1980s, the NP government tried hard to persuade the various apartheid designated black ethnic communities to accept its homeland (also called Bantustan) policy, but to no avail. By mid-1985 South Africa had become so ungovernable politically, that a state of emergency was declared on 20 July 1985 in a number of districts, and was then expanded on 12 June 1986 into a national state of

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4. ARCA: PV203, P.W. Botha, Confidential personal documentary collection, Uncatalogued transcript, Sterrewag Transcript, "Samesprekings Staatspresident, Ministers, Adjunk-Ministers en Blanke Ministersraad te Pretoria op 2 Augustus 1985" (hereafter Sterrewag Transcript).
 5. Personal communication from Dr Daan Prinsloo, biographer of P.W. Botha, 7 March 2019.
 6. RSA, *Report of the Commission of Enquiry into Matters relating to the Coloured Population Group*, RP 38/1976 (Government Printer, Pretoria, 1976).
 7. RSA, *Republic of South Africa Constitution Act, 1983* (Act 110 of 1983) (Government Printer, Pretoria, 1983).

emergency.⁸ It was in this context that the Sterrewag meeting was held as a brainstorming event to break or at least ease the crippling political and military deadlock between the NP government and its political opponents, the large majority of whom were black.

During July 1985, P.W. Botha instructed his Minister of Constitutional Development and Planning and chair of the State Security Council (SSC), Chris Heunis, to prepare proposals for the Sterrewag meeting. The Chief Directorate of Constitutional Planning was responsible for the development of options, proposals and strategies for political and constitutional policy reforms in South Africa.⁹ The Sterrewag proposals had to provide more practical and technical implementation details about the principles for future black constitutional progress that P.W. Botha had already announced in his speech at the opening of parliament on 25 January 1985.¹⁰ These principles were also developed by Heunis’s constitutional planners, recommended by the SCC. They included the idea of self-determination for what were termed “own affairs” of each racial group and co-responsibility over matters of mutual concern at all governmental levels for all South African citizens, irrespective of their descent. This would have constituted an expansion of the 1983 tricameral parliamentary system to include black South Africans.

On 31 July 1985, Heunis presented the president with proposals that he had tabled in the SCC and that had been discussed extensively there, but on which no agreement had been reached, for a special brainstorming session of the expanded cabinet on 2 August in preparation for announcements to be made at the upcoming NP provincial congresses.¹¹

These proposals were also accompanied by two pages of notes for P.W. Botha’s first speech at the Natal NP Congress on 15 August.¹² These speech inputs were approved in writing by the president the next day.¹³

8. Giliomee, *Die Laaste Afrikanerleiers*, pp 271–272.

9. This author headed the Chief Directorate at the time. The unit also served as the secretariat of the SCC.

10. P.W. Botha, “State President’s Speech at the Opening of Parliament”, 25 January 1985, *Hansard, Debates of the House of Assembly*, cols 5–17. See also D. Prinsloo, *Stem uit die Wildernis: ’n Biografie oor Oud-Pres. P W Botha* (Vaandel Uitgewers, Mosselbaai, 1997), 209–210.

11. ARCA: PV895, C.J. Heunis, Personal Collection, Department of Constitutional Development and Planning, File No. 23/8/2/1, “Staatkundige Ontwikkeling van Swart Gemeenskappe binne die RSA, Voorstelle vir Bespreking op 2 Augustus 1985”.

12. ARCA: PV895, Ministry of Constitutional Development and Planning, File No. 3/5/5/1, J.C. Heunis, “Notas vir die Staatspresident se Toespraak”, 15 Augustus, 10 Augustus 1985.

13. ARCA, PV895, File No. 3/5/5/1, J.C. Heunis, “Notas vir die Staatspresident se Toespraak”, 15 and 10 Augustus 1985.

The Sterrewag meeting

Chaired by President Botha, the meeting was attended by 33 senior NP political office bearers. Each minister motivated his views on the different options he believed could be considered to make the required political breakthrough to get the cooperation of legitimate black political leaders for further political reforms. These black leaders excluded the leaders of the banned black liberation movements, such as the ANC, the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP).

The main discussion during the meeting consisted of consecutive formalistic position statements in the form of political shopping wish lists, first by the president and thereafter by one minister after another. It took place in typical P.W. Botha cabinet “discussion” style, in strict order of seniority in the cabinet. Furthermore, there was no real debate of the different views expressed, and each speaker only had one opportunity to state his views.

From the start, Botha controlled and steered the proceedings in a strict, specific direction. As an introduction he reiterated his views that he was not in favour of a unitary state, a federation or a fourth chamber of parliament, but that he would prefer a confederal state structure because “... power-sharing with Coloureds and Indians [is] different from power-sharing with black nations and black cultural groups”.¹⁴ He emphasised the importance of own affairs for all population groups, and that the “independent homelands” had to be retained. He stated: “... we are facing a decisive period. In Biblical terms, ‘the Philistines are upon us’.”¹⁵ In the case of black communities outside the then existing “self-governing” and “independent” homelands established by the NP government, their own affairs would be managed at local government level in a way that linked them to those homelands.¹⁶

Concerning black elected local government, however, Botha asked explicitly “don’t we enforce a form of local government on them that they are not used to?”¹⁷ His reference was to the fact that that black “traditional leadership structures”, were not themselves based on democratic elections and that perhaps they ought to be the foundation of black local government. Botha boldly claimed further that “... most black communities are associated with witchdoctors”.¹⁸ He then quoted a “witchdoctor” who alleged that “... one man one vote is one of the biggest delusions in the world”.¹⁹ He claimed that the person concerned had also alleged that “apartheid among black

14. Sterrewag Transcript, p 20.

15. Sterrewag Transcript, p 25.

16. These “homelands” were consistently referred to by the NP government in general and specifically during the Sterrewag meeting, as “states”, although they were not recognised as such by the international community. In order to avoid confusion, the term “homeland” will be used hereafter to refer to those areas.

17. Sterrewag Transcript, p 23.

18. Sterrewag Transcript, p 24.

19. Sterrewag Transcript, p 39.

people is worse than among Afrikaners". Botha then asked rhetorically "... have we explored and exploited the influence of witchdoctors to achieve peace?"²⁰ Botha suggested in this way that traditional social, cultural and political practices were still dominant driving forces in black communities and that he held the political views of such important black leaders as "witchdoctors" in high regard. These views reinforced his conclusion that democratic practices might not be appropriate and should therefore not be enforced on black people.

Botha’s scepticism about enforcing Western democratic practices on black communities, was shared by Gerrit Viljoen, the Minister of Education and Training. He commented that what Westerners saw as bribery was for black leaders an opportunity to get access to services from people in power and also constituted additional income to enable them to give more attention to serving their black communities.²¹

As for the international community, Botha put it bluntly that in his view it was:

... unfair, uninformed and foolish. The Lord alone knows how we are going to live in this world ... We will have to make our army and our police as strong as possible because if they want to suppress us will we have to fight like a self-respecting nation.²²

The views expressed by P.W. Botha reflect very conservative perspectives that did not leave any room for major policy changes. Probably – knowing full well how short P.W. Botha’s fuse was – no minister took a contradictory stance to these forcefully expressed views during the rest of the proceedings.

Heunis then summarised the latest proposals made by the SCC. He was fully aware of and sensitive to the potential conservative resistance to some proposals he knew he would get from Botha and certain other colleagues, despite the fact that most of the senior members of cabinet were also members of the SCC and were well informed of the issues involved. He began his summary by stating explicitly that it would indeed be possible to accommodate black people politically in a future government system in such a way that civilised white control over government was maintained.²³

These opening remarks were well received by the meeting. During the rest of the proceedings, none of the speakers gave any indication that they were prepared to relinquish final white control over the country. On the contrary, there were explicit

20. Sterrewag Transcript, p 24.

21. Sterrewag Transcript, p 43. Various other ministers also later explicitly supported the view that Western democracy should not be "enforced" on black communities, and one also supported the idea to promote traditional African practices like witchdoctors in these communities. See Sterrewag Transcript, pp 76–78, 83, 86, 107, 47.

22. Sterrewag Transcript, p 25.

23. Sterrewag Transcript, p 35.

calls by more conservative as well as more progressive ministers for the protection of “civilised Western values” by retaining white political control in South Africa.²⁴

The main assumption underlying Heunis’s view was that full black control over what he called “black affairs” would, for example, mitigate the demands by black people for final overall political control in South Africa, while another collective decision-making formula could be devised to maintain white political end-control.²⁵ P.W. Botha responded with the suggestion that perhaps the president could be elected in a different way in future by all South African citizens, but then with “built-in safeguards”.²⁶ However, some speakers were bold enough to voice the opinion that black people/voters/citizens would not be happy with final white political control.²⁷

De Klerk emphasised that watershed decisions should only be taken with full knowledge of all the implications of such decisions.²⁸ He regarded some of Heunis’s proposals as being new and out of line with already accepted government policy. The principle of even limited executive power-sharing with black people in a proposed Council of Cabinets was one such “risky” idea. Such a Council of Cabinets implied representatives of the three legally racially-based cabinets in the tricameral parliament, representatives of the cabinets of the black self-governing homelands, possibly the black so-called “independent” homelands and an envisaged Black Ministers’ Council/Cabinet for black communities outside these black homelands. This was a departure from existing government reform principles.²⁹

De Klerk strongly supported the creation of different ethnic black own affairs ministers’ councils outside the black homelands (e.g. different ones for Zulu, Xhosa and Pedi people), linked to their own affairs legislatures.³⁰ However, he cautioned against the use of the term Council of Cabinets. This implied taking final executive decisions and after all, there could be only one sovereign government in any country.³¹ It implied power sharing with black people, which, as he pointed out, was not government policy. The principle of a new power-sharing idea would, in his view, have to be accepted by cabinet and by the NP congresses before it could be announced as government policy.³²

24. These supporters included Pik Botha and Gerrit Viljoen.

25. Sterrewag Transcript, p 49.

26. Sterrewag Transcript, p 70. This was supported by a number of ministers, Sterrewag Transcript, pp 97–100, 102–104.

27. Sterrewag Transcript, pp 83, 108. They included Wiley and De Klerk, the leader of the National Assembly.

28. Supported by Nel, Wilkens, Vlok, De Beer and Miller. See Sterrewag Transcript, pp 51–55, 108, 110–111, 112, 113, 116. See also F.W. de Klerk, *The Last Trek, a New Beginning: The Autobiography* (Macmillan, London, 1998), p 102.

29. Sterrewag Transcript, p 52.

30. Sterrewag Transcript, p 54.

31. Sterrewag Transcript, p 55.

32. Supported by Stoffel Botha, Venter, Clase and Pen Kotze, Sterrewag Transcript, pp 5–55, 93–95, 102–105.

De Klerk’s view that the limited executive power-sharing contained in Heunis’s proposals was “new”, is factually incorrect. Heunis had explained in his introduction (when he referred to the policy reform principles in P.W. Botha’s 25 January announcements) that the proposals he intended to table were logical strategies to implement those policy principles. He also emphasised that the indirectly elected Regional Services Councils (RSCs) and appointed Provincial Executive Committees that were to be established in 1986, were both examples of limited executive power-sharing arrangements at those levels already approved by government for the four main racial groups in South Africa. These, he said, included black South Africans outside the black homelands.

According to Heunis, the extension of this principle to a Black Ministers’ Council and a Council of Cabinets at the national level was therefore fully in line with government reform principles at the time.³³ The fully integrated RSCs would further also have full legislative and policy-making powers over the functions allocated to them, including bulk services provision, for example water, electricity, firefighting, ambulances, and would involve payment of user fees for these services. The participants at the Sterrewag meeting, however, demonstrated their resistance against extending this restricted power-sharing arrangement to higher governmental levels. Clearly, they understood that the demographic basis at local community level would have provided black voters with a majority of representatives at provincial and national levels.

During his initial input and in his final reply, Heunis stressed the importance of power-sharing among all races on issues of mutual concern at executive level in a Council of Cabinets. The assumption was that each racial group outside the black homelands would have one or more racially-based cabinets or ministers’ councils at national level to manage their “own affairs”. They would be nominated by the leaders of the three legislative assemblies (in the case of the white, coloured and Indian chambers), while black African municipalities would in some as yet unspecified way elect a dedicated minister’s council/cabinet, because those communities would not have their own “black affairs” legislative body at a higher level. All these racially separate own affairs bodies would nominate members to the Council of Cabinets that would also include nominated delegates from the cabinets of the respective black self-governing homelands and even possibly from the “independent” black homelands. This was the confederal-type political model that P.W. Botha preferred.

The dilemma that Heunis faced with these proposals was that many of his cabinet colleagues at the Sterrewag meeting continued to reject in principle the idea of black own affairs cabinets/ministers’ councils outside of the black homelands. Like Botha, most of them preferred the idea of a confederal-type Council of Cabinets consisting only of representatives of already independent black homelands and self-governing and “soon-to-become-independent” black homelands, excluding urban and

33. Sterrewag Transcript, p 33.

rural black communities outside those homelands in a confederal-type Council of Cabinets.³⁴

The single exception that all these speakers were willing to make, was that black local township communities in the so-called “common area” of South Africa should have their autonomous municipalities run by municipal councils (later called Black Local Authorities or BLAs) that could determine policy and legislation. No ideas were tabled, however, as to how these autonomous black local government bodies would then participate in higher level decision-making platforms if they were not allowed to have a black ministers’ council. Furthermore, there was no proposal to address the dilemma of direct black legislative participation at provincial and national levels over so-called “black affairs”, or of matters of general concern to all racial groups. These steps were apparently unthinkable to the meeting participants. The only generally-accepted principle of legislative powers for black South African citizens that was acceptable to the meeting, was that the black self-governing homelands and the black independent homelands should have full legislative powers in their own parliaments. In addition, those parliaments could have legislative control over black municipalities.³⁵ It is difficult to imagine how this could have worked in practice.

The meeting was also willing to restructure the President’s Council, then comprised of white, coloured and Indian representatives, to include black members. The President’s Council had a dual role: it was an advisory body to government regarding whites, coloureds and Indians, and it also had an arbitration function in the event of insoluble differences between the three racially separated legislatures. The proposal to expand this council to include black representatives implied that its tricameral arbitration function had to be relocated.

A separate Black Consultative Forum to advise government on issues of concern to black communities was also punted by some participants. This principle had already been announced by Botha on 25 January that year. This would have been a partial substitute for the absence of black political legislative powers at provincial and national levels of government outside the black homelands. It would also be a negotiating forum composed of different black stakeholders, including leaders from the black homelands, to thrash out options for further political participation of black South Africans at higher levels of government. The Sterrewag meeting failed to reach agreement on which of these two options would be taken forward.

The meeting failed to reach agreement about what precisely they wanted to do. Nor did Botha summarise how he interpreted the largest common denominators in the conversation, as usually happened in cabinet meetings. Instead, he left it to

34. For example, Schoeman, Sterrewag Transcript p 47. He suggested that Ministers’ Councils should only be considered if it later became necessary. Other ministers also preferred a Council of Cabinets to black Ministers’ Councils. See Sterrewag Transcript, pp 66–70, 97–100, 105–106.

35. Koornhof, Sterrewag Transcript, p 64.

Heunis in his final reply to the proceedings. Heunis simply reiterated his interpretation that the meeting had approved the core content of his proposals, although with some differences in nuance.

According to Heunis, the following had been agreed: i) a broad framework for negotiations, but that this was not for public announcement; ii) the principle of self-determination for all over their “own affairs”; iii) that executive bodies would need to be linked to legislative bodies (this applied to all racial groups); and iii) self-determination would be a final goal for homelands determined to be independent, and for self-governing homelands on their way to independence. However, there was a proviso. It was generally accepted that not all black people would be able, or even wanted to exercise their political rights in those particular homelands. The principle of separate racial local authorities for each group was still necessary to provide political participation mechanisms at least at the local community level, for those black communities outside the various homelands.

Significantly, in his summary, Heunis did not refer explicitly to the possibility of the extension of legislative powers to black peoples over their “own affairs” at provincial or national levels, or to black ministers’ councils. This was obviously because of the mixed reception these proposals had received from the meeting. According to Heunis, the principle of representation of black people in the President’s Council for negotiation and advisory purposes had also implicitly been approved by the meeting.³⁶ This interpretation is open to contestation, based on the transcript of the proceedings.

President Botha concluded the session. He remained silent on Heunis’s summary of the proceedings, but instructed the SCC to provide guidelines for his speech at the Natal NP congress on 15 August. These were to be based on the Sterrewag discussions which had just been concluded. However, those guidelines first had to be approved by the Federal Council of the NP and also had to be discussed with the leaders of the black self-governing and independent homelands before his speech (13 days in the future).³⁷ In addition, Botha stated explicitly that he did not want to be prescriptive about the government’s preferred strategies but rather to establish an open agenda for the envisaged negotiations with what he called “legitimate black leaders”. The contents of his speech should, he said, therefore not contain too many details.

Assessment of the Sterrewag proceedings

After P.W. Botha’s initial keynote introduction, he did not comment on the details of most of these proposals by Heunis and on the varying degrees of acceptance thereof by his other ministers. He only intervened periodically to clarify his stand on some issues.

36. Sterrewag Transcript, pp 120–124.

37. Sterrewag Transcript, pp 125–127.

The nature of the envisaged Council of Cabinets was controversial. Heunis's proposed participation of black South Africans at executive level did not imply taking them up in P.W. Botha's existing cabinet within the tricameral parliament. It referred to a hybrid federal/confederal executive council in which representatives of the different separate racially-based ministers' councils/cabinets would sit to take decisions on matters of mutual concern. This is a crucial distinction in the light of later press reports which alleged that P.W. Botha was supposed to have announced the interim membership of black leaders in his cabinet. This interim measure was supposed to apply until agreement had been reached in negotiations with credible black leaders about a final constitutional dispensation that would include all South African citizens.³⁸

It is clear that there was a reluctance on the part of P.W. Botha and his ministers to consider in principle legislative powers for black South African citizens at higher governmental levels. It was only in racially separate local government councils at the municipal level, that this was deemed acceptable. This was a deeply-held conviction among them. It presented them with a major conceptual dilemma in implementing the principle of "separate-but-equal" rights for all racial communities. Separate development was the main founding principle of apartheid.

Giliomee concluded initially that a possible reason for P.W. Botha's silence during most of the meeting could have been that he had suffered a light stroke in early 1985,³⁹ but later he retracted that conclusion on the basis of new evidence to the contrary.⁴⁰ He also suggests that it could have been the result of medical instructions not to raise his blood pressure.⁴¹ This is possible. On the other hand, it is clear from a number of transcripts of cabinet and cabinet committee proceedings which Giliomee may not have had access to at the time,⁴² that P.W. Botha's normal style of interaction in cabinet was to allow ministers to express their views without interruption, unless those views were too irritating to him, as is evident from the transcript of his last cabinet meeting on 14 August 1989 (to a day exactly four years

38. De Klerk, *The Last Trek*, p 106, confirms this.

39. Giliomee, *Die Laaste Afrikanerleiers*, p 183.

40. H. Giliomee, *The Rise and Demise of the Afrikaners* (Tafelberg, Cape Town, 2019). On the other hand, strong circumstantial evidence does exist that P.W. Botha suffered a first mild stroke during the middle of 1987, which was kept secret. See J.P. de Lange, "Interview with Max du Preez", Cape Town, 2007; and G. Bekker and H. J. Bekker, *Living on the Political Edge* (Bekker, Johannesburg, 2014), chapter 11. De Klerk also confirmed this in an interview with this author in Cape Town, on 29 April 2019.

41. Giliomee, *The Rise and Demise of the Afrikaners*.

42. Including an unedited transcript of the meeting of the SCC on Robben Island on 1 March 1986, ARCA: PV203, P.W. Botha, Confidential personal documentary collection, Uncatalogued transcript, "Samesprekings 1 Maart 1986, Robbeneiland". In interviews with De Klerk, Vlok and Barend du Plessis in April 2019, all three confirmed that they too were unaware of the existence of this full transcript of the Robben Island SCC discussions.

after his Rubicon speech), when every cabinet minister advised him to stand down.⁴³ P.W. Botha’s routine style in cabinet was to state his views upfront at the beginning of a discussion on a specific issue, and then to remain reasonably silent, thereby providing each participant in the meeting with an opportunity to state his views. Following this, an opportunity was afforded to each cabinet member, in strict order of seniority, to respond. P.W. Botha would then conclude the discussion on that issue by either explicitly or implicitly stating his interpretation of what needed to be done, in many cases irrespective of the collective views expressed. This is a regular decision-making practice in many Westminster executive systems.

In 2012, Giliomee explored different explanations in the absence of conclusive evidence of the kind that has now been uncovered.⁴⁴ His alternative explanations were feasible and realistic. However, they were based on interviews that he and others conducted with the most senior participants in the Sterrewag meeting two decades after the event. He discounted Coetsee and De Klerk’s recollections of the event. Coetsee alleged that a number of senior cabinet ministers, including himself, wrote the Rubicon speech. This is not true, as is explained later. De Klerk alleged that the concept of “grand apartheid” was rejected at the meeting. This is also factually incorrect, in the light of the verbatim transcript of the meeting. Giliomee regarded Heunis’s and Pik Botha’s versions as plausible. Heunis alleged that a decision was taken at the meeting to include black people in the existing tricameral cabinet. Heunis’s conclusion is, however, also incorrect against the background of the Sterrewag transcript. Pik Botha’s recollection (expressed more than 20 years after the meeting), that it was decided at the meeting to release Mandela,⁴⁵ is also totally incorrect. De Klerk and Prinsloo’s conclusions that P.W. Botha would never have considered announcing significant new policy changes,⁴⁶ can, however, now be confirmed as accurate. P.W. Botha had, right from the start of the Sterrewag proceedings, been very explicit that he was not planning to announce fundamental changes to the government’s policies at the time.

It is an open question how many of the narrow, conservative views that were expressed were instrumental, that is prompted, by P.W. Botha’s political intimidation, or that they were inherently normative, that is, because of their own hard-wired conservative attitudes. This author tends to lean towards a mix of these normative and instrumental drivers. In the case of Pik Botha who shortly afterwards (on 6 February 1986) declared that he would be willing to serve under a black president,⁴⁷ and his alleged intention to join the ANC in later years,⁴⁸ it was probably more instrumental than normative. On the other hand, Viljoen’s prior record of considering

43. Prinsloo, *Stem uit die Wildernis*, pp 390–419.

44. Giliomee, *Die Laaste Afrikanerleiers*, pp 195–197.

45. Giliomee, *Die Laaste Afrikanerleiers*, p 196.

46. Giliomee, *Die Laaste Afrikanerleiers*, p 196.

47. T. Papenfus, *Pik Botha and His Times* (Litera, Pretoria, 2010), p 381.

48. *Mail & Guardian*, “Pik Botha Joining ANC?”, 11 January 2000.

a coloured homeland during the early 1970s,⁴⁹ is normatively consistent with his more conservative views expressed in the Sterrewag meeting. It is also now clear that by 1985, P.W. Botha had reached the ceiling of his transformative potential.

P.W. Botha’s envisaged timeframe for consulting the NP Federal Council and other black leaders about the intended content of his speech was also clearly too tight to achieve all these envisaged decision-making and consultation goals, given the divergent opinions expressed at the Sterrewag meeting. This was a fundamental flaw in the implementation of the Sterrewag strategy.

Heunis’s inputs for the Rubicon speech

Immediately after the conclusion of the Sterrewag meeting, three ministerial inputs were submitted as proposals for possible inclusion in the forthcoming speech to be presented by the president on 15 August 1985. The most substantive suggestions were from Heunis, followed by one from Pik Botha and another by Barend du Plessis. Du Plessis’s input consisted of just a few paragraphs, focused on the South Africa economy. He did not deal with the political issues that were the foci of the Sterrewag meeting. Heunis and De Klerk also submitted an updated set of NP principles while other officials in P.W. Botha’s office also submitted short proposals.⁵⁰ Inputs submitted by Heunis and Pik Botha dealt directly with the political issues for purposes of which the meeting was called.

Heunis provided the president with two brief proposals, prepared by his constitutional planners. The first one comprised a watered-down version of the original three-page speech notes that these planners had prepared and sent to the president on 31 July, just two days before the Sterrewag meeting was due to be held. Heunis then watered down the contents after the inconclusive results of the Sterrewag meeting. He was clearly influenced by the general agreement in the meeting that the NP would first have to approve the detail of the reform steps for negotiation purposes with “credible black leaders”. Little concrete detail could be announced publicly during the upcoming NP congresses. The first revised version therefore focused more on the importance of black own affairs that were envisaged on regional and ethnic group bases for the various black communities, and on the importance to safeguard Western, Christian values.

Heunis then delivered this watered-down version of his 31 July proposals to P.W. Botha personally on Saturday 10 August. He writes that the president was very distant and cold towards him. He did not even invite Heunis into his residence, and just accepted the revised text. However, that same evening, he telephoned Heunis and informed him that he would not deliver what he called the “Prog” speech that Heunis

49. M. Horrell, D. Horner, and J. Kane-Berman (eds), *A Survey of Race Relations in South Africa, 1971* (Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations, 1971).

50. Prinsloo, *Stem uit die Wildernis*, p 342.

had written for him.⁵¹ This further illustrates P.W. Botha’s resolve not to make major policy change announcements.

After increasing speculation in media reports about possible dramatic announcements that could be expected within days in Durban, Heunis took it upon himself to prepare a further watered-down but expanded (five-page) version three days later, on Tuesday 13 August.⁵² This revision motivated in slightly more detail the government’s commitment to negotiating in future the details of further expansion of black political participation in both black own affairs and general affairs, beyond the existing provisions at the time at local and provincial levels. It also confirmed that black people living in independent homelands would retain South African citizenship if they preferred to do so. Its major new content, however, focused on P.W. Botha’s suggested response to the unreasonably high expectations for his speech that were created by media reports. It reiterated that the policy options mentioned in the media reports were “... not necessarily the only proposals under consideration ...”⁵³ by government, but that the details of specific policy strategies would be the result of negotiations.

On Tuesday 13 August, Heunis arranged for his second revision to be hand-delivered to the office of the president. President P.W. Botha then proceeded to finalise his speech.

Pik Botha’s input for the speech and his various briefings

Immediately after the Sterrewag meeting, Pik Botha briefed his department about the Sterrewag proceedings. He was in extremely high spirits and informed his colleagues that the meeting resulted in a major political breakthrough that included the temporary accommodation of black leaders in the existing cabinet, depending on the results of negotiations with credible black leaders.⁵⁴ However, this was incorrect. Such an option was not mentioned during the Sterrewag proceedings, and it is doubtful whether it would have been considered seriously, given the mood of the meeting. It is difficult to reconcile Pik Botha’s interpretation with what really happened at that meeting.

Botha instructed his deputy minister, Louis Nel, to start drafting his (Pik’s) input for the then upcoming presidential speech before he left on an international diplomatic briefing mission to inform the foreign representatives of the USA, UK and Germany what could be expected from the P.W. Botha’s address. Nel in turn instructed the deputy director-general, Carl von Hirschberg, and a senior

51. Heunis, *Die Binnekring*, p 80.

52. ARCA, PV895, File No. 3/5/5/1, J.C. Heunis, “Notas vir die Staatspresident se Toespraak”, 15 Augustus, 10 Augustus 1985.

53. ARCA, PV895, File No. 3/5/5/1, J.C. Heunis, “Notas vir die Staatspresident se Toespraak”, 15 Augustus, 10 Augustus 1985.

54. Papenfus, *Pik Botha and his Times*, p 367.

departmental official, Marc Burger, to coordinate the drafting on the basis of Pik Botha’s interpretation of the Sterrewag discussions.⁵⁵

Pik Botha felt that the most important issue in the president’s speech should be the government’s decision to release Nelson Mandela from gaol. According to Pik, even prior to the Sterrewag meeting, he had persuaded the president to release Mandela if the leaders of the most important black homelands confirmed and guaranteed that Mandela would cease to use violence in future to achieve his political goals. By the time the Sterrewag meeting took place, Pik Botha had already received assurances from the leaders of the Transkei, Ciskei, Venda, Bophuthaswana and KwaZulu⁵⁶ that they were willing to guarantee this, and he felt that this opened the gate for Mandela’s release. However, Pik Botha had not confirmed this assumption with P.W. Botha during the Sterrewag meeting. Secondly, Pik Botha wanted the president to say in his speech that the principle that negotiations would be held with legitimate black leaders had been accepted. Thirdly, Pik Botha was confident that the “pillars of apartheid” would be removed (probably referring to the inclusion of all racial groups in a Council of Cabinets as one of the possible outcomes of the envisaged negotiations with black leaders).⁵⁷

In the end, Pik Botha’s envisaged inputs for the president’s speech turned out to be a fully drafted partial speech in itself, comprising all of eleven pages.⁵⁸ It confirmed the government’s willingness to negotiate on an open agenda with legitimate leaders of all communities about a mutually acceptable solution that would accommodate the diversity of the people of South Africa through cooperation and co-responsibility of everyone, instead of the existing, simplistic “winner-takes-all” system. The document further proposed that Mandela’s release would be given serious consideration if other legitimate black leaders gave the South African government “satisfactory indications that he [would] conduct himself in a law-abiding manner”.⁵⁹ The proposed speech submitted by Pik Botha to President P.W. Botha concluded: “I believe that we are today crossing the Rubicon. There can be no turning back”.⁶⁰

The contents of this draft speech was, with the exception of the references to Mandela, also fully in line with the cautious approach and lack of concrete prescriptive detail that P.W. Botha wanted. The proposed speech was delivered to the P.W. Botha on 11 August.

55. Papenfus, *Pik Botha and his Times*, p 367, 370.

56. Papenfus, *Pik Botha and his Times*, p 367.

57. Papenfus, *Pik Botha and his Times*, p 368.

58. Stellenbosch University, J.S. Gericke Library, Giliomee Documentary Collection (hereafter GDC), Africana Room, Pik Botha, “The State President’s Durban Manifesto”, 1985.

59. GDC, Pik Botha, “State President’s Durban Manifesto”, p 8.

60. GDC, Pik Botha, “State President’s Durban Manifesto”, p 10.

Immediately after the conclusion of his diplomatic briefings in Europe on 8 and 9 August, Pik Botha possibly had an eleven-page report prepared, summarising the discussions that he had held on his European trip. A copy of this document was also found in P.W. Botha’s personal confidential documentary collection in Bloemfontein.⁶¹ It is in Afrikaans, is indeed eleven pages in length and explains in great detail what transpired during those diplomatic briefings. However, the specific origin of the report, its date and author(s) are not indicated. Senior officials who were involved with the briefings or in the department at the time, and who have been asked by this author about the report, have no recollection that such a report was ever drawn up. The Department of Foreign Affairs’ reports were normally written in English, and no one could remember such an Afrikaans report being prepared.⁶²

Two possible alternative conclusions about the origin of the report can be drawn. The first is that Pik Botha possibly had it written as a special, confidential Afrikaans summary of the English minutes of those diplomatic meetings, had it delivered directly to P.W. Botha and did not keep copies of it, as he also explained he had done with his original speech input.⁶³ It remains a mystery, however, why copies of these important strategic documents would not have been retained. A second alternative origin of the report could be that a professional intelligence operative also attended the briefings and submitted the report in question directly to President P.W. Botha via one of the state intelligence agencies.

The briefing report was dated Sunday 11 August 1985, and one can assume that after its completion it was probably delivered to the president’s office. At about that same time, Heunis was still revising his final comments to counter the perceived negative fallout of the numerous international and domestic media reports on what was supposed to be announced.

As summarised in the report, Pik Botha’s briefings on the diplomatic mission were fully in line with the Sterrewag proceedings, with the single exception of the references to the release of Mandela. As mentioned earlier in this article, there is no reference to Mandela in the 133-page transcript of the Sterrewag proceedings. This is despite the fact that P.W. Botha offered on 31 January 1985 in his reply to the debate on his speech at the opening of parliament on 25 January 1985, that his government would consider the release of Mandela if he explicitly rejected the use of violence to achieve his political ends.⁶⁴ However, no participant in the Sterrewag meeting even mentioned the possibility that the ANC could be unbanned for purposes of possible

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61. ARCA: PV203, P.W. Botha, Confidential personal documentary collection, Uncatalogued report, Pik Botha, “Verslag oor Samesprekings met Amerikaanse, Britse en Duitse Verteenwoordigers in Europa” 8/9 Augustus 1985.
 62. P.W. Botha’s biographer, Dr Daan Prinsloo, recalls that Pik Botha gave him a copy of this report in 1992 (See Prinsloo, *Stem uit die Wildernis*, p 350).
 63. ARCA: PV203, P.W. Botha Collection, Pik Botha, “Verslag oor Samesprekings met Amerikaanse, Britse en Duitse Verteenwoordigers in Europa” 8/9 Augustus 1985.
 64. P.W. Botha, “State President’s Reply to the Debate on his Speech at the Opening of Parliament”, *Hansard Debates*, 31 January 1985, col. 319– 320.

negotiations about a mutually accepted political settlement. It is therefore clear that the release of Mandela was unthinkable at that point in time in 1985 in the P.W. Botha cabinet.

According to his diplomatic briefing report, Pik Botha claimed he had not divulged any concrete steps discussed in the Sterrewag meeting. This, however, is doubtful. The US assistant secretary of state for African Affairs, Dr Chester Crocker, relates unequivocally that Pik Botha informed them in Vienna of the impending announcement of courageous plans for reform in South Africa, new formulae for constitutional development and new ideas for the release of Mandela.⁶⁵ This recollection by Crocker is not in line with the Afrikaans report summary of what Pik Botha told his diplomatic discussants during his briefing mission. One can therefore only accept that the briefing report comprised a sanitised version of what really transpired, as is substantiated by the much more detailed subsequent media reports on his briefings. It also sheds doubt on the report’s possible intelligence origins and makes it more credible that Pik Botha had a hand in its creation. It is difficult to accept that he would not have any written summary of his briefings prepared to explain his side of what happened, given the controversy that those briefings caused.

Immediately after Pik Botha informed his department on 3 August 1985 about the Sterrewag discussions and the required content of his proposals for the president’s speech, the media division of his department also started marketing the event to the international media. Botha’s press secretary personally phoned *Time Magazine* and *Newsweek* and tipped them off that a major policy announcement by President P.W. Botha was on the cards. One can only speculate about the level of detail that he had divulged. The international media took the bait and reports started to appear, alleging inter alia that black people would be included in the existing President’s Council and cabinet. Also that this would be the beginning of power-sharing among all racial groups in the country.⁶⁶ Similar reports also started to appear in the local South African media, based on different sources, including officials in Heunis’s department,⁶⁷ and directly from MPs.⁶⁸

These media reports were in total conflict with the general consensus in the Sterrewag meeting that: i) no details of further reforms should be made public because the NP had to be consulted about them, and ii) that the details should be the

65. C. Crocker, *High Noon in Southern Africa: Making Peace in Rough Neighborhood* (Norton, New York, 1993), cited in Heunis, *Die Binnekring*, p 79.

66. Papenfus, *Pik Botha and his Times*, p 369.

67. In an interview with this author during January 2019 in Pretoria, a senior official in that department at the time recalled how Neville Krige, the department’s media liaison official told him that during the week immediately before the speech, President Botha personally telephoned him on the golf course. The purpose of the call was to reprimand him for speculating in an interview with the SABC about what Botha was supposed to say in his speech.

68. Prinsloo, *Stem uit die Wildernis*, pp 343, 347; Giliomee, *Die Laaste Afrikanerleiers*, p 194.

outcome of negotiations. Unfortunately, these implicit agreements do not seem to have been taken to heart by the Sterrewag ministers who clearly had passed them on to their colleagues, officials and the media with whom they spoke about it after the meeting. The reports also contained the erroneous alleged intention of P.W. Botha to include some black leaders in his tricameral cabinet until such time as a final constitutional participation deal had been negotiated with “credible” black leaders.

As indicated above, the perceptions of the Sterrewag participants about what was decided at that meeting, are divergent. The president’s decision not to summarise his own interpretation of the proceedings at the end of the meeting, but asking Heunis to do it instead, probably contributed largely to a number of these divergent recollections. Afterwards, Pik Botha alleged that the meeting had approved the release of Mandela in principle, subject to his rejection/suspension of violence. This was incorrect. It seems more credible that he deliberately attempted (in his statement) to justify his later reports to the international diplomatic corps and his decision to have arguments supporting this view written into his draft speech notes to P.W. Botha. He probably did this deliberately to increase external pressure on the president to release Mandela, which was an issue that he felt very strongly about. Heunis’s 2005 recollection that the meeting decided to include black people in the existing cabinet,⁶⁹ is also not substantiated by the Sterrewag transcript. In this case it is possible that his interviewer could have misunderstood him on this issue.

Further, the Sterrewag transcript indicates clearly that President P.W. Botha and even the more “liberal” members of his cabinet still attempted to preserve final white rule in South Africa. P.W. Botha, who was under normal circumstances notoriously fickle and sceptical about the press, felt that he was being pressurised not only by foreign interests,⁷⁰ but also by his own colleagues such as Pik Botha on Mandela, and by Heunis and other more “liberal” (*verligte*) members of the SCC to de facto begin sharing power with black people. His innate reluctance even before the Sterrewag meeting to consider major deviations from established NP policy about black political participation,⁷¹ was further evident in that meeting transcript. Giliomee correctly identifies this reluctance on the part of the president to accept the practical implications of the principles on black political participation which he announced on 25 January 1985.⁷²

The Rubicon speech

P.W. Botha developed a basic framework and draft for the speech, taking into account all the inputs he had received. This framework was expanded by his speechwriters and resubmitted to him in successive stages until he was satisfied with the end

69. Giliomee, *Die Laaste Afrikanerleiers*, cited in Heunis, *Die Binnekring*, 148.

70. P.W. Botha’s interview with Steven Solarz of the American Congress is one case in point. (See Prinsloo, *Stem uit die Wildernis*, pp 343–344.)

71. Heunis, *Die Binnekring*, 69.

72. Giliomee, “P.W. Botha and Power Sharing without Losing Control”, in *Die Laaste Afrikanerleiers*.

product.⁷³ The president’s initial handwritten notes on which his introduction to the Sterrewag proceedings was based, and which formed the basis of his speech thereafter, were also found in the same folder as the transcript of the Sterrewag meeting. This confirms that he had, even before the Sterrewag meeting, very specific ideas about what he wanted to include in his speech.

On Wednesday 14 August 1985, the day before the speech was scheduled, the president read the full text that he eventually delivered, to his NP cabinet colleagues after the conclusion of his formal cabinet meeting which was also attended by Allan Hendrickse and Amichand Rajbansi in their ex officio capacities as chairs of their respective own affairs Ministers’ Councils. According to his biographer, P.W. Botha encountered no explicit resistance to its final wording from any of the NP members of his cabinet, all of whom had participated 12 days earlier in the Sterrewag proceedings.⁷⁴ This was hardly surprising, given his legendary intimidating interaction with his colleagues. However, in a later interview with Botha’s son, Jan, Heunis mentions that he did indeed respond to the president after he read the speech to them. He reminded P.W. Botha that he (Heunis) had provided him with inputs for his speech that reflected what was discussed at the Sterrewag meeting.⁷⁵

The contents of the speech have been well-publicised over time. In his delivered text, P.W. Botha reiterated his view that all South African communities should be able to participate in decisions on matters of common concern in structures created for such purposes through open-ended negotiation.⁷⁶ However, he again explicitly and prescriptively rejected a one-man-one-vote unitary political system in South Africa, as well as a fourth chamber of parliament. He made vague reference to the possibility that a solution could be found in a new type of devolution of power to allow for political participation for all but simultaneously also to protect minorities.⁷⁷ He also agreed to consider releasing Mandela if he undertook to renounce violence, as he had already announced in parliament almost seven months earlier, on 31 January of that year.⁷⁸

In delivering his speech, the president did not deviate significantly from his final written text. In the end he only used a few peripheral and innocuous sentences from Heunis’s inputs, probably because he decided to avoid details that could be seen as prescriptive and as opening a route to possible power sharing with black people. Simultaneously, however, he made it prescriptively very clear that he would only be willing to negotiate about the principles and details of a new, “devolved type of political system” that did not lead to the domination of one population group over another.⁷⁹ He had already expressed these sentiments very clearly at the Sterrewag

73. Prinsloo, *Stem uit die Wildernis*, p 343.

74. Prinsloo, *Stem uit die Wildernis*, p 345.

75. Heunis, *Die Binnekring*, p 80.

76. P.W. Botha, *Rubicon Speech*, p. 38.

77. P.W. Botha, *Rubicon Speech*, pp. 40-41.

78. P.W. Botha, *Rubicon Speech*, p. 49.

79. P.W. Botha, *Rubicon Speech*, p. 41.

meeting two weeks earlier. He also included Pik Botha’s reference to crossing the Rubicon as the concluding statement in his speech.

Assessment of the Rubicon fiasco

The recently discovered verbatim transcript of the Sterrewag proceedings and the official inputs subsequently made by Heunis and Pik Botha into the president’s Rubicon speech, now make it possible to develop definitive findings and draw more accurate conclusions about that fateful address and its negative consequences. Although many critical assessments have been written over the years and have captured different aspects of what occurred and why,⁸⁰ a number of unanswered questions remained. These new sources of information fill many conceptual and empirical gaps in the scholarly narratives on the topic thus far.

The first important new conclusion is that the controversial Sterrewag preparatory meeting to develop a blueprint for future government strategies to expand the existing tricameral constitutional dispensation in South Africa to include its black citizens, proved to be far less significant than was initially accepted and reported by many of its senior participants. It was a confusing meeting where the most senior National Party leaders just stated their preferences and other views, without any meaningful debate about such issues. The meeting did not achieve its main objective of narrowing down the existing strategic and tactical policy differences among the participants. It also failed to approve new political policy changes or breakthroughs that the president could announce in his speech on the issue two weeks later.

The main reasons for these failures include the strategy that P.W. Botha followed in managing the meeting. He tried to steer the discussions in the direction of maintaining the status quo. Taking his lead, the meeting was quite frankly, submissive, exploring only a few restricted tactics to implement existing political policy towards black political participation that were compatible with the tricameral parliamentary system and the dominance of whites within that system, in a way that would hopefully be more acceptable to black South Africans. Botha did not seek the meeting’s collective approval of possible strategies or tactics. In the end, no explicit decisions were taken,⁸¹ and very different perceptions remained (in the eye of the beholder) among the participants about what was approved and/or not approved.

This confusing outcome was further aggravated by P.W. Botha’s eventual refusal to accept the official inputs that he requested at the end of the meeting from his senior ministers. The president wrote his own speech, largely sticking to the

80. D. Worrall, *The Independent Factor* (Denis Worrall, Cape Town, 2018); Giliomee, *Die Laaste Afrikanerleiers*; Papenfus, *Pik Botha and his Times*; Heunis, *Die Binnekering*; De Klerk, *The Last Trek*; Prinsloo, *Stem uit die Wildernis*.

81. Contrary to virtually all the so-called informed reports about the meeting, including most recently the work by Worrall, *The Independent Factor*, p 132.

political status quo at that time, but declaring his government's intention in principle to discuss possible new approaches with what he called "legitimate" black leaders.

There were therefore no first (non-delivered) and second (delivered) Rubicon speeches by P.W. Botha in 1985, as has been widely claimed.⁸² In the light of the Sterrewag transcript, it is doubtful whether the foreign and domestic media leakages and the wide speculation about what the president was expected to say, caused him to deviate from the *content* of the speech that he was busy finalising. P.W. Botha clearly, from the outset, did not intend to announce more than what he ultimately delivered – the excerpts from his interventions in the Sterrewag meeting illustrate this. The media leakages and speculation before the meeting probably just had a negative influence on the *tone* of his delivery.

The irony is that both Heunis's versions for the president's speech were fully in line with P.W. Botha's stated approach at the Sterrewag meeting. The Heunis proposals were in the end just a watered-down version of his input in the Sterrewag meeting; he omitted all the concrete details of what he had suggested. The same can be said of Pik Botha's proposal for the speech, with the single exception of the conditional release of Mandela. P.W. Botha decided to incorporate that suggestion in his speech but he ignored the further proposal in Pik Botha's notes about guarantees to be provided by legitimate black leaders should Mandela himself still refuse to renounce violence.

It is clear from this new evidence that President Botha, even before the Sterrewag meeting, was inherently unwilling to make major policy concessions at that point in time. The media storm about what was supposed to be announced, the unjustifiably high expectations that were created by these reports and the pressure that he felt was being exercised on him to move further and faster than he was willing to go, and which he had discussed with his cabinet colleagues at that meeting, probably just strengthened his resolve to send a very hard-line message to everyone with his speech. He succeeded in doing exactly that, although it was obviously the wrong thing to do and very short-sighted, but then this was perfectly in character for P.W. Botha.

Based on the evidence of what occurred at the Sterrewag meeting, the expectation of major policy changes that Pik Botha created among his officials and towards his diplomatic contacts, were clearly the result of an over-idealistic assumption that Heunis's "enlightened" suggestions during his introduction to the proceedings had been accepted by the group and by P.W. Botha, although they would not be announced in detail in his speech.

Furthermore, the media leakages included a strange mix of accurate technical information (black participation in the President's Council and in a Council of Cabinets) and inaccurate information (that black leaders might be included in the

82. Giliomee Documentary Collection, Pik Botha, "State President's Durban Manifesto".

president’s existing cabinet at that time and a decision to release Mandela). These technical details were also directly contrary to President Botha’s own strategy to keep it vague and leave the details for the negotiations.

P.W. Botha also delayed the completion of his speech until the day before he had to deliver it. This made it impossible to stick to his own envisaged process of having the “new” strategies approved by the NP Federal Council and by legitimate black leaders before he announced them in public, as he stated in his conclusion of the Sterrewag proceedings.

In a manner of speaking, P.W. Botha and South Africa’s Rubicon disaster of 1985 was therefore inevitable. At the time of the Sterrewag meeting the NP government of the day was quite simply not ready to take the watershed decisions that everyone in the cabinet probably realised would eventually have to be taken. They tabled and entertained disparate views on possible steps to take, but everything was left hanging in the air, and no agreement was reached about core, outstanding issues.

The agreed-upon strategy that it was best to divulge as few details as possible publicly, failed miserably. It was decided at the meeting to keep the technical details of what was envisaged until party structures had approved the new direction. Instead there were indiscriminate leakages on the details by Sterrewag participants to their supporters, constituencies and preferred media contacts. To make matters worse, inaccurate information was provided and these media reports angered the president. It is clear from the analysis so far that Pik Botha cannot be blamed as the only source of media leakage about what transpired in the Sterrewag meeting. However, he was the main source of leakages to the international media.

In the end the Sterrewag strategy failed because it was badly managed, fundamentally flawed and untimely. Cabinet was in essence not ready to do what needed to be done. However, clearly under tremendous political and financial pressure, P.W. Botha eventually made a public acceptance and announcement of virtually all Heunis’s suggestions for a constitutional dispensation with limited executive power-sharing with black South Africans at national level in his later speeches during subsequent NP congresses in the Cape, Free State and the Transvaal in 1986. However, these proposals did not include the participation of black citizens in provincial and national legislative structures outside the self-governing and independent homelands. In addition, they did not unban and rehabilitate the banned black political liberation movements. These executive reform proposals were therefore doomed to failure at that stage because they were too little, too late to meet the increasingly high overseas and domestic expectations among black South Africans. De Klerk broke this impasse only in 1990, with the approval of his cabinet.

At the Sterrewag meeting the president and his cabinet were therefore totally unprepared for the extremely important new policy positions that P.W. Botha was supposed to divulge in his Rubicon speech two weeks later, despite the hype during

the meeting about a watershed time that necessitated critical thinking and speedy actions.

The run-up to the Rubicon speech in 1985 had a significant, negative impact on the delay of the eventual political settlement in South Africa. It was only 5 years later that the NP, under intense pressure, relinquished the rationale for its existence when De Klerk unbanned the black liberation movements and formally accepted the principle of an inclusive negotiated political settlement in the country. It was a formal recognition that it was no longer feasible to retain final white control in South Africa.

These new facts about the Rubicon speech offer a better explanation for many of the events of that time and for the results and longer-term significance of the transition process. They illustrate the troubled process of political transformation in South Africa that had unintended consequences and could not be fully controlled as the NP government had envisaged. They also have important lessons for any intended policy transformation project in future.

From a methodological perspective, the glaring differences between the later recollections of participants in the meeting on the one hand and the verbatim transcript of what really occurred, is very striking. The transcript confirms the important lesson that opinions and conclusions based on subjective recollections are very risky after an elapsed period of time and also as a result of the ideological and other subjective driving forces behind the formation of attitudes and actions.⁸³ This reinforces the significance of triangulation of data collection and research findings to increase the validity of systematic research results.

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