

On the eve of the crucial Commonwealth mini-summit in London, FT writers assess the leaders' attitudes

Head to head over sanctions and South Africa



RAMPHAL



THATCHER



KAUNDA



GANDHI



HAWKE



MUGABE



MULRONEY



PINDLING

THE KEY to Sir Shridath Ramphal is his job: Commonwealth Secretary-General. No Secretary-General likes to see the organisation over which he presides disintegrate, so ignore any stories that he would prefer to see a Commonwealth without Britain or would be unconcerned about (say) a Zambian walk-out. His job is to hold the Commonwealth together.

Ramphal, only the second holder of the post, gave the Commonwealth new life when he took over 11 years ago. He is a lively, charming man. As a Guyanese, he comes from a country perhaps more torn by racial conflict than almost any other. He has an acute awareness of how bad racial strife can be.

He tried almost to the very last day to prevent the withdrawals from this year's Commonwealth Games, knowing how harmful the effect could be on British opinion. He was also upset by President Kaunda's outburst at Sir Geoffrey Howe; the "kissing apartheid" episode.

Ramphal admits that the emotionalism of President Kaunda is a problem; so too, is the uncertain attitude of Nigeria which led the withdrawal from the Games, but is not a front line state.

His view of the mini-summit that starts tomorrow is that it should be a success provided that the participants argue about means, not ends. Mrs Thatcher, he thinks, still has to convince some of the other leaders that she is as opposed to the present South African system as they are.

He has no objection to holding a second meeting in two months. The essential point, he says, is to keep the Commonwealth process going.

Malcolm Rutherford

ONE POINT about Mrs Thatcher, the British Prime Minister, that not everybody realises is that her bark can be worse than her bite. She can seem at her most aggressive when she is about to change her mind.

When she took office in 1979 she did not expect that Britain would shortly be coming to terms with Mr Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe-Rhodesia. Under the guidance of Lord Carrington, her first Foreign Secretary, she allowed it to happen.

Another point about her that is sometimes overlooked is that she is a very good politician. She wins elections.

Africa has always been a difficult subject for the Tories. The party was divided over the granting of independence to the East African states in the 1960s, its attitudes towards the Central African Federation and again in its approach to the illegal declaration of independence by Rhodesia.

But South Africa was bound to be the most difficult problem of the lot, especially since the Conservative Party is no longer the party of the Commonwealth. Mrs Thatcher has reached the end of a Parliamentary session with unity just about intact and an all party Select Committee acknowledging the near inevitability of further sanctions.

Where she may have got into a tangle was in persuading herself that President Botha would take the bold course and opt for substantial reform. She says that that is what she would have done in his position. She was wrong, but may still entertain lingering hopes.

Malcolm Rutherford

IF THERE should be a show-down over sanctions at the Commonwealth's mini-summit, Kenneth Kaunda will be at the forefront of the scrap. The Zambian President first set the tone of confrontation earlier this year by repeatedly threatening to pull out of the Commonwealth if Margaret Thatcher maintains her refusal to impose new measures against South Africa.

He has kept up the pressure since then, publicly carpeting Sir Geoffrey Howe, the British Foreign Secretary, on both his recent visits to Lusaka.

In his 23 years in office, KK, as he is widely known, has suffered the effect of a series of independence wars in neighbouring territories: Angola, Mozambique, Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and Namibia.

Now Zambia, which provides the African National Congress (ANC) with its administrative headquarters, is in the front line of the most serious upheaval of all.

So it will be KK, impassioned and emotional, with his characteristic starched white handkerchief clutched in his left hand to wipe away the odd tear, who will lead the call for sanctions, and take on Margaret Thatcher.

An earlier confrontation ended happily. After a sometimes acrimonious Commonwealth conference in Lusaka in 1979, when Rhodesia headed the agenda, the two protagonists ended the conference on the dance floor doing the foxtrot.

Commonwealth chemistry, the mediating role of the Queen and, above all, the emergence of a strategy for Rhodesia's independence had brought them together. This weekend sanctions and South Africa may prove a tougher nut to crack.

Michael Holman

MR RAJIV GANDHI, the Indian Prime Minister, comes to London wearing two hats that need not always match—he is a third world leader championing the African cause. He is also a firm believer in the Commonwealth as an important and valuable international institution.

In London, Mr Gandhi will be flexing his international muscles in favour of the front-line African states. In the process, he could find himself on the side of forces that will strain the Commonwealth because of the threat of a clash with Mrs Thatcher.

The Prime Minister has in recent weeks launched his own brand of quiet diplomacy. He has spoken on the telephone to the Canadian and Australian Prime Ministers and with the frontline African leaders. This has led him to believe that a united stand is possible to put pressure on Mrs Thatcher to agree to sanctions.

The Indian leader played a major role at the last Commonwealth summit at Nassau.

What worries Mr Gandhi is that Mrs Thatcher is avoiding enforcing even the limited package of measures worked out there. This is the minimum that Mr Gandhi hopes Britain will agree to.

Mr Gandhi is unlikely to mince words in London. As one of his senior aides says: "The Prime Minister values the Commonwealth as much as his mother and grandfather did. But ending apartheid is even more important."

K. K. Sharma

MR BOB HAWKE, the Australian Prime Minister, goes to this week's Commonwealth emergency session on South Africa looking rather haggard. It is with some hesitation that the Old Silver—as he is affectionately called for his thick and wavy crown of hair—leaves Canberra to spare precious time that could otherwise be spent at home putting some order back into the economy.

But attendance at the London meeting is vital in his view. After all, he was one of those at the Nassau meeting who initiated the creation of the Eminent Persons Group and convinced the hard-liners to give dialogue with the South African Government a chance before jumping into sanctions. Since the EPG had failed to bring the white government to the negotiating table, he is frustrated, and feels the need to push on with the work.

Mr Hawke, 56, is bringing to London his distinctive style of persuasion, arbitration and bargaining so famous among Australians. Since his days as a union leader and as president of the Australian Labor Party, he has built a reputation as an arbitrator who alternately bullies and cajoles disagreeing parties. A cult had developed around his image as a larrikin, a fearless tough-talking yet charming Aussie lad.

Mr Hawke has criticised Britain and Mrs Thatcher for failing to understand that in order to retain British involvement in South Africa, the UK must not stand in the way of change but be associated with it.

"Now if Mrs Thatcher can come to understand that, I think she will see that sanctions are going to be necessary to get the South African regime to talk," he said recently.

Emilia Magaza

WHEN Robert Mugabe won Zimbabwe's independence election in 1980 whites were stunned. They regarded the man as a terrorist, leader of a guerrilla army in a war which cost over 25,000 lives. Within hours of his success, the Prime Minister made a remarkable plea for tolerance, urging reconciliation between the races.

Friends and critics alike acknowledge the steely will of a cold enigmatic man who emerged from ten years in detention under white rule with a string of degrees to his name. The singlemindedness with which he sought Zimbabwe's independence has been brought to bear on his support for efforts to end apartheid.

Mr Mugabe, who next month hosts the non-aligned summit in Harare, comes to the conference as dismissive as President Kaunda of the European peace initiative's prospects for success, and equally impatient for the introduction of sanctions. Unlike his neighbour, however, he has not threatened to leave the Commonwealth.

The need for southern African states to prepare for the consequences of the growing conflict in the republic, and to play their role in the ending of apartheid, is a frequent theme of his speeches.

He is acutely aware of Zimbabwe's own vulnerability to instability in southern Africa. Some 5,000 of the country's soldiers are deployed in neighbouring Mozambique, protecting a vital road, rail and oil pipeline "corridor" to the Mozambican port of Beira, which has frequently come under attack by South African-backed rebels.

Michael Holman

NOTHING would please Mr Brian Mulroney more than to receive at least some of the credit for whatever action the Commonwealth eventually decides to take against South Africa.

Gently nudged by the British, the affable Canadian Prime Minister has latched on to the South African issue in the past year as a way of asserting Canada's view of itself as a mediator in international trouble spots, and of boosting his own political standing at home.

In addition, the Commonwealth has a special significance for Canadians beyond whatever Mr Mulroney's private political ambitions may be. It is one of the few international bodies in which Canada can take a leading role without being overshadowed by the US.

Mr Mulroney has tried to take a lead in bridging the gap between Britain and the Afro-Asian and Caribbean members of the Commonwealth. He has appointed a special envoy (Mr Bernard Wood, respected head of the North-South Institute in Ottawa) to visit other Commonwealth countries in search of common ground. He imposed a package of sanctions against Pretoria earlier this year.

But the Canadians have been careful not to do anything too drastic. They did not join the Commonwealth Games boycott. The sanctions they have imposed so far—like a voluntary ban by travel agents on promoting tourism to South Africa and the withdrawal of Canadian accreditation from Pretoria's labour and agriculture attaches based in the US—fell far short of the tough measures which Mr Mulroney and his ministers often talk about.

Bernard Simon

IN 1967 Prime Minister Sir Lynden Pindling sought and achieved peaceful transition to black majority rule in the Bahamas.

Nineteen years later Sir Lynden, who will be chairing the weekend meeting, is convinced the same "quiet revolution" can end apartheid in South Africa—if Western leaders are prepared to apply mandatory economic sanctions now.

Judged alongside many Commonwealth leaders, the 56-year-old British educated lawyer might be considered conservative.

The chairman's mandate is clear: seek the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa and the establishment of a non-racial representative government as a matter of urgency. In this he has the support of the 13-member Caribbean Community (Caricom) following their meeting last month.

A charismatic man, known for his restrained life style—he neither drinks nor smokes and is an early sleeper—he can be brutally frank. He recently chastised President Reagan and Mrs Margaret Thatcher for their opposition to sanctions.

He is likely to emphasise the point that the West is fast losing its opportunity to influence the future of Africa through its refusal to respond to demands for change by the black majority in South Africa.

Sir Lynden is facing an election within the next year. If as chairman he is able to steer the Commonwealth towards consensus on the sanctions issue, the benefits in terms of his domestic popularity could be significant.

Nicki Kelly