

**In Search of an Irish Mandela?:
South Africa's Negotiated Transition and the Northern Ireland Peace Process in
Comparative Context.**

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Abstract

Since the beginning of the slave trade in the seventeenth century Europe has tended to view Africa as backward and uncivilized. Even into the twentieth century as the "dark continent" moved from colonialism to national self-determination, the western discourse has still been dominated by notions of African inferiority. Every African political or economic failure, from the Ethiopian famine to the 1994 Rwandan genocide, has served to reinforce a lingering Western perception of African backwardness. It is therefore interesting to ponder the impact on European politics of South Africa's recent transition from Apartheid to democracy. In particular, South Africa has become something of a model for those struggling to drag Northern Ireland out of the quagmire of three decades of civil war. For Sinn Fein, a key Irish republican party in the Northern Ireland peace process, South Africa is a veritable model of national reconciliation, democratic transition and ethnic coexistence. It is a living example of how even the most seemingly intractable violent political conflict can be resolved peacefully. Similarly, even Sinn Fein's political adversaries in the British government recognise the possible merit of the South African experience. This paper, which was originally drafted as a discussion document for republican prisoners in Long Kesh/Maze prison in Northern Ireland, analyses the historical links between the political struggles in South Africa and Ireland and attempts to draw some tentative conclusions regarding the impact of South African experience on the Irish peace process.