

SOUTH AFRICA: ON THE MOTIVATION FOR SANCTIONS

At face value, the persistent resort of governments to the use of economic sanctions – over 100 cases since 1914 according to *Hafbauer et al* (1985) – as a means to put pressure on foreign governments, is undoubtedly puzzling. The conventional wisdom, of which government policy makers presumably cannot be unaware, is that they do not work. Yet they remain a well used instrument of foreign – and as we argue below, of domestic – policy. In the case of South Africa at least, perhaps part of this puzzle can be resolved by delving a little deeper into the motivation behind sanctions.

In theory, as an institution, economic sanctions may have much in common with related measures such as economic warfare, tariffs and quotas, and the manipulation of foreign aid. But in practice their outcome is likely to be quite different. Sanctions represent for imposing countries a low cost option in comparison with, say, force of arms or economic blockade, which are options that require a much greater level of commitment, a level that is usually absent in times of peace. Even so, there is by no means complete agreement on the utility of sanctions, partly as a result of what James Mayall (1984) refers to as an ambiguity in liberal political theory.

Liberal theorists have always tended to oppose war to commerce since the former interferes with the latter and ultimately solves little. Trade on the other hand, in the vision of Adam Smith and, even more strongly, Richard Cobden, is a rational and progressive way of securing international harmony through mutual interdependence and the international division of labour. If war is irrational and trade is not, then it follows that sanctions are rational and force is not. At this stage, however, we run into problems with the interpretation of liberal logic, for, on the one hand there is the view that it is possible to resolve conflicts by economic means, and on the other hand the (Libertarian) view which opposes any interference by the government with market forces, particularly if it is done for non-economic reasons. So even within the broad Liberal house, there is no unified belief in the desirability of sanctions.

Barbour (1979) has identified three (not necessarily mutually exclusive) categories of objectives for sanctions: primary objectives – the ostensible *raison d'être* of sanctions; secondary objectives – relating to domestic considerations in the imposing countries; and tertiary objectives – dealing with broader international considerations relating to the structure and operation of the international system as a whole or those parts of it that are regarded as important by the imposing states.

We thus find a fairly complex (and dynamic) mix of potential benefits to be derived from applying sanctions. The relative weights of the categories may, of course, vary from case to case and shift over time – which we argue

below has happened in the case of South Africa. In the case of Rhodesia, for example, the primary objective was, however, to return the country to the British Crown and constitutional legality. The secondary and tertiary objectives, at least for the British government, were to counter attacks from opposition parties and protect Britain's status within the Commonwealth and the United Nations respectively. Over time the distinction between these categories became less clear, and the relative weight accorded to the tertiary class of objectives increased as the issue became internationalised.

It may be difficult to identify secondary and tertiary objectives in the context of dynamic domestic and foreign relationships, but they doubtless exert a powerful influence on policy makers. In his book **Sanctions: The Case of Rhodesia**, Harry Strack cites no less than seven secondary reasons for Rhodesia's trading partners applying sanctions. Experience gained from other instances where economic coercion has been employed, say, in the cases of Italy (1935-36), Cuba (1960-), and West Berlin (1948-49) clearly demonstrates a similar diversity of motives.

Commentators generally agree that an important factor underlying the choice of sanctions as a policy instrument is that of symbolism, elements of which are contained in all three of Barbour's categories. Applying sanctions, it is said, gives the impression of activity, of doing something when inactivity may be perceived as tacit support for, or indifference to the issues at stake. They are, like force of arms, merely an extension of international "diplomacy". They are a signalling device to underscore imposing countries' ethical, philosophical or political attitudes. They communicate on a multi-lateral as well as bi-lateral basis, and are an affirmation of principle for all to see. Schreiber (1973, p. 413) argues that: "It is mainly its symbolic function that makes economic coercion a tempting policy to governments", and concludes that if this is so, then, regardless of concrete results, governments will continue to be tempted by them.

More recently, Mayall (1984) has argued that two features of the contemporary international environment make it easier for governments to react by employing economic sanctions than by any other means. The first is the paradoxical strengthening of the state, which has facilitated easier monitoring and control of commercial and industrial activities. In other words, partly as a result of the increasing relative size of the public sector over time, at least in the industrialised countries, it is now easier for the state to administer a mercantilist type policy.

The second feature of the contemporary environment which is conducive to economic sanctions is the decay of the Western institutional order, due mainly to the non-coincidence of unilateral interests. According to Mayall,

the trend as a consequence is "clearly towards using sanctions as a symbol of 'alliance', European or even Third World solidarity rather than as an instrument of international order" (p.633). The decay of the international order has freed countries and/or blocs to pursue independent lines of action. In fact, this route has more or less been forced on them in the absence of any collective security. Concomitantly, sanctions are no longer regarded mainly as the prerogative of international institutions but are perceived as a legitimate instrument of an independent foreign policy.

In the case of South Africa, primary and tertiary objectives largely coincide, at least at the present time. The United Nations is the major forum in which calls for sanctions are made, and most if not all individual member countries stand in collective as well as unilateral opposition to the policies of the present South African government. The recommendations of the United Nations-sponsored International Conference on Sanctions Against South Africa held in Paris in May 1981 thus provide a useful outline of the primary and tertiary objectives of sanctions against South Africa.

- "1. To force South Africa to abandon its racist policy of Apartheid and to put an end to its illegal occupation of Namibia;
- "2. To demonstrate, by action, the universal abhorrence of Apartheid and solidarity with the legitimate aspirations and struggles of the people of South Africa and Namibia;
- "3. To deny the benefits of international co-operation to the South African regime so as to oblige it and its supporters to heed world opinion, to abandon the policy of racist domination, and to seek a solution by consultation with the genuine leaders of the oppressed people;
- "4. To undermine the ability of the South African regime to repress its people, commit acts of aggression against independent states and pose a threat to international peace and security;
- "5. To remove economic support from Apartheid so as to mitigate suffering in the course of the struggle of the people of South Africa and Namibia for freedom, and thereby promote as peaceful a transition as possible."

Until the mid-1980s, the sanctions campaign had little success but since then it has made substantial progress in isolating South Africa. The explanation of why this is so would seem to lie in the shifting nature of the relative weights accorded to each category of objectives. Primary and tertiary motives, though still relevant variables in the sanctions equation, have declined in relative importance since about mid-1984 while secondary objectives – concerned with domestic issues in the imposing countries – have increased in importance, particularly in the Western democracies where some account has to be taken of public opinion by vote maximising politicians.

From a South African point of view it is an unfortunate coincidence that it is precisely these countries with whom trade has traditionally been conducted. As far as sanctions are concerned, South Africa is thus at the mercy of party political interests in the West. For example, the Democratic Party in the U.S. adopted an anti-South African stance after its defeat by the Republican Party in the 1984

Presidential elections, which according to **The Economist** (1985) was a "balm, a motherhood issue" (Truu, 1986),

At the same time, as Truu (1986) makes clear: "Republican politicians need votes as much as their Democrat rivals and could therefore not be seen rowing against the tide, ... anti-South African sanctions thus became a bipartisan issue in America". In other Western countries a similar political imperative exists, and given that the lead in such matters is often taken from the U.S., it is not surprising that sanctions (in the form of disinvestment) pressure has spread across the Atlantic despite the opposition of Thatcher and Kohl. European businessmen and non-governmental organisations are being forced into a trade off between their American and South African interests. In due course it seems probable that European Community governments will be forced to follow suit in order to protect their domestic party political interests. For example, the strong ties between the Labour Party and the Anti-Apartheid Movement will ensure that the issue of sanctions gets a good airing on the hustings in the lead up to the next elections in Britain.

It is precisely because the intensity of international concern about the Apartheid "problem" is now great enough to make it a legitimate election issue in western countries, that there has been a quickening of interest in sanctions. Events on the ground in South Africa, while undoubtedly having deteriorated, are essentially a matter of foreign policy, about which many people know and care very little in comparison with domestic issues. But the issue of Apartheid is easily understood, at least superficially, in terms of morality and political justice – the very stuff of which politics is made.

The substantial increase in the relative weight of the secondary category of objectives in the 1980s is a by-product of the perception that the crisis in Southern Africa has heightened in *absolute* terms. More importantly, though, is that this has given a legitimacy to Apartheid as a genuine election issue in imposing countries, which has resulted in secondary objectives assuming a greater *relative* importance.

It is impossible to assess with any confidence the success of sanctions in terms of the open-ended and idiosyncratic motives of the imposing governments. But it need not be assumed that this will prevent them from continuing to use them. To some extent governments applying sanctions on South Africa probably have no real interest in the primary (or tertiary) outcome of sanctions; their interest is more fundamental and a lot closer to home. Starving South Africans and concerned delegates at the United Nations are hardly likely to catch the eye of vote-maximising politicians.□

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