

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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South Africa and Northern Ireland - Conduct of Negotiations

Background Note

1. Parallels were often drawn between the situations in Northern Ireland and South Africa. Their validity was denied with equal frequency. Irrespective of the degree of substantive congruence, however, considerable interest was shown by the parties to the Multi Party Talks in the mechanics of the South African negotiating process.

2. Several high-profile South Africans with a role either in the negotiations themselves or in subsequent developments visited Ireland in recent years. We were fortunate to have an opportunity to hear the views of a number of distinguished South African visitors on how their country's remarkable transformation was achieved. We greatly appreciated visits from such eminent South Africans as Cyril Ramaphosa and Roelf Meyer, Judge Albie Sachs, (Constitutional Court), Minister Kader Asmal and Dr Alex Boraine (Truth and Reconciliation Commission). Moreover, former President De Klerk addressed the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation in November 1995. Bishop Desmond Tutu paid a visit to Ireland 25 September-3 October 1998 to give a lecture sponsored by Independent Newspapers and met the President, the Taoiseach, David Trimble and Seamus Mallon

3. Significantly each of these individuals were at pains to emphasise that each conflict situation is unique, and that drawing exact parallels is simplistic, though there were undoubted elements of similarity. As Cyril Ramaphosa said, "While you might learn some lessons from the experiences of others, ultimately you will have to find for yourselves the processes and solutions that suit your own situation."

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4. The rules of procedure of the multi-party negotiations drew from the South African example the concept of "sufficient consensus", although it was somewhat more tightly defined, the adoption of a clear and realistic agreed timeframe was also valuable - as it proved to be in South Africa - . The parties were also be able to draw useful lessons from South African views on matters such as internal consultation and the composition of delegations.

5. However, what came through very clearly from accounts of the South African negotiations was the absolutely central importance of less tangible factors such as courage, leadership and trust. Of the many thought-provoking things Roelf Meyer and Cyril Ramaphosa said during their visit to Ireland, two perhaps stand out ; "it was trust that finally delivered a settlement", and "the one thing that always bound us together was the belief that there is always a solution to any problem." Ultimately no solution is achievable without the building of trust and without a determination to succeed.

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