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RECORD OF A CONVERSATION BETWEEN THE PRIME MINISTER AND THE
COMMONWEALTH GROUP OF EMINENT PERSONS ON SOUTH AFRICA ON
FRIDAY, 13 DECEMBER AT 1200

The Prime Minister
Mr. Charles Powell

General Olusegun Obasanjo
Mr. Malcolm Fraser
Dame Nita Barrow
Mr. John Malecela
Mr. Swaran Singh
The Most Reverend Edward Scott
Lord Barber of Wentbridge

After welcoming the Group, the Prime Minister said that she saw their mission as an historic opportunity to turn the tide in South Africa. It would also end South Africa's isolation. The Group had a difficult and sensitive task. The South African Government would be suspicious of them and disliked the notion of being told by outsiders how to run the country's affairs. This attitude would call for great tact and discretion from the Group. The Prime Minister continued that she attached importance to maintaining South Africa's economic strength while solving its political problems, so that there was a worthwhile inheritance for a future non-racial Government.

General Obasanjo agreed that the Group had an historic opportunity. They were as anxious as the Prime Minister to find a solution to South Africa's problems. They were aware of the sensitivity of the South African Government and recognised that no Government liked to be told what to do or be pushed around. They faced the difficult task of trying to help start a dialogue between the South African Government and representatives of the other communities in a situation where many inflexible positions had been taken up. Like the Prime Minister, the Group was conscious of the need to preserve the strength and buoyancy of the South African economy.

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General Obasanjo continued that the Group had decided that the first step should be to contact the South African Government. The two co-Chairmen would be writing to President Botha and would ask the United Kingdom, Canadian and Australian Ambassadors to deliver their letter. This would say that the Group was anxious to visit South Africa and to meet people in and out of Government who were true representatives of their communities, with the objective of facilitating the establishment of a dialogue. He hoped that the Prime Minister would use her good offices to secure a positive reaction to this response from the South African Government. The letter would be couched carefully in terms which would not be offensive to them. More generally, he was neither unduly pessimistic nor over-hopeful about the Group's prospects. But he believed that with the goodwill of Governments and people who had some influence over the South African Government, some progress could be made. This applied particularly to the Prime Minister whom the Group recognised as the person best placed to influence President Botha.

Mr. Fraser added that the Group hoped that their letter could be delivered on 16 December. He thought it was well put together. The Group wanted to visit South Africa as soon as possible. It seemed from the South African Government's recent statement that they wanted to communicate their point of view to the Group. He stressed that the Group would be conducting its mission as discreetly as possible. They did not intend to issue public statements nor to tell the Press about their programme or whom they were seeing or not seeing. They were not going to South Africa with the intention of embarrassing the South African Government. They needed to move quickly, however, to meet the six month deadline set by the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. The Prime Minister observed that this was not so much a deadline as a review clause. She foresaw the Group's task lasting longer, particularly if they were making progress. Mr. Fraser said that there had been some suggestion that the South African Government would prefer the Group not to go there until after

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the South African Parliament had met at the end of January. The Group wanted to go sooner than this and hoped that the generally responsible attitude towards publicity which they were displaying would help persuade the South African Government to agree to this. He repeated that they would be grateful for the Prime Minister's assistance.

Mr. Fraser continued that the Group's letter was designed to elicit a simple, positive response. It would make clear that the Group were willing to carry out whatever programme the South African Government proposed and that their first priority would be to meet Government representatives. But obviously there would be other groups to see with whom arrangements would need to be made separately. The Group hoped that the South African Government would not try to negotiate in advance precisely who the Group could and could not see. This would get the Group's work off to a bad start.

The Prime Minister warmly welcomed the Group's approach as explained by the two co-Chairmen. It was important above all not to give the impression of telling the South African Government how they should re-write their constitution. Rather, the goal should be to influence them to reach decisions which were sensible but their own. She repeated her anxiety about the need to preserve South Africa's economic strength. General Obasanjo said that this was important not just for South Africa but for the Southern African region as a whole. The Prime Minister continued that the United Kingdom would do everything in its power to help the Group in its task, both in providing information and suggestions for individuals whom the Group might like to meet, and help with communications.

The Prime Minister recalled that she had met President Botha when he came to Europe. He was undoubtedly a difficult and sensitive man but she thought he was open to influence and persuasion. Important developments were already taking place in South Africa, for instance, the suspension of forced removals. The country's difficulties in meeting its debts had

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been a shock and had helped to convince people of the need to go faster. She thought the moment for the Group's visit was propitious. General Obasanjo agreed. As had been the case with Zimbabwe, once a decision had been taken to seek a solution, it would always be possible to work out the modalities. The Group did not expect apartheid to be dismantled overnight: they recognised that it would take years. But once the process was initiated, fears might gradually diminish.

Archbishop Scott referred to the particular problem of the growing bitterness and alienation of young people in South Africa. This added urgency to the Group's task. Dame Nita Barrow welcomed the Prime Minister's offer to suggest names of people whom the Group might meet. She referred to her own particular interest in education and health services and saw this as an area where it should be possible to work across racial lines. She agreed that change would only come slowly. She saw the Group's role as that of a catalyst to bring together groups of people who did not normally meet and persuade them to talk to each other.

Mr. Malecela added that one of the Group's tasks would be to convey the Commonwealth's feelings to the South African Government, in particular the belief that it was still possible to achieve a negotiated and peaceful solution. He supported Mr. Fraser's request that the three Governments with diplomatic representation in South Africa should encourage the South African Government to allow them to make an early visit. The way in which the initial contact between the Group and the South African Government was handled could be decisive for the success of the whole enterprise.

Mr. Singh agreed that the initial stage would be crucial. This was where the Prime Minister's help was most needed. He expected some initial resistance from the South African Government. The Group recognised that it was not for them to determine South Africa's constitution, only to find a basis for a dialogue and then leave the South African people

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themselves to work out their future. But if the initial reaction was negative, the members of the Group would come under strong pressure from their respective constituencies to abandon the task.

Lord Barber said that one had to be realistic and recognise that the Group's chances of success were not all that good. But he was more optimistic now than when he had first taken on the task. He interpreted President Botha's willingness to meet him during the recent visit to South Africa as an encouraging sign. He had been pleased with the ease with which the Group had succeeded in reaching a consensus about its task.

The Prime Minister said that she was much encouraged by her meeting with the Group. She was under no illusion about the difficulty of their task. But they were off to a good start. She would certainly do her best to influence President Botha in a sensible direction. She would write to him immediately with an account of her favourable impressions from her meeting with the Group. She would press him to allow them to pay an early visit.

(C. D. POWELL)

13 December 1985

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10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

13 December 1985

Dear Colin,

**PRIME MINISTER'S MEETING WITH THE
COMMONWEALTH GROUP OF EMINENT PERSONS ON SOUTH AFRICA**

I enclose a record of the Prime Minister's meeting with the members of the Eminent Persons Group this morning. As you will see, the Prime Minister undertook to write immediately to President Botha with an account of the meeting and to urge him to allow the Group to pay an early visit to South Africa. I should be grateful for a draft message covering these points as rapidly as possible.

The Prime Minister would also like us to prepare a suggested list of names whom the Group might see in South Africa. This should be passed to the Commonwealth Secretariat. She assumes that our Mission in Pretoria will be offering whatever technical assistance with matters such as transport and communications that the Group may require.

I should record that Lord Barber subsequently telephoned to say that the Group had been very pleased with the meeting with the Prime Minister.

Yours sincerely,
Charles Powell

(C. D. POWELL)

Colin Budd, Esq.,
Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

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