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South Africa *Canada's essential role*

THE LATEST twist in the anti-apartheid saga makes Canada's External Affairs Minister Joe Clark look decisive and committed, but does nothing to change South Africa's racist policies.

As chairman of the eight-nation Commonwealth Committee of Foreign Ministers on South Africa, which met in Canberra this week, Clark banned Pretoria's ambassador to Australia from addressing the meeting.

A snub is a reliable way to express one country's displeasure at another's actions. Clark stressed his point by stating that the meeting is to hear from people who are often silenced.

A worthy reply to South Africa's paid ad in an Australian national newspaper deploring the Commonwealth's "meddling" in its internal affairs, and Pretoria's high-handed detention of Azhar Cachalia, an official of the United Democratic Front, South Africa's largest anti-apartheid group, who was to address the committee in Australia.

Central in the committee's deliberation was the demand by several groups, including the banned but still widely popular African National Congress, for tougher sanctions on Pretoria.

South Africa naturally opposes sanctions and has successfully answered calls for wider boycotts by claiming the sanctions would affect the black majority rather than the ruling whites.

Clark admitted that Canada and the Commonwealth can do little more than they are doing now to fight apartheid.

Economic sanctions are overrated. Their effect is limited since it will always be profitable for others to break them.

In the case of South Africa, Canada is an important but rather weak player. Our sanctions are not important because of the weight they carry, but are so because we are one of the few western democracies that speak out strongly against the evil of apartheid and the need to wipe it out. Clark said, "we don't have the leverage alone to be able to make important changes in South Africa. What we can do is encourage other economies and other countries to move with us."

The Commonwealth committee agreed to ask international banks to pressure South Africa to end apartheid by imposing tough repayment conditions on its loans. It also agreed to recommend to the Commonwealth tougher sanctions against Pretoria.

How effective these measures will be is questionable, considering that Britain, West Germany, the U.S. and Japan have huge investments in South Africa and oppose sanctions.

At this time it is obvious that change in South Africa can come only after a change in the existing political philosophy. Even then, only to avert the inescapable wrath of 23 million disenfranchised blacks rising against five million privileged whites.