

THE SOUTH AFRICAN INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

NATIONAL OFFICE:
Jan Smuts House
University of the Witwatersrand
Johannesburg
South Africa

Telex: 4-27291 SA
Fax: National (011) 403-1926
International + 27 11 403-1926



POSTAL ADDRESS:
P.O. Box 31596
Braamfontein
2017
South Africa

Cables: "INSINTAFF" Johannesburg
Telephone: National (011) 339-2021
International + 27 11 339-2021

Brief Report No.70
February 1989
Not for Publication

INTO AFRICA: MAKE WAY FOR A FORCEFUL LADY

THE EVENT

British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, will undertake a tour of four African states - Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Malawi and Botswana - in late March.

ANALYSIS

Margaret Thatcher is one of the most travelled of British Prime Ministers. In her almost ten years as Prime Minister, she has visited 50 countries on nearly 150 trips. This will not be her first visit to Africa; she attended the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Lusaka in 1979 and undertook a quasi-royal safari in early 1988 to Kenya and Nigeria. In Kenya, this forceful lady was taken by some to be Queen Elizabeth II!

This coming visit is potentially most significant, for the following reasons:

- * It follows in the wake of important diplomatic movement on the interlinked problems of Angola and Namibia. British diplomacy played no small part in this American-brokered settlement.
- * It builds upon personal contacts and progress made during the November 1988 visit by Mrs Lynda Chalker, Minister of State in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, to Gaborone, Pretoria, Harare and Bulawayo, and on the constructive meeting between British Foreign Secretary, Sir Geoffrey Howe, and Mozambican President, Joaquim Chissano, in Maputo in September 1988.
- * It has to be viewed against the backdrop of the next Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Kuala Lumpur later this year, and the British Government's coherent but controversial opposition to sanctions against South Africa.

- * It aims to strengthen growing economic links between the United Kingdom and the Southern African Development Coordinating Conference (SADCC). For example, in 1987-88, British economic assistance to Mozambique amounted to R148 million, of which R98 million was for the rehabilitation of the Limpopo railway.
- * It serves as a signal to Pretoria that the United Kingdom has legitimate interests in Southern Africa and that Whitehall (London) would be prepared to come to the assistance of the neighbouring states if those interests were jeopardised in any way.

SIGNIFICANCE

The late Harold Macmillan once described Margaret Thatcher as 'a brilliant tyrant surrounded by mediocrities'. Her coming visit to Southern Africa is also linked to her personal political fortunes and that of the ruling Conservative Party. She is unlikely to go out on a limb in trying to mediate in the South African conflict. British policy on South Africa is increasingly shaped by national interest and influenced by what Washington and Moscow do in this part of the world. National interest dictates that Margaret Thatcher will not engage in unilateral attempts to involve herself (and by extension, the Conservative Party) in trying to settle a high-risk conflict - that of South Africa.

Mrs Thatcher is no apologist for apartheid. Her opposition to further punitive sanctions against South Africa should not be seen (nor is it) as support for apartheid. She would only be able to engage herself in concert with the United States and the Soviet Union in the issue of South Africa if certain minimum conditions are met. These include: the unconditional release of Nelson Mandela and other political detainees; the unbanning of the ANC, PAC and other extra-parliamentary forces; and the substantive and systematic abolition of apartheid. Given these policy parameters, it is highly unlikely that she could afford politically to mediate in the South African conflict at this stage.

The real significance of these visits lies in the cementing and expansion of British regional interests, which in this region coincide with Commonwealth interests (most of the Southern African states being members). In so doing, the Thatcher Government acts as a real constraint against any disruptive trans-border actions by South Africa. At the same time, the strengthening of British interests should serve as a reassurance for South Africa and an encouragement to those promoting more cooperative links with neighbour states.