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10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

17 March 1986

Dear Colin,

PRIME MINISTER'S MEETING WITH LORD BARBER

The Prime Minister saw Lord Barber this morning to receive an account of the Commonwealth Eminent Persons Group's visit to South Africa. The Foreign Secretary was also present.

Lord Barber reported that the members of the EPG had got on well together on a personal level. There was some suspicion among the Group of the United Kingdom's role in preventing agreement on economic sanctions at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Nassau. On the other hand, President Botha had made clear that South Africa would not have been prepared to receive the EPG had it not been for the Prime Minister's personal intervention.

The Group had visited both South Africa and most of the Front Line States. On the whole, the latter had been prepared to give the Group's activities a fair chance. Indeed Mr. Mugabe had underlined the importance which he attached to the mission which had been a Commonwealth and not just a British initiative. Those whom the Group had met appeared to believe that there was at least a remote chance that it would succeed in bringing people together in South Africa.

The Group had met the leaders of the ANC in Lusaka. In Lord Barber's judgement, Oliver Tambo would be ready to take part in negotiations with the South African Government provided certain conditions were laid down. This was not necessarily true of all his lieutenants. Tambo was evidently not Communist himself, although again the ANC leadership had made clear that they would accept support from any quarter. It had been left that the Group could go back to the ANC if they had further proposals to put following their visit to South Africa.

Members of the Group had also met Nelson Mandela and had been impressed by him. Mandela, for his part, had said that the EPG was the most important visiting group which he had met. The EPG assessed that it should be possible for an accommodation to be reached between Mandela and the South African Government. Equally they believed that, were the older generation of ANC leaders such as Mandela and Tambo to

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disappear or be bypassed, supporters of a hard line would come to the fore. Indeed the young people in some of the townships were already effectively out of the ANC's control.

Turning to the Group's dealings with the South African Government, Lord Barber said that they had been very well received. The South African Government had gone out of its way to make clear that they took the EPG very seriously. There had been three meetings respectively with Pik Botha and Heunis as well as meetings with a number of other ministers. The talk with President Botha, however, had been a disaster. The Group had received a 45-minute lecture during what had been intended as a courtesy call, but had avoided reacting so as not to raise the temperature unnecessarily. The Group's overall impression from its contacts with the South African Government was that they were deeply split on what should and could be done. But they also recognised that if they turned down the Group's ideas, they would be face to face again with demands for stepped-up sanctions.

Lord Barber said that there were two points which he particularly wished to stress to the Prime Minister. First, although the South African Government talked about dismantling apartheid it was difficult to pin them down to what this meant in practice. It was clear that they were not prepared to abolish, at least at present, the Population Registration Act or the Group Areas Act. South African ministers had also stated categorically that there was no possibility of doing away with separate education. The Prime Minister commented that the South African Government would have to change its position on some of these points, particularly the Group Areas Act. There must at least be the prospect of change within a defined period. Lord Barber continued that, secondly, there should be no misapprehension about the nature of the police state which the South African Government ran in the black townships. Blacks were subject to a great deal of harassment. Equally, the Group was in no doubt that the South African Government could contain black unrest more or less indefinitely.

Lord Barber said that the Group had left the South African Government with a piece of paper described as a possible negotiating concept. Its title was intended to make clear that it was not a hard and fast position but a document which could be the subject of discussion and negotiation. They had also made clear their view that the South African Government were tactically inept in continuing to make belated concessions without securing anything in return. If they were prepared to accept the Group's document or something close to it, the Group would be ready to go to the ANC and urge them to give an absolute assurance to suspend violence while negotiations between the South African Government and representatives of the black population took place.

Lord Barber said that he had two requests to make of the Prime Minister on behalf of the Group. The first was

that she should send a message to President Botha urging him not to turn down the Group's paper even though he might wish to suggest modifications to it. Secondly, they hoped that the Prime Minister would be ready to urge President Reagan to add his influence to persuading the South African Government to avoid reacting to the Group's paper in a negative way.

The Prime Minister complimented Lord Barber on the Group's work so far. She was certainly ready to meet both the requests made of her. She had studied the Group's paper and suspected that dropping the ban on the ANC would be the most difficult point for the South African Government. She saw little prospect that they would agree to this without the firm assurance that the ANC would suspend violence. It would not surprise her if there were to be a serious split within the South African Government on this point. There was also the risk that the ANC would not be able to deliver a suspension of violence. This would give President Botha an excuse for breaking off any negotiations. She thought that the United States Administration's decision to meet Savimbi might have helped re-establish their credentials with President Botha. She assumed that the objective of a message to the President would be to inform him of the Group's meetings and to ask him to urge the South African Government to give their proposals very serious consideration indeed, pointing out that if the South African Government turned these proposals down there was really nothing else on offer which had a chance of securing international support. Ideally she would wish to discuss this directly with the President. But there would be no chance for them to meet until the Economic Summit in Tokyo in May.

Lord Barber said that he thought the South African Government realised that what the Group were asking was not unreasonable. They would like to find a way to release Nelson Mandela and other imprisoned ANC leaders. They also recognised that the ANC leaders could not be released into South African society without lifting the ban on the ANC, otherwise they would simply find themselves flouting the law. Equally, it was recognised that there could not be negotiations with representatives of black South Africans unless there was also freedom of assembly and freedom of speech. The Foreign Secretary added that it would be helpful to get President Reagan's specific endorsement of the Group's role.

Lord Barber stressed the need for early progress. The South African Government had been asked to give a reply to the Group's document by the end of April and the Group would be ready to return to South Africa at that time. Lord Barber also referred to the possibility of the Group conducting a shuttle between the ANC in Lusaka and the South African Government. The Commonwealth Secretariat were urging the Group to have their report ready by mid-June, to leave scope for a possible meeting of Heads of Government in mid-July. The Prime Minister said sharply that this had not been agreed. It was more important to continue the process

of discussion and negotiation than to set deadlines for meetings. It was vital to keep President Botha in play. The Prime Minister added that she doubted that the Commonwealth Secretariat were playing a helpful role.

Yours sincerely
Charles Powell

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