

# Out of steam? Mulroney and sanctions

by Kim Richard Nossal

One of the most dramatic changes in foreign policy since the Progressive Conservative government of Brian Mulroney came to power in September 1984 has been in Ottawa's approach to South Africa. Even staunch critics of Canada's South African policies seem to agree that the policies embraced by Mulroney overturned or abandoned the cautious and anti-sanctionist approach that had been the mark of each postwar government down to 1984. Instead, the Conservative government engaged in an active attempt to put pressure on the South African government, an approach that had at its core the embrace of sanctions. However, after two years of anti-apartheid diplomacy, it seemed to many analysts and activists that the government's momentum had been lost, that it no longer was taking the initiative, that it was backpedaling on its earlier promises to break all relations with South Africa, that, in short, it had run "out of steam" (to use the cliché of choice for describing Ottawa's present policies towards South Africa). Significantly, even Stephen Lewis, who as Canada's permanent representative to the United Nations had played an important part in the Mulroney government's diplomacy, would complain publicly on his retirement in August 1988 that the issue appeared to have lost the importance to the government that it had had in 1985.

Is it accurate to portray the Mulroney government as "out of steam" on the South African issue? On the one hand, there can be little doubt that after the Commonwealth Heads of Government meetings in Vancouver in 1987, there have been few new Canadian initiatives, and the issue has appeared of only sporadic interest to the Prime Minister and his Secretary of State for External Affairs, Joe Clark. On the other hand, it is not clear that this represents a loss of interest or impetus on the South African issue. Rather, it can be argued that by 1988 the government had indeed slackened the pace, not for lack of interest, but because of a recognition that maintaining the logic of increasing pressure on South Africa would have led the Mulroney government into policies that would be, for Canada, quite radical, involving implications well beyond the willingness of the Prime Minister to countenance.

## Loss of steam?

To assess the "loss of steam" argument, one must begin with an examination of the changes to Canadian policy introduced by the Mulroney government in the summer of 1985 and the assumptions that underlay them. These changes, beginning with the economic and other sanctions introduced by Joe Clark on July 6, marked a substantial shift from the traditional Canadian approach to apartheid, which had been rhetorical denunciation of the institutionalized racism in South Africa, but with a commitment to maintain normal diplomatic and commercial relations with Pretoria. If previous governments had placed a premium on

what has been called a "business as usual" approach, the Mulroney government left us in little doubt in the summer of 1985 that it had no commitment to maintaining such ties. Following the imposition of the state of emergency in South Africa in July, the government invoked further measures in September, promising that if an end to apartheid were not forthcoming, Canada would invoke "total sanctions" and "end our relations absolutely." Indeed, there is widespread agreement among observers and officials in Ottawa that the prime minister and his external affairs minister have a personal, almost visceral, antipathy for apartheid and a disdain for the "business as usual" approach that in its essence involves an acceptance of institutionalized racism. Likewise, if previous governments had been willing to let others take the lead on the South African issue in multilateral forums, that Mulroney government adopted a highly active role at the biennial Commonwealth meetings and the annual Economic Summits in an attempt to rally multilateral support to put pressure on Pretoria.

If this approach marked a significant change in how a succession of Canadian governments prior to 1984 approached the South African issue, it was nonetheless based on a particular logic that would doom it to appear to "lose steam" the longer that it was in place. For the Mulroney government's policies towards South Africa since the summer of 1985 have been premised on one key assumption: that South Africa can be coerced or forced by non-violent means, into abandoning apartheid. The attachment to the logic of coercion can be seen in the government's rejection of the primary alternative to the status quo, that is, symbolic statecraft. However much it was dissatisfied with the cautious policies of its predecessors, the cabinet rejected what might be thought of as the "fire all of your guns at once" approach to relations with South Africa.

## Single grand gesture?

This view, advocated by many anti-apartheid activists and both opposition parties, holds that Canada should embrace the single grand gesture, terminating diplomatic relations, and imposing a unilateral total ban on the movement between the two countries of anything that could be directly controlled by Ottawa — goods, services, capital, technology, communications and people. Of course, such a single-shot blast, however satisfying emotionally, and however important it would be in terms of the signal sent to the non-whites in South Africa and to other states, has symbolic but little instrumental value as far as apartheid is

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