

Mr. C Powell ✓



CDP  
26/6.

*With the compliments of*

**THE PRIVATE SECRETARY**

This is the letter ~~to~~  
Mr. E. Ferguson mentioned  
to you

AP. Robert Budd. 25/6

**FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE  
SW1A 2AH**





BRITISH EMBASSY  
PARLIAMENT STREET, CAPE TOWN

7 June 1985

Nigel Thorpe Esq  
SAFD  
FCO

*Dear Nigel,*

**SOUTH AFRICA: THREATS TO THE REGIME**

1. In your teletype of 14 May you asked for comments on the threats facing South Africa within the next year to 18 months and also asked us to speculate on the outlook up to 1989 when the next elections are due. Neither task is simple because there are so many imponderables, not least the progress of the Government's reform programme on which so much depends (and on which my views were set out at length in my teletype of 26 March). But I think most of what we can now say may be expected to apply broadly to a three or four year timescale no less than to the immediate future. So we have not attempted to distinguish specifically between the two. All of it is essentially a short term view.

Urban Unrest

2. Sporadic outbursts of urban unrest are not a new problem for the South African Government. Most recently there were the major incidents of 1976 which took a couple of years to subside and then further problems, largely connected with schools, in 1980. Previous troubles have always had a staggered pattern with unrest breaking out in different areas at different times. One of the features of past months has been that tension and incidents have been more widespread and sustained than hitherto. However, serious trouble has still been restricted primarily to the Transvaal, the northern Orange Free State and the Eastern Cape. In contrast Natal and the Western Cape have been quiet, apart from disturbances of limited duration at Crossroads earlier this year. (Lack of unrest in Natal can be partly attributed to firm leadership exercised by Chief Buthelezi over the Zulus.) This pattern could well continue.

3. Apart from the traditional trouble-spots around Johannesburg, it is not easy to account for the geographical pattern of recent disturbances. The Eastern Cape however is a rather special case. The black urban community there is of longer standing than in most other regions of South Africa. Blacks were encouraged to settle with families at Port Elizabeth and nearby towns in the 1920s and 1930s to provide a labour force. This and the opportunity to benefit from relatively better schooling in the Eastern Cape left the region with an active and articulate black urban community. It is also an area

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with long-standing social and economic problems and more recently an acute unemployment problem, accentuated by the economic depression. Its local police are amongst the most reactionary in South Africa. For these reasons the Eastern Cape has always appeared to be a potential flashpoint. The scale of incidents this year is the main current cause for Government concern.

4. Previous experience suggests that the unrest may persist for several months at more or less the present level, then exhaust itself even in the Eastern Cape. Comments made to us by parents, shop floor workers, drivers and other blacks with an established place in the local community all confirm that there is a widespread dislike of the violence. Indeed leaders of the United Democratic Front (UDF) have repeatedly assured us that they are opposed to violence which they see as counterproductive and are trying to restrain in the younger hotheads. It is nevertheless a fine dividing line between this attitude and the use of militant protest which they have actively exploited. The UDF and similar black organisations remain short of trained and committed leaders, and their relative inexperience is a further difficulty for them in sustaining the present level of unrest.

5. Nevertheless the political organisation provided by the UDF has been a new factor not present in earlier periods of tension. In providing an umbrella body for the constituent trade unions and other organisations that have affiliated to the front, the UDF have helped and encouraged activists to pursue the struggle. As time goes on we believe their organisational capacity will continue to improve. But this is likely to be a slow business, not least because the leadership will probably continue to be harried by the authorities even while the Government maintains its effort to bring "responsible" blacks into a dialogue. The UDF would have to make substantial strides in organisation and effectiveness before it could seriously threaten the Government's ability to control the situation.

#### White Morale

6. There is little doubt that morale among the whites has suffered recently, particularly in the Eastern Cape. Difficulties resulting from the economic downturn have in any case led to complaints about the Government's performance. These have been heightened by the breakdown of law and order in black townships in several parts of the country. The general sense of apprehension about future developments may help to account for an increase in the number of requests for British passports.

7. Hitherto any direct threat to whites had been minimal. The problems have been in black areas insulated by geographical separation from white areas under the Group Areas Act. The greatest threat of unrest spreading into white areas is where boundaries are adjacent particularly in industrial regions.

8. In general there is no sign of the black community wishing to turn on the whites. But there have been a few isolated incidents including the regular stoning of white cars in Grahamstown and the

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attacks on two white drivers in Duduza in the Transvaal in circumstances which suggest that an element of the local population had set out to ambush and attack passing cars. Such incidents could spread on a modest scale although we do not believe that an intention to attack white areas is in the minds of the great majority of blacks at present.

9. Were there to be any substantial growth of such incidents, this would probably lead to rapidly mounting tension between the white and black communities and a backlash against the Government's pleas for managed change. We have been told that some farmers in the Eastern Cape who had not previously found it necessary to arm themselves are now regularly carrying weapons. The Government themselves are acutely aware of the risk of a white backlash against further moves to dismantle apartheid and to accommodate the blacks. This could lead to isolated violence being instigated by ultra-conservatives. But protests are more likely to remain political in character and in effect, and may be none the less significant for that.

#### Black Morale

10. Although there has been some satisfaction in UDF circles at the Front's ability to carry out sustained political protest there is a mixed reaction among blacks generally to recent developments. Evidence on the ground is that blacks continue to fear police action, that the great majority are still concerned with day to day problems of finding jobs and food for their families, and that the protests arise primarily from social and economic frustrations. Opinions within the black community are said to be fragmented, with no single group of leaders having local sway. Incidents between the rival black UDF and AZAPO movements are further confirmation of the divisions amongst blacks. There has been tension between the UDF and FOSATU unions, with members of the UDF criticising the unions for lack of commitment to the political struggle. It is hard to see this tendency to fragment changing much in the near future.

#### Unions

11. Most experts continue to consider the threat to the authorities from industrial action in pursuit of political gains to be a limited one, at least for the present. Trade unions have unquestionably become more politicised in recent years. But their capability to mount co-ordinated stoppages is inhibited by various factors:

- black unionisation is still only partially developed. Probably only a tenth of the black workforce is yet unionised and only about a quarter on the economically strategic mines;
- unions find it more difficult to operate in times of recession. Any regeneration of the economy will strengthen union bargaining power;
- the large reservoir of some three million unemployed black Africans particularly in the "homelands" enables management to replace a striking workforce quickly, e.g. the

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management at the SASOL coal/oil installation were able to carry out mass dismissals after the November Transvaal stay-away;

- neither workers nor unions have resources to sustain long strikes. Most strikes are quickly over. Workers have to be convinced of the likelihood of financial benefits from striking or alternatively must be experiencing extreme tension and frustration as during last November's stay-away before they are ready to sacrifice pay or risk dismissal;
  - lack of unity within the trade union movement. This is partly an ideological split. The most effective industrial unions, notably those belonging to the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) and the Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA) eschew a leadership role on political or community issues, although they are sometimes prepared to lend support. This is in contrast to the so-called "community-based" unions who want unions to be in the vanguard of political agitation. Trade union unity will be enhanced by the eventual formation of a "super-federation" of between 300,000 and 400,000 members. Clearly such an organisation will be a potent force. But it is still likely to be led by those who argue that it is premature for trade union leaders to take the lead in organising for political reform. Eventually this may change, however, as unionisation among black Africans becomes more widespread and the trade union movement achieves greater organisational unity;
  - strikes are illegal in "essential services" such as municipal and government employment and in agriculture;
  - the Government clearly demonstrated their determination to keep politics out of industrial relations when they arrested prominent trade union leaders in the wake of the November Transvaal stay-away, and then they included four officials from the community-based South African Allied Workers' Union (SAAWU) in the current trial for treason of UDF members.
12. A general strike does not seem probable within the next two years or so. If one were attempted, there would be likely to be significant defections at an early stage. Nor would we expect the black community in the Transvaal to hold another successful two or three day stay-away from work again for many months. Without a major new issue to change matters, people in the townships are temporarily weary of proposals for stay-aways. Industrial action "on a scale to threaten economy and state" can therefore be ruled out for the moment. Politically-motivated industrial action widespread enough or sufficiently well-targetted to cause significant damage to the economy for a period is however possible as time goes on. Even then it is unlikely to be on a scale to threaten the functioning of the economy and/or the state.

#### Economic pressures

13. The threat of punitive American legislation coupled with continuing pressures on US firms not to do business with South Africa

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has already contributed to the lowering of white morale. Barriers to South Africa's access to American financial resources are taken seriously. Nevertheless American loan capital seems unlikely to dry up: a source in the SA Reserve Bank has told us that American banks are already making dispositions to continue their South African business in a suitably disguised form. Disinvestment will if necessary be circumvented by those who have an interest in finding a way around any boycott. On the other hand lack of new investment and/or a run-down in the activity of American companies in South Africa may not only cause some retrenchment (they are reckoned to employ some 50,000 whites and 250,000 blacks) but will also result in a loss of technology transfer and job creation which business circles and the Government possibly regard as the more serious longer term consequence.

14. Pursuing strategic self-sufficiency has imposed a heavy burden on the economy. While this could be carried in years of rapid economic growth (no less than 8% in 1980), three years of deepening recession have served to expose a fabric of artificial pricing, over-subsidising and market manipulation which is now being increasingly questioned.

15. Failing the windfall of a surge in the gold price and in commodity prices generally, South Africa is bound to be faced with a difficult 12-18 months. Living standards will decline and the general rise in prices will bear particularly hard on the unemployed black.

16. The prevailing view is that the country's present economic difficulties, though serious, are manageable. The real dangers the country faces are longer term. They stem from the apparently inexorable demographic trends which will see a largely white, managerial, technological, tax-paying base supporting large numbers of low skilled blacks with rising economic expectations and not enough jobs to go round. But this is not likely to be a seriously destabilising factor within the next four years.

#### Pressures on the Police

17. For a country in which the police have often been given a major role, South Africa does not have a particularly large police force (roughly one policeman for every 500 people, which is less than in the UK). The Government are taking steps to increase the size of the force. The Minister of Law and Order recently announced plans for recruiting an additional 30,000 men over the next three years. Recruitment should not be a major problem given the high levels of unemployment. In some areas black local authorities have created their own police force with official encouragement.

18. In recent months the South African Police (SAP) have been severely stretched in some areas. We know they have used white recruits under training to help with cordon and search operations. In any case training appears inadequate for the role of maintaining law and order in urban areas. One point which has become clear

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from the judicial enquiry into the shooting of blacks at Uitenhage earlier this year is that the training provided was in many cases of the wrong type e.g. directed to rounding up terrorists rather than containing a mob. It also appeared that senior police officers had little grasp of the reality of problems on the ground and possibly inadequate political directives on what was and was not allowable action in support of crowd control, local tension, funeral marches etc. The police are hampered by the absence of training in community relations. These weaknesses have undoubtedly had some effect on white morale in the force. The shootings at Uitenhage appear to have resulted partly from inadequate control procedures by white officers who were disillusioned with their failure to stem growing disorders in the area. Moreover many police officers are temperamentally out of sympathy with the current drift of Government policy towards greater accommodation with the blacks.

19. We believe a few black policemen have resigned. The problem has been mainly the vulnerability of their homes and families to attacks by black activists. The SAP have responded by moving most of these families into compounds. This helps to get round the problem but does not dispose of it altogether. It has the effect of black policemen being further ostracized by their communities, but it may also strengthen the resolve of policemen concerned to continue in their jobs as they could be victimised if they left the force.

#### Role of the Army

20. By contrast with the police, use of the South African Defence Force (SADF) appears to be efficient, well controlled and effective. The SADF have been called upon to provide back-up support in both the Transvaal and the Eastern Cape. The situation would not have to get much worse for the Government to deploy the SADF on a significantly larger scale than at present. It is noticeable that when the SADF have been deployed to deal with disorders, few incidents have occurred between the force and the local community. We have been told by contacts in the Eastern Cape that there is some evidence that local communities have welcomed the deployment of troops as an alternative to the police who are now widely distrusted. (In this respect there may be some parallel with the reaction of the Northern Irish Catholic community to the initial deployment of British forces.)

21. Within the Army itself there seems no problem over its deployment. Soldiers accept that their role includes dealing with any disorders that go beyond the capability of the South African Police. SADF training now has a greater emphasis on dealing with internal security incidents. Part-time reservists are also being prepared for deployment in an IS role. We have observed no difference in the attitudes of English and Afrikaner soldiers to these new duties, which are seen as part of the job. There has, however, been some criticism by parents amongst the English-speaking community about deployment of conscripts in township areas. We also understand that a larger number of conscripts than usual failed to report for enlistment at the beginning of 1985, though the reasons for this are varied and may only partially be connected with the current unrest.

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22. We continue to see little prospect of a military coup. Senior military officers appear to share the Government's views that blacks should be co-opted into a programme of managed change. Dissatisfaction in the middle to junior ranks may increase if law and order and economic problems persist. There could then be problems with lower levels in the SADF who might sympathise with more conservative viewpoints. But we do not believe this is liable to result in the SADF intervening in politics, which would be wholly uncharacteristic of their training and discipline. Attitudes among army officers are more likely to reflect the same lack of unanimity as may be found among their civilian counterparts.

#### External Threat

23. We continue to see no credible external military threat to South Africa in either the short or long term. Periodic bomb attacks against soft targets gain attention for the ANC but have so far made little if any difference to normal life. A deliberate campaign to kill whites could, however, rapidly escalate tension within the country. Assassination of a leading Government figure would have major backlash effect. Meanwhile the ANC can take advantage in a small way of widespread black unrest and is probably doing so at present. It may step up its attacks against white targets and against blacks regarded as collaborators. We see no reason to believe that it can operate within South Africa in such a way as to pose a serious threat to the stability of the regime in the foreseeable future.

#### Conclusions

24. (a) The present level of urban unrest is unlikely to subside quickly. But unless there are other major disasters as at Uitenhage the application of law and order should after a few months give the South African Government some respite. Blacks will be left sullen and uneasy. The atmosphere is likely to be one of brooding discontent with sporadic disturbances.

(b) The police badly need a shake-up. They have hitherto just managed but would be very hard pressed if faced with simultaneous rioting throughout South Africa. The army is likely to play a growing role.

(c) Recent events have been a boost for black militancy. Blacks need time to regroup and reorganise. But the level of their demands has risen. Black unions have not been able to play a major role in a time of economic downturn. Economic recovery could strengthen their bargaining power.

(d) Economic collapse is not in prospect. But the present weak economy has made it more difficult for the Government to move ahead with their plans for managed change.

(e) White morale has been dented. The Government face a credibility crisis with the way forward lying uneasily between white conservatism and growing black non-cooperation.

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(f) It is difficult to be optimistic about the Government's prospects of winning over blacks with policies they appear to have in mind at present. The Government have a number of possible options to promote dialogue, including the release of Mandela. But while the present urban unrest continues and Mandela refuses to give assurances about his future course of action, any Government would be taking a risk in giving him unconditional freedom.

(g) Slowly mounting tensions may frustrate the Government's plans. The prospect will then be for a white backlash or a more radical programme of reform. Indeed both are possible, accompanied by an intensified effort by the Government to maintain law and order.

(h) The demographic reality is such that few would doubt that a backlash would only delay the day when blacks eventually win real power. But for the present the Government are capable of maintaining control. Even if the police are stretched, the back up provided by the SADF should be sufficient to ensure that the Government does not have to change course precipitately in the next four years or so.

*Yours ever*  
*Patrick Moberly*

P H Moberly

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TELELETTER

FROM HMA, BRITISH EMBASSY, CAPE TOWN

NFR DATED 11 JUNE 1985

FOLLOWING FOR N J THORPE ESQ, SAFD, FCO

COPIES TO: D TONKIN ESQ CMG, BRITISH EMBASSY, PRETORIA  
C T BRANT ESQ CMG CVO, JOHANNESBURG (PTA PSE PASS)

SOUTH AFRICA: THREATS TO THE REGIME.

1. IN MY LETTER OF 7 JUNE I ATTEMPTED THE ASSESSMENT FOR WHICH YOU HAD ASKED ABOUT THE SHORT-TERM OUTLOOK. ON REREADING MY LETTER I NOTICE THAT THE PASSAGE ON BLACK MORALE (PARAGRAPH 10) MAY SEEM A BIT TOO SHORT AND COMPRESSED. OF COURSE WE HAVE ALSO DEALT WITH THIS ASPECT IN THE OPENING SECTION ON URBAN UNREST (PARAGRAPHS 2 TO 5). NEVERTHELESS BLACK MORALE IS A CRUCIAL FACTOR IN ANY ASSESSMENT AND I SHOULD PERHAPS ADD SOMETHING TO MY LETTER ON IT.

2. MAY I DRAW ATTENTION TO A LETTER FROM RICHARD THOMAS DATED 17 MAY (WHICH GRAHAM ARCHER HAS COPIED TO YOU WITH HIS LETTER OF 7 JUNE BY THE SAME BAG AS MY LETTER) GIVING THE VIEW FROM JOHANNESBURG, PARAGRAPHS 10 TO 15 OF WHICH CONTAIN SOME USEFUL INSIGHTS INTO THE CURRENT STATE OF FEELING AMONG BLACKS. IT BRINGS OUT THE CONSIDERABLE MIXTURE OF EMOTIONS TO BE FOUND, BUT ABOVE ALL THE WIDELY-HELD SENSE OF FRUSTRATION AND SHARPENING OF POLITICAL AWARENESS AMONG BLACKS AS A RESULT OF RECENT DEVELOPMENTS. IT HIGHLIGHTS THE GROWTH OF MILITANCY, EVEN THOUGH MOST OF THE BLACK COMMUNITY IS AGAINST VIOLENCE IN PRINCIPLE, PLUS THE WIDESPREAD SCEPTICISM ABOUT REFORMS NOW ON OFFER FROM THE GOVERNMENT. WHILST DESCRIBING ATTITUDES IN THE TOWNSHIPS AROUND JOHANNESBURG, MUCH THE SAME COULD BE SAID ABOUT TOWNSHIPS IN THE EASTERN CAPE.

3. IN SUM, THE PICTURE OF BLACK MORALE IS AS FOLLOWS:

- (A) CONTINUING EFFECTS BEING FELT OF THE ECONOMIC RECESSION.
- (B) UNDERLYING ISSUES SEEN AS JOBS, HOUSING AND EDUCATION, ALL OF WHICH ACCENTUATE THE SENSE OF DEPRIVATION OVER POLITICAL RIGHTS.
- (C) GENERAL REJECTION OF GOVERNMENT-INTRODUCED LOCAL COUNCILS IN THEIR PRESENT FORM.
- (D) GROWING MILITANCY AMONG THE YOUNG WHICH IS FELT THROUGHOUT THE BLACK COMMUNITY AS A WHOLE.
- (E) EXPECTATIONS AROUSED BY TALK OF REFORMS AS YET LARGELY UNFULFILLED.
- (F) THE MORE THAT THE GOVERNMENT INTRODUCES MINOR CHANGES, THE MORE THESE ARE SEEN AS EMPHASISING THE REMAINING INADEQUACIES FROM WHICH BLACKS SUFFER.

4. AS FOR THE NEXT 3 OR 4 YEARS, BLACK ATTITUDES ARE LIKELY TO DEPEND ON THE PROGRESS OF THE GOVERNMENT'S REFORM PROGRAMME, INCLUDING ATTEMPTS TO BRING LEADING BLACKS INTO A DIALOGUE SEMI-COLON SUCCESS OF MILITANTS IN NEGATING GOVERNMENT EFFORTS, ESPECIALLY AT LOCAL LEVEL SEMI-COLON EFFECTIVENESS OR OTHERWISE OF LAW AND ORDER SEMI-COLON AND OUTCOME OF RIVALRIES FOR LEADERSHIP OF BLACK COMMUNITIES BETWEEN COMPETING ORGANISATIONS. AT BEST BLACK MORALE CAN BE EXPECTED TO REMAIN AS BRUISED AND AGGRIEVED AS NOW. AT WORST, IT MAY BECOME MORE INFLAMED AND EVEN LESS SUSCEPTIBLE TO MANAGEMENT BY THE REGIME.

SIGNED P H MOBERLY