

DEMOCRACY IN ACTION

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People were hurt, admits unlikely star Wessels

DEPUTY Foreign Minister Leon Wessels looked like an unlikely star in the line-up of prominent speakers at the "South Africa in Transition" conference.

But in many ways he was: admitting to government policies having "hurt" people in the past, calling on whites to identify themselves emotionally with Africa and become truly involved with its successes and failures, and showing concern and understanding for those who distrust his government.

The tall former Afrikaanse Studentebond president cut a sincere and humble figure before an audience made up mainly of traditional "enemies" of the National Party, many of them ANC and MDM leaders.

It was the first time a member of the government had appeared on a public platform with a member of the ANC (recently released Robben Islander Jeffrey Radebe) and also the first time the cabinet had accepted an invitation to participate in an Idasa conference.

Mr Wessels soon showed that his presence was not a token gesture. He admitted that his personal "journey into Africa" had

started only very recently – on the same day that Nelson Mandela took his first steps to freedom from Victor Verster prison. Wessels was watching the event on television in a country elsewhere in Africa. That visit was an eye-opener, he said. He realised that most whites were only physically in Africa and that they still had to learn how they can constructively be part of the continent.

The deputy minister rounded off his performance by spontaneously offering, to some amusement and applause from the audience, to hold the microphone for co-panelist Jeffrey Radebe (a compliment Radebe returned during question time later).

In response to questions from the audience, Wessels said it was very gracious of the "other side" to bury the hatchet and forgive past mistakes, but it would be counter-productive for the government to gloss over past errors.

"We have to talk about the past if we are going to talk about the future. That is the only way we will discover and rediscover each other. No matter how well intended policies were – people were hurt in the process."

Meet needs of disadvantaged, conference on transition told

By Ronel Scheffer

THE political transition process in South Africa could easily be derailed if some of the material expectations of the disadvantaged sections of the community were not met in the short term.

This warning, alluding also to the need to give the masses reason to have faith in the negotiation process, was one of the key messages from the "South Africa in Transition" conference hosted by Idasa in Port Elizabeth in June.

Several speakers, among them noted academics and trade unionists, pointed to contradictions in the government's approach –

and, to a lesser extent, also in the statements and actions of the progressive opposition – in the current pre-negotiation phase. Such anomalies, it was felt, would exacerbate the public confusion, fear, bewilderment and anger normally associated with periods of political transition.

Also emphasised during the debates were:

* The government's determination to control as far as possible the negotiation process;

* The need for unbanned organisations to be ready to participate and bargain in the

"normal" world of conventional politics;

* The next phase in transition depends to a very large extent on whether the government and its potential allies in transition can consolidate the process in the centre, contain opposition on the perimeters and begin to share responsibility for managing the process away from domination;

* The uncertainty of the outcome of attempts to liberalise and democratise South African society;

* The fact that South Africa was not an "exceptional case" but could learn from

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Deputy Foreign Minister Leon Wessels holds the microphone for Jeffrey Radebe of the ANC.

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