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From the Private Secretary

19 February 1988

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PRIME MINISTER'S MEETING WITH THE SOUTH AFRICAN AMBASSADOR

The Prime Minister received the South African Ambassador this morning to take delivery of President Botha's reply to her recent message. A copy of the reply is enclosed.

The Prime Minister read the reply carefully. She then said that she wanted to be frank. President Botha's message did not address the heart of the matter. Apartheid was a basic grievance and it must go. In her view, it must go peacefully by negotiation between the Government and all the parties. The alternative was violence of which she had a horror and condemned wherever it appeared and whoever was responsible for it. But if people had legitimate aspirations, they must be addressed by negotiation. Despairing of progress in South Africa, most of the rest of the world had turned to sanctions as a remedy. Almost single-handedly she had held the line against sanctions. But she had to be able to argue convincingly that more progress would be made towards political reform in South Africa without sanctions than with them. There was nothing in President Botha's letter which enabled her to say that. Of course she was interested in what the President had to say about the South African economy and about a conference on Southern Africa. But without internal political progress the heart of the matter was just not there.

The Prime Minister continued that she believed that the negotiating concept of the Commonwealth Eminent Persons Group still offered the best formula for progress, of negotiations against the background of a suspension of violence. That was the course we had followed in Zimbabwe. The parties had not renounced violence but had agreed to suspend it. Looking at the situation in South Africa she had noted that the law and order situation had improved and that industry was breaking down barriers in job reservation, housing and other areas. But there had to be some political movement if people like her were to go on saying that if only South Africa were free of external interference, they would start negotiations. President Botha had said that apartheid must go and she believed him. But in practice we were not seeing the progress

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which there had been until two or three years ago. It just seemed to have come to a halt. As a result, she had nothing to show for her battle against sanctions. The most devastating result would be if people achieved by violence what they could not get from peaceful protest. She was particularly disappointed that Mandela remained in prison. The South African Government were making a legend of him and, if he were to die in prison, he would become a legend which could never be erased. She recalled the great mistake which Ian Smith had made in Rhodesia in the 1960s of not accepting Nkomo's offer of gradual political advancement for blacks. There were very reasonable black leaders in South Africa such as Chief Buthelezi and Mr. Mabuza who wanted to negotiate. But they could not hold out indefinitely without any prospect of progress. She did not for a moment pretend to dictate the outcome of negotiations in South Africa. But unless there was something to show in terms of political advance, her position would be a false one and people would say that her campaign against sanctions had only served to make South Africa safe for apartheid.

The Prime Minister continued that the Ambassador should convey to President Botha her thanks for his reply. But he must also say that she was disappointed by it. She had read through the letter eagerly expecting to find indications that South Africa was going to do something on the political front. But there was nothing there. She had done and would continue to do everything in her power to give South Africa time. She would argue that South Africa must be enabled to make progress towards her own destiny in her own way. But there must be some hope. She could only influence other governments as long as progress was seen to be made. Until then, other ideas such as a conference of Southern African leaders was simply a diversion. The time for a conference was when preparations for international negotiations had been made and South Africa needed the help of other African governments to achieve the suspension of violence. She had always said that President Botha must be given a chance and he would make changes. His letter gave her nothing to sustain that belief.

The South African Ambassador made a number of remarks about economic enfranchisement of blacks being a step towards political enfranchisement. Mandela was not forgotten. The Prime Minister said that economic progress was not a substitute for political progress. She had hoped that President Botha's letter might give her, if only in strict confidence, an indication of the further reforms he intended and of how he saw the way towards negotiations. We needed to see a way to the future. But it simply was not there. She would be replying to the President along the lines of her remarks.

The Prime Minister and the Ambassador agreed that no announcement would be made of his call although, if it did become public, we would confirm that the meeting had taken place to enable the Prime Minister to set out her views on the situation in South Africa. The existence of the message and its contents should be treated as strictly confidential.

B/P//
The South African Ambassador took no notes. It may therefore be helpful if you were to let Mr. Renwick have a full account of the conversation in the terms above so that he can draw on it as necessary. I should also be grateful for a draft reply to President Botha's message, fashioned from the Prime Minister's comments to the Ambassador.

(CHARLES POWELL)

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Foreign and Commonwealth Office.