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THE IMPLICATIONS FOR SOUTHERN AFRICA OF A CONSERVATIVE GOVERNMENT IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

Although public opinion polls point to a Conservative victory in the British general election of 3 May 1979, it should be borne in mind that the polls have on occasion been wrong - particularly in forecasting a Labour victory in 1970. If the Tories win, it could be a narrow victory and they may find themselves relying on smaller parties to stay in power. Such an outcome is bound to circumscribe a Tory government's freedom of action in both home and foreign affairs. For the purposes of this report, however, it is assumed that the Conservative Party will win by a comfortable margin.

Recent Tory pronouncements on Southern Africa have created hopes of a more sympathetic British attitude towards this region if the Conservatives came to power. Tory views were outlined by Mr. Francis Pym, shadow Foreign Secretary, and also briefly explained in the Party's election manifesto.

On Rhodesia, Mr. Pym said that if the Rhodesian election was "reasonably fair and free ... and with a reasonable turnout ... it will be the duty of any British Government to bring Rhodesia back to legality and do everything possible to make sure that the new, independent state receives international recognition." The Conservative Party's election manifesto states that the next British government would have a similar duty (to lift sanctions, return Rhodesia to legality and ensure international recognition) "if the six principles, which all British governments have supported for the past fifteen years, are fully satisfied after the present Rhodesian general election." In the Tory view, only the sixth principle was still in question before the election, viz. that a Rhodesian settlement should be generally acceptable to the people as a whole.

Regarding South West Africa/Namibia, Mr. Pym observed that "the Western nations and the United Nations have been willing to appease Swapo and urge South Africa to accept further delays and modifications (to the Western plan). The approach has not been a balanced one and that is unwise." He called on the West and the UN to "show a greater degree of resolution towards Swapo and its international backers."

As for South Africa, Mr. Pym made it plain that his Party was "completely opposed" to the imposition of economic sanctions on the grounds that it would be destructive and counter-productive. The Tories were, however, opposed to apartheid and would urge the South African Government to liberalise its policies. He intimated that one lever of influence would be British investments in South Africa.

These statements need to be viewed with caution. There is no guarantee that a Tory government would pursue policies along these lines. A political party in power, it should be remembered, operates under a different set of constraints than one in opposition. Put in a different way, the Tories are now stating their aspirational interests, which may well be different from their operational interests once they are in power.

There are already clear signs that Tory election pronouncements on Southern Africa will not necessarily become Conservative government policy. Six days after his statement, Mr. Pym toned down his firm commitment on Rhodesia. A future British Government would necessarily have to proceed cautiously, he said, adding that it may be necessary to consult "our American, European and Commonwealth friends before a decision is reached."

Mr. Pym's explanatory remark indicated some of the constraints under which a Tory government would approach Southern Africa:

First, the United States. It can safely be assumed that the Carter Administration would welcome a Conservative defeat on 3 May. President Carter's Southern African policy has largely depended on Mr. Callaghan, who supported America's dominant role and who apparently also got the other EEC members to go along. It is therefore not surprising that President Carter reportedly personally informed Mrs. Thatcher that any steps by a Conservative government to recognise a Zimbabwean government, could seriously harm Anglo-American relations.

Second, the EEC. The West German Government's recent categorical statement that it would not recognise the results of the Rhodesian election, is an indication of the kind of attitude with which a Tory government would have to contend in the EEC. Given the Conservative Party's often stated commitment to the EEC, they could not lightly ignore their partners' views.

Third, the Commonwealth. It is common knowledge that Britain greatly values its membership of the Commonwealth, not least because it is the architect of the association. Given the strong black African element in the association, it is understandable that some of the harshest critics of white-ruled Southern Africa are to be found in the Commonwealth.

Fourth, Third World states, particularly in Africa. This is obviously a group no Western state can ignore. Considerations that come to mind are the voting strength of the Third World in the UN and their role in the great power rivalry. Their importance has further been enhanced by the North-South dialogue. The Conservative Party has already indicated that it would seek to promote closer links between the West and the developing countries. The Tories are no doubt aware that the West's relations with South Africa would have a bearing on their relations with the Third World.

Fifth, the Soviet Union. In his speech quoted above, Mr. Pym took a strong line against the "communist threat" in Africa. There is, however, no certainty that a Tory government would not also - because of its perception of political realities - try to outmanoeuvre the Soviets in Southern Africa by trying to get the Soviet-backed militants involved in settlements in Rhodesia and SWA/Namibia. Britain's limited physical capabilities have to be borne in mind: it is hardly in the position to pursue an interventionist foreign policy in Southern Africa, and would in any case not want to run the political risks involved.

Sixth, British domestic opinion. Opposition to white-ruled Southern Africa is a British "growth industry" which no British government can ignore. It has to be acknowledged that there is very little British public sympathy for apartheid and racial discrimination. Mr. Pym, for example, strongly condemned the "repugnant system of apartheid."

Seventh, and finally, a Tory foreign secretary, whatever his own preferences and aspirations, has to contend with an influential Foreign Office bureaucracy with strong and established views on Southern Africa. This could well set bounds to any Conservative foreign policy innovations.

Given these constraints, what could we, in Southern Africa, expect of a future Tory government? It is only natural that a new British government would, initially at least, tread warily and essentially perpetuate the status quo in its foreign relations - also with regard to Southern Africa.

As far as Rhodesia is concerned, it is very doubtful if a Conservative government would give a Zimbabwean government outright and unilateral recognition. The risk of antagonising most other states is simply too great. This consideration is bound to weigh heavier than the fairness or impressive turn-out in the Rhodesian election. Another - and perhaps more respectable - excuse a Tory government could use to postpone or evade a decision on recognition, would be that the exclusion of the Patriotic Front from the internal settlement would prolong the war and increase the risks of escalation and foreign intervention. What could, however, sway a Conservative government, would be recognition of Zimbabwe by black, particularly Commonwealth, states and by the US

Administration (under pressure from Congress).

As a member of the Western "Gang of Five", it is questionable whether Britain under a Tory government, would unilaterally step out of line on SWA/Namibia by, for example, declaring its support for an interim government. A Thatcher government could, however, press for a stronger Western stance against Swapo demands and, by a generally softer British line on South Africa, perhaps restore South African confidence in the West and persuade the Republic to resume negotiations with them on SWA/Namibia.

A Tory government would no doubt be committed to encourage change in South Africa away from racial discrimination. The means and style would probably differ from those of the present Labour Government. One could thus expect less talk and threats of sanctions. On the other hand, and as a kind of substitute, a Tory government might place greater emphasis on the role of private enterprise - and British companies in particular - to induce change in the Republic. Diplomatic pressure through public statements and private discussions would obviously continue.

In view of past developments, the question of British arms sales to South Africa deserves mention. There is little chance of a Tory government supplying arms. With the Simonstown Agreement terminated, Britain is no longer under any obligation of any kind to sell arms to South Africa. Also, the storm caused by Mr. Edward Heath's decision to resume arms sales in the early 1970s, would still be fresh in the Conservative memory. There is furthermore the UN Security Council's mandatory arms embargo to be reckoned with.

South Africans ought to heed the lessons of history as far as a Conservative government is concerned. It was a Tory Prime Minister, Mr. Harold Macmillan, who made the "wind of change" speech in 1960; it was a Tory government which first declared, in 1961, that apartheid "has aroused deep emotions throughout the world and has ceased to be a matter of purely domestic concern"; it was a Tory government which, even before Sharpeville, placed a voluntary ban on the provision of certain arms for South Africa and which gave qualified support to the UN Security Council's first call for an arms embargo against the Republic in 1963.

On the whole, South Africans need to view a future Conservative government with a healthy dose of scepticism - and realism. Fortunately, there are signs that this is being done and that local expectations of a Tory government's foreign policy are pitched at a realistic level.

A final thought: however much the present Labour Government may be disliked in South Africa, it may prove easier - though not more pleasant - to get along with a Socialist government, committed ideologically and otherwise, which knows what it wants in Southern Africa, than with a wavering Tory government trying to satisfy too many conflicting interests.

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