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10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

10 October 1985

PRIME MINISTER'S  
PERSONAL MESSAGE  
SERIAL No. T. 84/85

My dear Prime Minister,

In view of the considerable interest which has been expressed about how the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting will deal with the South Africa question, I thought that it might be useful to let you know my thoughts on the matter.

Like you, I abhor apartheid and want to see it abolished at the earliest possible moment. I have made this quite plain to President Botha. I have tried to avoid prescribing what system of government should take its place: that must be for the South African people themselves to decide. But whatever system is chosen will have to command the support of the people as a whole.

We thus agree as to the right objective: there must be urgent and fundamental reform. The question is how in practical terms is this goal to be achieved. There are elements of paradox in the present situation. On the one hand there is the violence and repression reflecting the pent-up pressures of years of black frustration. On the other hand, perhaps for the first time ever, we see the beginnings of a process of reform and a perceptible change in attitudes on the part of many in the white community, notably in business. That being so, I think it vital that any action taken by the international community should help to create

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both the political atmosphere and the mechanism which will bring the communities in South Africa together to begin work on finding a political solution.

Britain has for many years placed more restrictions on its relations with South Africa than many of its Western partners. We have no military co-operation, no arms trade, no collaboration for nuclear development - military or civil, no exports of crude oil, and strict licensing controls on the export of sensitive equipment. We have now joined our European partners in agreeing a package of measures consolidating and adding to these restrictions, notably by recalling military attaches. We have thus sent the South African government a political signal of the need for reforms: and I know that they have received it loud and clear.

But each Commonwealth government must choose for itself what means it thinks will be most effective. I am firmly opposed to additional economic sanctions. I believe that such an approach is fundamentally mistaken and will not lead the South African government to make the changes which we all want to see. Indeed it is likely to be counter-productive with the white community, playing into the hands of the right wing and thus putting a stop to further significant reform. I see no point in creating unemployment in Britain in order to increase black unemployment in South Africa. We should only worsen the cycle of frustration, violence and repression there. Market forces are already exerting much more effective pressures than government-imposed sanctions ever will. Unlike such sanctions they cannot be dismissed as "foreign bullying" since they are seen to have been caused directly by the actions of the South African Government itself.

I believe therefore that in Nassau the Commonwealth should avoid sterile confrontation on whether or not to

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impose economic sanctions. The latter would be of no help in resolving South African problems and the serious damage that they would do to Commonwealth unity would only detract from the influence which the Commonwealth might otherwise have. If others wish to take additional measures that is for them to decide. But our principal aim should in my view be to have a frank and realistic discussion of what practical ways there may be for the Commonwealth to help bring about dialogue in South Africa. No other group of countries is better placed to provide such assistance. Together our links to the different South African communities offer important opportunities for constructive action.

I hope that when we see each other in Nassau we can explore what might be done. If the Commonwealth can find ways of making some practical contribution to solving a major international problem, as it did over Rhodesia, then it would set a useful and much needed example to the international community. I shall certainly do my best to try to achieve such a constructive outcome.

Warm regards,

Yours sincerely,

Margaret Thatcher

The Rt. Hon. David Lange, M.P.  
Prime Minister of New Zealand.

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