

Thatcher, the Commonwealth and apartheid South Africa

Controversial she may be, but the former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher still played a role in the dismantling of South Africa's apartheid regime, says Sue Onslow of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies.

Margaret Thatcher was not just a highly controversial figure on the British Left, and in the history of Britain's relations with Europe. As Prime Minister, she proved equally controversial within the Commonwealth for her staunch opposition to the imposition of economic sanctions against apartheid South Africa.



Margaret Thatcher invited the former South Africa apartheid leader PW Botha to visit Britain

From the standpoint of the then Secretary-General Sir 'Sonny' Ramphal, and other Commonwealth leaders, her vocal opposition to the imposition of financial and commercial sanctions at the Nassau CHOGM in October 1985 was fundamentally counter-productive and divisive to a voluntary association that operated on the basis of consensus. To the delight of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, Ramphal himself had openly called for sanctions in mid-1985; and Thatcher's obduracy in this issue prompted exasperation from the Commonwealth Secretariat in London, and heated criticism from Commonwealth African leaders, as well as Canada and Australia. Although Thatcher was obliged to give way at the Vancouver CHOGM in 1987, Britain refused to join the observer 7-member Committee on Southern Africa created at this meeting. Thatcher was again in full combative mode at the Kuala Lumpur CHOGM in 1989, and undercut the painstaking work her new Foreign Secretary, John Major, had put in private to reach an accommodation on the sanctions issue. In the words of her foreign policy adviser Sir Percy Cradock, she played 'the villain with relish'. Her previous Foreign Secretary Geoffrey Howe was most notably on the receiving end of prime ministerial harangues – his innate courtesy precluded the robust exchange Thatcher's argumentative intellectual character craved and thrived upon – and he was frequently called upon to soothe Commonwealth sensibilities in private. Throughout her time in office, Thatcher remained fundamentally unimpressed by the Commonwealth's attempts to take the moral high ground over South Africa, given the dismal records of very many of its member states on democracy and human rights.

This then is the received wisdom in the history of the Commonwealth, and its passionate supporters. Thatcher was vilified as an effective supporter for apartheid rule. Notwithstanding her

robust and divisive political style – what is not widely known nor acknowledged is that the apartheid government valued Thatcher as a worthy political opponent and “true friend of South Africa”. Thatcher’s loathing of apartheid on moral grounds, as well as her conviction it made “economic nonsense”, was well understood in Pretoria. However, former South African Foreign Minister RF “Pik” Botha is adamant that had it not been for Baroness Thatcher, the Commonwealth’s Eminent Persons Group of 1986 would not have been allowed to visit South Africa in the first place. It was only thanks to her sustained persuasive correspondence with President PW Botha (who was initially determined to bar the EPG from entering South Africa) in late 1985 and early 1986 that the South African government relented and permitted the 4-month EPG tour, which included a meeting with the then imprisoned Nelson Mandela. Fear of antagonising one of pariah South Africa’s few remaining allies persuaded the preternaturally stubborn and suspicious South African President. From the EPG’s mission emerged the Possible Negotiating Concept which later formed the crucial starting point for the National Party government’s formal negotiations with the ANC in 1990 following the release of Mandela and the ANC’s suspension of violence. Although Thatcher was later to irritate profoundly both the British Foreign Office and ANC negotiators with her support for Chief Buthelezi’s ideas of federal autonomy, former President FW de Klerk’s statement on the announcement of her death, again underlines the value the National Party leadership attached to her support for the negotiating process in 1989-1990.

“Although she was always a steadfast critic of apartheid, she had a much better grasp of the complexities and geo-strategic realities of South Africa than many of her contemporaries. She consistently, and correctly, believed that much more could be achieved through constructive engagement with the South African government than through draconian sanctions and isolation. She also understood the need to consider the concerns and aspirations of all South Africans in their search for constitutional consensus.”

Indeed, excerpts from the former British Ambassador to Pretoria, Robin Renwick’s forthcoming new book (*A Journey With Margaret Thatcher*, to be published by Biteback on 23 April 2013), in *The Sunday Times* on 7 April, underline the importance de Klerk attached to meeting Thatcher in 1989. At this meeting, Thatcher urged de Klerk to release Mandela – something the new South African President had already privately concluded was vital if there was to be any hope of South Africa’s peaceful transition from apartheid, together with the decommissioning of South Africa’s nuclear programme. Renwick makes clear that while in public Thatcher insisted on no negotiations with the ANC as “terrorists”, in private her government officials were authorised to explore contacts with all South African nationalist parties, inside and outside the country. Commonwealth support for South Africa’s transition prompted a spectrum of policies from its member governments: while Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney was attentive to maintain sanctions to support the ANC’s negotiating stance, Thatcher’s and later John Major’s governments were keen to lift international measures to send positive signals to the National Party and its Afrikaner constituency, as well as the South African English business community. (Both Thatcher and Major supported a long-standing and perfectly sensible FCO line that a major challenge across Africa was to attract foreign investment, and once investors had disengaged from South Africa it would be extremely difficult to draw them back.) Renwick also points to the value Mandela himself attached to Thatcher’s diplomacy and intervention.

So although this flies in the face of the Commonwealth and its strongest supporters’ entrenched views of Thatcher’s perfidy, the Prime Minister’s lone and embattled stance at successive Commonwealth summits made the National Party value her input all the more, just as the ANC leadership appreciated her authority and standing. This is not to argue that Thatcher was key to South Africa’s extraordinary and unlikely transition to black majority rule in April 1994. But she was certainly an important facilitator at early critical stages of the negotiating process.

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