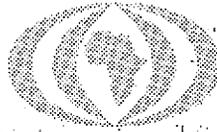


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BRIEF REPORT NO. 34

THE COMMONWEALTH HEADS OF GOVERNMENT SUMMIT

Melbourne, Australia

September 30 - October 7, 1981

The 30-year old Commonwealth of Nations recently held their biennial Heads of Government Summit in Melbourne. The Commonwealth is a free association of 45 states and, with a total population of 900-million, makes up roughly a quarter of the world total. This year two new states were represented at the gathering: Zimbabwe (in which the Commonwealth played a decisive role in bringing it to Independence) and Belize.

This Report will discuss three aspects of the Melbourne meeting:

- i. Issues of Southern Africa;
- ii. Other Issues; and
- iii. Assessment of the meeting and prospects.

i. Issues of Southern Africa

As has traditionally been the case, the meeting devoted considerable time to Southern African issues. Three primary concerns preoccupied the leaders: the recent Springbok Rugby Tour to New Zealand and the future of the Gleneagles Agreement, the continuing impasse on SWA/Namibia and South Africa's regional and domestic policies.

The Rugby Tour to New Zealand ensured its central place on the agenda, because it had directly led to the moving of the Commonwealth Finance Ministers' Meeting from New Zealand to the Bahamas. It was also feared that the Tour could threaten the 1982 Commonwealth Games scheduled for Brisbane.

At stake was the need for the Melbourne gathering to reaffirm the Commonwealth's commitment to the 1977 Gleneagles Agreement on discouraging sporting links with South Africa.

(Under Gleneagles, Commonwealth governments accepted it as their duty to withhold and discourage sporting links with the Republic because of its domestic policy. However, the Agreement did recognise that it was for each member government to determine, in accordance with its own laws, the methods by which it might best discharge this undertaking. It was nonetheless stressed that only an effective commitment to the spirit of the Agreement could ensure its eventual success.)

The New Zealand government of Prime Minister Robert Muldoon was seen as renouncing, or perhaps playing down, the spirit of Gleneagles by not calling a halt to the Springbok Tour. For his part, Muldoon argued that

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his undertakings under the Agreement fell short of refusing visas to South African sports teams. Further, he argued, a cherished principle in New Zealand life was freedom of association and he was under an obligation not to violate this. For their part, other Commonwealth leaders viewed the Gleneagles Agreement as a statement of principle and charged that Muldoon had acted both counter to the spirit of the Agreement and counter to Commonwealth and international interests in not calling a halt to the Tour.

Host Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser, had originally hoped to keep this contentious issue in the background for fear of creating a rift between founder- and Afro-Asian-members which might jeopardise other pressing issues on the Agenda. Muldoon thwarted this by going on the initiative and bringing the issue to the centre of focus. He made veiled threats to expose violations of Human Rights by Afro-Asian members and exchanged heated words with Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe, Tanzania's Julius Nyerere and Fraser.

Some commentators suggested that Muldoon's aggressive stance was an attempt to capture headlines given the fact that he faces a General Election in the near future. (28 November, 1981). They link this to a curious policy of inconsistency on Muldoon's part; insisting on the correctness of his actions on the Springbok Rugby Tour and, later, announcing that he would support U.N. sanctions against South Africa should these be called.

As it transpired, the important Final Communique (traditionally reached by consensus) reaffirmed support for Gleneagles, but failed to specifically redefine the meaning of Gleneagles. However, Muldoon failed to place on the Official Conference Records a statement on why the Tour had taken place and a caution that African states ought not to threaten further sporting links with New Zealand.

The role played on this issue by Australian Prime Minister Fraser is of interest. His primary concerns were to prevent a split in the meeting, to enhance his own reputation and the fruition of the Brisbane Games. His domestic Opposition were, however, quick to point out the high price he was paying for supporting the Afro-Asian position. (A recent opinion poll in Australia showed majority support for the Muldoon position against the desirability of Afro-Asian participation at Brisbane.)

Turning to the issue of SWA/Namibia, the gathering focussed on attempts by the Western Contact Group to reach a negotiated settlement of the question. The meeting stressed that any agreement reached with Pretoria should not deviate from Security Council Resolution 435. The meeting had earlier pressed both Britain and Canada (members of the Contact Group) to divulge the substance of their negotiations with Pretoria. This was, however, apparently unsuccessful, but Britain's Margaret Thatcher and Canada's Pierre Trudeau managed to elicit Commonwealth support for continued contacts with Pretoria.

This was a far cry from the optimistic hopes entertained on Namibia by Secretary General Ramphal and Fraser who had hoped that the Melbourne conference would secure the basis for a settlement on the issue. (It would have enhanced the Commonwealth's reputation in resolving Southern African issues, following the Zimbabwe success at the 1979 Lusaka meeting.)

The general posture on the issues, coupled with a belief that Lancaster House-type negotiations might bring the issue to a successful

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solution and a general anti-South African stance by Fraser, earned him a rebuke from Pretoria's Foreign Minister Pik Botha. In the rebuke, Botha referred Fraser directly to the thorny issue of Aborigines in Australia and indirectly to the recent World Council of Churches' report on the plight of these people. (See later)

The SWA/Namibian issue was tied to the question of possible sanctions against South Africa in the event of her failing to implement the conditions of Resolution 435. Again, however, Thatcher and Trudeau deflected the issue. The Final Communique, as a result, does not directly call for sanctions but expresses "grave disappointment" that the January Geneva Conference was aborted owing to Pretoria's intransigence. It does, however, demand that South Africa allow the Namibian people the right to exercise, without further delay, their right to self-determination and independence. (Namibia is a potential Commonwealth member and at the 1975 Jamaica Summit the country was invited to join the Commonwealth on attaining Independence.)

Condemnation of the Republic's domestic policy was linked to Pretoria's regional actions. The August-September incursion into Angola, particularly, came under close scrutiny and condemnation. Paragraph II of the Melbourne Communique stressed that, at the core of Southern African problems, lay the "apartheid system which the white minority regime in South Africa continues to sustain and strengthen in a variety of ways, including the brutal internal repression of the African majority, the persistent refusal to implement relevant Security Council resolutions providing for Namibia's long-delayed independence, the pursuit of policies of destabilisation against neighbouring states, the repeated threats to and violation of their territorial integrity, and the expansion of South Africa's military capability".

ii. Other Issues

Whilst South African press reports tended to stress the Southern African issues discussed at Melbourne, the conference did devote time to other issues. Of these, the North-South dialogue (between the Developed and Developing nations) was of significance.

On this issue, alternatively called the search for a New International Economic Order, a pervading feeling is that the Commonwealth represents a microcosm of the broader problem. To successfully resolve the existing inequities in the Commonwealth would, it is felt, hold some promise for a successful outcome of the issue on a global level. So urgent did Fraser consider the question, that he put it at the forefront of the Agenda.

Some consensus was reached, and this found expression in a Declaration on Economic Affairs (dubbed the "Melbourne Declaration") which expressed support for the efforts of the Developing nations in their attempt to reduce the inequities between them and the Industrialised countries.

Britain's Thatcher, however, warned against the adoption of a consensus-based Commonwealth position on North-South issues, holding that the upcoming Cancun Summit* - on the 1980 Brandt Report - was the principal forum

*This Summit Meeting will be the subject of a forthcoming Background Briefing.

for discussion thereof. New Zealand's Muldoon was openly disdainful of the Melbourne Declaration calling it "a string of pious platitudes".

At the request of Vanuata (formerly the New Hebrides), the plight of Australia's 160 000 Aborigines was placed on the Agenda. (It was aggravated by two pressures; first, a recent World Council of Churches Report entitled "Justice for Aboriginal Australians" and lobbying of the Meeting by representatives of the Aborigines.) Fraser was unconcerned, hoping that other members would understand the nature of the problem and Canberra's efforts to deal with it. It is, however, speculated that Fraser's persistent support for the Afro-Asian members on a range of other topics probably resulted in them easing the criticism on this issue.

The Final Communique also reflects concern for a number of other international trouble spots. It contains, for example, a call for the withdrawal of Soviet Troops from Afghanistan, concern for the situation in Poland and a statement on the Kampuchean question. Some indications are that the Final Communique is less severe on these questions than it might have been. It is suggested that this was the result of the influence of left-leaning governments, like Grenada and Seychelles, which diluted the wording thereof.

iii. Assessment and Prospects

By any standards the Commonwealth is a unique grouping of states held together by a common language and colonial experience. The style of functioning is also unique with the absence of formal voting providing immense difficulties in the path of arriving at, inter alia, the Final Communique.

In assessing the meeting it should be recognised that South African-related issues continue to provide the Commonwealth with a paradox: on the one hand, generating divisions between member states and, on the other, drawing members together in the need to arrive at consensus.

The Melbourne meeting cannot be considered as successful as the 1979 meeting in Lusaka which emerged with the Zimbabwean prize. Melbourne, it seems, was more divisive with far less dramatic breakthroughs. However, issues were tackled in a workmanlike fashion, and the domestic house-keeping chores of the Commonwealth did not produce serious divisions.

The 24th Commonwealth Summit is scheduled for New Delhi in 1983. In the interim, there will be elections in a number of member states and the clues to the direction that the New Delhi Conference will take are likely to be found in the outcome of these elections.