



# An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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TO: HQ  
FOR: Second Secretary O hUiginnFROM: Belfast  
FROM: Bill Nolan

**Subject: Conversation with Roelf Meyer, Secretary General of the  
National Party of South Africa**

1. The Joint Secretary briefed Cyril Ramaphosa and Roelf Meyer on the Castle Buildings negotiations from an Irish Government perspective at the end of their visit to Belfast, 29 June 1996. Both had by then met with all Northern Ireland parties (except the Womens' Coalition), including party leaders David Trimble, John Alderdice, Gerry Adams, David Ervine and Bob McCartney. They found David Ervine the most impressive interlocutor "by far".
2. I had the opportunity of a lengthy conversation with Roelf Meyer following the briefing. This was his second visit to Belfast. He has a good grasp of the issues as well as a reasonable knowledge of the parties and personalities involved here. The main impressions which he and Ramaphosa had formed from their meetings with the parties, and which they wished to pass on, are as follows.
3. They seemed somewhat surprised to discover that there is "no real negotiation process under way" here. They had thought, following the elections, that the way had been cleared for a proper negotiation and they expected to find a CODESA type situation in place or, at least, nearly so. They wondered what to make of the present proceedings at Castle Buildings.

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4. With the exception of David Ervine, they could not be sure that "the will to negotiate" is there on the part of the Unionists. They thought Trimble and Robinson clever and well able to argue points, but the South Africans were left with the feeling that both aimed to deploy their talents more in the direction of avoiding rather than engaging in negotiations. Meyer compared this attitude to that of South Africa's Conservative Party, which could not shake off its abhorrence of the notion of negotiating with the ANC, even after the remarkable referendum result of March 1992, which gave de Klerk an almost 70% mandate to proceed with reforms and negotiations.
5. Meyer accepts that the context here is very different from that of South Africa in 1990-91 and that 'outsiders' (i.e. the two Governments) must be part of the process. He suggests that this has an unbalancing effect which the two Governments should try to correct, by giving as much responsibility for the negotiations as possible to the parties themselves. We discussed this at some length and I was able to explain why, because of the issues involved, the two Governments cannot be seen as outsiders. They are not to be compared in any way with the front-line States in Southern Africa. Nevertheless, Meyer argued, the two Governments should find ways of letting the parties take as much responsibility as possible for the negotiations; otherwise they have every excuse to misbehave, raise obstacles and avoid the burden of taking difficult decisions. I explained that the Three Strand structure of the negotiations will, in fact, impose an obligation on the parties to take on responsibility for their part of the negotiations in due course.
6. If and when substantive negotiations get under way, Meyer strongly advocates:
  - (a) that a small, totally dedicated "driver-group" be set up to push negotiations forward regardless;
  - (b) that a stage by stage timetable be laid down and strictly adhered to.

Ramaphosa and Meyer were, I gathered, particularly struck by the absence of any notion of deadlines during their discussions with the Northern Ireland parties. They asked one delegation about the time-frame envisaged and were given an answer along the following lines: we might get somewhere in a year or so, but it could take two or three years. The South Africans regard this as a perfect scenario for endless

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prevarication and delay. They hope the Governments will establish strict deadlines at the start, if the parties themselves fail to do so. Strict deadlines helped save the process in South Africa, both during negotiations on the Interim Constitution and on the new Constitution, which concluded within the deadline last May. It was an exhausting but necessary way of getting agreement, according to Meyer, who intends to take a lengthy period of leave upon his return to South Africa.

7. With regard to the idea of a 'driver' or 'motor' for the negotiations, Meyer believes that it will be necessary to set up a small representative group of full-time personnel to carry negotiations forward to a conclusion at each stage. He supposes that this would be composed of No. 2's or Deputies from each party who would possess the necessary mandate and authority to cut deals and make them stick when referred back to plenary. Meyer mentioned that Peter Robinson evinced a certain amount of interest in this idea.
8. In discussion, Meyer agreed that these two suggestions are derived from his experience of the South African peace process. They were as uncertain of how to proceed at the beginning as the parties here seem to be at this stage. The two suggestions became 'rules' only when he and Ramaphosa took effective control of the process and when the mandate for negotiations was confirmed by the March 1992 referendum result. In that sense, he is not surprised by the vagueness (as he sees it) of intentions here at this stage. What he wishes to convey is the notion that there will not be a serious negotiation here until the Governments and the parties put a group of representative individuals into a room with a strong mandate to reach agreement on all main issues within a certain time-frame. The time-frame should be as tight as possible and the negotiators should be asked to confine their work to principles and main points. If "the fundamentals" are dealt with in this way (and this is the only way in Meyer's view), the filling out of details and other lesser tasks can be carried out later by the full plenary membership of the parties so as to give them a sense of ownership and involvement. On matters such as this, Meyer told me that he personally (and the South African Government) would be very willing to offer advice and good offices to the negotiations here were this to be requested by the two Governments.
9. In their presentations at the public meeting held under the auspices of the Irish Association (and in their meetings with some of the parties), the South Africans

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stressed the importance of not allowing single issues, no matter how important, to hold up the negotiations. Referring to South Africa, Meyer said that when they 'hit a wall' on individual items, the negotiators referred it to an appropriate ad hoc grouping of some kind to be dealt with in parallel. I explained that this was very much in line with the approach of the Irish Government to issues such as decommissioning and that the Mitchell Report endorsed this approach and provided a frame of reference within which it could be implemented in a constructive way.

10. In much the same vein, Meyer expressed astonishment that anyone could suppose they were contributing to advancement of the peace process in Northern Ireland by keeping any of the parties out of negotiations. The only plausible rule one can have about this, in his view, is a permanently open door policy (this could be combined with some kind of sin bin inside the negotiations, if necessary, for those who offend during the process). In his view, there is no justification for excluding Sinn Féin from the negotiations. He advocates the South African approach whereby the door is kept permanently open to all and the parties themselves decide whether or not to enter and participate in the various parts of the negotiation. Meyer believes that if Sinn Féin were obliged to take this kind of decision freely for itself, rather than be forced to do so by others and under certain conditions, it would immediately and immensely strengthen the hand of the 'peace party' over the 'war party' within the Republican movement.
11. The door was permanently open to all parties during the South African peace process. Most of those involved in the negotiations had renounced violence, but not all (the PAC for e.g. did not). Bringing in Sinn Féin might not end violence, but it would make it very difficult for hard-liners within the Republican movement to continue to argue that violence was the only way. Meyer understands the 'hang-up' the Unionists have about Sinn Féin, but he believes they are mistaken and he wonders if some of them might have enough courage to break out of the old mindset, as de Klerk's National Party was able to do. He found it a bit difficult to believe that David Ervine's openness and willingness to look at issues from various points of view could command such little respect among the Unionists here. Given his Afrikaaner background and his identification with the Unionist community, Meyer seemed quite pained by this and by the lack of any sign of a de Klerk on the horizon. He did not see Trimble taking on this role. McCartney, in his view, made the Conservative Party in South Africa seem respectable.