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Leadership slips

The latest meeting of the Commonwealth committee of foreign ministers on South Africa showed a tendency to downplay the leadership role governments must play in fighting apartheid.

Rather than endorsing tougher sanctions against South Africa's racist regime, the eight foreign ministers called on international bankers to apply pressure by giving no breaks when Pretoria attempts to reschedule its multi-billion-dollar foreign debt in the next year.

It is quixotic at best to expect the banks to voluntarily embarrass a major client and even jeopardize the security of their outstanding loans by demanding the highest possible interest rates and insisting upon quick repayment. The unlikelihood becomes even greater when many of the banks are based in countries whose governments themselves refuse to censure South Africa's policies.

Nor are the banks likely to be inspired by the apparent reluctance of Commonwealth countries like Canada, which claim to be taking a leadership role in applying sanctions, to follow the advice of an independent report commissioned by the foreign ministers' group and intensify their own pressure tactics.

If other governments and private interests are to be persuaded to join the sanctions movement, they will have to be convinced people like Canada's External Affairs Minister Joe Clark are not wavering in their belief that turning the economic screws is both right and effective. It is regrettable the meeting in Australia did not result in a recommendation that the Commonwealth summit in October endorse even further measures.