

# In search of Mr

## Changing face of only Nat premier

Belligerent, right-wing hawk or a politician who cares?

MOIRA LEVY interviewed Cape premier Hernus Kriel in an attempt to find the person behind the reputation.



**A** REBEL within the ranks of the National Party, verlig before anyone else had ever heard of the term, misunderstood and unfairly maligned – this is the image Cape premier Hernus Kriel offered in a recent interview.

Chatting to him in his new office in the old Cape Provincial Administration building, one would hardly think that this affable gent once headed South Africa's dreaded Department of Law and Order. Listening to him recount tales of his youthful rebellions against government policy and earnestly attest to life-long reservations about apartheid, one is forced to the conclusion that the new South Africa is preparing to discard its past with the ease of a snake shedding an old skin.

The country's only National Party provincial premier, Kriel talks in terms of the new South Africa. He swears allegiance to President Nelson Mandela and holds former president FW de Klerk in the highest regard – De Klerk "had the guts to relinquish power to bring justice to all South Africans". He urges a colour-blind approach to delivery of services and asserts that he has worked for change all along.

He says he has repeatedly declared himself committed to the ANC's Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). He firmly believes in an "integrated, holistic" approach to redressing the imbalances of the past and talks without faltering of his ideas for social and economic development in the region – jobs first, the rest must follow, he says.



# Verligte

"It will not help to build houses if the occupants do not have jobs to earn a living in order to maintain such houses and pay for services. To give a man a house if he does not have a job is to place an unfair burden on him.

"The first priority is to build a growing economy. This ensures job creation which in turn empowers people to improve their living standards. We are in the process of formulating the Western Cape RDP. We are obtaining all the information that is available from local authorities as to where the most urgent needs can be found, in rural as well as urban areas. Once we have that then we can make proper decisions about where to start and what our priorities should be."

Top of his list, he says, is provision of water. Despite regular flooding in some areas of the Western Cape, many township residents don't have access to clean water.

Pressed on exactly when the people of the Western Cape can expect to start seeing the jobs, houses and services he refers to, Kriel repeats: "We must plan properly before we can start spending money. We are in the process of planning. Once we have those plans in position, we will publicise them, make them known, liaise with people at ground level."

He's a man who won't be rushed but he's also one who is emphasising the need to liaise and consult. He acknowledges that this signals a shift in government style.

"That was a mistake we made in the past. We tried to address what we perceived to be the problems and not the expressed problems. Now we have to see whether our plans meet the expectations and expressed wishes of the people."

Characterised by political opponents as both reactionary and aloof, Kriel counters that he is "not willing to create a high profile with sweet-sounding promises; it is easy to announce grand schemes but you also have to deliver the goods".

He also insists that he is accessible to the people of the region. "Since I took up office I have seen a total of 278 community leaders from the Western Cape. I have declared my team of ministers and myself available to the people. I am at present as accessible as can be. I will consider suggestions from people to improve my accessibility – but the biggest enemy is time."

Kriel is equally philosophical about resentment of him among residents of Western Cape townships and widespread disappointment at the National Party victory in the region.

"In any election there will be one party that gets more votes than the others. That explains the disappointment. It is, however, true that we have a government of national unity. The same applies to the Western Cape.

"I have already instructed the Western Cape administration to give the highest priority to the needs of disadvantaged communities – mainly situated in the townships. I trust that these concerns will be allayed through the visible actions of the Western Cape government."

Asked how he would like to be remembered in years to come, Kriel is

reticent at first. "I do not want to be specifically remembered for myself. I would rather like to retire from public office, when the time arrives, knowing that the Western Cape is a strong province that offers hope to all its people – a province of good hope."

But he relents later: "If you insist on a personal expectation, it would be to be remembered as a politician who cared for the people who voted for him."

Asked how he reconciles this aspiration with the reputation he acquired as a belligerent, unyielding, right-wing hawk, his response is a mixture of bemusement and indignation. His was the first department to introduce affirmative action, he says, and under him police training colleges were integrated "by restoring police officers who had been discriminated against because of racial policies to their rightful place in the hierarchy".

"I was the first man to appoint generals of colour. I took the dangerous step of placing on pension more than half of the general staff and bringing younger and more verligte guys into the management of the police force."

He points proudly, also, to a history of political dissent as a student. Before verligtheid became the National Party modus operandi, Kriel was one of a group of five NP members who wrote a pamphlet titled "Pro Libertate" which called for direct parliamentary representation for Asians and coloureds ("we weren't brave enough to call for a vote for blacks"), a re-examination of the Mixed Marriages and Immorality Acts and the scrapping of the Group Areas Act.

The pamphlet "caused a furore at the time" and resulted in his immediate dismissal from the party.

He explains his dissenting role in terms of friendships he developed with coloured children he grew up with. "I just couldn't accept that they couldn't go to certain places while I could. It was so embarrassing," he says.

He explains his return to the party of apartheid in these terms: "If you want to be a politician and if you want to change things, you have to work within the structures."

Kriel declares himself a man of the De Klerk generation. He rose rapidly through the political ranks under De Klerk, becoming Minister of Planning and Provincial Affairs in 1989 – in which role he introduced the parliamentary debate on the scrapping of the Group Areas and Land Acts – and Minister of Law and Order in 1991, taking over from the disgraced Adriaan Vlok in the wake of the Inkathagate scandal.

As one of the members of the De Klerk inner circle, his responsibility to the negotiating process was to "create the climate in which negotiations could take place". This included "using the sword power of the state from time to time".

One of those times was when he ordered the mass arrest of Pan Africanist Congress negotiators following a wave of terrorist attacks by

and finds that the poor have adopted a patient attitude in

regard to the RDP.

**T**HERE is no cynicism on the ground about the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). People in the townships of the Western Cape are upbeat about delivery of improvements to their lives.

Mzwakhe Zwana, 34, is confident that the new government will fulfil at least some of its promises and says that change is "already noticeable". "There are people who come out here and give us soup and bread when the weather is very cold. They tell us that the government is looking to our problems."

Unemployed and homeless, Zwana hopes the RDP will give him a job so that he can return to his family in Site C, Khayelitsha. He left his wife and two children three years ago after losing his job. Realising he could no longer support them, he "sneaked away".

He now survives by begging from motorists stopping at traffic lights in Lansdowne Road. Sometimes he scavenges at the local dumpsites. "Only God knows how I manage to make it through the day," he says.

Domestic worker and single mother Elizabeth Dube, 48, who lives in Mbekweni, Paarl, with her three children and two of her sister's, hopes the RDP will help domestic workers get better pay. Dube says her employer has already started showing concern for her well-being and has placed her in insurance schemes.

"If only the RDP can ensure that such

## 'Looking to our problems'

arrangements are extended to all domestic workers!"

Xolile Ndinisa, 25, of Crossroads, expects the RDP to alleviate the desperate unemployment in the townships. Studying community development at the University of the Western Cape, Ndinisa says the companies that are going to build roads and houses will consult and employ local labour. In that way people will be actively involved in the RDP.

Ndinisa is concerned that the RDP has not been thoroughly explained to the people but adds: "Through television and radio they know it's something that is going to meet their problems. Workshops can quickly solve this difficulty."

The slow pace of implementation of the RDP in the region is what concerns Xakabantu Jongaphi, 36, a former shop steward of the Nyanga administration office

branch of the South African Municipal Workers' Union. However, he attributes this to the collapse of local government structures.

"The abandonment of local government structures by former councillors left an empty space. Things will go back to normality probably after the coming local government elections," he says.

"Ikapa Town Council moved the local administration office – which used to be at Nyanga – away from the people it is supposed to serve. Participation of communities in development will ensure such things do not happen in future without consultation. We will make sure the council is administered by people who understand our problems."

A house is what 30-year-old Ntombekhaya Nomvete of Guguletu wants from the RDP.

Journalist Mark Jansen, 26, wants the RDP to address the prejudices created by years of apartheid rule, specifically by addressing imbalances between township and white schools. He thinks black teachers should be encouraged to apply for posts in white areas.

"A common practice is that blacks are employed in these schools to teach Xhosa. They should be empowered to teach other challenging subjects such as physics, biology and mathematics. Some of them even qualify to be principals. These are some of the problems that should be addressed by local governments." ■

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the organisation's armed wing Apla. Hugely criticised for what was construed in a variety of quarters as an action that threatened the gains of the negotiation process, Kriel remains adamant that he did what he had to do.

The result was a noticeable drop in terror attacks and a PAC-initiated meeting in Harare. "I didn't mince my words," he says of the meeting. "They accepted that I was going to give them more, unless they came to an agreement."

This is the kind of tough talk that was familiar as the Kriel style. But he has no nostalgia for the past. "That part of my career is past. I never attend reunions."

However, he defends the security forces, says 99 percent are good, honourable people,

and denies all knowledge of hit squads, assassinations and mayhem in the ranks. He is also "extremely pleased to have had the opportunity to be minister of law and order" and "thoroughly enjoyed it".

So, who is this man called Hernus Kriel who demonstrates the political ability to wield carrot and stick with equal vigour; who can stare down his foes without the flicker of an eyelid but enjoys nothing more than to share an evening meal of traditional farmer's tripe and rice with friends? Who is the man that spearheaded security force clashes with civil society but now declares that the notion of justice is the guiding principle according to which he lives his life?

It had to be asked: "Mr Kriel, have you

changed, or do you think you have been misunderstood all these years?"

He doesn't laugh, agrees he has changed, says he sees himself as something of an agent of change. He traces the shifts in the National Party back to the days of John Vorster when, he says, the first cracks started appearing in the apartheid edifice. Younger members of the party, including himself, "played a role in changing the party from within, had an influence on the thinking of the party over the years".

If they had known then what we all know now – that the result would be an apartheid-free South Africa led by Mandela – would they have persisted?

He hesitates only for a moment. "I think we wanted change because that is also a development process in your own thinking. Once you start change, then you develop with the change that is taking place. And eventually you will come to the conclusion that there is no other alternative." ■