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The Commonwealth and  
South Africa: Restoring A  
Relationship  
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ABSTRACT

The departure of South Africa from the Commonwealth in 1961 seemed to mark a watershed in that community's self-awareness, giving rise to hitherto vaguely felt sentiments on moral and other issues. Far from falling into decline with the departure of one of its founder members the Commonwealth has gone from strength to strength, playing an active role in political, economic and cultural affairs on the world stage. The reunion of a truly democratic post-apartheid South Africa with the Commonwealth can only be to the mutual advantage of all parties.

#### Introduction

The establishment of a Government of national unity on the basis of the elections planned for early 1994 will mark the beginning of the normalisation of South Africa's relations with most of the world. The resumption of Commonwealth membership, should that be the wish of the people of South Africa and the new Government, will be part of this general trend. It is in this context that I have been asked to contribute this article on South Africa and the Commonwealth.

South Africa's membership of the Commonwealth, however, will not be like its membership of other comparable international organisations. In the Chief Emeka Anyaoku is a Nigerian-born and educated diplomat of extensive experience. His long service with the Commonwealth Secretariat culminated in his appointment as Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, a position he still holds.

SALLA VOL! No. 1 1993 1

case of the Commonwealth, South Africa will be returning to an association in which it had played a front-line role up to 1961 and which it would not have left but for the enormity of apartheid. And because it will be a case of returning to the fold of an extended kin group. I have thought it helpful. especially in the interest of the new generation which has come to the fore in public life in South Africa but which has no living memory of the Commonwealth, to recapitulate the historical background of South Africa's involvement in the Commonwealth.

The referendum in South Africa in October 1960 had resulted in a majority for a republic and the Government had applied for South Africa to continue in Commonwealth membership after 31,May 1961 when the republican Constitution was due to come into force. On the precedent of India which combined a republican Constitution with Commonwealth membership, South Africa's application should have presented no difficulties; what presented difficulties however, was South Africa's apartheid system against which the conscience of the world had been aroused only a short year previously by the Sharpeville massacre. It was therefore on South Africa's apartheid policies that consideration of its application came to be focused.

In the vanguard of the attack on apartheid were John Diefenbaker, the Canadian Prime Minister, and several leaders of the newly independent Commonwealth countries. Mr. Diefenbaker said that apartheid had become the world's symbol of discrimination and Commonwealth leaders could not give unqualified consent to South Africa's application without appearing in the eyes of the world to be condoning the policies that went with apartheid. Nor could they do that, without irreparable damage to the association itself. It had become a multi-racial association and had the potential to be a force for good in the wider world. And if the Commonwealth was "to be a force for good. as it should be, there must be a measure of general agreement that discrimination in respect of race and colour shall not take place". Prime Minister Diefenbaker had no doubt that the resolute resistance to apartheid which the meeting had demonstrated was an unqualified boon and he went on to round off his remarks in these memorable words:

What has happened might be epitomised thus. We have declared that non-discrimination on the basis of race and colour is the foundation stone of a multi-racial association composed of representatives from all parts of the world. No foundation could be broader or more solidly based than the fundamental principle which, though unwritten, has emerged from this Meeting.

Apartheid South Africa's membership of the Commonwealth stood in the way of the organisation realising its full potential as a force for good. There

was the rub. A representative of the old-"Commonwealth had articulated the real essence of the new Commonwealth and thereby enabled the transition from the one to the other to take place not only without rancour but in a " manner which brought enduring strength to it. Black and white had stood shoulder to shoulder in opposing an evil they saw in apartheid and thereby laid the foundations for one of the most exciting adventures in international partnership and co-operation.

Dr. Hendrik-Verwoerd, who had by now become Prime Minister of South Africa. not altogether surprisingly saw it all differently. In his view, the point at issue was not the freedom of the black man in South Africa but the position of the white man. Since there could clearly be no meeting of minds on South Africa's internal policies. he appealed to the Meeting to "forget these points of difference and look for points of agreement".

For a Commonwealth whose membership was becoming increasingly non-white. it made all the difference in the world whether it put racial equality in the first place or in the second. A watershed point had been reached. As Harold Macmillan later put it in his statement to the House of Commons on 22 March 1961, there was no question of expelling South Africa from the Commonwealth for it had become apparent to Dr. Verwoerd himself that he could not serve "the Commonwealth or help its unity and coherence in any other way except by withdrawing his application". This Dr. Verwoerd did and so brought to an end South Africa's membership of the Commonwealth.

The London Meeting was a truly historic occasion. The Commonwealth had evolved organically without a Charter or a pre-determined objective. Nor had any previous crisis in its relatively long history compelled a fundamental rethinking of what the association was about or what it might aspire to be. Admittedly. it had not entirely stood still. Allegiance to the Crown as a basis of Commonwealth membership had ended with the precedent of India in 1949 and the Suez crisis of 1956 had similarly ended the long standing tradition of close consultation between Commonwealth governments on major international issues. But even those developments brought about no serious self-introspection. Only the South African issue necessitated this critical self-examination and in the result freed the association to pursue a wider international vocation commensurate with its potential.

But even outside the Commonwealth, South Africa continued to influence the agenda of the association in a way which no other single issue was to do. It had become apparent at the London Meeting that the Commonwealth needed to spell out the principles animating it for the avoidance of doubt as to what it was striving for. This was finally done at the Singapore Heads of Government Meeting of January 1971 and. significantly. after a passionate

debate over the sale of arms to South Africa.

The Singapore Declaration of Commonwealth Principles. as the document became known, set out what might in comparative terms be described as the Commonwealth's equivalent of the Nicene Creed. It proclaimed the traditional belief in the liberty of the individual, in equal rights for all citizens regardless of race, colour, creed or political belief. The departure lay, however, in the recognition of racial prejudice as "a dangerous sickness threatening the healthy development of the human race and racial discrimination as an unmitigated evil of society". Then followed a matching commitment vigorously to combat this evil within each Commonwealth country and not to give assistance to regimes which contribute to the pursuit or consolidation of this evil. Dr. Verwoerd had argued that the Commonwealth had no binding principles on race relations or any other issue for that matter. The way had now been cleared for the Commonwealth not only to combat the evil of racial discrimination within the ranks of its own membership but also outside it.

There was also another departure at Singapore with implications for a wider international role for the Commonwealth. By 1971, Commonwealth membership was overwhelmingly drawn from the developing world of Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific; and reflecting the concerns of this constituency, the Declaration pointed out that "the wide disparities in wealth now existing between different sections of mankind" were too great to be tolerated" and made "their progressive removal" the aim of the Commonwealth. The Singapore Meeting showed the Commonwealth which, far from disintegrating as some had feared would be the case with the departure of South Africa, at its most confident and providing a constructive example of a multinational approach whether in combating racial intolerance or helping to reduce the existing disparities in wealth between nations.

The Singapore Declaration was followed in 1977 by the Gleneagles Agreement on Apartheid in Sport. The Gleneagles statement was intended to discourage sporting contacts between Commonwealth sportsmen and women and teams from South Africa or any other country that practised discrimination in sport on the basis of race, colour or ethnic origin. Significantly, Gleneagles was later to provide a model for universally accepted approaches to the question of sporting contacts within the framework of the international campaign against apartheid.

Much has of course happened since London (1961) and Singapore .. (1971); but there is a sense in which these two landmark Meetings can be said to have launched the Commonwealth on its present outward-looking career. ' " .

## A Post-Apartheid South Africa in the Commonwealth

Where is this outward-looking Commonwealth, which sees itself and is increasingly being seen by the rest of the world as a force for good, bound? With the end of apartheid in South Africa, can it play an even wider international role as Prime Minister Diefenbaker believed it could, untrammelled by apartheid? And how can the new South Africa help to advance the Commonwealth's crusade for a saner world, in politics and economics?

Practically everything the Commonwealth aspired to achieve for its own member countries and the rest of the world was spelt out in the Singapore Declaration. The belief in the liberty of the individual and free institutions, the unalterable opposition to racial prejudice and racial discrimination and the urgency of economic and social development in the interest of national societies and a harmonious world. All these and more were not only stated as principles but as practical objectives, the pursuit of which gave a contemporary relevance to the Commonwealth. The end of the Cold War therefore was seen by Commonwealth leaders as providing an auspicious, almost uniquely fostering international environment for the pursuit of these objectives.

The Harare Heads of Government Meeting in October 1991 was the first Commonwealth summit to be held in a full-blown post-Cold War world; and, appropriately enough, it made the promotion and protection of the fundamental political values of the Commonwealth as the areas on which the Commonwealth would now concentrate "with renewed vigour". Foremost among these were democracy, the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary, just and honest government; and fundamental human rights, including equality of rights and opportunities for all.

A beginning had already been made at the Kuala Lumpur Heads of Government Meeting in October 1989 when Commonwealth leaders agreed that one of the Commonwealth's contributions to strengthening democracy might be the provision of assistance in helping member countries to reinforce their election and other constitutional processes through the facility for mounting observer missions at the request of member governments. Harare built on this foundation with the result that since October 1991 official Commonwealth observer groups have observed no less than eight polls in member countries. It is a measure of the progress made towards democratisation that today the number of Commonwealth countries which are still under military or one party rule is less than half the figure at the time of the Harare Meeting.

In recent years, the Commonwealth has also widened its efforts to help strengthen the key institutions that sustain democracy and civil society and

which help to protect and promote human rights. Accordingly technical assistance has been provided to member countries in such areas as constitutional and electoral reform and the strengthening of electoral commissions. Helping to build the appropriate national institutions to underpin democracy has been no less important and this the Commonwealth has done through a programme of mutual assistance among its members for the provision of the expertise necessary for the establishment and development of such institutions.

A post-apartheid South Africa, reconciled and at peace with itself. will make a critical contribution in a variety of ways to the promotion of democracy, good governance and human rights. First. a post-apartheid South Africa will in itself be a great triumph for the most cherished of all Commonwealth principles; namely, the equality of all human beings irrespective of skin colour and other adventitious criteria. By renouncing apartheid and resuming Commonwealth membership. South Africa will be the Commonwealth's most effective argument against the forces of racial discrimination. To a world which is witness to "ethnic cleansing" and all manner of intolerance, a South Africa cleansed of apartheid can bring a true healing touch. In more practical terms, a post-apartheid South Africa stands to contribute validly in expertise, in personnel and in other appropriate ways to the furtherance of the cause of democracy in the wider Commonwealth. There is sense in which the history of the Commonwealth can be written around the word "freedom" in its broader possible meaning; and the association is never so true to itself as when it is protecting and advancing democracy. In a post-apartheid South Africa. the Commonwealth should find an invaluable partner in the cause of democracy.

An equally crucial orientation of the Commonwealth in recent years has been its involvement in the effort to secure an equitable international economic order. Of the Commonwealth's 50 member countries, only four are industrially developed. The great majority of the remaining 46 are at various stages of development. Almost invariably they are also commodity producers. For these countries the disparities in wealth which Commonwealth leaders found at Singapore to be too great to be tolerated have become more marked and even less tolerable. Since the 1970s they have seen a precipitate and continuing fall in the prices of their export commodities against ever increasing prices of the imported manufactures which they need for their development. In other ways too the terms of trade have worsened against them.

The Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation (CFTC) has enabled the Commonwealth to assist its developing member countries. But a lasting solution to their economic problems lies in a re-ordering of the international economic system which compels developing countries to produce more and

more for less and less. A distinct Commonwealth contribution in this regard has been the use of Expert Groups drawn from the developed and the developing Commonwealth to make recommendations on how the Commonwealth might contribute to an international consensus on the way forward. The best known among these have included those on protectionism (1982), the North-South Dialogue (also 1982), the Debt Crisis (1984) and more recently the Expert Group on Global Change (1989/90). Here too, there is room for a post-apartheid South Africa to make a major contribution

The Commonwealth has traditionally seen itself not only as an association of governments but also as an association of peoples. The numerous professional nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) which make up this unofficial Commonwealth have given the association a peculiar resilience. The Commonwealth would be the poorer without this network of associations which give meaning to the concept of the Commonwealth as a family. Before 1961, South African professional organisations played a distinguished role in this network. With the end of apartheid, South Africa's professional organisations should make an invaluable contribution to the flowering of this network. South Africa, which did so much to foster the evolution of the conception of the Commonwealth as a "sen'ice" Commonwealth, can surely do more to consolidate this perception which has now become the accepted commonsense view of the association in its member countries.

But South Africa cannot make any of these much needed contributions unless the Commonwealth first helps South Africa to complete the ending of apartheid and the establishment of a viable multiracial democracy. Commonwealth policy towards South Africa in all its facets has consistently been directed towards one objective, the end of apartheid and the establishment of a stable multiracial democracy. From South Africa's enforced withdrawal from the Association in 1961 to the campaign against apartheid in sport in the 1970s through to the Eminent Persons Group Mission in 1980 and the imposition of sanctions thereafter, the Commonwealth has sought to bring the parties to the table to negotiate a lasting settlement. And in the Commonwealth Observer Mission to South Africa (COMSA) and the constitutional and other expertise which the Commonwealth stands ready to make available to the negotiating parties it is already contributing to a peaceful settlement. But beyond that there is more the Commonwealth can offer.

First, the Commonwealth has an unrivalled wealth of experience in the management of pluralism. In addition to the associations core preoccupation with promoting unity in diversity, a number of its member countries are multi-racial and multicultural in composition and have been

SANA VOL! No 1 1903 7

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so for a long time The whole of the Caribbean is one region of multi-culturalism and multi-racialism. Malaysia, Singapore. Australia, Canada and many others are plural societies. The South African issue is ultimately about the successful management of pluralism. South Africa can draw on this accumulated experience as it seeks to build the new South Africa on the ashes of apartheid. '

A related area of possible Commonwealth assistance is in the realm of external relations. The years of apartheid have meant a considerable narrowing of South Africa's external relations. The Commonwealth will provide a post-apartheid South Africa with a gateway to the wider world and through a variety of ways. Notwithstanding its relatively greatly expanded membership, Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings still have an intimacy which is not the case with most other international organisations or groupings of States. And because they are intimate and informal. they provide an opportunity for Commonwealth leaders from the various ends of the world to exchange information. influence the policies of other governments and be in turn influenced by others. In short. the Commonwealth provides a ready machinery for South Africa to pursue its external policies.

Below the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings, Commonwealth co-operation proceeds through Ministerial meetings and meetings of Senior Officials. Law Ministers, Finance Ministers, Education Ministers and a host of other Ministerial meetings which provide further opportunities for Commonwealth countries to exchange views and experiences and where necessary to concert positions. South Africa, which has been excluded from most such international caucuses. should find these Commonwealth gatherings of considerable value.

The opportunities for trade and investment will be no less considerable. The lifting of sanctions will inaugurate a two-way traffic in trade and investment in which the Commonwealth connection. once used so effectively to mobilise international economic pressure against apartheid, can also be used to stimulate trade and investment in South Africa. ;

On both sides. then, there is a great deal to be gained by South Africa's return to the Commonwealth. One of the reasons which Harold Macmillan , gave to the House of Commons for regretting the departure of South Africa from the Commonwealth was that it made "a breach in a community which has a great part to play in the world". The end of apartheid should enable South Africa to heal this breach and, at the same time, to play a greater part in Commonwealth and world affairs. I

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