

**November 17, 1985**

**Letter from UK Prime Minister Thatcher to South  
African President P.W. Botha**

**Citation:**

"Letter from UK Prime Minister Thatcher to South African President P.W. Botha", November 17, 1985, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Available via [margaretthatcher.org/archive](https://margaretthatcher.org/archive). Included in "Southern Africa in the Cold War, Post-1974," edited by Sue Onslow and Anna-Mark Van Wyk.  
<https://wilson-center.drivingcreative.com/document/118370>

**Summary:**

Letter from Margaret Thatcher to South African State President P.W. Botha, expressing her disappointment and anxiety over South Africa's refusal to cooperate with the Commonwealth group. Encourages South Africa not to publicize their refusal, and notes quite plainly that British assistance will be lost if South Africa continues down this path.

**Credits:**

This document was made possible with support from Leon Levy Foundation

**Original Language:**

English

**Contents:**

Original Scan  
Transcript - English

**10 DOWNING STREET**

THE PRIME MINISTER

17 November 1985

*Dear Mr. President,*

I have to say that I am very disappointed, indeed dismayed, by your message of 12 November and particularly by the statement that your Government consider that it would be impossible to co-operate with the Commonwealth Eminent Persons Group. I recognise the difficulties both of principle and of domestic politics which the Commonwealth initiative inevitably raises for you. Equally I am convinced that it would be infinitely more damaging to South Africa's future interests were you to refuse to have anything to do with the Group.

At the very least I would urge you to avoid any public statement of refusal to co-operate with the Commonwealth initiative. None of us yet know precisely what form it will take. The only guidance in the Commonwealth Accord is that it should "encourage through all practicable ways the evolution of that necessary process of political dialogue". This does not seem to me too alarming a mandate. The Group of Eminent Persons has not yet been completed, let alone held a first meeting to consider its course of action. At this stage it is far from clear whether the Eminent Persons would even want to visit South Africa as a group. It might be possible for your Government to meet individual members of it. The Group's very existence will begin to focus attention on the complexities of the South African situation, to which you have always rightly drawn attention.

STRICTLY PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL

It will give you a fresh chance to put your case to important sections of international opinion in this country, in the United States, and elsewhere.

We are aware of the studies by the Foundation for International Conciliation to which you refer in your letter. I would want to encourage all well intentioned and helpful efforts. But I fear the Foundation will not carry much credibility internationally. I can see no prospect that this initiative could possibly become a convincing alternative to the Commonwealth Group.

May I ask you to consider for a moment the full implications if your Government were to reject co-operation with the Group. Your enemies in the Commonwealth would be delighted: they never wanted it anyway. We and others who had hoped for progress through dialogue will be told that we should have known better. The international pressures for sanctions against South Africa will fast gather momentum again. Most of the value of my having held the line at Nassau will be lost. My ability to help preserve the conditions in which an internal dialogue of the sort you are seeking has a chance of success will be critically, perhaps fatally, weakened.

In short I can see no need for you to take a decision about co-operation with the Group now, let alone reject it publicly. If you value my continuing help, I urge you most strongly not to do so. I do not think I could be plainer.

Yours sincerely  
Nagendra Sahota

The Honourable P.W. Botha, D.M.S.

STRICTLY PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL

STRICTLY PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL

10 DOWNING STREET

The Prime Minister  
17 November 1985

Dear Mr. President, [written]

I have to say I am very disappointed, indeed dismayed, by your message of 12 November and particularly by the statement that your Government consider that it would be impossible to co-operate with the Commonwealth Eminent Persons Group. I recognize the difficulties both of principle and of domestic politics which the Commonwealth initiative inevitably raises for you. Equally I am convinced that it would be infinitely more damaging to South Africa's future interests were you to refuse to have anything to do with the Group.

At the very least I would urge you to avoid any public statement of refusal to co-operate with the Commonwealth initiative. None of us yet know precisely what form it will take. The only guidance in the Commonwealth Accord is that it should "encourage through all practicable ways the evolution of that necessary process of political dialogue". This does not seem to me too alarming a mandate. The Group of Eminent Persons has not yet been completed, let alone held a first meeting to consider its course of action. At this stage it is far from clear whether the Eminent Persons would even want to visit South Africa as a group. It might be possible for your Government to meet individual members of it. The Group's very existence will begin to focus attention on the complexities of the South African situation, to which you have always rightly drawn attention.

It will give you a fresh chance to put your case to important sections of international opinion in this country, in the United States, and elsewhere.

We are aware of the studies by the Foundation for International Conciliation to which you refer in your letter. I would want to encourage all well intentioned and helpful efforts. But I fear the Foundation will not carry much credibility internationally. I can see no prospect that this initiative could possibly become a convincing alternative to the Commonwealth Group.

May I ask you to consider for a moment the full implications if your Government were to reject co-operation with the Group. Your enemies in the Commonwealth would be delighted: they never wanted it anyway. We and others who had hoped for progress through dialogue will be told that we should have known better. The international pressures for sanctions against South Africa will fast gather momentum again. Most of the value of my having held the line at Nassau will be lost. My ability to help preserve the conditions in which an internal dialogue of the sort you are seeking as a chance of success will be critically, perhaps fatally, weakened.

In short I can see no need for you to take a decision about co-operation with the Group now, let alone reject it publicly. If you value my continuing help, I urge you most strongly not to do so. I do not think I could be plainer.

Yours Sincerely [written]  
Margaret Thatcher [signature]

The Honourable P.W. Botha, D.M.S.