



# international UPDATE

SAIA ARCHIVES

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## SOUTH AFRICA AND THE COMMONWEALTH: RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL?

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Why on earth would South Africa wish to rejoin the Commonwealth - that collection of marginal, meddlesome and malcontent states which once formed part of the British empire? Would this not mean a step backwards constitutionally - a return to something less than full independence or even to subordination to the British crown? And to what purpose? The direct economic advantages of Commonwealth membership have disappeared as Britain has become fully integrated into the European Union - gone forever are the imperial preferential tariffs, the special arrangements for commodities such as wool and sugar, the privileged access to the London capital market. The strategic advantages of the unwritten military alliance (an implicit part of the association at least until the 1960s) declined as Britain retreated from a world role. Institutions such as the Commonwealth games (which, eccentrically, include lawn bowls in their programme) seem a sorry substitute for their fully international counterparts like the Olympics. So why should South Africa accept the Commonwealth's invitation to become part of an association from which South Africa was so ignominiously excluded in 1961 and which displayed so much hostility towards South Africa for most of the next thirty years?

Many South Africans have long been used to hearing condemnation of South African racial policies from Commonwealth governments with human rights records little better than South Africa's or to seeing calls for sanctions from others with vested interests in excluding South African goods from world markets. They could be forgiven for still viewing the Commonwealth with disdain, for losing sight of the Commonwealth's significance and the reasons for South Africa's departure from it, and for being unaware of how the Commonwealth has developed since 1961.

At the end of the Second World War, the Commonwealth was essentially a club of 'white' governments, an association linking Britain to the four autonomous overseas dominions - Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. South Africa had played a leading part in transforming this part of the British empire into the British Commonwealth, pushing for the acceptance of the view (given legislative reality in 1931) that Britain and the dominions were constitutional equals. Until 1949, membership depended upon allegiance to the crown - an entity quite distinct from the British government. But in that year (with, paradoxically enough, the Malan government's whole-hearted support) the rules were changed to allow India to remain a member as a republic with its own president rather than the British monarch as head of state. Thenceforth the only real condition of membership was the agreement of the other members, so that today the majority of members are republics.

The admission of India and Pakistan in 1947 had been much agonized over by other members, who knew that their admission would dramatically transform the association. Yet they reasoned that it was far better to sustain close contact with Britain's former colonies - to use the Commonwealth as a bridge between East and West, between the white and non-white powers - than to shun these newly independent states merely to sustain the intimacy of the old club. In fact, such was the flexibility of the Commonwealth that the relationship between Britain and the old dominions (including South Africa until 1961) was largely unaffected by the addition of new members.

Moreover, the Commonwealth's expansion provided an opportunity for the old dominions to develop close relationships with countries which might

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otherwise have remained distant and alien lands.

These direct links between Britain's former colonies, links that by-passed the British centre of the Commonwealth, became steadily more important after 1947. Indeed they seem to have been the key to the Commonwealth's strength and longevity. And it was the South African government's disregard for its relations with the Commonwealth's new members, its belief that the Commonwealth was merely a collection of bilateral relationships with Britain, that lay behind South Africa's departure from the association thirty-three years ago.

When the South African government decided to establish a republic, it was obliged to obtain the approval of other members in order to remain in the Commonwealth. Certain members were reluctant to grant such approval, and not simply because of South Africa's internal racial policies as they then existed. Their reluctance derived in large part from Verwoerd's personal expression of devotion to apartheid ideology at the London meeting of Commonwealth prime ministers in 1961, a devotion so dogmatic that there appeared no prospect of the South African government's accepting even the principle of racial equality while the National Party remained in power; so rigid that South Africa would not welcome diplomatic representatives from non-white Commonwealth countries.

In quiet behind-the-scenes efforts, Britain and the other old members of the Commonwealth had long tried to encourage the South African government to reform its racial policies. But Verwoerd forced upon them a choice: either keep South Africa in the Commonwealth on his terms (i.e. that the Commonwealth would not be allowed even to discuss South Africa's racial policies without his permission), or lose African or Asian members (who were adamant that South Africa give a sign that its racial policies were headed in a new and positive direction). It should have come as no surprise that the Commonwealth, led by Canada, India and Ghana, chose to lose South Africa, especially when the Verwoerd government had no real interest in preserving the Commonwealth connection. The National Party regarded the Commonwealth as one more annoying relic of subordination to Britain, a link to be sustained only because breaking it might damage the government's electoral prospects.

So it was that South Africa excluded itself from the Commonwealth, becoming a major, though by no means the sole, preoccupation of successive Commonwealth prime ministers' meetings (subsequently known as heads of government meetings). After 1961, the disputes over policy towards the white regimes of Rhodesia and South Africa were so all-consuming and attracted so much attention that some commentators (including, recently, Pik Botha) suggested that the Commonwealth would lose its purpose and become

irrelevant with the establishment of majority rule in South Africa. However, a closer look at heads of government meetings shows that there has always been far more to the modern Commonwealth than the concern about South Africa.

These meetings, which are the most prominent manifestation of the Commonwealth's activities, have proved to be an invaluable forum for discussing any issue of current international concern - and with the Commonwealth including one quarter of the world's population, and with members on almost every continent, there are few international problems that do not impinge upon it. Furthermore, these meetings are unique in concentrating so many heads of government for so long a stretch of time. They are a place where the concerns of developing countries can be brought to the attention of leaders from some of the most highly industrialized countries; where the leaders of small island states of the Caribbean or Pacific can meet face to face with the leaders of some of Africa's and Asia's giants; where the problems of one hemisphere - north or south, east or west - can be addressed by representatives from the other.

In Cyprus in October 1993, at the most recent heads of government meeting, representatives of forty-seven countries meet over six days to discuss issues ranging from the emergence of global humanitarian order to terrorism; from the development and security of small states to world economic issues. Such discussion is not without purpose: the Cyprus meeting gave voice to the Commonwealth's shared economic interests by issuing a declaration reaffirming the commitment of member governments to an early and comprehensive conclusion of the Uruguay round of Gatt negotiations, constituting a ministerial mission charged with putting the Commonwealth's views to the Gatt director general in Geneva, to the European Commission in Brussels, and to leaders in selected other capitals.

Recent progress towards democratic rule in South Africa has ended the deepest divisions within the Commonwealth, freeing the association to develop a new unity of purpose in the promotion of human rights and democratic freedoms. Lending assistance in crucial elections is nothing new: the Commonwealth played a leading role in the transition to democratic rule in Zimbabwe in 1980. But over the past two years the Commonwealth has assisted in the successful multi-party elections in Zambia, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho and the Seychelles. And since October 1992 a Commonwealth observer mission has been in South Africa to assist and monitor progress towards the April 1994 election.

South Africa thus remains a special Commonwealth concern, with members having rapidly

shifted their attention from applying sanctions to lending assistance in the transition to full democracy and in the economic and educational development of the country - matters in which the Commonwealth has had long and extensive experience. Assistance is already being given by agencies such as the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation, established to provide experts, training and consulting services, with much of the expertise being drawn from developing countries. In addition, the Commonwealth, in conjunction with the United Nations, had taken the lead in convening an international donors' conference on human resource development in post-apartheid South Africa.

Such assistance will continue whether or not South Africa rejoins the Commonwealth, if only because most of the rest of southern Africa is in the Commonwealth (Namibia having joined upon gaining independence in 1990). Mozambique is another non-member which receives substantial Commonwealth aid. South Africa could, without returning to the Commonwealth, also join certain organizations such as the Commonwealth Agricultural Bureau (known since 1986 as CAB International) which disseminates information across the whole field of agricultural sciences.

But it is one thing to be a beneficiary of Commonwealth assistance or to have observer status in the Commonwealth as does Mozambique; quite another to participate fully in the activities and institutions of the Commonwealth, to use the Commonwealth as a vehicle for giving aid and technical assistance elsewhere in Africa, or to play a leading part at Commonwealth heads of government meetings. The full advantages of the Commonwealth - from involvement in the Commonwealth scholarship and fellowship plan (which enables thousands of Commonwealth students and academics to attend universities in other Commonwealth countries) to participation in the myriad activities of the Commonwealth Foundation (which aims to foster contact amongst peoples of the Commonwealth, especially through professional associations); from gaining a place on the Commonwealth Science Council (established to encourage co-operation between scientific organizations) to joining in the Commonwealth games (this year to be held in British Columbia) - can be acquired only by becoming a full member of the Commonwealth. Yet this is a simple enough step for a former member such as South Africa, the only requirement being that South Africa accept the invitation to rejoin.

So what would South Africa gain if their country returned to the Commonwealth (besides once again having the chance to be Commonwealth bowls champion)? Membership means having a special relationship with fifty other countries, some of the world's smallest as well as largest; countries stretching

around the globe, including one a member of the European Union and another a part of the North American Free Trade Area; members of the Association of South East Asian Nations and leading players on the Pacific rim. Every two years, South Africa's leaders would be able to meet those from elsewhere in the Commonwealth and, as representatives of the sixth largest member (by population), would be assured of a prominent role. Many South Africans would, through professional associations, through scholarships and fellowships, through Commonwealth initiatives in distance learning, through technical assistance, through scientific conferences, through arts festivals and sports, gain opportunities for international contact which they would not otherwise have, contact with people who have both much to offer to and much to learn from South Africans.

Through historical circumstance - through once being united under British rule with all that this entailed in terms of the spread of people, languages, customs, institutions and sports - South Africa, with its mixtures of races and languages, of first and third world economies, of highly sophisticated and untried electorates - is almost a microcosm of the Commonwealth as whole. It would be a pity if misconceptions about the Commonwealth's function or resentment of its past action against apartheid were to prevent South Africa's return to an international association that offers so many opportunities.

#### Other Reading:

*A Commonwealth for the 21st Century*, John Groom, University of Kent, UK, published by SAIIA.

#### **STATEMENT OF PURPOSE**

*The South African Institute of International Affairs is an independent organisation which aims to promote a wider and more informed understanding of international issues among South Africans.*

*It seeks also to educate, inform and facilitate contact between people concerned with South Africa's place in an interdependent world, and to contribute to the public debate on foreign policy.*