

Address by Horst Kleinschmidt to the Owl Club, delivered at the Kelvin Grove, Newlands, Cape Town, 15 September 2015.

Out of sight.
The house arrest of Beyers Naudé
between 1977 and 1984.

Good evening! Thank you for inviting me.

Had Beyers Naudé lived, he would have been 100 years old this year. He was born in May 1915.

I shall assume that you all know who the troublesome Dutch Reformed priest, and one time Broederbonder, Beyers Naudé was. In 1977 the Prime Minister, BJ Vorster ordered that Beyers Naudé and the Christian Institute (CI), which Beyers founded in 1963, be banned.

If you visit the present day Beyers Naudé School for Public Theology, attached to the Theology Faculty of the University of Stellenbosch, you will there find his every word, from student days until his death meticulously recorded, except for one gaping hole, a void of seven years, from 1977 and 1984. To ban Beyers Naudé was a warning that he was halfway toward being arrested and detained without trial, and worse would come, if he did not desist from his criticism of government policy. For seven years Beyers was subjected to a form of house arrest. The banning order had 30-odd conditions which included that he could not be quoted, was not allowed to speak to more than one other person at a time, had to report at a police station regularly, had to surrender his passport, could not leave his home between six in the evening and six the next morning, etc. There was no legal avenue to appeal this arbitrary executive decree. This made Beyers traverse from uncomfortable but legal critic of apartheid, to becoming a secretive, underground operator. The description 'revolutionary' is not far-fetched.

Middle-class, white and Afrikaans, Beyers' life journey is extraordinary. Well into his 50's, this trusted and respected Afrikaner leader crossed the vast political terrain to become a trusted participant in the secret world of Black resistance. Amongst his many gifts honesty and humility stand out.

I joined the staff of the Christian Institute in 1972. In 1975, I was asked to become assistant to Beyers. A month after my appointment, I was detained under the Terrorism Act and six months after my release fled South Africa because of a tip-off that I was likely to be re-arrested. My journey took me via Botswana, Zambia, to spend 3 years in Holland, and another 12 years in the UK.

From 1977 to 1984, I was facilitating Beyers' underground work from London. These were the hardest, most dangerous and demanding years for Beyers. From London, I felt the pressure also. There was no room error. The slightest lapse or indiscretion on my part could land Beyers in jail. When Beyers died in 2004, we had collaborated for thirty-two years.

I tell his story now not to advocate that we build a monument to a great man whom we respect and bow to from time to time. Beyers' call for a free, truly equal, non-racial, non-racist and non-sexist South Africa remains in large measure unfulfilled. To honour him must inspire a new generation to carry on where Beyers left off. We are, today, still building the inclusive, tolerant society that is free of hunger and poverty. Beyers would urge us to act and make a difference.

To build the rainbow nation of our dreams it is right that a white Christian Afrikaner has a place in the South African narrative where liberty and egalité triumphs over our history of slavery, apartheid, inequality and domination of one group over another.

But, back to Beyers during the years when he was banned.

In a letter dated 27th October 1977, a week after the Christian Institute, Beyers himself, and many others were banned, he wrote, "... I'm willing to serve wherever my presence could make the greatest and most meaningful contribution." A year later, in a letter, dated 9 October 1978, he wrote: "As long as God gives me the necessary strength, I shall continue. I have no intention of withdrawing or 'retiring' or discarding the task in which I am involved ... with the full awareness that a moment may arrive where I may find it impossible to continue". He wrote this from his home in Greenside, Johannesburg. The letters were smuggled out of the country because posting them would have meant interception, and providing the Security Police (SB) with evidence of his continued activism. This would have led to charges against him, from breaking the terms of his restriction order, to sedition.

During the years Beyers was banned, he smuggled hundreds of letters, all in his distinctive handwriting out of the country. I have collected more than 140 of his letters.

What did they say? What was Beyers up to? - They provide a window into the opaque world he entered after October 1977.

The early letters raise questions whether to build a Christian underground liberation movement or whether instead, to join as Christians, an existing liberation movement. If so which movement? - Beyers and others eventually sided with the ANC. This was controversial but inevitable – contrary to Black Consciousness the ANC was inviting whites to work with it. Some of those banned felt they had reached the end of the road of struggle. Yet others forcefully opposed the decision to work with the ANC because they wanted the newly banned Black Consciousness Movement to become a third liberation force that should eventually replace the ANC and PAC. For several reasons this never happened. The most important was that the cold war politics that was imposed on African freedom struggles at that time, made it impossible for a third liberation movement to gain a foothold in the world of exile.

Several of Beyers' letters concern the modalities of the delicate transit from the open and legal world of opposition, into the hidden and secretive underground, one that was fraught with new and additional danger. The SB's were already watching every one of us, including those abroad. The system we built could not be perfect but neither was that of the police who had a very patchy rate of success.

The new situation raised the obvious question: How would we pursue our objectives if not through public pronouncement? If the tool of public discourse and the contestation of ideas was no longer open to us, what do you actually do?

As the letters show, despite Beyers' choice to support the ANC, he did not betray his Black Consciousness associates. They were at that time a formidable internal, but since 1977 also banned, resistance thrust. Beyers kept close links with Steve Biko. At one point Beyers and his banned CI colleague, Rev. Cedric Mayson, were involved in arrangements to smuggle Steve Biko from his place of banning in the Eastern Cape to Botswana so he could meet up with Thabo Mbeki. This was a highly risky and logistically difficult operation. The meeting never happened because Biko was killed in September 1977, just prior to the comprehensive bannings. This undercut the possibility of co-operative relations between the largely external ANC and the internal BCM. In my view these two leaders had it in them to spearhead a political break-through much sooner than 1994 brought us. Not only did the murder of Steve Biko prevent such a meeting, history will eventually tell that Thabo Mbeki, because of the position of the South African Communist Party did not have as free a hand as he might have liked. (I am not suggesting that the SACP shopped Biko – I am merely suggesting that the SACP saw a 'bourgeois' and non soviet-trained influence, as fatal to their interests inside the ANC). Whatever setbacks there were, Beyers continued to build bridges between the ANC and Black Consciousness. He did so on his own terms even when the ANC was hostile or dismissive of the Black Consciousness people.

After Steve Biko's death, Beyers contemplated going into exile. With Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi there was a plan in 1978, to create a new thrust for change and to demand negotiations with the apartheid rulers. A press conference with Oliver Tambo, the ANC president, in Lusaka, was in the offing. I was charged with the arrangements to get Beyers to Mozambique and then to Lusaka. A Canadian pilot and light aircraft stood ready at Midrand airport. But the time was not ripe. It was assessed that PW Botha

was not willing to talk or find a political solution. The plan was abandoned at the last minute. Thus, Beyers retained his internal role.

Throughout these years, Beyers built a massive hidden funding conduit for individuals and organisations to re-build the resistance the apartheid regime had temporarily smashed. His coded letters testify to his countrywide reach. Getting money to Beyers was a formidable challenge. The banking system could not be used nor trusted. US dollars and British pounds could not be converted at any bank. We required used South African Rand notes – hundreds of thousands of them. To overcome this we found rich South Africans, keen to secretly get their money out of South Africa. Their need for secrecy was just as high as our own, even though we thought their morality was very different to ours. They were willing to hand over cash – yes in suitcases. For obvious reasons, Beyers could not store this money at his home. Once more, there were new unsung heroes, willing to hide the money until it was required. At the London end, I arranged for the funds from official German and Dutch church donors, willing to participate in this subterfuge, to have their money paid into the secret accounts these disloyal South Africans held at Coutts International and other private banks. Trust and absolute discretion were as important as timing and what conversion rate was to be applied.

You might ask: So was Beyers beholden to non-violence or did he support the armed struggle of the ANC? Without any doubt, Beyers had nothing to do with Umkhonto weSizwe (nor did I) and Beyers had explicit assurances from Oliver Tambo that Beyers and others of his persuasion, did not have to subscribe to ANC military actions. You might say this is inconsistent, and it is, but the divide between violent and non-violent responses was not as tidy as Mahatma Gandhi would have wished - that was the messy reality. Beyers continued to support non-violent actions and initiatives. One of them was to advise and fund the people that eventually lead to the formation of the United Democratic Front.

Did Beyers waver in his Christian belief? – Never and not for a moment. Primarily Beyers has to be remembered as a Christian activist and not as a man who accidentally wandered into politics. In his letters, he affirms that his religious beliefs demanded that he acts for the betterment of all humans on earth.

Beyers' letters are a constant imploring of church leaders throughout the western world that they should urge their Governments to put renewed and additional pressure on Vorster, Botha, and then de Klerk, through sanctions and boycotts. In the early 1980's Beyers wrote to Alan Boesak, then President of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, suggesting that the time had come that the forthcoming global Calvinist Church gathering in Ottawa declare apartheid a heresy. Boesak made the case eloquently and as a result, the South African Dutch Reformed churches were expelled from the world body.

Did Beyers disavow his roots and Afrikaans background? Not for one minute. He loved Afrikaans and believed his people needed liberating from the racial ideology of apartheid. He wanted Afrikaans not to be a white man's language but one that belonged to a much wider section of South Africans. His passion for reconciliation remained his abiding pursuit.

There were three ways in which we communicated, in and out of the country, in this period: smuggling letters was one way, hiding microfilmed letters and publications in innocently looking gifts was another. The third method was to call Beyers at appointed times, at different designated public phone boxes. He had the numbers of over 100 of the old tickey boxes, with a date and time next to each number throughout the Johannesburg CBD. I had the identical list, and to make monitoring more difficult, I called Beyers from public call boxes in the UK – with pockets full of 50-pence coins. - Beyers and the others of his 'inner circle' were never caught. The interrogations of Cedric Mayson and others in later years established that our communication was not intercepted.

In May 1990, he was invited to the first Groote Schuur talks as a negotiator on the side of the ANC, testimony to his role as a trusted comrade. His signature appears on the minutes of the meeting. This was the first of the official talks that lead to the negotiated settlement with the apartheid rulers. This was the start of what created our democracy, constitutional dispensation, and Bill of Rights.



Beyers Naudé, back row, 4th from the left at the first Groote Schuur talks.

Beyers was however, not seen in any subsequent negotiations. Was he dropped because his moral Christian pursuit of *égalité* did not fit into the modalities of what the parties to our new dispensation had in mind? I have not yet found the answer to this question. In 2000, when he was already confined to a wheelchair Beyers warned against the ease with which the new ruling party immersed themselves into comfort and luxury, and then sunk into corruption on an unprecedented scale. Was it that Beyers was already a step ahead and could not be part of the compromises the incoming order was busy making?

Are there Beyers Naudé's in today's South Africa? I would count Bishop Jo Seoka, Anglican Bishop of Pretoria, as one of them. He identified the inhuman conditions the miners at Marikana live in, long before the massacre took place. He called for dignified housing and living conditions; had he been listened to, the hopeless confrontations could have been avoided.

Are we sleepwalking into a new darkness in South Africa? Why do South Africa's Christian denominations, once again, remain silent? Or will they eventually pronounce on the impending dangers only when injustices and the lack of services have led to violent outburst on a scale no one is able to manage or control?

If Beyers were with us today, he would be warning those who live in sumptuous comfort or have control over limitless wealth, in and outside of Government. He would warn politicians and private sector leaders, white and black, that our social order will fail, if it is based on inequality, especially on the vast scale we have in South Africa. The growing gap between the haves and the have-nots is, he might say, once more, reaching breaking point. He was not content merely to oppose corruption and authoritarian trends whether before, or after 1994. He was concerned with the deeper systemic fault-lines.



Ilse and Beyers in their garden during the years of Beyers' banning.

In an interview with Beyers, not yet published, Beyers, true to character asks: "What is there that I can do to share in building a new and just society?" These are his words spoken not prior to 1994 but just before the year 2000.

Beyers' quest for *égalité* has not remotely been achieved.

For further articles and contributions on this subject go to my website: www.horstkleinschmidt.co.za.