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### BRITAIN, SOUTH AFRICA AND THE FALL OF MARGARET THATCHER \*

Has British policy towards South Africa changed with the fall of Margaret Thatcher? When Douglas Hurd, the Foreign Secretary, was asked this question by the Commons Committee on Foreign Affairs, he responded with a firm 'No'. He said that Britain's 'overwhelming objective in South Africa is that peaceful negotiation should succeed because we see that as the only way of achieving a new and post-apartheid South Africa' and because such an outcome is strongly in British interests. 'There has been no change', he stated 'in the objective [of British policy] or, indeed, in the means used to advance it'. Doubtless the Foreign Secretary was correct in terms of the broad orientation of British policy, and in terms of continued British interests in South African affairs. However, had the question been phrased in a different way he would not have been able to give such a positive answer. For example he might have been asked: 'Will Mrs. Thatcher's fall have an impact on the way (including the style) in which relations between Britain and South Africa are conducted?' 'Will it affect the way Britain behaves on South African affairs at international gatherings?' In answering those questions it is impossible to believe that he could, with honesty, have said that there will be no difference.

Mrs. Thatcher was the dominant figure in her government and took a keen personal interest in South Africa, often in the face of strong criticism at home and abroad. With her fall the way in which British policy towards South Africa is handled will change in three ways.

First, it will no longer have the regular personal attention of the Prime Minister. Second, the impetus in policy making will move from No.10 to the Foreign Office. Third, and as a result of that move, the style and tone of policy making will change. Yet, despite these changes, Douglas Hurd was right in the sense Britain will still seek to play a significant part in South and Southern African affairs, because of substantial and continuing interest and traditional links.

#### THE END OF THE THATCHER FACTOR

By chance the first major international issue which Mrs. Thatcher faced as Premier concerned Southern Africa: a renewed British effort to settle the long, bitter Rhodesian conflict. The outcome of that effort was a diplomatic triumph for the new government, and led to Zimbabwe's independence. Although the day to day negotiations at the Lancaster House Conference were handled on the British side by Lord Carrington (the Foreign Secretary), he worked closely with Mrs. Thatcher. In his memoirs Carrington records that before coming to office Thatcher 'had not particularly bent her mind to Africa', and her 'right wing' instincts were sympathetic to the Rhodesian whites, but she subordinated her heart 'to what her intellect came to decide made political sense'.

Perhaps that early success whetted Thatcher's appetite, for during the 1980s she became a prominent player in Southern African and especially South African affairs: clashing with Commonwealth colleagues over sanctions; shaping British policy with its emphasis on constructive engagement; touring the Front Line States; building a network of contacts with leading political figures; and exerting influence where she could. While it was the dramatic clashes over sanctions that captured the headlines, she was also influential in persuading Pretoria to modify some of its apartheid policies and security measures, including the release of Nelson Mandela. Her personal touch was also felt in the region. For example after a successful meeting with President Samora Machel of

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Mozambique, she personally decided that Britain should give aid, including military training, to Mozambique.

With her fall that powerful personal factor in British policy making towards South Africa has gone. Her replacement, John Major, has little experience of foreign affairs. In 1989 he had a short and not entirely comfortable stay at Foreign Office, and there was a sense of relief all round when he quickly returned to the Treasury. Despite that, as Prime Minister he will certainly be drawn into foreign policy making, but it will take time before his particular interests become known, and before he becomes established enough internationally to make a personal contribution. It is improbable that South Africa will catch his special attention.

Although Southern Africa has had a place in British politics throughout the twentieth century, and has been especially prominent since the 1960s (the decade of the 'Wind of Change' speech, the emergence of the Anti-Apartheid Movement and Rhodesia's UDI), the degree of attention given to it has fluctuated, depending on developments within the sub-continent and competition from other international concerns. There have always been sceptics in Britain of the time and trouble the government has spent on the region. Some of Wilson's cabinet colleagues were critical of his early (but not lasting) obsession with Rhodesia; Douglas Hurd as a young adviser to Edward Heath complained about the amount of time the Prime Minister was spending on the 'arms for South Africa' dispute, which, wrote Hurd, 'bore little relation to the central purpose of Mr. Heath's government'; and even Carrington, despite his Zimbabwe triumph, showed little interest in the region thereafter.

Major comes to office with no background in Southern African affairs and, unlike Thatcher, without an immediate British problem to draw it to his attention. Instead, he has entered NO.10 when the world is gripped by concern about the Middle East and the upheavals in Eastern Europe. The immediate and central interests of all Western states, including Britain, are in those troubled areas, and added to that the British Government has a particularly difficult task in handling its relations within the European Community (EC) - the issue which led to Thatcher's fall. Major's own experience in the Treasury has drawn him into EC affairs, not least the ongoing dispute about a European currency. These problems, and not Southern Africa, will consume Mr. Major's attentions. Therefore there will be no strong personal input by the Prime Minister into South African affairs for the foreseeable future.

## RE-ENTER THE FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

With the Prime Minister's reduced role, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) will become more prominent in policy making towards South Africa. Obviously the FCO has always played an important part, but during Mrs. Thatcher's time the impetus and initiative often came from No.10, and it was generally accepted, even in the Foreign Office, that South African policy was her policy. Now that she has gone the FCO will follow the same broad policy lines (as Hurd indicated), but the issue will be handled in a different way both internationally and within the machinery of government.

To an extent the change will reflect the personalities within the FCO who have responsibility for South Africa. Although Douglas Hurd as Foreign Secretary, has ultimate responsibility within the office, his major interests are in European and Atlantic affairs and not Africa.

Therefore a recent change in ministerial responsibilities within the FCO will have considerable importance. This is the extension of Lynda Chalker's brief. She is a woman of great ability, and it was a surprise when Major failed to promote her to the Cabinet. For some years she has been Minister for Overseas Development (i.e. overseeing the Aid Programme) and therefore knows Southern Africa well. Now her responsibilities have been extended to include all foreign policy issues in South Africa and Southern Africa. Douglas Hurd explained that 'it seemed to me sensible that the diplomatic part of the Foreign Office should benefit from Mrs. Chalker's deep understanding of South African problems'. This means that at a ministerial level it is Mrs. Chalker and not Douglas Hurd who will be the main spring of policy on South Africa. In taking up her wider brief she is not in a position to have the same clout as Margaret Thatcher, but she is a strong personality, fights her corner with considerable charm and has the ability to persuade others to her point of view. Lynda Chalker's style is less combative than Margaret Thatcher's, but it is one formidable woman taking over from another formidable woman.

A further major change in terms of FCO personalities is in the pipeline. As Mrs. Chalker takes up new duties, so within a few months Sir Robin Renwick (the British Ambassador in Pretoria) will be moving to Washington. Sir Robin, who had Mrs. Thatcher's full confidence, has been a remarkably successful and influential figure in South Africa. Together with his able young staff, he has greatly enhanced British

influence in the Republic, not only with the government but with all sections of the community, including the black parties. His successor has not yet been named, but, whoever it is, he has a difficult act to follow, and furthermore, unlike Sir Robin, the new Ambassador will not have a direct line to a Prime Minister who has a personal stake in South Africa.

#### A CHANGE OF STYLE AND PRIORITIES

While the personalities within the FCO will have their influence on British policy, the shift of emphasis from Downing Street to the FCO also implies institutional change. A powerful personality is replaced by a major bureaucracy. This will soon be seen in terms of style, and undoubtedly style is important in international affairs. No British Minister - whether it be John Major, Douglas Hurd or Lynda Chalker - can, or perhaps would want, to rival Thatcher's pugnacious approach, and senior FCO officials certainly would not emulate the ex Prime Minister. Added to that, the shift to the FCO also implies different priorities in the way South African affairs are handled. Characteristically, when Prime Ministers are very active in foreign affairs (whether they be Thatcher, Churchill or Macmillan), they seek to solve problems quickly by personal initiatives and contacts: hence their enthusiasm for summits. The FCO's approach is different. It has to keep contact with international organizations and other governments on a long term basis. It pursues British interests through established norms and practices; committed to gaining agreements often by compromise; and aware of the views of other governments and organizations as it seeks to sustain existing alliances and build new ones. The FCO's search for compromise and its willingness to see alternative view points often incurred Mrs. Thatcher's wrath. It was, she said, 'wet'.

In terms of Britain's approach to South Africa that means that instead of Thatcher's bold and often isolated stands, the FCO will be looking for joint agreements, seeking to avoid isolation, and ensuring that British interests in other fields are not jeopardised by recalcitrance on South Africa. Britain will operate more within the pack, whether 'the pack' be the EC, the Commonwealth or the UN. Britain's voice on South Africa will not always be as clear or as strident as in Thatcher's day, or produce as many plaudits from white South Africans or brickbats from Pretoria's opponents, but it does not mean that Britain will slavishly follow the lead of others or that internationally Britain will be less influential on South African affairs. It does mean that Britain will seek to persuade rather than challenge, and that it will accept

compromises to gain joint agreements. Thatcher's dynamic personality and her blunt no nonsense approach will be missing, but that produced mixed results, and in terms of international influence the change of approach is probably a case of swings and roundabouts. Although Thatcher's determination sometimes forced others to change their position, her intransigence also alienated others. By working more closely with her allies Britain's international influence on South African affairs may actually increase, and in the Republic she may work more comfortably with black groups.

#### THE INTERNATIONAL SETTING

In assessing current British policy towards South Africa there are other factors that have to be brought into play as well as Thatcher's fall. These include international developments, so that even if Thatcher had remained in office, there would have been less attention paid to South Africa.

As already noted the problems of the Middle East, Eastern Europe and relations with the EC are currently the dominant issues for the West. There is also a growing weariness with African affairs - the famines which major aid efforts have failed to solve, the civil wars, the corruption and brutality, and the poor economic performance. While support continues to be directed to the continent, there are signs of growing aid fatigue at a time when rival demands are coming from Eastern Europe. Perhaps unfairly, South Africa may suffer from these general trends, but its prospects are not improved by the regular media reports of the fighting and slaughter in the black townships, and the conflicting accusations of responsibility levelled against the Police, the ANC, Inkatha, radical youths and right wing whites. The image is of a country which is far from stable, and because of that one which may suffer similar problems as other African states. To repeat, that may be unfair, but few businessmen would now think of placing much new capital in South Africa, and governments will become wary of deep involvement. Their views will only change when there are clear indications of political stability and reasonable prospects for economic growth. Paradoxically, President de Klerk's initiative in creating a more open political atmosphere has also taken some pressure off Western governments to become involved in South Africa, because the edge has gone from the Anti-Apartheid Movement's campaign (as the removal of the picket outside the South African Embassy in Trafalgar Square bears witness). The 'guilt factor' in Western attitudes towards South

Africa is therefore less compelling.

#### A CONTINUING RELATIONSHIP

These general considerations are likely to be less significant for Britain than other Western states, because her continuing interests and long standing involvement in the region make the relationship with South Africa more durable and resilient than Pretoria's other relationships outside Africa. Despite all the problems and crises of recent decades, Britain is still deeply involved in South Africa through trade and investment, through aid, through personal relations (not least the large number of British passport holders), through cultural contacts and through political convictions and activities. Moreover in recent years this involvement has been given a boost by the vigour of Thatcher and Renwick in forwarding British interests. That provides a momentum which will be carried forward. However, it is unlikely that Britain's efforts will be given a further substantial step up above the present level of activity. A post-apartheid government may hope for increased support from the West and in particular from Britain, but, because of the general international situation, it is improbable

that its hopes will be met. Britain is likely to continue to provide aid and support at its present substantial level, if the negotiations for a new South Africa continue to make progress. But the message for all South Africans must be that they live in a harsh world in which they cannot anticipate the international community providing a massive development programme.

In summary, therefore, following Mrs. Thatcher's fall, South Africa will be less prominent in British politics; it will slip down the political agenda, for a time at least (partly because of Mrs. Thatcher's political demise but also because of developments internationally and inside South Africa); and Britain will handle South African affairs in a different way and with a different style. Yet, that having been said, Britain will retain a major interest in South Africa and will continue to see it as part of a region in which Britain has special interests and would aim to be 'a' and perhaps 'the' leading Western state. Douglas Hurd was correct in making the point that British policy has not changed in its broad approach, even if much of the drama, excitement, conflict and the richness of personality has disappeared with Margaret Thatcher.

Life will be duller without her.

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