

MISSION TO SOUTH AFRICA: THE COMMONWEALTH REPORT

The Findings of the Eminent Persons Group on South Africa

Harmondsworth, Penguin Books for the Commonwealth Secretariat, 1986. 176pp. 2.50 Pounds Sterling.

In October, 1985, the Commonwealth heads of government assembled for their customary biennial summit meeting. On this occasion the setting was Nassau in the Bahamas. Prior to the event it was obvious that proceedings were going to be dominated by discussion on the Commonwealth's policy towards South Africa. Twenty-five years ago Prime Minister Verwoerd was virtually compelled to withdraw South Africa from the Commonwealth because his Nationalist government's racist practices were so abhorred by the former British colonies elsewhere in Africa and in Asia and the Caribbean. Yet the spectre of South Africa still haunted the Commonwealth, so much so that it threatened the very unity of this British club, which prides itself on being able to conduct affairs of state without rancour. In 1977 the Gleneagles Agreement urged Commonwealth members to discourage official sporting links with South Africa. The communiqué issued after the Commonwealth meeting at New Delhi in 1983 stated that apartheid was 'the root cause of repression and violence in South Africa and of instability in the region', but did not propose any new measures against P.W. Botha's government.

By 1985, however, the climate of international opinion had become increasingly less tolerant of apartheid rule. Most Commonwealth heads of government arrived at Nassau determined to ensure that South African obduracy should be countered by the imposition of comprehensive, mandatory economic sanctions. It was equally well known that the British Prime Minister, Mrs Thatcher strongly disagreed with this strategy and believed, by contrast, that Mr Botha should be given as much leeway as possible to encourage his government to dismantle the apartheid system according to its own timetable. Since these opposing views were irreconcilable the most important priority at the Nassau conference was, somehow, to arrive at a formula that could command unanimous consent, thus enabling the Commonwealth to speak with one voice.

The upshot was 'The Commonwealth Accord on Southern Africa', which called on the government in Pretoria to renounce the apartheid system and begin to dismantle it, to end the then existing state of emergency, to release all political prisoners, to unban political movements and, finally, to establish conditions for dialogue, which would be a step in the direction of a non-racial, democratic political order. To initiate the process of dialogue, the Commonwealth decided to appoint a small group of eminent persons to study conditions in South Africa at first hand and to establish a basis for negotiations between the Nationalist government and

its opponents, principally the African National Congress. Substantial progress towards the objectives of the Commonwealth Accord had to be achieved within six months. Failing that, economic sanctions of some kind were likely to be introduced against South Africa.

Mrs Thatcher, far from acknowledging that the spirit of Commonwealth compromise had prevailed in the Bahamas, instead proclaimed a victory for her point of view. Immediately suspicions were aroused among the South African government's more implacable foes: an exercise in 'shuttle diplomacy', they said, was merely a delaying tactic, designed to postpone the onset of sanctions. So the Commonwealth mission, the Eminent Persons Group, made its way to South Africa in early 1986, knowing that doubts about its credibility had to be overcome in order for progress to be made. How successful was the mission to Africa? It turned out to be a mission impossible, with profound consequences for South Africa and for the Commonwealth. The whole story cannot be told here. But to make some sense of the events now unfolding around us in South Africa, the Eminent Persons' Report, **Mission to South Africa**, is essential reading. Its remarkably swift publication is a real boon. Furthermore, unlike most governmental committee reports, especially in this neck of the woods, it is a good read.

Only superannuated politicians were appointed to the EPG. Three, in particular, carried considerable clout. Malcolm Fraser had been Prime Minister of Australia for eight years and fancied himself as a world statesman. General Obasanjo of Nigeria enjoyed the rare accolade for a military ruler of relinquishing his position as head of state and restoring civilian rule. Lord Barber had been Edward Heath's Chancellor of the Exchequer and was now chairman of the Standard Chartered Bank, which has considerable interests in South Africa. In addition, the Bahamas proposed Dame Nita Barrow; India, Sardar Swaran Singh; Canada, Reverend Scott; and Zambia and Zimbabwe, John Malecela, a Tanzanian who is a former government minister. About the only thing they had in common was that they were all English speakers, yet they managed to submit a unanimous report, an astonishing political feat in the circumstances.

The emissaries spent roughly five weeks in Southern Africa, touring the region, collecting information and conducting numerous interviews with persons of all political persuasions. In South Africa they talked to Government ministers, parliamentarians representing all political parties (except the HNP), academics, news-men, students, churchmen, ambassadors, businessmen, trade unionists, community organisers and civil rights campaigners. They conversed in stately buildings, they entered townships, they investigated informal

settlements. Their bleak impressions are recorded in

Mission to Africa.

What will intrigue many readers too, I suspect, is the portrait they draw of Nelson Mandela, so important and yet so shadowy a figure to virtually all South Africans nowadays. They visited him on three occasions. Their assessment? 'He impressed us as an outstandingly able and sincere person whose qualities of leadership were self-evident. We found him unmarked by any trace of bitterness despite his long imprisonment. His over-riding concern was for the welfare of all races in South Africa in a just society; he longed to be allowed to contribute to the process of reconciliation'. Not a demon at all. Actually, rather a wistful elderly man, rueing his country's lost opportunities, but adhering steadfastly to the principles which led to his long imprisonment.

What captivated me most in this document, however, was the saga of the Eminent Persons' discussions with the South African government. In effect, the success of the Commonwealth mission depended on working out ground-rules which would be equally acceptable to both the Nationalist government and the ANC. The parties, the EPG reasoned, would have to agree on the terms of negotiation before negotiations proper could get underway. The exchange of letters between the Commonwealth co-chairmen, Fraser and Obasanjo, and the two Bothas, P.W. and Pik, gives us a rare insight into how the leading lights in Pretoria think and conduct themselves away from the glare of publicity. These letters make sombre reading. Now, with the benefit of hindsight, one can see quite plainly that P.W. Botha resented what he saw as the Commonwealth's intrusion in South African domestic affairs. Nor was there any chance of his government agreeing to bargain with the ANC on equal terms for that would be seen as granting the organisation a legitimacy his Cabinet was not prepared to concede. Furthermore, the EPG believed that for negotiations to get underway both sides would have to suspend violence. The South African government did not accept the premise that it perpetrates violence. Moreover, it demanded that the ANC renounce violence, not merely suspend hostilities temporarily. The State President refused to budge and preferred instead to pander to his domestic constituency by authorising military raids against Zimbabwe, Zambia and Botswana. These took place on 19th May, the same day that the Eminent Persons met the South African Cabinet's Constitutional Committee. Hardly surprisingly, the Commonwealth initiative collapsed instantly. Its prospects of success were always very slim, contrary to what the Report says, but no-one could have foretold how abruptly the process would end. Certainly the Commonwealth could not have been rebuffed in a more humiliating way.

The aftermath proved ironic. The Commonwealth Report left Mrs Thatcher unmoved, as her subsequent interview with Hugo Young in *the Guardian* reveals. And the six months delay only increased the clamour for sanctions. Over half of the nations refused to participate in the Commonwealth Games in protest against the British government's stance. Even Queen Elizabeth, some reports suggested, found herself drawn into the conflict and there were signs of restiveness too among Mrs Thatcher's Conservative parlia-

mentarians who see this issue as a potential liability at the polls in the forthcoming general election. Sir Geoffrey Howe, the British Foreign Secretary, was despatched rapidly to Southern Africa to recoup some damage, but failed comprehensively. As Britain is currently presiding over the European Economic Community, Sir Geoffrey was ostensibly acting on its behalf, which no doubt he was, although Britain's deteriorating relations with the Commonwealth would surely have been foremost in his mind as he flew between Southern African capitals.

The Commonwealth venture was originally mooted as a compromise which would prevent serious divisions from driving its members apart. In the end the tactic failed. When the seven Commonwealth leaders involved met at Marlborough House in early August to consider the Commonwealth's response to the EPG's findings they were unable to decide on a common course of action. Eventually they agreed to disagree on what economic sanctions to adopt against South Africa. Britain proposed a relatively modest package, entailing a voluntary ban on new investments and on the promotion of tourism and said she would cease to import coal, steel, iron and gold coins. The others - Zambia, Zimbabwe, India, Australia, Canada and the Bahamas - opted for sterner measures. They intended to stop importing South African fruit and vegetables, uranium, coal, iron and steel, as well as to halt bank loans to South Africa, to cut air links and to withdraw most consular facilities from South Africa.

As things stand now, the Commonwealth has ended up with the worst of both worlds. Its unity is severely threatened by Mrs Thatcher's stubbornness. And economic sanctions, while they may be instituted for noble motives, can only be effective in practice provided the participants act collectively. So far the Commonwealth has not yet managed to do this with the result that sanctions are likely to be applied unevenly. This, in turn, implies that they will have to be enforced for a long time before they achieve the desired results. While this is happening the South African government will not remain idle. If its past record is any indication, it will retaliate by making life as uncomfortable as possible for the Commonwealth states in Southern Africa.

The Commonwealth initiative has failed, and some South Africans may be smug about the outcome. However, the situation is deeply disturbing. If diplomacy fails, there can only be war. And a state of war is already upon us. We occupy a foreign country by force; we attack our neighbours whenever we please; and we have a state of emergency at home. The Commonwealth's **Mission to Africa** reinforced my impression that the present South African Government has turned its back on the world in the belief that it has the will, the policies and the means to monopolise political power indefinitely, no matter what measures the international community takes against the apartheid state. Mr Botha's government seems to be confident that it can triumph by pursuing a dual strategy of refining the apartheid system, while, at the same time, ensuring that its neighbours pose no threat to its overwhelming dominance in the Southern African region. If subsequent events bear this interpretation out, the Commonwealth Report will serve as an important indication of when and why this strategy was adopted. □