

# SOUTH AFRICA AND THE WORLD: HOME THOUGHTS FROM ABROAD

The Republic's fortunes have changed dramatically since the heady days of the Nkomati Accord signed just two years ago. Then there were widespread expectations at home and in Western capitals that internal reform was well under way, that the security agreements with Mozambique and Swaziland were a major setback for the African National Congress and a prelude to a constructive regional role for Pretoria. The Government — it was claimed — had bought time to put its domestic house in order, free of ANC attempts to mobilise black hostility via the techniques of "armed propaganda." Externally, the neutralisation of Mozambique as an ANC sanctuary and the prospect of similar agreements with other regional states appeared to vindicate the doctrine of Constructive Engagement: the Reagan Administration had, after all, encouraged the peace process with Mozambique and promoted the Lusaka agreement on the future of Namibia. Regional peace, and Western support and approval for South Africa's initiatives would give Mr Botha prestige abroad and flexibility at home — both essential for the success of reform.

Yet by September 1984 — a bare six months after Nkomati — this happy vision of the future had begun to disintegrate: the tri-cameral constitution by its deliberate snubbing of black political aspirations paradoxically raised expectations of change which, coupled with the impact of economic recession, provoked a fierce resistance which continues unabated to the present day. The ANC — far from being deterred by the Nkomati Accord — increased its rate of attack on "hard" targets to over a hundred in 1985 from a peak figure of 56 in 1983. That much-vaunted locus of power — the State Security Council — was unable to contain the muddle that arose as rival factions within it disputed over what to do about the Mozambique Resistance Movement. Finally, following a declaration of a State of Emergency in July 1985, external pressure mounted and limited, if largely symbolic, sanctions were imposed by the Western powers.

## LOBBIES

But what has really made an impact on the domestic political scene has been the "private sanctions" undertaken by foreign businessmen and bankers during the last six months. These decisions are in part based on hard headed commercial calculation, the product of growing doubt about the Republic's credibility as a debtor nation and a secure base for future investment. They are also influenced by the "hassle" factor: the unwillingness of

companies — especially in the United States — to commit time and energy to fending off pressures from a host of anti-South African lobbies whose saliency is a strikingly new feature of American politics. Born out of resentment at Reaganite indifference to the claims of the poor and the deprived at home and abroad, these groups have devised new strategies to embarrass companies with interests in South Africa and have succeeded in persuading many city and state governments to divest their shares. Their leaders are acute critics of Constructive Engagement and recent events in the Republic have confirmed their analysis of the doctrine's failure. They have not only won the intellectual argument, they have also — to a degree — won the political one as well insofar as President Reagan has been compelled, against his own political instincts, to accept a Congressional package on sanctions.

Their counterparts in Western Europe (with the possible exception of the Scandinavian countries) have not enjoyed the same success. The Anti-Apartheid Movement has no doubt influenced the British Labour Party into committing itself to sanctions against South Africa, but cynics point to the failure of previous Labour governments to fulfil similar promises made in opposition. Ethnic minorities in Britain, while hostile in principle to apartheid and all its works, have been pre-occupied with domestic problems — the plight of the inner cities, black unemployment, and police/community relations. Thus the significant influence on Mrs Thatcher's government has been external: last year's Commonwealth Conference in Bermuda was dominated by the South African issue; "eminent persons" were appointed to visit South Africa, and timetables were set for indications of positive reform. Not an epoch-making response, I agree, but evidence at least that the great majority of Commonwealth leaders will not allow Mrs Thatcher (or her successor) to get off so lightly next time — especially if, as most competent observers expect, the current crisis in South Africa persists with no break in the stalemate between the government and the militant black opposition.

Thus, on the external front, South Africa can hope for little relief. *Ad hoc* measures (for example, the proposed modification of influx control and its corollary of forced removals; freehold property rights; common citizenship; etc.) which two years ago might have been welcomed unreservedly by Western leaders lose their impact and credibility in the absence of a major declaration of intent promising radical, structural change and the political incorporation of the black majority. Nor will keeping South Africa off the world's television screens through

restraints on media reporting help the government very much; the fact that these had to be imposed was taken as a tacit admission that the State of Emergency had failed in its primary objective to restore order swiftly in the townships. The image of a state in turmoil persists — a constant reminder to Western governments that sooner or later the South African issue will have to be faced squarely and decisions taken to limit the damage to electoral and economic interests alike.

#### WESTERN ATTITUDES TO SOUTH AFRICA

In this context the West as a whole — like President Botha at home — appears to lack a sense of direction and purpose. The traditional policy of “wait and see”, “give reform a chance”, is in ruins. There has also been a significant change in the attitudes of businessmen and bankers at home and abroad.

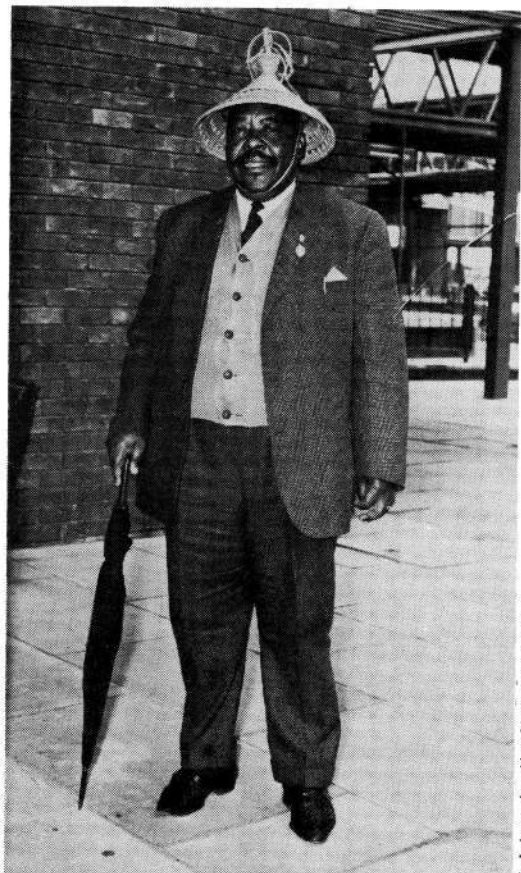
When conditions were stable (for example in 1965-74 period) there was a happy coincidence of interest between Western politicians and businessmen in the West on the utility of economic growth as the ultimate solvent of apartheid. Businessmen no longer share that blithe sense of confidence in the Republic's prospects and this weakens the case of politicians like Dr David Owen, the leader of the Social Democratic Party, who do not want the South African economy brought to its knees, and who would welcome an increase in resources to the private sector in the hope that this would contribute to the building of a social infrastructure (black housing, employment, social services, etc.) without which any reform of influx control, for example, is meaningless. The irony is that bankers and investors now press for major political reform as the price of a restoration of confidence: fair enough, but at the same time an indictment of the thesis, so assiduously defended in the past, that economic development alone would produce meaningful political change. Clearly, growth, like patriotism, is not enough and men, political animals, are at last recognised as having the primary responsibility for political change, rather than the impersonal forces of the market place.

A considered, carefully planned, response by the West to the South African crisis is inhibited not simply because of the irrelevance of the conventional wisdom, but also because the one remaining option — full-scale sanctions — seems to many Western conservatives uncertain and unpredictable in its consequences. Some observers have interpreted the measures that have so far been imposed as a firm political signal to Pretoria that worse might follow if the pace of reform does not accelerate. This I believe to be an optimistic reading of Western motives; the Scandinavian countries apart, the United States, Britain and its EEC partners had to be pushed and shoved into taking these steps. In Britain, they constituted a rearguard action against domestic and Commonwealth pressures, and there will be considerable resistance to the adoption of comprehensive, mandatory sanctions involving a trade and investment embargo.

Many of the arguments against such measures will be familiar to South Africa readers: these include the strongly held belief of Mrs Thatcher, for example, that severely undermining the Republic's economy would harm the interests of blacks already suffering the impact of recession, provoke yet more frustration and violence and result in even greater repression by the state. To pragmatic, affluent Europeans this emphasis on the adverse

effects of economic deprivation seems rational enough, though it is based on a reading of human nature which gives primacy to economic well being and ignores man's capacity to suffer hardship if the case appears just. (After all in 1940 Englishmen, completely isolated in the struggle against the might of Nazi Germany, might have “rationally” concluded that peace with Germany and a division of imperial spoils might have brought them a measure of security and avoidance of the harsh sacrifices that they did, in fact, choose to make.)

Secondly there is the claim that sanctions will have a destabilising effect on the economies of South Africa's poorer neighbours, and in this context Professor Gavin Maasdorp's excellent study — **SADCC: A Post-Nkomati Evaluation** (1) has demonstrated the profound dependence of these states on the South African economy. This argument cannot be lightly dismissed, especially of the SADCC states were to require compensatory assistance (calculated at £ 1,5 billion for every year that sanctions were imposed). The Republic's recent blockade of Lesotho and the resulting overthrow of Chief Jonathan demonstrated all too clearly what economic and political damage its government can do to neighbouring states. (As the **Financial Mail** prophetically remarked in October 1984, South Africa has the capacity to “delay vital shipments . . . lose wagon loads of traffic and withhold leased locomotives”.) Nor is there much comfort to be gained from the argument that the Lesotho crisis illustrates just what sanctions can do if applied with sufficient ruthlessness: Lesotho is the weakest and most dependent of the SADCC states and comparisons with South Africa in this context are not especially helpful. And we should note the indifference of Britain and the United States to



Chief Leabua Jonathan

(picture by the Natal Witness)

Jonathan's appeals for help against the effects of the blockade: their silence and inaction might be interpreted as a tacit warning to small states in the region of the implications of full-scale economic sanctions were these to be imposed in the future.

Thirdly – and this is the joker in the sanctions pack – the likely reaction of the target state cannot be easily predicted. Here there is scope for argument and debate as supporters and opponents of sanctions alike have no foolproof way of demonstrating what the reaction of the South African government would be. The theory, and certainly the practice, of international politics is not an exact science and as in the debate over the utility of nuclear weapons as a means of keeping the peace, the protagonists in the sanctions argument can only base their judgements on what is usually a highly selective choice and interpretation of historical analogies. Thus supporters of nuclear deterrence, for example, point to forty years of peace on the European landmass as a vindication of the peace-keeping function of nuclear weapons. They assume that general war in 1914 would have resulted in the absence of the protective umbrella of nuclear weapons, but this is a plausible argument at best and certainly not one based on "scientific" premises since one cannot create a laboratory replica of a world without nuclear weapons in the hope of confirming the hypothesis that war would have resulted in their absence.

#### OPPONENTS AND SUPPORTERS

Similarly, in the case of sanctions, opponents point to the Rhodesian experience where UN measures produced unexpected consequences: import substitution on a massive scale, covert assistance from a "maverick" state (South Africa), and a restructuring of the economy to provide Robert Mugabe's successor government with a sound base for further development. Alternatively, supporters of sanctions on the Republic can only speculate, drawing on historical experience and current perceptions about how a beleaguered government would react. Here conflicting interpretations of the strength and cohesion of Afrikaner nationalism enter the analyses: would a Boer War mentality reassert itself, committed to a fight to the death despite clear evidence of inevitable defeat? Would the new breed of Afrikaner technocrats and businessmen break ranks and press the politicians to capitulate to external demands? Would Free State farmers join artisans from Alberton in welcoming a military takeover in the face of ministerial vacillation? That these questions can be asked suggests how difficult it is to make reliable estimates about the **political** impact of sanctions on a ruling elite. Those who are sceptical about the utility of sanctions point to the government's policy of stockpiling key resources such as oil, and the certainty that contingent plans exist for the creation of a siege economy within the wider framework of a garrison state in which even tighter social controls would be exercised over individuals and key institutions. Those who favour sanctions argue that a "quick kill" is preferable to a long drawn out war of attrition in which the damage to the social and economic fabric of South Africa (as well as the West's economic interests) would be far greater. Better to act now, sanctioneers claim,

rather than to be faced later with civil war, the collapse of the state's authority and a gravely weakened Western capacity to manage the resulting crisis.

The difficulty with this argument is two-fold: first, it assumes that the apocalypse is closer than many Western leaders are prepared to acknowledge; in any case, their governments are not well placed to engage in prophylactic action designed to forestall a crisis, however long-predicted. For foreign ministries the short term is all; coping with the current flood of "telegrams of anger" is hard enough without having to plan for contingencies which may never arise and if they do may well assume a form and substance very different from that envisaged by contemporary scenario builders.

The second objection relates to the imprecise nature of the political objective sanctions are designed to achieve: as in the case of military intervention, economic pressure only succeeds if the objective is limited and those responsible for its imposition have some prospect of monitoring and controlling the course of events induced by sanctions.

A third objection is the economic damage inflicted on the states exerting pressure: this will vary – the United States is likely to suffer far less than the United Kingdom where, it is argued, some 150-200 000 jobs are at stake in an economy already burdened with over three million unemployed. Thus a unanimous response might be difficult to engineer, providing "maverick" states with opportunities to capitalise on the self-denial of those governments willing to accept the risks and costs of the sanctions programme.

#### THE IMPACT OF LIMITED SANCTIONS

Nonetheless, even the most hostile opponent of sanctions has had to admit that some external pressures – falling short of a total embargo – have produced positive results.

Prominent South African businessmen would not have made the journey to Lusaka to talk to Oliver Tambo without the dramatic fall in the value of the Rand induced by the "private sanctions" of their counterparts abroad. There is evidence too that the business community has also been influential in persuading government to ease restrictions in areas like influx control and black trade union activity. Whether their advice will, however, be heeded on major structural reform is debatable, but the fact that their voices have been raised in recent months on this issue suggests that external pressure has been influential.

Similarly, the supporters of sanctions can claim some success in compelling the South African government to modify apartheid in certain spheres: the sports boycott has led to a varying degree of integration, notably in football and athletics, but nothing like enough to win re-admission to international competition. The promise to soften the harsh impact of influx control, and the forced removals of "black" illegals to the homelands, is the consequence of years of adverse publicity in the world's media to the attempted destruction of communities such as Crossroads in the Western Cape. President Botha has admitted this publicly and equally, as Merle Lipton has convincingly demonstrated in her new book **Capitalism and Apartheid** (2) – external pressure via the international trade union movement has contributed to the growth of black unions in South Africa.

But we should not assume that the reaction of the target state will always be positive: the arms embargo led to the growth of a massive indigenous arms industry, while impatience with the outside world's tendency to "move the goal posts" as a response to South Africa's efforts in the sporting field has led to the "buying" of rebel tours.

### REGIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

Western policies on the regional front have not been productive: Chester Crocker's failure to secure a Namibian settlement confirms the general Western perception that no progress can be expected while domestic unrest continues and the government comes under increasing attack from right wing Afrikanerdom. There may be good strategic reasons for withdrawing to the Limpopo; there may, indeed, be a case for allowing Namibia to come under SWAPO rule on the assumption that Pretoria could still exercise a dominant influence on the new state's affairs — but these incentives to decolonise are heavily outweighed by the domestic constraint to appear tough on regional issues. Thus Western criticism of attacks on ANC sanctuaries in the neighbouring states makes little impact given the government's commitment to destroy the movement's capability and undercut its standing as a liberation movement in the eyes of the black majority.

But viewed from abroad there can be no doubting the ANC's credibility as a major actor in the South African drama. The government's attempt to portray it as a mindless terrorist organisation bent on taking innocent lives has made little impact on influential "publics" in the West who have been impressed by Oliver Tambo's exposition of his case. In this context South Africa is losing the propaganda battle with its hated rival, and Tambo's so-called "change" in strategy is regarded by sympathisers abroad — despite South African claims to the contrary — as one of degree rather than kind: hitting "hard" economic targets remains the priority, but more will be hit in the process, more civilians caught in the cross-fire.

The picture is a bleak one: neither side in the struggle can impose its will on the other. But unlike previous confrontations (in 1960 and 1976, for example) external pressure will not wither away, and "creeping sanctions", however reluctantly and haphazardly imposed, may well be the consequence of continued South African obduracy. □

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