The Commonwealth is a voluntary association of countries from all the six continents, bonded to the principles of world peace, racial equality, liberty and equal rights to all citizens. This international organisation evolved out of the British decolonisation process, expanded with the inclusion of India and matured with the entry of the African members. The swelling number of the African countries in the Commonwealth—1 out of 10 in 1961 to 13 out of 29 in 1969—radically changed the complexion of the Commonwealth. This, along with the Asian and Caribbean countries who had anti-racial and anti-colonial sentiments, made Commonwealth a forum for struggle against racialism and colonialism. The fact that all these members were once colonies themselves was an advantage in the fight. The African countries used this unique composition of the Commonwealth and their majority to their advantage in their struggle against racism and colonialism.

British decolonisation policy was to give independence with majority rule in respective countries. However, in South Africa, power was transferred to the white minority, perpetuating the policy of Apartheid. To the African countries, South Africa was an insult to the dignity of Black people. To Britain, South Africa represented a problem to be solved without their economic interest being affected. The fallout was that Britain found itself in an unenviable situation of having to choose between showing solidarity with other African countries or with South Africa.

After the II World War, the pressure against South Africa increased with India being a vocal critic in the United Nations Organisation. In the Commonwealth, the old members tried to resist the pressure for long on the ground that South Africa's problems were its internal jurisdiction. Moreover the tradition that internal affairs of the member countries were not discussed in the Commonwealth worked to South Africa's advantage. Britain, however, realised the emerging African nationalism and warned South Africa as seen in chapter 2.
The African countries regarded racial equality as a pre-requisite for the Commonwealth membership. Although the white nations had overlooked the South African policies based on racial superiority, the independence of African countries and their increasing presence in international organisations changed the attitudes in the white nations. The new members of the Commonwealth, to get around the traditional rule of not discussing the internal affairs used South Africa's decision to become a republic as a way to force it out. This brought the African countries and the Commonwealth its first success in its fight against racialism.

The threat of the member African countries to quit the Commonwealth, that of the non-member African countries that they will not join it, and Canada's policy of changing its track from the old Commonwealth to accommodate the new Commonwealth made Britain realise that survival of the Commonwealth is at stake. This made Britain throw its weight with the new members and ask South Africa to withdraw. The virtual expulsion of racist South Africa was a price the African countries successfully negotiated for, with the support of the Asian members and Canada.

The Commonwealth was Britain's hope for being more than just a European power. It realised that this would not be possible without the African members in the Commonwealth and that South Africa inside the Commonwealth would mean the end of the Commonwealth.

The exit of South Africa declared that just being the subject of the British was not enough qualification for membership in the Commonwealth. The exit set an example to other organisations to imitate its lead. The African countries found Commonwealth to be an asset to their fight against racialism and colonialism. Their calculation was strengthened with the withdrawal of South Africa from the Commonwealth in 1961. The withdrawal, in anticipation of a certain expulsion, showed the impact of the African presence.

The next step of concerted action was to bring South Africa around to end its racial policies, even though it was no longer a member. They began to target the economic and cultural ties South Africa enjoyed with the other nations. In the Commonwealth,
Britain was attacked for continuing economic relations with South Africa even after its forced exit from the Commonwealth. This resulted in resentment between African countries and Britain. Moreover, as the meetings were conducted by the British Foreign Office, the African countries felt that their problems were not given enough importance. The African countries, angered with the unchanging situation in South Africa and suspicious of the British attitude towards the problem of racialism strongly went in for the establishment of the Commonwealth Secretariat. This could be considered an African victory as it gained them a neutral ground to fight their cause. The Commonwealth Secretary- Generals have been sympathetic to the Africans and have been prominent in the fight against racialism.

The advantage for the Africans in the Commonwealth has been its composition. Unlike Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and Non Aligned Movement (NAM), which included African, Asian and some Socialist states, the Commonwealth had a distinct composition. It included African and Asian countries and at the same time some developed countries. Commonwealth included Britain, which had a large economic interest in South Africa. In the Commonwealth, Britain could not hide behind its veto power as in the case of the UN. Commonwealth recognised certain principles like racial equality and non-discrimination and could tie Britain on these principles, which an economic organisation like European Economic Community (EEC) could not do. Commonwealth adhered to the policy of equality and this allowed African and Asian countries to apply moral and diplomatic pressures on Britain. The Commonwealth meetings were held in secret and the details of discussions are not made public. Hence it gave the leaders more freedom in the discussions.

To the Black Africans, Britain's resumption of arms sale (1971) was to convey respectability on South Africa, which was South Africa's own desire. They argued that South Africa was economically and militarily the most powerful country in the Southern Africa and that there was no guarantee that South Africa would not use these arms for internal suppression. African Countries like Nigeria, Tanzania, Zambia and Uganda took a militant stand: They threatened to take economic actions against Britain, to withdraw from the Commonwealth, and talked about expelling Britain. A few like Kenya
denounced the deal and questioned its legality. But, others like Ghana, Malawi and Lesotho and Uganda, after Idi Amin coming to power, supported the arms sale as explained in chapter 3.

Along with the pressure from Africans, Britain had to face pressure from India and Canada. With just Australia and New Zealand toeing its line, Britain faced pressure from within the Commonwealth. This then saw Britain splitting hairs between arms for internal oppression and maritime defence. Though Britain argued that the resumption of arms sale to South Africa was to protect the Cape route from the Soviets, Britain took at it an issue to prove that the Commonwealth countries would not push it around. Retreat was to be seen as a sign of weakness and would have affected its credibility at a time when it was trying to join EEC. This made Britain more adamant. Even then the pressure from Commonwealth succeeded in restraining Britain from trading in all that South Africa asked for. Another advantage out of the issue was that by 1975 Commonwealth agreed on an arms embargo ahead of UN embargo.

Another Commonwealth lead and African victory came with the implementation the Gleneagles agreement, which restrained Britain and New Zealand, which had sporting relations with South Africa. This was possible due to the African pressure. After the New Zealand’s rugby team to South Africa the African countries boycotted the Olympic games. The fear that they might boycott the 1978 Commonwealth games in retaliation of the New Zealand sports relation with South Africa fixed the issue. Though rebel tours did occur, they came to be noticed more for their anti-apartheid publicity rather than sports. In 1986 the African countries used the excuse of sports to pressurise Britain on sanctions when they withdrew from the Edinburgh Commonwealth games.

However, on the issue of the destabilisation policy of South Africa all members of the Commonwealth including Britain, came together and condemned South Africa. This issue also brought a growing solidarity between the FLS. Even Malawi, which for long had been the, maverick of the pack, joined with Tanzania and Zimbabwe to guard the Nacala Line from Mozambique National Resistance (MNR) destabilisation.
This was an irony as Malawi had always been against isolating South Africa and had given base to MNR to destabilise Mozambique, as explained in Chapter 3.

Britain used the destabilisation policy of South Africa to be in the good books of the countries in Southern Africa. Britain did not want to alienate the Africans and this resulted in a dual policy of opposing sanctions against South Africa and at the same time providing financial and security alliance to the Southern African Development Coordination Countries (SADCC). Britain increased its aid to SADCC countries to compensate South Africa’s destabilisation strategies while an effective way to end this would have been direct pressure on Pretoria. The other countries like Australia, Canada, New Zealand and India called for support to the front-line states.

More contentious was the issue of trade and economic ties South Africa had with other nations. The issue was more intricate this time as the old Commonwealth countries was also in line with the Asian and African countries. Realising the advantage, the African countries tried to pressurise Britain. Nigeria, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe took the militant line and threatened to withdraw from the Commonwealth if the British did not take economic actions. Malawi, Swaziland and Lesotho (after the fall of Chief Jonathan in 1986) were against sanctions. Among the SADCC countries, Zambia and Zimbabwe, in spite of the certain difficulties they would face, called for sanctions.

Although Zambia and Zimbabwe called for sanctions their dependence on South Africa and differences in their own countries prevented them from implementing it. The other countries in the SADCC knew that it was not possible for them to implement sanctions and did not call for sanctions. They were more concerned with protecting their own neutrality. Moreover the fact remained that it would be more pragmatic for Western Countries which had a high economic clout in South Africa to apply sanctions first. Without the support of the main trading partners of South Africa their implementation of sanctions would be suicidal for them as explained in chapter 3.

Britain was not willing to accept their demands fully. This resulted in the Commonwealth policy of sanctions and negotiations. Sanctions were to be
complemented by a process designed to facilitate real political dialogue with South Africa. The plan was to supplement economic sanctions by encouraging a dialogue of change, which, if failed, would result in substantial sanctions. The Eminent Persons Group (EPG) organised for the purpose of dialogue was clear on the need of sanctions. Britain, however, was unyielding to apply sanctions and the consensus was breached.

With sanctions, Commonwealth gave another lead against the fight against apartheid. It became the first among other international organisations to apply sanctions, which if followed by others, could dismantle apartheid. The sanctions issue brought many firsts in the Commonwealth also. The 1986 August meeting set a precedent in the Commonwealth, which allowed exceptions from consensus. Commonwealth decisions were arrived at by consensus. Now, a country could stand aside from the decisions taken and was no longer bound by consensus. The Communiqué issued would now say, with the exception of a certain country and was not based on consensus. The sanctions issue on South Africa also showed that it was able for the Commonwealth to go ahead without the British leadership. On this issue, the position of Britain as the leader in the Commonwealth was abandoned.

Britain by then had moved closer to other European powers in the making of its foreign policy, which was represented outside the Commonwealth. However inside Britain opposition came from the anti-apartheid activists and the opposition members with even the Queen being dragged into it. This and the Commonwealth pressure led British government to apply at least some sanctions.

Among the old Commonwealth countries, in most of the issues Canada tried to support the African point of view, even though it was against sanctions. Australia, after years of unconditional support to British in its South African policy started moving away by strictly enforcing the sports boycott. New Zealand had towed the British line on the South African issue. All these countries had, however, been against sanctions and had supported Britain in its no-economic sanctions policy. The deteriorating situation in South Africa and the changes in their own countries, as explained in Chapter 5, led them to support sanctions in the Nassau summit (1985). At a crucial period, they joined sides
with the African and Asian countries, to the surprise of Britain. This even led to acrimony between Britain and other old Commonwealth members.

Commonwealth, which in the early days was an organisation of the white members, changed to one of mixed race and cultures by 1961. An organisation of colonial power transformed into an organisation that fought for the colonised countries and against racialism. This was possible through the pressure from the African and Asian countries. Once they became members of the Commonwealth, the African countries successfully negotiated their presence in the organisation to assertively voice the concern of the Black Africa. In spite of all their internal differences and squabbles, these African nations succeeded in making the organisation a plank to raise their common demands.

The African strategy to deal with the issues that came up in the Commonwealth was to threaten to withdraw from the Commonwealth, to take economic action against Britain, and to threaten to expel Britain from the Commonwealth. However, differences between them and the incapability to take united action made it difficult to put their threats into practice. The threat that they might withdraw from the Commonwealth was their strength. Whatever the issue no British government wanted to be associated with Commonwealth disintegration. But once they were exposed, their capacity to influence British position suffered. Moreover the threats were given very often and were never put into practice as a result, they lost their impact over time.

Economic problems of the African countries and the unyielding stance of the western powers by continuing their economic relations with South Africa, which helped apartheid regime, made the tasks difficult for the African countries. Moreover the incapacity to take united action also worked against them. The instability and corruption in the African countries also provided a good excuse for South Africa to point out the folly of African leadership and the western powers to go slow on the issue.

The Asian countries and the Caribbean countries supported the African countries in their struggle against apartheid. India’s role against racialism had been a prominent one. After Nehru, India’s interest in the Commonwealth lessened for some time
because of its internal problems. But this in no way affected India's support to the African countries. On the arms issue, it appeared that India might withdraw from the Commonwealth even before the African countries. On the sanctions issue, India started to play an active role in the Commonwealth in alliance with African countries, Australia and Canada. Among the Asian countries, though all agreed on the need for sanctions, the policy of the ASEAN, in which Malaysia and Singapore were members, was to ban imports but only to discourage exports. Although Malaysia was strident on sanctions issue, Singapore, which had one of the busiest international ports, was not.

As mentioned above the strength of the Commonwealth is its composition while the weakness of the Commonwealth has been that decisions taken carry only a moral obligation to respect the majority view and none of the decision takes are binding. As decisions were taken on consensus sometimes decisions are taken, which left the gaps open as seen from the Gleneagles agreement and the making of expert group in the arms issue.

While United Nations was seen as a broader forum in the fight against racialism its weakness in the form of the veto power prevented it from fulfilling its role completely. Commonwealth on the other hand pointed the way for tackling the problem of South Africa, which was later on taken up by others as the policy of isolation. The General Assembly on the other hand waited till 1974 to suspend South Africa’s membership. In Sports, Commonwealth gave a lead to world action with Gleneagles agreement and in sanctions it was Commonwealth which laid the groundwork which was acknowledged by the United States legislators themselves who had gone on to apply more sanctions than President Reagan wanted.

The internal pressure from South Africa and the external pressures from the international organisations resulted in the dismantling of apartheid. In this the Commonwealth played a leading and effective role. Other than the leads that the Commonwealth gave a unique utility of the Commonwealth was the ability to restrain Britain. While in the UN it could hide behind its veto power and in the EEC it was able to resist the pressure from other countries, in the Commonwealth, it was not able to do so. In the EEC while Britain was reluctant to apply the diplomatic and military
sanctions of September 1985 in the Commonwealth in October 1985 it had to agree to certain economic measures also. Later in June 1986 while Britain was able to delay sanctions in the EEC in the Commonwealth on August 1986 it had to apply a voluntary ban on new investments and ban on promotion of tourism. While the EEC had to go according to the British lead the Commonwealth to an extent was able to pressurise Britain to their point of view.