

October 31, 1985
**Letter from UK Prime Minister Thatcher to South
African President P.W. Botha**

Citation:

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<https://wilson-center-digital-archive.dvincitest.com/document/118367>

Summary:

Letter from Margaret Thatcher to South African State President P. W. Botha describing how Thatcher had to defend South Africa at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting from economic sanctions. She emphasizes the need for South Africa to show improvement and let foreign officials into the country within the next six months to avoid economic sanctions eventually being imposed.

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P. H. MOBERLY
HILL STREET, PRETORIA

31 October 1985

Private Secretary to the
State President of the
Republic of South Africa

Dear Private Secretary,

I have been instructed to pass on the enclosed text,
which I have just received from London, of a further message
to the President from the Right Hon Mrs Margaret Thatcher MP.

Yours sincerely
Patrick Moberly

P H Moberly
HM Ambassador

SECRET & PERSONAL

10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

31 October, 1985.

Dear Mr. President.

Thank you for the message which you sent me on 28 October. Now that I am back in London, I should like to give you a fuller account of the discussion of South Africa at the recent Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in the Bahamas and to put some ideas to you on the way forward. These cover some of the points raised in your message. I should be grateful if you would treat this letter very much as personal to you.

The Commonwealth meeting opened with forty-five countries seeking extensive trade and economic sanctions against South Africa. In some cases this amounted to lip-service only; the interests of some countries would be severely damaged by sanctions if they were applied. But the plain fact of the matter is that nobody else in the course of the meeting was prepared to speak out against them. It was left to me.

My rebuttal of the case for sanctions rested on two main premises: that sanctions do not work, indeed are likely to be counter-productive and damaging to those they are intended to help; and that it was inappropriate to take punitive action against South Africa at the very moment when you are taking

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steps to get rid of apartheid and to make major changes in the system of government in South Africa. I received a good deal of abuse in response, being accused of preferring British jobs to African lives, of being concerned with pennies rather than principles, of lack of concern for human rights and much more in the same vein. I in turn reminded them of some of the less satisfactory features of their own societies and pointed to the inconsistency of trading with the Soviet Union, with its appalling human rights record, and putting trade sanctions on South Africa. In short, as your message acknowledged, the debate was a highly unpleasant and bitter one; and there is no doubt that the issue of sanctions will not go away, despite my success in preventing the Commonwealth from adopting them at this meeting.

My other main purpose was to secure Commonwealth backing for dialogue between the South African Government and representatives of the black community in the context of a suspension of violence by all sides. The concept of course comes from your earlier letter to me: and I hope you will agree that it is no small achievement to have persuaded the Commonwealth to put its name to a suspension of violence, though there are several governments who will not wish to see substance given to this commitment if they can avoid it.

Looking now to the future, one has to draw the two strands together. The case for sanctions will undoubtedly continue to be pressed, at the United Nations and when the Commonwealth considers progress in six months time. I am resolved to continue to resist that pressure, and I was encouraged to find President Reagan similarly determined when we discussed the matter in New York last week. But I need your help in this task and I need it in three ways:

i. Obviously you cannot and will not allow outsiders to dictate the pace and the scope of change within South Africa. The Commonwealth Accord looks only for "progress" within six months and acknowledges in terms that "the forms of political settlement are for the

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people of that country - all the people - to determine. But it would in my view be unwise not to receive the Commonwealth Group of Eminent Persons, explain patiently to them what your Government has done and is intending to do, and allow them to make contacts among the various communities. I can well imagine that you will find this tiresome to say the least. While we shall do our best to guide the Group in a constructive direction, I am under no illusion that much of what it will say and do will be distasteful to you. But I am convinced that it will be infinitely more damaging to South Africa's standing and to the hopes of securing a wider understanding for what you are trying to do, were you to refuse to see the Group or to limit its activities unreasonably. At this stage I cannot tell you how soon the composition of the Group will become public knowledge, nor how long it will take to decide on how it should tackle its task. My best guess is that it will be three to four weeks before any firm request will be put to the South African Government.

ii. Your letter of 4 October to me set out in great detail what you have done and what you are proposing to do both in terms of removing discriminatory legislation and practices and of developing a political role for black people. It seems to me that you will need to have an eye to the international repercussions of the timing and presentation of your decisions. What was eventually said in your speech in August did not match the expectations which had been created nor indeed the reality of the decisions which you were then considering. I should like to see you present the sort of proposals you mentioned to me as a major initiative by the South African Government, at whatever you judge the appropriate moment. The initiative would not be taken in response to international pressures: it would be the result of what you and your government considered appropriate in terms of your country's needs and interests. But the international impact would be very

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most greater.

iii. Finally - and this is the most difficult since it involves an outsider presuming to trespass on your affairs - I do very strongly believe that you should be aiming to take further specific measures in the next month or so. I have noted the decision to lift the state of emergency in six districts: but have been sad to see that violence in the Western Cape has forced a further extension on you. Please do not under-estimate the impact on international opinion of the imposition of states of emergency and the gain from lifting them as soon as you are able. I continue to believe, as I have said to you before, that the release of Nelson Mandela would have more impact than almost any single action you could undertake. A specific initiative to launch a political dialogue before the Commonwealth Group gets far into its work would also be a skilful move and one in line with the intentions which you expressed to me.

I have spoken frankly on these points because I want to be able to go on helping you end the violence and bring about peaceful and fundamental change. But there are many more others who do not share these goals. I shall continue to resist sanctions because I believe they are wrong and because it is in Britain's interest to do so. But if my efforts are to carry conviction more widely in the international community, then I need to be able to point to concrete results from them. It is up to you to decide what weight you attach to these efforts. I very much hope that you will conclude they are worthwhile and that we can help each other in this way.

Yours sincerely
Margaret Thatcher

The Honourable P.W. Botha, DMS

P.W. Botha

[illegible, appears to be PA Embassy]
Hill Street, Pretoria

31 October 1985

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being concerned pennies rather than principles, of lack of concern for human rights and much more in the same vein. I in turn reminded them of some of the less satisfactory features of their own societies and pointed to the inconsistency of trading with the Soviet Union, with its appalling human rights record, and putting trade sanctions on South Africa. In short, as your message acknowledged, the debate was a highly unpleasant and bitter one; and there is no doubt that the issue of sanctions will not go away, despite my success in preventing the Commonwealth from adopting them at this meeting.

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Yours sincerely [written]

Margaret Thatcher [signature]

The Honourable P.W. Botha, DMS