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THE COMMONWEALTH AND SOUTH AFRICA: SANCTIONS & CO UNLIMITED?

THE EVENT

The Commonwealth meeting of Foreign Ministers in Canberra displayed a number of interesting trends revolving around the tightening of sanctions, based on a commissioned report undertaken by Dr Joe Hanlon. The study recommends 30 specified steps to secure an eventual total trade embargo. Provision is also made for a boycott of most products of South African origin, though this too, would have a phased approach.

ANALYSIS

Differences of opinion amongst the member states of the COMMONWEALTH COMMITTEE OF FOREIGN MINISTERS ON SOUTHERN AFRICA (CCFMSA) are considerable, particularly when the view of the Thatcher Government is taken into account. The degree of polarization is reflected broadly as follows:

* The Thatcher principle opposing the use of sanctions as a punitive measure

* The 'centrist' position now adopted by states such as Australia and Canada, supporting more rigid and universally enforced limited sanctions but not prepared to back comprehensive sanctions

* States who remain true to the belief that mandatory sanctions present the only way to force states to change offensive policies.

The 'gradualist' approach proposed by Hanlon could cause some controversy: Already member-states of the Commonwealth differ on the measures to be adopted against Pretoria - now the time limit is likely to become an issue, too. The question could well be asked whether the use of recommended intensification of varying levels of sanctions would not harm the Commonwealth more than South Africa.

Two subsidiary but important arguments are also covered in the commissioned report: It is suggested that the proposed measures would create new jobs - simply by forcing Pretoria to slow down (and eventually stop altogether) the process of automation. Similarly, the Hanlon Report suggests the imposition of sanctions over time, thereby allowing Commonwealth countries to adapt to the punitive measures by seeking viable alternatives to South Africa as trading partner. South Africa's neighbours, in particular, should be allowed to implement the measures fully once they are able to do so.

The report's consultants seem to have revised their position on immediate mandatory sanctions, although offering a gradual ban which would be easier to implement. The Commonwealth, divided into three camps on the sanctions-issue, has failed to achieve unity. It is unlikely that the current Tory government will amend its opposition to sanctions. There is little chance that India and the African states represented on the committee (CCFMSA) could afford politically to change their stance on the imposition of mandatory sanctions. The countries caught in the middle, such as Australia and Canada, have adopted a centrist approach and are more likely to accept only certain aspects of the Hanlon Report. Little wonder, then, that the Heads of Government Commonwealth summit in October 1989 could be split on the issue of disciplinary measures to be taken against Pretoria. Disagreement seems probable over the more draconian aspects of the report: that 'sanction-busters' (individuals) should be punished and that any company/corporation engaged in 'sanction-busting' should be isolated. This is essentially pertinent in the light of information from 1983-1985 which indicated that South African exports covering Southeast Asia has increased by 35% (exports), while imports have also increased.

Already the Commonwealth Foreign Ministers of the CCFMSA-group have endorsed the application of the 'minimum package', (Phase one) of Hanlon's proposals. These are based largely on financial sanctions, taking advantage of the leverage that international banks will enjoy during 1990 and 1991, when ± US$ 3 billion are due to be repaid. These measures include banks tightening debt repayment conditions, as well as imposing a total ban on new loans. It appears unlikely at this stage, however, that the effort of Hanlon to impose tough, yet moderate, sanctions, will succeed in the acceptance of the report.

The cost of the oil embargo is estimated at US$ 25 billion, while the effort of 9 major industrialized countries to isolate South Africa has reduced South Africa's international trade by at least 7%. It has been calculated that the South African import levels of 1987 would be reduced by 45% and 55% if gold should drop below the US$ 350 level. The CCFMSA are convinced that these steps have contributed to the Namibia peace plan and other attempts to settle regional strife.

PROSPECTS

In October at the Commonwealth summit, calls of the following nature could be expected:

* A 30-step programme to end apartheid

* Rapid 'ratcheting-up' of sanctions

* An advantage due to Pretoria's debt crisis in 1990\91

* A call was made to phase out all trade with South Africa over the next five years

* An immediate ban on bulk commodities which could be supplied by other sources

* A ban on all South African agricultural products and manufactured goods

* A ban on non-strategic minerals, such as coal and base-metals (including iron ore, uranium and others)

* An embargo on the sale of motor vehicles, spare parts and computer technology

* Calls for negotiations between the ruling National Party and all significant political formations. In this context, the recent ANC proposals could be discussed.

The Hanlon report, which is to be presented to the Commonwealth Heads of Government summit at Kuala Lumpur in October, is confident that the international community will follow the steps taken by the Commonwealth member-states. Yet even at this early stage, differences of opinion have emerged among the eight-member committee of foreign ministers, which do not support this view. Notwithstanding the exclusion of the U.K. from their committee on Southern Africa, due to the opposition of the Thatcher Government to sanctions, it appears that a further split in the ranks cannot be avoided.

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