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Bungle in Venice

Prime Minister Mulroney nearly fell flat on his face in Venice over South Africa. This was predictable and could have been avoided.

The much-heralded Mulroney initiative last April was at first designed to enlist the support of the leading industrial nations to promote a peaceful end to apartheid. The original plan was to send a summit mission to South Africa to try to accomplish what the Commonwealth Eminent Persons Group (EPG) failed to do — promote a meaningful dialogue between Pretoria and recognized black leaders.

Power-sharing was the aim, the abolition of apartheid the starting point. Co-operation was to be the means to that end.

What made this different from the Commonwealth try was the proposed sponsorship of the visiting team. The industrial nations have tremendous economic and financial clout and stakes in South Africa. If they offered their collective good offices, President P. W. Botha could hardly refuse.

The idea, then, was an excellent one. But Mulroney's first task was to make sure that the political will was there on both sides.

What went wrong? Obviously the principal players were not persuaded. They might have been wrong, but domestic preoccupations argued against participation.

Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had an election on her hands. West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl didn't want to upset his business community at a time of economic recession. President Reagan has Irangate and the credibility of his leadership on the front burner.

In brief, and sadly, there was nothing in it politically for the elected leaders of the Western industrial world. So they weren't prepared to take a chance for South Africa, or for Brian Mulroney.

When the prime minister's soundings went sour, and Botha did not encourage them, he should have cut his losses and dropped South Africa from his Venice agenda. There would be other opportunities.

But no. Just prior to the summit, Mulroney said he still wanted to raise the subject but — and here was his big mistake — he switched his tune from co-operation to condemnation. He called for tougher sanctions against Pretoria. He didn't even mention the mission idea.

Before he went to Venice, Mulroney knew that there was opposition among his peers to a reference to South Africa in the final communiqué. But he still pressed the issue, for his own reasons.

The result was last-minute agreement to an oral reference by the summit's president in his final statement calling for the dismantling of the apartheid regime and its replacement by a democratic non-racial one.

A victory? For Mulroney? For South Africa? Nothing much for anyone.