CHAPTER III

SOUTH AFRICA'S POLITICAL RELATIONS WITH UNITED KINGDOM

Britain's policy towards South Africa has long demonstrated a total disregard for the yearning of the majority of the people of South Africa for equalitarian order and freedom from apartheid. As a major foreign investor; as a principal trading partner; and indeed as the former colonial power, Britain is placed in a unique position vis-a-vis the rest of the world. Its determined efforts over the decades to defend the apartheid regime of South Africa from the impact of effective economic sanctions was perhaps the most inhumane of its kind. Hidden behind such British policy orientation has been South Africa's commercial attraction to Britain, as discussed in the previous chapter.

The pursuit of commercial advantage was therefore the complete explanation of a narrowly based self-seeking British policy towards South Africa. In this context, the present chapter examines the British government's stand in various international fora on issues related to South Africa, particularly on the question of its membership of the Commonwealth, on the question of arms embargo, and on the
question of imposing economic sanctions against the apartheid regime, which certainly gives enough insight as to how Britain remained in a unique position vis-a-vis the rest of the international community.

South Africa as a matter of international concern was set apart on the following counts. It was unique in the way that it used formal legislation based on race to preserve and create divisions among its people. The discriminatory legislative framework of the society was quite comprehensive. It concerned such matters as to where people might live, what schools they were to attend and in what trains they would travel. This was applied with great determination by a large bureaucracy and a ruthless police force. The discrimination of race maintained by the ruling white minority has been perceived by the international community as an offence against cosmopolitan justice,¹ i.e. a concern which involves mankind as a whole. The strength of moral indignation was such that East, West and the Third World nations were bent on condemning South Africa for its racial policies. But the irony was that when other members of the world community were in favour of taking punitive action by imposing sanctions against the Pretoria regime in different

international fora, Britain stood often single handedly to diffuse strong collective action to bring to an end the system of apartheid in South Africa. Here, the British stand in the Commonwealth on action against South Africa may be taken as an example to explain how the British government tried to block stronger united action.

As Britain's colonies gained independence and became members of the Commonwealth, the issue of race remained predominant owing to South Africa's policy of apartheid. It was the racist policy of South Africa that reminded citizens of newly independent African and Asian states that they had once been in a position of social and political subservience. Therefore, apartheid became an extremely sensitive issue within the Commonwealth due to the Organisation's principles against racial discrimination, and because the worst aspects of apartheid were being implemented in South Africa. Many African and Asian countries became more assertive about racial equality. The Commonwealth thus made a perceptible impact on Britain's policy towards race relations. Although a spirit of accommodation and tolerance

towards the different races inhabiting the Commonwealth became the cornerstone of Britain's racial policy during the post-war period, Britain's official attitude on the question of South Africa's continued membership of the Commonwealth raised doubts on the genuineness of Britain's racial policy. Even prior to the issue of South Africa's membership of the Commonwealth, the official attitude of Britain was that even if there was disagreement among the members of the Commonwealth, it would be wise to observe restraint in public utterances. This was how Britain took shelter under Article 2 paragraph 7 of the UN Charter and stated that the question of race relations in South Africa was an internal matter. When the question of racial discrimination in South Africa came up before the UN General Assembly in September 1952, the South African representative and the representative of UK opposed the inclusion of the item on the agenda arguing that discussion of this question in the world forum would infringe the domestic jurisdiction of South Africa. This remained Britain's official position towards South Africa's apartheid policy. Those who represented Britain in


the United Nations and elsewhere explained that Britain's vote in the UN against the discussion of South Africa's racial policy was a judgment, not on the merits of apartheid, but on the world body's competence to debate a subject falling within the domestic jurisdiction of a member state. So the U.K did not even want to condemn or criticise the culture of racism in South Africa.

It was not only in the United Nations that there was evidence of the British government's disposition to afford as much diplomatic cover to South Africa as could be reconciled with Britain's own interests; this was equally evident within the Commonwealth. Indeed, from the first moment when it was mooted that the Union of South Africa should be expelled on the grounds of its racial policies, the Harold Macmillan government in Britain threw all its weight against the idea, 'exhausting' as Macmillan later recalled, 'every effort to preserve South Africa in the Commonwealth'.

The official British opinion and its stand on South Africa's racial policy at the United Nations were not sup-

ported by the other members of the Commonwealth. As far as apartheid was concerned, Britain together with South Africa, stood somewhat isolated. The British government took a hypocritical stand that it would not be right for it to express views on the internal policies of other Commonwealth countries. As the British representative in the UN Special Political Committee had expressly stated, "in opposing the resolution concerning South Africa's racial policies Her Majesty's Government were not expressing any opinion on those policies".

In relation to its stand in the United Nations, Britain attempted to follow a similar policy in the Commonwealth. The aim was to stop any discussion on South Africa's racist policy and block any move to condemn or expel South Africa from the membership of the Commonwealth. This became apparent as early as 1960. On 20 January 1960, Verwoerd announced that a referendum was to be held on the question of the National Party's longstanding ambition to transform South

6. Australia was the only country to toe the British line. Other members like Canada and New Zealand adopted a fairly flexible attitude towards this question. The Asian & African members like India, Ceylon, Pakistan, Ghana and Malaya continued to attack the British stand.

Africa into a republic. By established norms, a decision in favour of a republic would mean that South Africa would have to re-apply for Commonwealth membership. In other words, the Commonwealth members would decide whether to approve or deny South Africa's membership of the organisations once it became a Republic. As the Commonwealth was dominated by Afro-Asian members, vowed to end apartheid in South Africa, it was quite clear that they were not going to approve South Africa's Commonwealth membership. As for Britain, it was a testing period as to whether to back South Africa's continued membership or to deny its re-entry into the Commonwealth. In 1959, the election manifesto of the British Conservative Party indicated a 'wind of change' in Britain's policy towards apartheid. The manifesto declared: "Our aim in multi-racial countries is to build communities which protect minority rights and are free of all discrimination on grounds of race and colour". In January 1960, the British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan re-emphasised the 'wind of change' in Britain's policy towards apartheid. In a speech in Accra, he announced to the people of Africa: "We


want you to know that you have the respect, the friendship and the good wishes of all of us in Britain in your great adventure". It was true that Macmillan's 'Wind of Change' speech came as a shock to the South African racist government, but this had hardly jeopardised their standing relations. Macmillan went to considerable lengths in the speech itself to emphasize that the points of difference between Britain and South Africa were minor compared to the 'many practical interests which we share in common'. He further insisted that a 'wind of change' was one thing; 'a howling tempest' quite another.

Thus only a few days after his famous 'wind of change' speech he was reassuring the Commonwealth and Empire Industries Association of his government's determination to prevent the difference on racial policy between Britain and South Africa from sweeping aside the friendship that existed.


13. ibid.
between the two countries. 14 It soon became clear that no profound alteration in Britain's attitude toward South Africa was foreshadowed by Macmillan's speech. The 'wind of change' had resulted in a sort of adjustment which was to prove a middle course that Macmillan hoped to be able to steer between white domination and black nationalism. But it was soon seen to be veering sharply to the white side of the divide.

As for the leaders of South Africa, they were not much concerned about what the world outside thought of their apartheid policy. Thus, before the Sharpeville massacre in March 1960 and before world-wide condemnation had seriously begun, Verwoerd's feelings about the Commonwealth seemed somewhat equivocal. At a cabinet meeting on 11 January 1960 at which the referendum for Republic was discussed, Verwoerd apparently did not express any positive feeling about the value of the Commonwealth. However, his argument in support of the idea of continued Commonwealth membership after the achievement of the Republic was only for the tactical reason of getting as much English-speaking support in the referendum as possible. 15 But after the Sharpeville shoot-


15. n.8, p.124.
ings, followed by the world wide condemnation and increased isolation of the racist regime at various international fora, Verwoerd was made aware that national and party interests necessitated continued membership of the Commonwealth. In these circumstances South Africa needed all the friends it could get to appeal to Commonwealth solidarity to avoid increasing diplomatic isolation. It was because of this that South Africa began to attach more value to the Commonwealth's regular and varied meetings at all levels in government for the political information which they provided for the presentation of South Africa's case. Besides, there were further apprehensions that if South Africa were to leave the Commonwealth it would not be an easy task for Britain to justify the continuation of 'Commonwealth Preference' on South African goods entering the vital British market. Because of all these reasons Verwoerd ceased to equivocate and in May 1960 South Africa Minister of External Affairs Eric Louw was sent to the Commonwealth Prime

16. Leif Egeland, who was South Africa's High Commissioner in London from 1948-until 1950 (though a Smuts appointee) also stresses the privileged position of High Commissioners with regard to access to British Ministers and to their papers, Bridges of understanding (Cape Town and Pretoria, 1977), p.202.

17. Reassurance in the matter of Commonwealth preference was amongst South Africa's top priorities after its departure from the Commonwealth in 1961.
Ministerial Conference to secure a promise that South Africa would be allowed to remain in the Commonwealth in the event of an affirmative vote on Republic.\textsuperscript{18}

However, Eric Louw's mission failed to attain anything substantial on the question of continued membership. When asked to show evidence that South Africa had begun to mend its ways, Eric Louw was said to have declared the implacable determination of his government to maintain its quasi-religious dogma i.e. the policy of apartheid.\textsuperscript{19} And the British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan who tried to broker South Africa's continued membership of the Commonwealth had to console himself with the thought that though nothing had been resolved at this conference, his mediation had kept the Commonwealth at least for the time being from being broken up.\textsuperscript{20} The restraint shown by the Commonwealth members at the May conference encouraged Macmillan to press for South Africa's desire for continued membership of the Commonwealth. Macmillan seemed to have believed that he could

\textbf{Notes:}

\textsuperscript{18} Verwoerd had intended to go himself but had not yet fully recovered from an assassination attempt in early April.

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Times Weekly Review}, 12 May 1960.

still extract some concessions from Verwoerd and prevent the Union's expulsion. Clearly this depended largely on preventing the Afro-Asian members from raising the question of South Africa's membership of the Commonwealth. Macmillan thus set himself two tasks-first, to persuade Verwoerd to postpone the referendum on the republic; second, to persuade the Afro-Asian members not to adopt any firm postures of opposition to South Africa's membership prior to the next meeting of the Commonwealth Prime Ministers scheduled to be held in March 1961. But Verwoerd was neither ready to give up the idea of a Republic in the immediate future, nor to amend his internal policies. Despite the Afro-Asian members' assurance to withhold comment until the next meeting of the Commonwealth Prime Ministers in London, Verwoerd decided to hold the referendum, and on 5 October 1960 the white minority of the Union voted for a Republic. In spite of Verwoerd's intransigence, Macmillan's determination to prevent the expulsion of South Africa remained firm.

21. Macmillan was personally notified on 2 August that this would take place on 5 October 1960, n.12, p.286.
22. ibid., pp.287-288.
23. ibid., pp.287-289.
24. ibid., pp.292 and 297.
The Commonwealth Prime Ministers meeting in March 1961 was a crucial one. What Macmillan apparently had in mind in 1960, and again in 1961, was to make it clear to South Africa that in spite of Britain's dislike of apartheid, Britain would still try to find some way of helping South Africa out of the crisis. To avert South Africa's expulsion from the Commonwealth Macmillan worked out a compromise formula on the following lines (i) that the Prime Ministers should discuss the subject privately with Verwoerd present, (ii) that if the question of apartheid was to be discussed at all in the plenary session, it should be discussed in the context of the general situation in Africa and as an aspect of the problems of that continent, and not in a manner that would make the discussion appear as an overt interference in South Africa's internal affairs; and (iii) that the membership question should be treated as a purely technical matter, so that the argument would be based on such constitutional points as to whether South Africa was being readmitted or whether it was simply seeking to continue its membership without any break after becoming a Republic.25

This plan devised by Macmillan intended to forestall a demand for the outright expulsion of South Africa. However,

South Africa's attitude was not quite conducive to Macmil-lan's objective. On his arrival in London on 3 March 1961 to attend the Commonwealth Prime Ministers meeting, Verwoerd said that South Africa was not prepared to change its racial policy and would not allow the Commonwealth to interfere in its internal policies. Reacting to this statement the Afro-Asian members, along with Canada, launched an outright attack on South Africa's policy of apartheid. They formed a united front against South Africa. The Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru spearheaded this new move, which later came to be known as the 'Nehru plan' or the Commonwealth charter. The Plan called for the Prime Ministers of the Commonwealth to put their signatures to a simple statement which read: "We accept the principle that apartheid is inconsistent with membership of the Commonwealth of nations." Nehru warned the Prime Ministers: "If we fail to act now against apartheid and race discrimination, the Commonwealth, as we know it, will shirk and disintegrate. If we decide that those who practice racial discrimination must be excluded, then the Commonwealth of to-day will continue to grow in strength and size." Nehru seemed to have tried

28. ibid.
to convince Macmillan that the latter's effort to enable South Africa to retain membership of the Commonwealth through compromise would only lead to the disintegration of the organisation. 29

Without giving much attention to Nehru's warnings, Macmillan placed his compromise formula before the Prime Ministers. He envisaged a declaration accepting the Republic of South Africa into the Commonwealth and at the same time registering the abhorrence of apartheid felt by many of the Commonwealth leaders. 30 In the discussion that followed, while Verwoerd asked the assembled Prime Ministers not to link apartheid with the question of South Africa's membership, Diefenbaker, the Canadian Prime Minister, insisted that there should be a Commonwealth declaration of human rights. 31 The rift between South Africa and other members over apartheid became so wide that the smooth functioning of the Commonwealth itself was placed in jeopardy. 32 It was at this point that Macmillan realized that South Africa's apartheid policy was threatening to damage the

29. ibid.
31. ibid.
concept of the Commonwealth itself as a multi-racial association. Ultimately when it became clear that South Africa's application would be voted out in the event of it being pressed further, Macmillan advised Verwoerd to withdraw his application for continued membership in the Commonwealth rather than face an eventual expulsion, Verwoerd complied with this.

Thus over the years Britain's role remained one of justifying, then to excuse, and finally to safeguard, the Republic from the consequences of its policy of apartheid. When Britain found it necessary to condemn the racial policies of South Africa, it managed to introduce an even-handed tone into her denunciations. But ultimately Macmillan had to yield to the pressures from other Commonwealth members to abandon his compromise formula which sought to denounce apartheid while allowing South Africa to stay in the Commonwealth. According to Kenneth Younger if there had been no pressure from the Commonwealth, Britain would not have acted


34. Kenneth Younger was Minister of State for foreign affairs in the Atlee government.
at all'.\(^{35}\) The main reason behind Britain's keenness to keep South Africa within the Commonwealth was strong economic relations between the two countries. This became clear when Macmillan assured Verwoerd that South Africa's departure from the Commonwealth would not in any way affect the substance of Anglo-South African relations, in particular the benefits which the racist regime received from membership of the Sterling Area and the Preference Area which would essentially remain intact. Verwoerd himself made this clear the day after the Union's departure, when he announced that bilateral arrangements would continue both 'unamended and untrammeled.'\(^{36}\)

Soon after the departure of South Africa from the Commonwealth the first step taken by the Conservative government was to announce a decision to promote temporary legislation through parliament in order to freeze the status quo in all constitutional and other relations with South Africa for a period of one year. This was passed in May 1961.\(^{37}\) The justification for this freeze was that such a

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37. This was the Republic of South Africa (Temporary Provisions) Act.
period would be necessary to allow time for the complicated legal issues raised by South Africa's departure to be sorted out. Whatever be the reasons for the freeze, it hardly damaged the substantive economic relations between Britain and the Republic of South Africa. This was made clear by Duncan Sandys, the Commonwealth Relations Secretary, during his opening statement on the Temporary Provisions bill made to the House of Commons on 24 April 1961. In the course of his statement, Sandys said that although the special relations in economic and defence affairs between Britain and South Africa would have to be reviewed, their origin in bilateral arrangements made it formally impossible for South Africa's departure from the Commonwealth to have any effect on them. In his concluding remarks, Sandys said, "we have an intimate and many-sided association with South Africa for more than a century. Our affairs have become closely interwoven in numerous ways, and we have developed between one another valuable connections in trade, and other spheres. The relationship between Britain and South Africa will, of course, not be the same as before, but I should like to emphasise that we have no desire needlessly to destroy links which are of mutual benefit to both our peoples.\textsuperscript{38}"

\textsuperscript{38} UK, House of Commons, Parliamentary Debates, vol. 639, col. 105.
statement as it appeared was narrowly based. To him mutual benefits were the sole factor for retaining Britain's relations with the racist regime of South Africa. These benefits were nothing but commercial benefits. Besides, when he talked about people, it was about whites only; for what he was seeking was the continued relationship with the racist white minority regime of South Africa.

Thus, upon becoming a Republic, South Africa was not deprived of any of the important privileges of her former financial, commercial and military arrangements with Britain. The new Republic was ousted from neither the Sterling Area nor from the Preference Area, while the sanctity of the Simonstown Agreement was reaffirmed (See Appendix 3). All of this was legally confirmed by the passage of the South Africa Act in early 1962. The continued flow of British arms to South Africa was also assured. All these were done not with any objective of removing the psychological or political impact in South Africa of their severance from the Commonwealth. The main motives were the economic and commercial benefits. It was at this time that South Africa repre-


sented one of Britain's most important foreign markets for both visible and invisible exports (discussed earlier) and its loss would have deeply injured the British government. Besides, South Africa was valuable to the British government during this period because of Britain's recurrent and deepening balance of payment difficulties. This followed from the fact that South Africa was by far the world's largest producer of gold, and at the right moment, could be obliged to settle Britain's trading deficits, i.e., the so-called dollar gap. South Africa's growing domination of world gold output in the 1950s and 1960s, and Britain's increasing reliance on its contribution to the central reserves of the Sterling Area, constitute additional evidence of the existence of a market of great significance to the British government. Thus despite widespread opposition to apartheid, Britain, because of its commercial interests refused to make more than token adjustments in its friendship with South Africa. It supported South African's retention in the Commonwealth until the last moment, and subsequently ensured that its departure would not significantly alter their relationship. 41

41. n.8, p.132.
THE POLITICS OF BRITISH ARMS SALES TO SOUTH AFRICA:

South Africa's departure from the Commonwealth in 1961 did not stop the criticism of apartheid by the countries of the Commonwealth. The campaign against apartheid had resulted in the UN calling upon its members to refrain from exporting arms and ammunition to South Africa. While the members of the Commonwealth were all in tune with the UN call, the Conservative government in Britain declared that it would reserve the right to supply arms to South Africa for the external defence of the country in accordance with the Simonstown Agreement. It was of the view that the embargo applied only to arms capable of being used for internal security and repression, not those needed for external defence. The critics of British policy of violating the arms embargo argued that the supply of arms for external defence could also be used for internal repression.

The extreme hypocrisy characterising the Conservative government's policy seemed to underline the difficult problems of attempting to separate the political and defence interests, where moral issues were deeply involved. That is, while Britain claimed that it denounced the morally revolt-

42. For the legal obligations of the Simonstown Agreement, See UK, H.M. Government, Cmnd. 4589 (London, 1971).
ing apartheid policy, it nevertheless felt that defence cooperation with South Africa remained uneffected by apartheid. Concerned political circles knew well that one could not differentiate between the arms-for external or internal use - particularly when it was recognised that the main threat to South Africa remained one of domestic uprising and revolt on the one hand and possible acts of aggression by African states on the other.\textsuperscript{43} It was, after all, Lord Carrington, the British Defence Secretary in Prime Minister Edward Heath's administration (1970-74), who reportedly admitted the following as early as 1963: "The government cannot guarantee that no weapon could even in any circumstances be used for this purpose (i.e. enforcing apartheid) ....even naval weapons could at a pinch be used to bombard a land target".\textsuperscript{44}

When the Labour Party came to power in 1964, Prime Minister Harold Wilson imposed an officially declared arms

\textsuperscript{43.} As regards the South African defence posture, Geoffrey Kemp wrote that the South African defence force was designed to cope with any internal threat to the status quo and to fulfil a number of related functions: counter-insurgency against any attempt to promote guerrilla activity from beyond South Africa's borders and deterrence against any conventional attack by the African states. Geoffrey Kemp, "South Africa's Defence Programme", \textit{Survival} (London), vol. 14, no. 4, July-August, pp. 158-159.

\textsuperscript{44.} \textit{X-Ray on Current Affairs in Southern Africa} (London), vol. 1, no. 6, December 1970, p. 3.
embargo on South Africa. Although the Wilson government intended to take a strong line against apartheid, it also opposed any move to impose a trade embargo on South Africa which would hamper British-South African trade ties. Even though the Labour government imposed an arms embargo on South Africa it was far from total. It was during the first six years in office that the British Labour government continued to issue licenses for the supply of spares and ammunition.\textsuperscript{45}

It may be noted that the development of the business attitude to arms sales had been influenced by a number of interacting factors, some linked to Britain's imperial past and others independent and disparate: Britain's steady decline as a great power in political, military and economic senses; the loss of the empire which had previously also served as a readily available arms export market; turning to other arms markets by many of the former colonies; and the development of a lucrative trade in the international arms traffic.

It was a political commitment that the Labour government agreed to an arms embargo, which was itself a partial

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\textsuperscript{45} SIPRI, \textit{The Arms Trade with the Third World} (1971), pp.679-680.
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Moreover, the political commitments that the Labour government had undertaken by imposing the arms embargo were sheer exhibitionism. Had they really been committed to equalitarian principles they would have gone for economic sanctions, at least for expressing solidarity with those victims of racism who had been fighting for social justice for so long in South Africa.

Therefore, whether it was the Conservative or the Labour government in Britain, economic attraction remained vital to them in disregard of the aspiration of the people for a non-racial society. As far as the Labour government's arms embargo was concerned, there was in fact no unanimity within the administration itself for such a policy. The rejection of an order of some £200 million worth of arms export to South Africa by the Harold Wilson administration almost led to a split within the government itself. The decision to turn down the order was not carried out unanimously by the cabinet; Defence Secretary Denis Healey and Foreign Secretary George Brown reportedly favoured breaking the arms ban

As for the Conservative Party, the appeal of arms sales and the inter-linked economic benefits made it denounced the Labour government's apparently unpopular decision (as the Conservatives saw it) to reject South Africa's gigantic order of 1967. The Conservative party's arguments about South Africa's strategic importance to Britain were presented even more forcefully by senior shadow cabinet Ministers. Edward Heath, as party leader, set the trend; in December 1967 he engaged in a bitter confrontation with Prime Minister Harold Wilson in the House of Commons over the government's utter disregard of British interests in their rejection of South Africa's arms order. In an impassioned speech on 19 December, Edward Heath said: "The government have taken the wrong decision. They have failed to justify it to the house. It is damaging to our national interest in finance, trade and defence, and a Conservative Administration will reverse it." It was in fact the Conservative Administration of Heath which ultimately lifted the arms embargo. On 22 February 1971, Sir Alec Douglas Home, the Conservative spokesman, informed the House of Commons of the government's decision to lift the arms embargo on South Africa. The need for commercial benefits thus became the

single overriding objective in the British government's overall approach toward South Africa. Therefore, without doubt, the retention of economic links remained a priority for Britain. This could be further illustrated by taking into account the Thatcher era.

**BRITAIN ON SANCTIONS: THATCHER ERA:**

When Margaret Thatcher's government came to power in May 1979, it quickly confirmed that it had no intention of reducing economic links with the Republic of South Africa. Cecil Parkinson, the Minister of State at the Department of Trade, speaking in a debate in the House of Commons in May 1979, made a special point that civil trade with other countries should be determined by commercial considerations, not by the character of the government of those countries; and underlined the particular importance of South African trade.48

This view of the government was further strengthened by Margaret Thatcher, who told the Foreign Policy Association in the USA that "there is now a real prospect that the conflicts on South Africa's borders, in Rhodesia and Namib-

48. n.1, p.86.
ia, would shortly be ended. This, combined with the welcome initiatives in South Africa's domestic policies, offers a chance to diffuse the crisis which is potentially of the utmost gravity, and to make progress towards an early ending of the isolation of South Africa in world affairs."  

Thatcher constantly sought to give credit to the Pretoria government for minor reforms during the Botha years, none of which, however, altered the basic system, i.e. apartheid. Moreover, the argument advanced by Margaret Thatcher for opposing sanctions was that they could harm the blacks in Africa. Commenting on Thatcher's argument, Frene Ginwala argues: "Nothing could better illustrate the political perspectives of those governments which oppose sanctions than their new found concern with the suffering of blacks in South Africa which they used to justify continued support for Pretoria. This argument is hypocritical, presumptuous and racist. Are we supposed to believe that Mrs.. Thatcher, for one, is unaware that blacks have been suffering for decades because of apartheid and are suffering even now?"

Whatever the justifications advanced for her stand on sanctions, Margaret Thatcher succeeded in almost totally


isolating Britain over this issue. Her stand looked all the more obvious given Britain's economic and kith and kin links with South Africa, as well as her readiness to quote an official estimate of December 1985 that 120,000 British jobs could be jeopardised by a ban on trade with South Africa. At the Nassau Commonwealth Conference in 1985 Margaret Thatcher took the same stand on sanctions; explaining it to the Parliament later she said that she did not believe that apartheid would come to an end by creating unemployment. 51

The British argument against sanctions was that her economic relations with South Africa would help to reform apartheid. This rationale was rooted in Britain's economic interests in the continuance of relations. With this hard line Margaret Thatcher almost came to wrecking the Commonwealth. The Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi responded to British adamancy by commenting that Britain was losing its position as head of the Commonwealth because it was compromising on basic values and principles. Zimbabwe's Prime Minister Robert Mugabe described Margaret Thatcher as 'an ally of apartheid'. 52


52. ibid.
Despite the criticism of British position on sanctions against South Africa the Afro-Asian members of the Commonwealth tempered their stand to keep Britain as part of any Commonwealth agreement. Accordingly, the Nassau agreement—known as the Commonwealth Accord on South Africa—went to great lengths to accommodate British concerns. It conceded the implementation of sanctions in phases, and established a group of eminent persons to travel to South Africa in order to establish a process of dialogue that would lead to the dismantling of apartheid. The sanctions to be adopted consisted of such measures as a ban on government loans to the South African government and its agencies; an end to the government promotion of trade missions with South Africa; an end to the import of Kruggerands and to the export of oil, and the discouragement of all cultural and scientific cooperation except where it contributed to the end of apartheid. The intention of the accord was to tell South Africa that, as put by Canadian Prime Minister Mulroney, "the world will simply not abide apartheid any longer." But this was undermined by British Prime Minister Thatcher, who announced that

53. For details see The Nussau Comminique (London, 1985).

Britain had compromised 'Just a tiny little bit' and had no intention of imposing stiffer measures. All that Britain did was to ban the import of Kruggerands and end government promotion of trade; and the second measure was abandoned a mere two years later. As for Margaret Thatcher agreeing to the Eminent Persons Group (EPG), her concerns always seemed to delay further the pressure for sanctions. As Allister Spark claims: "Not to put too fine a point on it, the group had been appointed as the result of a ploy by Mrs. Thatcher to sidestep pressure for sanctions against South Africa...."55

Soon after the Nassau Summit of the Commonwealth concluded, attention was centred on the Eminent Persons Group. The Commonwealth Secretary General Sridath Ramphal defeated a British attempt to have Foreign Secretary Geoffrey Howe lead the mission and instead appointed seven distinguished persons, including the former British Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer Anthony Barber, two former heads of state from Australia and Nigeria, and an archbishop.56


56. In addition to Lord Barber, the members of the Eminent Persons group were: former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser of Australia; former President Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria; Archbishop Edward Scott from Canada; John Malecela, a former Cabinet Minister from Tanzania;
Sardar Swaran Singh, a former Cabinet Minister from EPG travelled widely within South Africa, meeting a range of groups and individuals, including members of the government. Its efforts were aborted in May 1986 when the South African forces bombed the capitals of three neighbouring states. The EPG report described apartheid as being achieved and sustained only through force, creating human misery and deprivation and blighting the lives of millions.57 It concluded unequivocally that "at present there is no genuine intention on the part of the South African Government to dismantle apartheid".58 Indeed, the EPG thought that the South African government was moving consciously away from any realistic negotiating process, and that, if the world did not act, the spiral of violence would intensify. The EPG had genuinely attempted a peaceful resolution to the crisis in South Africa. In rejecting such overtures, the South African government had displayed its resistance to serious negotiations. Nevertheless, British leaders continued to speak out against sanctions. Margaret Thatcher passionately

India; and Dame Nita Barrow, former President of the World Concil of Churches and the World YWCA.


58. ibid., p.66.
denounced them as immoral, and advocated only by those who would not suffer from their effects.\textsuperscript{59} Thatcher challenged the findings of the EPG at the Commonwealth Mini-summit of 1986 in London. She insisted that South Africa was involved in a process of reform and, therefore, should not be subjected to economic sanctions. The London Summit saw all but Britain agree to end consular facilities in South Africa and impose several bans: on air links, on the import of agricultural products, uranium, coal, iron and steel; on new investment or reinvestment of profits earned in South Africa. Britain agreed only to a voluntary ban on tourist promotion, a ban on new investment (but not on reinvestment)\textsuperscript{60}. The Mini-Summit in London marked a turning point because it signified Thatcher's determination to reorient British policies away from its former colonies. Once the Commonwealth Mini-Summit of August 1986 was concluded, it was clear that Margaret Thatcher had no intention of softening her attitude towards sanctions. It was quite clear that under her leadership Britain was becoming increasingly isolated on this issue.

\textsuperscript{59} Hugo Young, "Thatcher refutes the moral argument," \textit{Manchester Guardian Weekly}, 20 July 1986, pp. 4-5.

\textsuperscript{60} The EEC under British and West German pressure decided not to ban imports of coal from South Africa.
Following the impasse in London in 1986, the Commonwealth did not take any new initiative on this issue the following year, a reflection of disunity within the organisation. During this time the South African government succeeded in deflecting world public attention with its curbs on the media and its harsh crack-down and extensive detentions. Britain also began to lobby to change the emphasis of Commonwealth action from the 'negative approach' of sanctions to their 'positive approach' of providing more assistance to front line states. In September 1987 British Foreign Secretary Howe arrived in Canada to argue the British case at the Vancouver meeting of the Commonwealth Heads of Government. Commenting on the British government's approach, President Kenneth kaunda of Zambia said that while assistance against destabilisation was welcome, without sanctions it would be just like fattening us for the slaughter. The frontline states remained committed to sanctions against South Africa. The Vancouver summit accordingly rejected the British strategy of simply concentrating on aid to the frontline states. The final communique stated that, with the exception of Britain, the Commonwealth leaders believed that economic and other sanctions had a significant impact, and

61. n.54, p.154.
they remained committed to additional sanctions. While British intransigence prevented a more effective Commonwealth initiative on sanctions, it produced bitter divisions within the Commonwealth. After describing the African National Congress (ANC) as a typical terrorist organisation at the Vancouver Commonwealth summit, Thatcher stated that 'anyone who thinks that the ANC is going to run the government in South Africa is living in a cloud-cuckoo-land'.

While the United States and all other member countries of the European Economic Community (EEC) sent delegates to the ANC's seventyfifth anniversary celebration in Arusha in December 1987, British officials were ordered not to attend. Even after the Vancouver summit the battle between Britain and the rest of the Commonwealth continued. Given the reluctance of major western powers to act decisively on the issue of sanctions, it was not surprising that the impetus for sanctions within the Commonwealth ceased at the London Mini-Summit in all but rhetoric.


63. n.54.
As the next Commonwealth Summit, scheduled for Kuala Lumpur in October 1989, approached, Margaret Thatcher once more spelt out her position on sanctions; "We played the leading role in bringing Zimbabwe to independence and have given a great deal of help since independence", she said.\(^{64}\) She further reiterated that the neighboring countries would be the first to suffer from more general sanctions against South Africa.\(^{65}\) By reiterating this she was trying to convince her opponents that Britain always remained concerned over the state of affairs of the black Africans. Not surprisingly her appeal failed to convince the African members of the Commonwealth.

The Commonwealth was due to consider the sanctions report which had been prepared by a group of independent experts led by the American Joseph Hanlon. It made thirty recommendations for further sanctions including the curtailment of bank loans and the transfer of high-tech information. Britain hopes that there would not be a British-versus-the rest confrontation at Kuala Lumpur, were dashed when the Summit Chairman, the Premier of Malaysia, Dr. Mohamad Mahathir, said in his opening speech: "Sanctions work. Do

\(^{64}\) n.51., p.164.

\(^{65}\) ibid.
not be deluded into believing that the small changes we are seeing there are due to a sudden flowering of humanitarian feelings. Concern for the effect of sanctions on the blacks is misplaced. Consequently sanctions must not only continue but must be escalated."  

Kuala Lumpur probably represented the worst of British relations with the rest of the Commonwealth over the issue of sanctions. After much debate the Commonwealth statement said that Britain and the other 48 members had agreed that sanctions on South Africa should remain in place until there was clear and irreversible change. But a few hours later, the British government issued a statement claiming that the Commonwealth should concentrate on encouraging change rather than on further punishment. Explaining the statement, the British Foreign Secretary said, "The Commonwealth statement sets out what the Commonwealth wants; it does not set out what Britain wants."  

The result was the ultimate row in the association, with a united response of anger against the British action. On four issues Britain had rejected the Commonwealth communique: she rejected the paragraph which said that sanctions had begun to influence the policies of

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66. ibid.

67. ibid.
South Africa; she rejected an Australian proposal to investigate ways of tightening financial sanctions and the call to make the arms embargo more effective; she refused to agree to the creation of an independent agency to review and report on South Africa's financial links; and she voted against an Australian and Canadian proposal to review the situation in six months time. Never before had Britain stood out against her Commonwealth colleagues so vehemently.

Following South African President F.W. de Klerk's speech of 2 February 1990, declaring the Pretoria's decision to release ANC and other political leaders and unbanned political parties and hold negotiations with Africans for changes in the constitution, Margaret Thatcher of Britain became more emphatic on removing sanctions against South Africa. Her reaction to the release of Nelson Mandela was an immediate call to lift sanctions: 'Given that President de Klerk has now announced the release of Nelson Mandela and has already set free other long-term security prisoners, has unbanned the ANC and other political organizations, and is offering to lift the state of emergency, if conditions of calm are maintained we believe it no longer makes sense to discourage new investment in South Africa.' She went on to say: 'We believe that the steps President de Klerk has
taken merit a positive, practical response'.

Two weeks after Mandela's release Britain formally ended her voluntary ban on tourism and new investment in South Africa.

It may thus be deduced that gradual and reluctant British acquiescence in minimal sanctions was only achieved as a result of Commonwealth pressures. The British sanction was so insignificant and so narrowly imposed that it could hardly affect major economic links between Britain and South Africa.

What remained important to Britain was South Africa being a centre of its economic activity. Because of the extensive and long standing economic links, Britain did not yield to the demand for sanctions.

From the discussions in this chapter, it has clearly emerged that Britain's economic interests have clearly shaped its political stand on South Africa. Whether it was on the question of South Africa's membership of the Commonwealth, or on the question of the British supply of arms, or on the question of positive sanctions against Pretoria, the policies of successive British governments remained more or less similar, i.e, the Republic's economic attraction pre-

68. The Observer, 11 February 1990.
vailed upon their policies. In order to protect its economic interests, the British government tried to delink economic matters from political and moral issues. British economic interests in the Republic of South Africa thus added to its responsibility not only for the foundations of apartheid, but also for strengthening it. In building up South Africa's economic power and in preventing the imposition of sanctions for long, Britain enabled the minority regime of South Africa to dominate the region racially, economically, and militarily. The irony was that Britain's political and economic support gave the racist regime as much freedom as possible to evolve many draconian laws aimed at suppressing the blacks.