

PRIME MINISTER

SOUTH AFRICA: LETTERS FROM THE PUBLIC

*M* cc Mr Sherbourne  
Mr Ingham

You may like to glance at the attached analysis of letters from members of the public between May and mid-September last year about South Africa, which has been compiled by a young man in the Foreign Office. The main points of interest are:-

- (i) The extraordinary high ratio of support for the Government in the letters: about 88:12 in the Government's favour.
- (ii) The strong feelings of correspondents against the Commonwealth.
- (iii) The very widespread admiration for your firm stand on sanctions was an example of standing up to the bullying tactics of black leaders, leftist politicians, bent media, etc.
- (iv) The extraordinary way in which the issue became personalised. You were held personally responsible by almost everyone, supporters and critics alike, for Britain's refusal to impose punitive sanctions against South Africa. The public seem to have detached you from the Government to a remarkable degree - many of them arguing that you had to contend not just with the Opposition but with your own Government as well!

*CDP*

Charles Powell

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MJ2CUA

## SOUTH AFRICA: LETTERS FROM THE PUBLIC

### SUMMARY

1. Between May and mid-September over 8,000 letters from the public were received, mostly written to No 10. These indicated massive support for the Government's refusal to impose punitive sanctions against South Africa. But praise was mainly reserved for the Prime Minister personally. Many expressed contempt for the Commonwealth.

### WHAT HAPPENED ?

2. Correspondence from the public about South Africa generally consists of a steady daily trickle of letters, amounting to perhaps forty or fifty a month, mostly urging the Government to act more firmly against apartheid. But starting in May this year, the numbers of letters rapidly increased as events in South Africa began to feature more prominently in the news. Over two hundred letters arrived in May, nearly eight hundred in June and just under four thousand in July. Correspondence peaked when 1,765 letters arrived in the first week in August and then rapidly fell away in the second half of the month. By mid-September the surge was over.

3. During May and early June, when violence in South African townships became daily news, writers urged the British Government to do something. Later in June, as pressures mounted for the Government to heed the call of many and impose tough economic sanctions against South Africa, so the flood of letters grew - but suddenly those urging that we stand firm against sanctions began to soar and outnumber those calling for tougher action; 1,400 of the 1,765 letters which arrived in the first week of August, (mostly written just before the Commonwealth Review) urged us to stand firm while only 194 were critical, a ratio of 88:12 in the Government's favour. Annexes 1 to 4 show the main subject raised in the letters received from June to mid-September. Annexes 5 and 6 show the rise and fall in total correspondence over the same period, and that the dramatic increase in numbers of incoming letters was due mainly to a massive increase in letters of support.

## WHO WROTE?

4. It is hard to generalise about writers who were critical except to say that, in the main, a greater proportion were younger than supporters and included the greater number of churchmen and almost (but not quite) all trade unionists writing in an official capacity. Letters of support came from just as wide a cross section of the British public and included doctors, students, nurses, farm labourers, trade unionists (just two) and even inmates of HM Prisons. Critics included some who had "always voted Tory" (some of whom "would never do so again") while supporters included writers who said they were Liberal or Labour.

5. Some writers claimed personal knowledge of South Africa, either through having lived there or through having friends or relations there. Those who had such links almost always pleaded for greater understanding of the complexities of South Africa's problems and supported the Government's refusal to impose sanctions. A small number of supporters recalled South Africa's support (and sacrifice) for Britain during both world wars and felt we were now letting down those who had helped us in our hour of need. Many of these writers also recalled the hospitality shown to British servicemen when British troop ships called at South African posts during the war. As one writer put it, "the hospitality received by many young Britons was the last experience of human kindness they ever knew before being killed, or ending their days on the Burma-Siam railway." Such sentiments clearly run deep in the hearts of those old enough to remember - and there must be many.

6. The overwhelming majority of letters emanated from within the UK but, of those that came from abroad, almost all were supportive and most came from South Africa. These were, with only a few exceptions, written by whites, more usually women, and very often began with a detailed preamble explaining the writer's links (ancestral or other) with the UK. Most other overseas correspondence came from Australia, Canada, the United States and New Zealand - in that order. Curiously a high proportion - some 20% - of letters from the USA were either totally incomprehensible or highly eccentric to say the least, but were mostly supportive.

Writers from Canada and Australia took pains to disassociate themselves from the anti-South African stand taken by their governments; they wanted to assure the Prime Minister that this did not represent the feelings of the Canadian or Australian people.

#### WHAT DID THEY SAY?

7. Predictably, **critics** called for punitive economic sanctions and condemned the Government for not doing enough to help the blacks. A view frequently expressed was that, in failing to implement sanctions, the Government was supporting the South African Government, if not apartheid itself. Our reasons for opposing sanctions were dismissed as hypocrisy, particularly our fears that sanctions would add to unemployment in the UK. Critics pointed to the existing high level of unemployment as evidence that the Government did not really care about those out of work. Some even claimed that high unemployment was an integral part of the Government's economic policy. Nevertheless, the Prime Minister's concern solely for Britain's own economic welfare was put forward most often as the real reason for the Government's refusal to impose sanctions against South Africa.

8. Many critics also condemned the Government's refusal to heed the call for sanctions by, eg, the Eminent Persons' Group, other Governments, the blacks in South Africa ("as represented by their leaders like Archbishop Tutu and the ANC") and other political, community and church leaders in the UK. Surely those who called for sanctions could not all be wrong? No, said the critics, but the Prime Minister thought they were, and stubbornly believed she alone was right. Later, after it became known that letters in support of the Government's policy had greatly outnumbered those against, some critics wrote to say the reason for this was that most people knew it was pointless writing to the Prime Minister; nothing would persuade her to admit she was wrong. And in any case, they said, she simply did not care. Some critics said that black majority rule was inevitable, and that when it came the black leaders of South Africa would not forget Britain's failure to support them.

9. There was evidence of several campaigns in support of tougher measures against South Africa. Many wrote in June in response to a call from Archbishop Tutu who, in a widely publicised sermon, asked congregations to write to the Prime Minister and urge that Britain impose sanctions. Campaigns were also organised by several trade unions, some local and borough councils, and also a number of student unions.

10. Letters of support on the other hand revealed no evidence of any organised campaign (the only exception being a pretyped letter of support sent in by six separate individuals). Many opponents of sanctions continued to assert that theirs was the view of the majority, even though (as they wrongly believed) letters of support were in the minority. Several supportive writers said their view was shared by others ("all my workmates", "everyone in this area", "most people who call in at my shop", "all the residents of this (old age) home" etc). The main message of supporters was that apartheid was wrong, but the Government were right in refusing to impose sanctions as a means of bringing it to an early end.

#### WHAT ELSE DID THEY SAY?

11. Many writers made secondary points which are not shown in Annexes 1-4. Fears were expressed by some, for example, that Britain's intransigence was threatening the very existence of the Commonwealth. Far more frequent, however, were the harsh words of contempt for the Commonwealth expressed in over 18% of all letters of support. Half of those who criticised the Commonwealth also added that it would be no loss to Britain if the Commonwealth disintegrated (though a few suggested that a continuation of just the 'Old Commonwealth' would not be a bad thing). The Government was frequently exhorted not to give in to "blackmail" (the word most commonly used) from the Commonwealth. This referred to threats to withdraw from the Commonwealth Games or from the Commonwealth itself, or to take retaliatory measures against Britain. Writers referred again and again to hypocrisy of Commonwealth leaders who criticised Britain but who were quick to accept British aid, whose own countries were in economic disarray, and whose human rights record was as bad as (or worse than) that in South Africa.

12. Particular anger was directed towards Zambia and Zimbabwe, and some writers urged the Government not to use British aid to offset self-inflicted difficulties which might be experienced by recipient countries who chose to impose their own sanctions regime against South Africa. Zambia was severely criticised following President Kaunda's harsh words spoken to the Secretary of State in front of the television cameras. Some writers offered their sympathy, but many more said that, "as a representative of the British people" or "of the Queen", the Secretary of State ought to have reacted much more vigorously to such an outburst.

13. Another secondary point (made by 12% of supporters) was that the media (and the BBC in particular) were biased in their presentation of the situation in South Africa. Facts were either wrong or deliberately misrepresented or shown out of context in order to give a distorted and wholly inaccurate portrayal of events. Critics of the media also asked why so much publicity was given to injustices in South Africa while those perpetrated elsewhere in Africa, under regimes that were sometimes even more repressive, were almost totally ignored. Many writers claimed that the media were saturated with reports etc on South Africa. By "media", writers were usually referring to radio and television.

14. Supporters for the Government's anti-sanctions policy usually agreed that apartheid was wrong but saw calls for early and sudden change as misguided. A plea made by some was that the Government should explain more clearly to the public why it did not favour sanctions. "Go on television," urged one writer, "like President Reagan does".

15. Opponents of sanctions often condemned the ANC because, they said, it was backed by communists and advocated violence. Reference was made time and again to Mrs Mandela's call for "necklacing" and several writers sent lurid press cuttings describing this practice. Many asked why we supported the ANC and not Chief Buthelezi.

## WHY DID THEY WRITE?

16. Clearly most people wrote because felt genuine concern over events in South Africa and the level of public interest was heightened by prominent news coverage. There were those who felt Britain was becoming isolated in its refusal to impose sanctions, and there were others who felt that sanctions were wrong. But many wrote letters of support because they were stung by the threats and criticisms from the Commonwealth. A smouldering resentment towards the immigrant population in Britain, anger at growing number of crimes of violence attributed to blacks, and the antics of some local councils (Brent was most often mentioned) seem also to have prompted sympathy for whites in South Africa. The Prime Minister's firm stand against those calling for sanctions was seen as a firm stand against what many writers saw as the bullying tactics of black leaders, left-radical politicians, frenzied rabble-rousers and the dishonest media etc. Some letters written just before the Commonwealth Review Meeting betrayed a note of panic that, in the face of mounting pressure, the Prime Minister would waver. Letters of support became briefer: "Sanctions - stand firm!" was the message on one hastily dashed-off postcard.

17. The cutting of air links with South Africa was hardly mentioned, except by some elderly people who feared they would be prevented from seeing their relations (usually children and grandchildren) in South Africa. Such writers did not usually comment on policy; they merely implored the Government not to sever air links.

## SO WHAT DO WE KNOW?

18. South Africa clearly remains an issue which rouses intense passions - on all sides. If the letters truly represent public opinion, we should not under-estimate the strength of feeling in the UK for the predicament facing whites in South Africa. There is great sympathy for the blacks, but greater identification with the whites. Many opponents of sanctions agree that apartheid is wrong and that change is necessary, but do not wish this to lead to South

not borne out by polls

Africa becoming another of the politically and economically bankrupt regimes which they perceive elsewhere in Africa. Those calling for tough measures on the other hand want nothing less than black majority rule, and they will be heard loud and long until this is achieved.

19. Those calling for tougher measures tend to have an over-simplified perception of the situation in South Africa. They see a black majority denied every human right and united in their suffering under an oppressive white minority regime. In the face of this, they say, Britain must take the most rigorous measures (including sanctions) against South Africa. The impracticability of enforcing these is completely ignored. More important than the effectiveness of sanctions is the fact that Britain must be seen to be on the side of the blacks in South Africa - and to be doing something.

20. One cannot fail to notice from the correspondence expressions of resentment towards the Commonwealth; hardly any spoke in its favour but many did so against. Anger will subside as passions cool, but the dents in the Commonwealth's image will remain.

21. But what emerges very clearly from the correspondence is the extent to which the public appear to have detached the Prime Minister from the Government and hold her personally responsible for Britain's refusal to impose punitive sanctions against South Africa. It is not to the Government but to the Prime Minister personally that correspondents have written; praise is ecstatic and fulsome, but directed always to the Prime Minister. Not only has she to contend with the Opposition, some say, but with her own Government as well. But she is not alone, the people of Britain are behind her; she is the best Prime Minister since Churchill, she is the best this century, she is the best Britain has ever known. Time and again supporters admit to being moved to tears by the Prime Minister's courage and resolution in the face of all opposition. But her critics are sickened. It is to the Prime Minister personally they direct their most poisonous venom. She thinks she alone is right and everyone else wrong; she refuses to heed the advice even of her supporters; she is only interested in money; she

just does not care. And like her supporters, the Prime Minister's critics have detached her from the Government and "ordinary folk". In the minds of many she has become extra terrestrial.

22. But main message that came through from the majority of letters was overwhelmingly one of support for the Prime Minister. As one correspondent wrote just before the Commonwealth Review Meeting: "Hang in there, Kid, we're with you - all the way."

RECORD OF LETTERS AND PETITIONS RECEIVED DURING JUNE 1986  
FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

Against sanctions	From UK:	110	<u>Supporting UK policy</u>
	From SA:	7	
	From elsewhere:	5	
General support for UK policy but not mentioning sanctions:	From UK:	2	
	From SA:	-	
	From elsewhere:	-	
Supporting Secretary of State's visit to SA:			
Against banning of UK/SA flights:		9	133
For sanctions	From UK:	454	<u>Critical of UK policy</u>
	From SA:	-	
	From elsewhere:	-	
General criticism of UK policy but not mentioning sanctions:	From UK:	-	
	From SA:	-	
	From elsewhere:	-	
UK should act more strongly against apartheid:		72	
UK should stop supporting apartheid:		9	
Hypocrisy to condemn SAG attacks on neighbours but support US air strikes against Libya:		14	549
General criticism of SAG:			<u>Critical of SAG</u>
Intervene on behalf of	UDF treason trial accused:	2	
	Oxfam workers:	-	
	Zondo, Payi and Xulu:	6	
	Nelson Mandela:	-	
	Sharpeville Six:	19	
	Other detainees:	-	
Amnesty International intervention pleas:		-	27
Against ANC/any HMG contact with ANC:		23	<u>Supporting SAG</u>
Appeal for support/understanding for SA:		35	
Anti-SA bias of UK media:		1	
UK has no right to interfere:		-	59
			<u>Other</u>
Personal/unconventional proposals to solve SA's problems:			
Requests for information:	3		
The Queen should not be involved:	-		
Reply to earlier letters:	-		
Other miscellaneous:	1		
Incomprehensible:	-		
Misdirected to SAfD for reply:	-		
			4
			<u>4</u>
			TOTAL 772

RECORD OF LETTERS AND PETITIONS RECEIVED DURING JULY 1986  
FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

Against sanctions	From UK:	1,449	<u>Supporting UK policy</u>
	From SA:	225	
	From elsewhere:	234	
General support for UK policy but not mentioning sanctions:	From UK:	341	
	From SA:	-	
	From elsewhere:	-	
Supporting Secretary of State's visit to SA:		19	
Against banning of UK/SA flights:		13	2,281
For sanctions	From UK:	925	<u>Critical of UK policy</u>
	From SA:	-	
	From elsewhere:	-	
General criticism of UK policy but not mentioning sanctions:	From UK:	25	
	From SA:	-	
	From elsewhere:	-	
UK should act more strongly against apartheid:		148	
UK should stop supporting apartheid:		23	
Hypocrisy to condemn SAG attacks on neighbours but support US air strikes against Libya:		3	1,124
General criticism of SAG:		7	<u>Critical of SAG</u>
Intervene on behalf of	UDF treason trial accused:	1	
	Oxfam workers:	9	
	Zondo, Payi and Xulu:	6	
	Nelson Mandela:	2	
	Sharpeville Six:	11	
	Other detainees:	9	
Amnesty International intervention pleas:		6	51
Against ANC/any HMG contact with ANC:		44	<u>Supporting SAG</u>
Appeal for support/understanding for SA:		176	
Anti-SA bias of UK media:		5	
UK has no right to interfere:		2	227
			<u>Other</u>
Personal/unconventional proposals to solve SA's problems:		68	
Requests for information:		16	
The Queen should not be involved:		5	
Reply to earlier letters:		-	
Other miscellaneous:		14	
Incomprehensible:		63	
Misdirected to SAfD for reply:		96	262
<b>TOTAL</b>			<b>3,945</b>

RECORD OF LETTERS AND PETITIONS RECEIVED DURING AUGUST 1986  
 FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

FINNEN 3

Against sanctions	From UK:	1,559	<u>Supporting UK policy</u>
	From SA:	216	
	From elsewhere:	207	
General support for UK policy but not mentioning sanctions:	From UK:	320	
	From SA:	85	
	From elsewhere:	89	
Supporting Secretary of State's visit to SA:		17	
Against banning of UK/SA flights:		6	2,499
For sanctions	From UK:	313	<u>Critical of UK policy</u>
	From SA:	-	
	From elsewhere:	24	
General criticism of UK policy but not mentioning sanctions:	From UK:	51	
	From SA:	1	
	From elsewhere:	4	
UK should act more strongly against apartheid:		28	
UK should stop supporting apartheid:		6	
Hypocrisy to condemn SAG attacks on neighbours but support US air strikes against Libya:		-	427
General criticism of SAG:		2	<u>Critical of SAG</u>
Intervene on behalf of	UDF treason trial accused:	-	
	Oxfam workers:	5	
	Zondo, Payi and Xulu:	1	
	Nelson Mandela:	2	
	Sharpeville Six:	7	
	Other detainees:	26	
Amnesty International intervention pleas:		2	45
Against ANC/any HMG contact with ANC:		5	<u>Supporting SAG</u>
Appeal for support/understanding for SA:		62	
Anti-SA bias of UK media:		3	
UK has no right to interfere:		19	89
			<u>Other</u>
Personal/unconventional proposals to solve SA's problems:		43	
Requests for information:		18	
The Queen should not be involved:		3	
Reply to earlier letters:		44	
Other miscellaneous:		96	
Incomprehensible:		73	
Misdirected to SAfD for reply:		42	
			319
	TOTAL		3,379

RECORD OF LETTERS AND PETITIONS RECEIVED DURING FIRST HALF OF SEPTEMBER 1986  
FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

Against sanctions	From UK:	29	<u>Supporting UK policy</u>
	From SA:	22	
	From elsewhere:	34	
General support for UK policy but not mentioning sanctions:	From UK:	2	
	From SA:	7	
	From elsewhere:	3	
Supporting Secretary of State's visit to SA:		-	97
Against banning of UK/SA flights:		-	
For sanctions	From UK:	37	<u>Critical of UK policy</u>
	From SA:	-	
	From elsewhere:	3	
General criticism of UK policy but not mentioning sanctions:	From UK:	2	
	From SA:	-	
	From elsewhere:	-	
UK should act more strongly against apartheid:		5	56
UK should stop supporting apartheid:		9	
Hypocrisy to condemn SAG attacks on neighbours but support US air strikes against Libya:		-	
General criticism of SAG:			<u>Critical of SAG</u>
Intervene on behalf of	UDF treason trial accused:	-	23
	Oxfam workers:	2	
	Zondo, Payi and Xulu:	13	
	Nelson Mandela:	-	
	Sharpeville Six:	-	
	Other detainees:	8	
Amnesty International intervention pleas:		-	
Against ANC/any HMG contact with ANC:		-	<u>Supporting SAG</u>
Appeal for support/understanding for SA:		19	21
Anti-SA bias of UK media:		1	
UK has no right to interfere:		1	
			<u>Other</u>
Personal/unconventional proposals to solve SA's problems:		6	45
Requests for information:		4	
The Queen should not be involved:		-	
Reply to earlier letters:		3	
Other miscellaneous:		17	
Incomprehensible:		14	
Misdirected to SAfD for reply:		1	
			45
TOTAL			242