MISSION TO SOUTH AFRICA: THE COMMONWEALTH REPORT
The Findings of the Eminent Persons Group on South Africa

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 communique 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, newsmen, 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, rue­
ing his country's lost opportunities, but adhering steady-
fastly to the principles which led to his long imprison-
ment.

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 par-
ties, 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 con-
duct 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
invasion in South African domestic affairs. Nor was
there any chance of his government agreeing to bar-
gain 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 constitu-
cy 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 sur-
prisingly, the Commonwealth initiative collapsed instant-
antly. 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. Cer-
tainly the Commonwealth could not have been rebuffed
in a more humiliating way.

The aftermath proved ironic. The Commonwealth Re-
port left Mrs Thatcher unmoved, as her subsequent
interview with Hugo Young in the Guardian reveals.
And the six months delay only increased the glamour
for sanctions. Over half of the nations refused to par-
ticipate 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 resista-
cence 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 Geo-
ffrey Howe, the British Foreign Secretary, was des-
patched rapidly to Southern Africa to recoup some
damage, but failed comprehensively. As Britain is cur-
cently presiding over the European Economic Com-
mentary, 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 in-
volved 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,
etailing 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 econo-
ic 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 poss-
able 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 diplo-
ymacy 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 Common-
wealth'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 inter-
national 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 subse-
quent events bear this interpretation out, the Com-
monwealth Report will serve as an important indication of
when and why this strategy was adopted.