

Nelson Mandela left his mark on the Commonwealth

Sue Onslow reflects on how the Commonwealth opposed apartheid and the impact Nelson Mandela had on the organisation when he became leader of South Africa.

In the cascade of tributes to Nelson Mandela following his death on 5 December, personal friends, liberation fighters in the struggle, fellow politicians and commentators have addressed Mandela's complex personality and political outlook, his charisma and astute diplomatic skills, legacies for South Africa and the region, and Mandela's relationships with other heads of state.

No mention has been made of his contribution to the evolution of the Commonwealth as a voluntary values-based association of sovereign states: i.e. Mandela's contribution to the cohesion and scope of a multinational organisation, not simply to the South African domestic scene, or bilateral relations.



Commonwealth support for the international struggle against the apartheid government, and the associated campaign for South West Africa/ Namibia's independence was a consistent 'good news' story for the association in the 1970s and 1980s. Commonwealth activity, both bilaterally and in the multilateral forum of the biennial Heads of Government meeting consistently sought the end to Apartheid and agitation to secure Mandela's release gathered momentum in these decades: through collaboration and support of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, the Commonwealth Sanctions Committee followed by the Commonwealth Committee on Southern Africa from 1987, the many initiatives taken to persuade Mrs Thatcher to adopt financial and economic sanctions, as well as its sensitisation of other governments. (The Gleneagles 1977 Agreement banning international sporting contacts with South Africa was a significant Commonwealth initiative.) This sustained anti-apartheid campaign, and the associated drive to secure the release of ANC 'prisoners-of-conscience' – Mandela had become the most well-known by the 80s – helped to give the Commonwealth cohesion and wider sense of identity. This was not withstanding the very public spats between Mrs Thatcher and other Commonwealth heads in the mid-late 1980s on the issue of economic sanctions. (Critics of Thatcher frequently forget that her government supported sport sanctions and observed the compulsory United Nations' arms embargo against Pretoria.)



Mrs Thatcher herself had been a consistent advocate for Mandela's release in her meetings and correspondence with the South African President PW Botha from 1984. The Commonwealth Eminent Persons Group which visited South Africa between February – May 1986 to solicit opinion from all sides of the political spectrum visited Mandela in jail, and used their discussions in the final suggested Possible Negotiating Concept which was put to the South African government. (This Commonwealth diplomatic mission ended abruptly when South African defence forces simultaneously bombed ANC cadres in Lusaka, Harare and Gaborone.) Mandela's first international flight following his release in February 1990 was to Lusaka, capital of a leading Commonwealth front line state and headquarters of the exiled ANC. Mandela's first visit to a Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting was to the Harare summit in October 1991, where he arrived unexpectedly and without a prior invitation at the banquet hosted by the Queen as Head of the Commonwealth. Swift shuffling of the table settings by Commonwealth Secretariat aides ensured that a potential public relations disaster of Mandela being denied entry was averted.

These anecdotes illustrate the symbolic importance of Nelson Mandela to the Commonwealth. However, it was as President of South Africa post-1994 that Mandela enabled the Commonwealth to become a 'global story' in support of democracy and human rights. The occasion was the Auckland Commonwealth Heads of Government in 1995, Mandela's first as head of state. On the eve of the summit, news came through that the military government of General Abacha of Nigeria had executed the poet and political activist, Ken Saro Wiwa, and eight fellow Ogoni dissidents. This was despite Mandela's personal plea for clemency for Saro Wiwa. Outraged by this brutality, and deeply empathetic as a fellow political dissident who had faced the death penalty by a repressive regime, Mandela immediately lent his inestimable moral authority to the suspension of Nigeria from the Commonwealth and the creation of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG), precisely to address the attacks on democracy by military coups and to organise Commonwealth pressure for a return to the democratic process. The speed of the decision, taken at the Commonwealth Retreat, and the manner in which the news story of Commonwealth sanction went global, was entirely down to Mandela's moral authority and his standing as a one-man pressure group.

Critics of the Commonwealth have lambasted the organisation for its recent faltering record on human rights, given the choice of Sri Lanka as venue for the last Commonwealth Heads meeting, and inability to use CMAG to press the Colombo government into a more publicly proactive stance examining 'serious and persistent violations'. Mandela's death allows the Commonwealth to look back to a high point when there was an unequivocal and united stance in support of human rights, and immediate action to do something about it. Given the South African government's role in the confirmation of Sri Lanka as CHOGM venue at the 2011 Perth meeting, this would appear another example in which the present ANC government squandered Mandela's inheritance: in its individual action at Port of Spain in 2009 and again in Perth, in support of Sri Lanka, despite its highly questionable human rights record; and the ANC government's subsequent collective responsibility not to demur on the choice of venue. This is indicative of the lack of importance the current ANC leadership attaches to things Commonwealth.

Rejoining the Commonwealth was one of the incoming Mandela government's top 5 priorities in April 1994. As a head of state who assiduously attended Commonwealth Heads Meetings, Mandela was a star drawing card for other heads of State (witness Blair's pleasure at his photo opportunity with Mandela at the Edinburgh summit in 1997) and an incomparable moral force. Although President Zuma denied the Commonwealth had played any role in the transition to black majority rule at Perth in 2011 – a view point which infuriated committed Commonwealth politicians and diplomats – Mandela, by his presence and his actions between 1994 and 1999, certainly repaid the Commonwealth for its long-standing commitment to his release and peaceful transition to democracy. The admiration was entirely mutual.

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