

MBEKI

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Political Will

Some five weeks have passed since President Thabo Mbeki's inauguration. In the interim, remarkable evidence has emerged to show Government's political will to introduce economic reform.

It started out with the privatisation of 20% of SAA at a price which far exceeded the most optimistic expectations of commentators. Then followed the announcements heralding the restructuring of Telkom and Transnet, with modernisation and greater efficiency as their goals but at the cost of significant job losses.

Government could easily have lost its nerve, considering that thousands stand to lose their jobs at what would still ultimately be State-controlled enterprises.

The Telkom and Transnet announcements were followed by the news that the Post Office is to acquire international partners, hopefully leading to modernisation and a better postal service.

The same period saw Government reject the wage demands of trade unions in the civil service, arguing that this would leave less money for social services. At the same time, Government stopped its subsidy to the ERPM gold mine, despite the dramatic job losses and bad publicity which would inevitably follow.

All these announcements, which resulted in job-losses, occurred less than 50 days after the election. Cosatu could not have been too impressed.

To crown in all, Mbeki delivered a strongly worded speech in Algeria in support of sound economic management, committing himself and his Government, by implication, to the economic policy currently being pursued.

Example is better than precept, and it appears that Government is determined to press ahead with the painful but essential economic reform.

An interesting sub-text is the role played by so-called communists in the process of reform. Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi is the minister who, on behalf of Government, is saying no to the civil service trade unions.

Jeff Radebe is putting privatisation into practice and promises more of the same. Alec Erwin, who enjoys a great degree of credibility on the Left of the political spectrum even though he has allowed his SACP membership to lapse, is one of the most enthusiastic and energetic advocates of economic reform.

This puts paid to a number of perceptions, for instance, that Government is not really committed to economic reform: that its trade union and SACP partners will prevent it from carrying out reform and that it won't have the political will to introduce painful measures.

Government deserves recognition for what it has achieved thus far, as well as encouragement so it can continue on this road.

In a country crying out for growth and job creation, the first five weeks of the Mbeki administration have been encouraging. If this kind of political will can be sustained over five years, the country will experience drastic changes.

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