

British Debate on Pretoria Sanctions Puts the Monarchy at Center Stage

By Karen DeYoung
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LONDON — A political controversy over Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's refusal to impose sanctions against South Africa is threatening to boil over into one of the most sacred areas of public life here, the role of Queen Elizabeth II as head of state and leader of the 49-nation Commonwealth.

The queen, having presided during her 34-year reign over the growth of the Commonwealth from a collection of dependent former colonies into a community of staunchly independent nations, now faces the prospect of reigning over what some say may be its demise.

Newspapers have been awash with rumors that Elizabeth is displeased with the controversy that has pitted Mrs. Thatcher against the vast majority of Britain's former dependencies who are clamoring for sanctions.

According to widespread press reports, attributed to unnamed senior cabinet members who purportedly are concerned over Mrs. Thatcher's highly visible intransigence, the queen has communicated her displeasure to the prime minister during the regular Tuesday evening meetings when the two women sit alone to discuss the week's events.

Buckingham Palace, normally eager to disclaim any political interference on the part of the monarch, has avoided all comment on the reports.

But Elizabeth is known to take her Commonwealth role seriously. And while many Britons profess to consider the Commonwealth little more than a useless vestige of empire that is more trouble than it is worth, they often react strongly on the queen's behalf when they think she is troubled.

Senior politicians in Mrs. Thatcher's Conservative Party are

known to be concerned that opposing sides in the sanctions debate will seek to invoke the queen's name, giving rise to public unease and domestic political problems.

In an apparent attempt to signal some moderation of the government's heretofore implacable opposition to comprehensive sanctions, the foreign secretary, Sir Geoffrey Howe, told the House of Commons on Wednesday that if his upcoming mission to South Africa "does not procure tangible and substantial progress, I would regard agreement on some further measures" against Pretoria "as likely to be necessary."

Sir Geoffrey, who went to Washington on Thursday for talks with the Reagan administration on South Africa, declined to specify what measures Britain, and Mrs. Thatcher, might be willing to consider.

The controversy already has wreaked havoc on the Commonwealth Games, which the queen is to open next week in Edinburgh.

[Three more countries were reported Thursday to have joined a boycott of the games to protest Mrs. Thatcher's stand, The Associated Press reported.

[The Bahamas, Sierra Leone and Papua New Guinea were said to have joined Nigeria, Ghana, Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya and Malaysia in boycotting the games.]

Several heads of Commonwealth governments, most prominently President Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia, have threatened to withdraw from the community if Britain does not bend to the will of the majority of its former dependents.

The role of the monarchy in Britain's political life has been a sensitive issue throughout modern history. Although she serves as head of state, Elizabeth is not head of the government.

In substantive terms, the monarch has only one vestigial power

— to decide which party leader should be called upon to head a new government in the event there is no clear winner in an election.

■ Reagan Presses Envoy Bid

The Reagan administration is pressing ahead urgently with plans to name Robert J. Brown, a black businessman, as the next ambassador to South Africa, The New York Times reported from Washington.

"They are trying to compress in two days what usually takes months," an administration official said Wednesday, "because of the desire to have the nomination announced in a very short period of time." One plan is for President Ronald Reagan to announce Mr. Brown's nomination during a policy speech on South Africa next week.

A group of black leaders led by the Reverend Jesse L. Jackson has expressed concern that given the Reagan administration's refusal to impose severe economic sanctions against South Africa, Mr. Brown would be undertaking a "suicide mission" and urged him not to take the assignment.

■ Visits to Prisoners Sought

Lawyers said Thursday that they would ask to visit at least 700 jailed activists after a ruling Wednesday by the provincial Supreme Court in Durban, The Associated Press reported from Johannesburg.

The court upheld the legality of the state of emergency decree imposed June 12, but it also ruled that people detained without charge under the emergency decree must be allowed to see lawyers.

■ AFL-CIO Chief in Appeal

Lane Kirkland, president of the AFL-CIO, the largest American trade federation left for Johannesburg on Thursday with a delegation of international union leaders to show solidarity with black workers in South Africa, Reuters reported from Washington.