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OPINION

THE "Iron Lady" British Premier Mrs Margaret Thatcher is not all "iron" after all. By her own admission (she said she liked being called "Iron Lady") inside the iron casting is a soft heart.

That soft heart has now, won her great admiration as the most crucial Commonwealth conference draws to a close. So far her speeches on the vexing Rhodesian problem have been most welcome.

No wonder her Lusaka Press Club audience joyously sung in unison: "For she is a very jolly good fellow".

Through her Britain and the rest of the Commonwealth feel a new determination to solve what has been a 14-year-old running sore in Britain's relations with Black Africa.

Mrs Thatcher may still view the situation from the right. But she is a tough and realistic politician.

Once she is pointed in the right direction, as she now appears to be, she may show greater strength and will in dealing with Rhodesia than any of her predecessors.

In her speech to the Press Club she declared: "We mean now to move swiftly towards our immediate objectives of working with the parties to draw up an independence constitution."

The operative words were "move swiftly." That shows determination. But it will not be easy. Britain, the former great imperial power, cannot now maintain law and order in its own Irish backyard. But there is still some life in the "old lady".

If today she is a bit short on gunboats, she still has a formidable array of diplomatic and negotiating experience to draw on. She has five immediate tasks.

She has to draw up a new constitution which all parties can support. (If this hurdle is surmounted the rest will be relatively easy).

With the help of the Commonwealth or other nations, she must convene an all-party conference on Rhodesia. The cessation of hostilities and ending sanctions should not be the priority.

Thirdly she must establish the machinery for preparing comprehensive lists of registered voters and delimitation of constituencies.

Then she has to determine the composition of the authority which will supervise elections ensuring that they are held in a conducive atmosphere and are "free and fair".

Lastly she has to prepare the ground for an orderly and genuine transfer of power to the majority.

With Mrs Thatcher's newly-found determination and her desire to "move swiftly" all this can be done before Christmas. Only then can we say Mrs Thatcher is sincere.

We hope with courage she can live up to her lofty aims.