**COMMONWEALTH DIPLOMACY AND THE END OF APARTHEID**

Inaugural Anthony Low Commonwealth Lecture by Professor the Hon Gareth Evans AC QC FASSA FAIIA, Chancellor of The Australian National University, Canberra, 17 November 2016

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It is a pleasure and a privilege for the ANU to be hosting, and for me as Chancellor to be delivering, this inaugural lecture in a new series to honour the memory of Anthony Low, which will give us an annual opportunity to recognise his extraordinary achievements as a scholar, his outstanding record of academic institutional leadership, and his wonderful qualities as a human being, evident not least in the warmth with which he guided, mentored and inspired generations of students from Africa, Asia and every other corner of the Commonwealth. It is a particular delight to have celebrating the occasion with us Tony’s family, in particular his indispensable partner for so many decades, Belle; their daughters Angela and Penny, and grandchildren Georgina and Anthony; and Angela’s husband – my colleague and friend from Foreign Affairs days, Matthew Neuhaus.

Anthony Low is most widely remembered at ANU for the seven years he spent, from 1975 to 1982, as a much-admired Vice-Chancellor. The youngest in our history, he came to the role at the age of 47 with a stellar reputation after a successful stint in England and an impressive two years as the Director of the ANU Research School of Pacific Studies. And he left it with that reputation further enhanced by the quality of his personal and professional leadership during some of the most turbulent times in the University’s, and the country’s, history.

As I described his contribution in the Memorial Celebration we held in July last year, he faced, and admirably faced down, three major challenges during his tenure. The first was to cope with the major changes in higher education, when the Federal Labor Government in 1974 assumed full responsibility for the sector. While ANU remained the only university established by an Act of the Federal Parliament, it now had to take its place in a queue of eighteen other universities competing for Commonwealth funding. The second was to recreate a sense of harmony on the campus after a long period of student unrest, driven among other things by considerable unhappiness with the ANU administration, with protests in and around the Chancelry a semi-regular occurrence. And the third was to navigate the passions unleashed – not least his own! – by the dismissal of the Whitlam Government in 1975, when ANU academics and students came under fire from the new conservative administration.

Vice-Chancellor Low was always strong and unequivocal in his intellectual and emotional defence of the ANU community: “the 10,000 of us” as he always described it, making no distinction between the 6,000 students and 4,000 staff of the time. He led and represented this University with skill, passion, determination and strength. ANU is much the better for his time here, and his contribution will very long be remembered.

Tony Low will also of course be remembered far beyond the confines of this university for the breadth, depth and impact of his scholarship, pursued not only at ANU, including very productively here in his retirement years, but in his earlier career at Makerere and Sussex Universities, and later at Cambridge, particularly as Smuts Professor of the History of the British Commonwealth at Cambridge from 1983-94. He was a masterful chronicler of Empire, of India and South Asia, of Uganda and emerging Africa, and deeply knowledgeable too about the Pacific and – as his son-in-law Matthew has described it – about all the currents of “common experiences and philosophy that brought together Nehru, Sukarno and Nkrumah in forming the Non-Aligned Movement and reshaping our world”.

Moreover, as Matthew has also described it he was, as a scholar, “a revolutionary forging new traditions”, one of the post-war generation of young historians who “rebelled against Hugh Trevor Roper’s taunt that there was no such thing as African history because of its lack of written records. Using the techniques of anthropology and oral history as well as the records of missionaries and explorers to supplement official sources, they forged a whole new body of history just in time for the new nations then emerging”.

It could not be more appropriate for this new lecture series to be called not just the Anthony Low Lecture, but the Anthony Low *Commonwealth* Lecture, because it was for the Commonwealth of Nations – and all the ideals of democracy, equality and partnership it represented, a different universe from that of the power politics of the Cold War era and beyond -- that he had an abiding affection and commitment. It was for the Commonwealth Round Table that he first wrote in the 1950s, and it was with the Commonwealth Round Table of Australia, that he founded with Hugh Craft, Tony Eggleton and others that he was still consumed throughout his last years back in Canberra.

Of all the achievements of the Commonwealth, the one most widely acknowledged, and certainly the one that I cherish above all others, was its central role in bringing to an end the hateful apartheid regime in South Africa. It was a cause dear to Anthony Low's heart, and one which he helpfully advanced, particularly in the 1960s at Sussex University where, as founding Dean of the School of African and Asian Studies, he worked closely with the famous Institute for Development Studies that provided a haven from that regime for so many students, activists and academics from South Africa, including the second president of free South Africa, Thabo Mbeki. And it is to that subject, the Commonwealth’s role in ending apartheid, that I now turn as the topic of this lecture, focusing particularly – because I had the good fortune to live through it – on Australia’s part in the enterprise.

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One of the most exhilarating moments of my public life was standing, as Australia’s Foreign Minister, with Nelson Mandela on the steps of the Sydney Opera House in October 1990, in front of tens of thousands of cheering Australians, all of us ecstatic at the birth of the new democratic South Africa that we were witnessing, after so many years of dark struggle, and so many fears that the price of democracy was going to have to be terrible further bloodshed. My first encounter with Mandela, eight months earlier, had been equally overwhelming: it was in Lusaka where he had flown to meet his ANC colleagues in exile, just a few days after his release from prison in February, where I was one of the very first international figures to meet and talk with him – in Kenneth Kaunda’s dining room. How can I forget being captivated then, as so many others have been since, by that huge luminescent smile, by the unending charm and grace, by the lucid intelligence with which he discussed his country’s transition problems, but above all by that extraordinary, almost unbelievable, lack of bitterness toward his Afrikaner gaolers of twenty-seven years?  Of all the meetings with all the international leaders I have had in all my years of public life, there is no question but that this is the one which gave me the most sheer joy.

My Prime Minister, Bob Hawke, was equally overwhelmed by his first meeting with Mandela, during his October 1990 visit to Australia, as he has described in *The Hawke Memoirs,* recording that among Madiba’s first words were “I want you to know, Bob, that I am here today, at this time, because of you” as he thanked Hawke for his leadership and initiatives in the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting (CHOGM) which he said had accelerated his release and the collapse of apartheid.

Mandela’s African National Congress (ANC) was certainly pushing on an open door so far as members of the Hawke Labor Government were concerned. Many of us were from the student generations of the 1960s and 1970s who had actively campaigned for the anti-apartheid cause, a period graphically recalled in the splendid exhibition, *Australians Against Apartheid,* now runningin Old Parliament House, which was opened by Bob Hawke earlier this year. In my case my passion was ignited, as was the case for so many others around the world, by the Sharpeville massacre in 1960, while I was still at school. At Melbourne University in 1965 I led a student protest against the arrival of the Springbok rugby team, out at the old Essendon airport, where the only security between us and the aircraft door was a low wire fence and a short stretch of tarmac. We wore rugby jumpers and black face paint, jumped over the fence and held up placards saying “Why Won’t You Play with Us?” Thankfully the coppers got to us before the Springboks did, and all I suffered was the indignity of a headlock and being thrown back over the wire fence. But I think it was at that stage that I decided that the rest of my life was going to be devoted to peaceful protest rather than the more adventurous kind.

Of course Hawke Government was not the first in Australia to play an active international role in bringing down the cursed regime. That honour belongs to both the Whitlam and Fraser Governments before us. But the key point for present purposes is that all of us chose to work through the Commonwealth as our chosen primary vehicle for change. By the mid-1970s there was plenty of reason to do so, but it has to be acknowledged that the Commonwealth was a slow starter when it came to taking a strong stance against racism, certainly by comparison with the United Nations, where India had succeeded in inscribing the condemnation of apartheid on the agenda of the General Assembly as early as 1946. Even after the Sharpeville massacre in 1960 hardened attitudes against Pretoria, which in turn was a key factor leading to South Africa’s withdrawal from the Commonwealth, with the old dominions wanting to turn a blind eye no serious action began to be taken until the early 1970s. But with South Africa excluded from the Olympic Games in 1964 and 1968 and expelled from the movement two years later, sports boycotts had come to centre stage, and no sports mattered more to white South Africans than the quintessentially Commonwealth ones of cricket and rugby.

The Whitlam Government made a vital contribution to the launch of the Commonwealth sports boycott, with the Prime Minister announcing in December 1972 that sporting teams selected on the basis of race would not be allowed to enter Australia. The turning point came when a New Zealand All Black tour of South Africa in 1976, coinciding with the bloodily suppressed Soweto riots that year, led to an African boycott of that year’s Olympics and threatened the failure of the Edmonton Commonwealth Games in 1978: this prompted the CHOGM retreat at Gleneagles in 1977 to reach the Agreement which declared apartheid in sport abhorrent and led to a dramatic reduction in all sporting contacts. Given the breadth and profile of the contacts forbidden it is fair to say that Australia – closely followed by New Zealand – suffered more pain with the sports boycott than anyone else. Or at least anyone other than the cricket and rugby-mad white South African community: the sense of isolation and deprivation was not in itself enough to bring down apartheid, but it unquestionably played a psychological role.

The then Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser played a central role in the Gleneagles negotiation, and it should be acknowledged that he personally deserves real credit for the political risks he took with this issue, which was a deeply unpopular cause in his own party room and among conservative voters during the whole transitional period. While at the time of the Whitlam dismissal Fraser was not Anthony Low’s favorite person any more than mine – ANU relations with the new government did not exactly get off to a promising start when television cameras actually caught Tony protesting outside Parliament House! – there is absolutely no doubt that Fraser’s personal convictions on matters of race, in South Africa as elsewhere, were absolutely genuine and heartfelt, as he subsequently demonstrated over and again, not least in his subsequent leading role as co-chair, with former President Obasanjo of Nigeria, of the Commonwealth’s highly influential Eminent Persons Group (EPG) in 1986.

It’s a fascinating question as to how racial difference could matter so little to a man of Malcolm’s rural aristocracy background and conservative instincts, when for most of his colleagues then it meant so much? When I was a student myself at Oxford in the late 1960s, my Magdalen College history tutor, Kenneth Tite, who had taught us both, offered a plausible explanation for this minor psychological mystery, although it never seems to have been acknowledged as such by the man himself or any of his biographers. He told me that when Malcolm had arrived at Magdalen directly from secondary school, he had been shy, awkward and very lonely – until he was befriended by a young man on the staircase opposite him, who just happened to be from India…

It was not until a few years later, in 1985-86, that Commonwealth anti-apartheid efforts picked up pace on a wider front, in reaction to the further cycle of violence and repression then occurring. Really wide-ranging and substantial economic sanctions, with a real capacity to bite, started to be put in place by the international community. The Commonwealth, then European Community, the US and individual Nordic countries led the way, each drawing successively on precedents set by the others.

It was at this time that Bob Hawke, who came to Australia’s leadership in 1983 very deeply committed to the anti-apartheid cause, became intensely personally engaged with the issue of sanctions at successive Commonwealth meetings, and ended up taking the campaign forward in a whole new direction. He was a key player, along with Rajiv Gandhi and Brian Mulroney, in establishing, at the Nassau CHOGM in 1985, the EPG initiative, which produced a year later a seminal report which was seen as both authoritative and realistic, and contributed importantly to the ultimately effective Commonwealth collective approach to a South African settlement adopted in 1989. The critical issue throughout this period was bringing aboard the UK under the indomitable, and invariably instinctively hostile, Margaret Thatcher.

While Bob Hawke’s memoir does not acknowledge what I have seen described elsewhere as the strategy of using Gandhi and Mulroney to convert her as ‘two good-looking men representing important countries’,[[1]](#footnote-1) Bob did seem to be as effective as anyone in curbing some of her excesses. One of his anecdotes about the 1985 retreat, describing how he dealt with Thatcher’s ‘delay-by-parenthesis’ technique, captures the flavor rather nicely:

We were discussing the Eminent Persons Group and the stage-by-stage concept of sanctions. Brian Mulroney was developing his main argument in support of Rajiv’s and my attempt to persuade Margaret to come in behind the idea. Brian was unwise enough to refer to an aside she had made during the afternoon’s discussions. ‘Margaret, when you said that I thought the fat was really in the fire’.

At that her eyes blazed and she pulled herself erect in the chair. ‘What do you mean the fat was really in the fire? Just what do you mean? What fat? What fire?’ she asked imperiously. ‘Brian, I was brought up to mean what I say, and say what I mean. What do you mean *the fat was really in the fire?’*

‘My God!’ I thought’. I couldn't refrain from jumping in: ‘Margaret! For Christ’s sake! Forget the bloody fat and the bloody fire, it’s got nothing to do with anything. Just listen to what Brian’s saying, will you.’ Margaret looked at me in some astonishment but, to her great credit, she copped it.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Bob Hawke’s most important single contribution to the cause came at the 1987 Vancouver CHOGM, when he suggested that a major new emphasis be placed on *financial* sanctions as the best way of putting the screws on the South African regime. As the 1980s wore on the international community had been gradually coming to the realization the sanctions on trade in goods and services, like the sports and cultural boycotts, were going to be insufficient, and that there had to be some real additional discipline in the form of drying up the sources of trade credit and investment funds, and general support through the banking system.

A movement to apply such sanctions had been initiated in city and local governments in the US, through the black caucus in the Congress, and pressure on corporate private lenders.  But until 1987 this trend did not really have coherence or focus, and no serious analytical work had been done to establish whether a worldwide financial strike could be sustained, and if so what difference this would make to the South African economy. Hawke’s particular contribution was to get the Commonwealth to take a leading role on this, beginning by initiating a ground-breaking study by an expert committee chaired by Tony Cole, who later headed the Australian Treasury, which made clear that financial sanctions were indeed the key to success, and laid all the foundations for their systematic international implementation. To ensure that this work did not just languish in the Commonwealth bureaucracy, we then followed this up – I had by this time become Foreign Minister – by sponsoring the publication of a highly influential Penguin book, *Apartheid and International Finance,* written jointly by Cole and the scholar and author Keith Ovenden, a friend of mine from Oxford days, which we ensured was circulated among policymakers worldwide.

In the late 1980s international financial sanctions started to bite really hard. The whole process was self-reinforcing in a way that trade sanctions never were and never could have been. Every new financial institution in some part of the world refusing credit, or setting tougher terms, increased the risk for other suppliers still in the field. By 1990 the denial of access to new international capital was dramatically and comprehensively strangling the economy.  South Africa could fund internally growth of no more than 2 per cent a year, but it needed to grow at least 4 per cent or more to create jobs for its expanding population and to maintain existing standards of living. If nothing had changed, the country would have exploded. I am in absolutely no doubt that it was the impact of these financial sanctions that was the really decisive factor in creating the conditions for the end of apartheid, not just as a matter of abstract analysis but because, in so many words, I was told so by the key local players – including the finance minister and reserve bank governor – during my visit to the country in 1991, and years later in conversations with FW De KIerk himself.

Another Hawke/Australia initiative at the 1987 CHOGM was the establishment of the Commonwealth Committee of Foreign Ministers (CFMSA), in which I became very closely involved over the next few years, chaired by Canada’s former prime minister Joe Clark and including among others from around Africa, Asia and the Caribbean, a future prime minister of India, Narasimha Rao, and president of Tanzania, Ben Mkapa. Its role was to monitor the evolution of Commonwealth policy, including in particular the new financial sanctions, and to develop a strategy not only of relentlessly increasing sanctions but also winding them back to the extent that particular benchmarks of policy change were achieved by the South African government. I should say that all these initiatives through the 1980s were supported and complemented by a strong and committed Secretariat, including Hugh Craft who served through this period. The then Secretary-General, Sonny Ramphal, was a force of nature, who provided real leadership grunt to the Commonwealth that inspired a confidence in the institution in those early post-EPG days and beyond that I think it has to be acknowledged we have not really seen since.

The CFMSA was a group that developed a very close internal *esprit de corps*, and gave me some of my most close and long-lasting international friendships, as well as laying the foundations for some very treasured friendships with key players in post-apartheid South Africa. These were the years when I and other members of the group consolidated close personal and policy links with the key African National Congress players, particularly Thabo Mbeki, later to become President, and the Mandela generation leaders Oliver Tambo and Walter Sisulu. My friendship with Thabo Mbeki – honed by frequent semi-clandestine meetings with him in all sorts of exotic locations, not least on one occasion the game park lodge in Botswana where Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor had secretly trysted a few years before – has survived, despite the serious failings and idiosyncrasies of his leadership of the country when he eventually succeeded Mandela as President in 1999. In retrospect it is clear that Cyril Ramaphosa, who I also came to know well – the trade union leader later turned successful businessman, who neither carried neither Thabo’s lumber-yard of chips on his shoulder nor the Stalinist ideological inheritance of Thabo’s father Govan– would have made a much better president, and Mandela is known to have privately rued his choice. But Thabo, for all that, was a pivotal figure in South Africa’s emergence from apartheid darkness, and he deserves honour and respect for that.

The Foreign Ministers Committee also gave me some of my more memorable diplomatic experiences. One was at the 1989 CHOGM in Malaysia, when yet another major confrontation developed with Margaret Thatcher’s UK government over its still extremely reluctant approach to applying sanctions pressure. Our Committee was tasked by the prime ministers to try, before they met at their Langkawi retreat, to come up with draft language on South Africa for the communique which was as accommodating to Britain’s concerns as we could be without sacrificing any point of principle. Despite a very bumpy ride along the way, which I’ll describe in a moment, we succeeded beyond our expectations with Thatcher accepting the draft – only then for her, to the absolute fury of her colleagues (well described by Bob Hawke again in his memoirs), to renege on that agreement when she got back to Kuala Lumpur, and produce yet another consensus-minus-Britain outcome

The Committee’s bumpy ride centred around our dealings with Thatcher’s very newly appointed Foreign Secretary (and later to be Prime Minister) John Major, who was neither very well informed about the substantive issues, nor any more inclined than any of her other cabinet ministers to take on the Iron Lady. Things got off to a rather bad start when I met him on his arrival and, on behalf of the CFMSA, invited him to join us for an an informal dinner that night, before the formal meetings started, to explore ways of finding common ground. He replied that he was indeed available, but ‘did not choose to’ have any such discussion. Things got worse when I reported this back to my colleagues, and we had next day some extended exchanges across the table on the adequacy of UK policy – in what diplomatic parlance would describe as a ‘robust exchange’, and anyone else a full-scale verbal brawl.

While we didn't, in the final result, end up making much difference to the UK attitude on this occasion, at least the story had a rather charming sequel.  Very soon after the Malaysia meeting, when Major had still only been Foreign Secretary for a few weeks, an unexpected resignation elsewhere led to him being appointed Chancellor of the Exchequer.  I sent him a rather cheeky note saying ‘Dear John, I know we had our differences in KL, but Maggie didn't really have to move you that quickly.’  He replied with splendid grace: ‘Dear Gareth, Thank you for your message. I did indeed learn something about the language of diplomacy when I was in KL. Maybe that’s why I am now Chancellor.’

Even if the Commonwealth did not always manage to achieve unanimity, the relentless international pressure for change and the ever-mounting internal tension had created all the necessary conditions for change in South Africa. But there was still need of white political leadership clear-headed enough to grasp the moment. That came at last with succession to the Presidency in February 1989 of FW De Klerk, replacing the ailing hardliner PW Botha. The speech he made to launch the reform process in February 1990 was genuinely historic, announcing as it did the government’s willingness to enter into serious negotiations on a wholly new democratic and non-racial constitutional dispensation, the unbanning of the ANC and other political organisations, and above all the release from imprisonment, after twenty-seven years, of Nelson Mandela.   Whatever his past may have been, De Klerk saw the light at the right time, delivered in full on the expectations he created, has been an influence voice for peace and reconciliation around the world ever since, and fully deserved the Nobel Peace Prize he shared with Mandela in 1993.

My own first visit to South Africa was in June 1991, in the early days of the transition process. It is a trip which has assumed a certain legendary status of its own as a result of a carefully contrived press leak by old guard forces in the South African Foreign Ministry who hated what Australia had been doing to undermine their regime. The context was a car trip out to the Khayelitsha, a then-largely-squatter township outside Cape Town, to visit some community workers and projects which the Australian Council of Trade Union’s international humanitarian aid and development arm, APHEDA, was partnering. Everyone wanted the exercise to be totally unobtrusive because of the incredible tensions still in the air, but the security services accompanying me deliberately went right over the top, blaring their sirens and flashing their lights in a way that was manifestly designed to embarrass our community hosts.

All this led me to describe their performance to my wife Merran, sitting beside me in the back seat of my official car, as ‘fucking useless’: a rather gentle assessment in fact, given the provocation, and certainly not one addressed directly to any official. But it happened to be overheard by our Afrikaner police driver, who reported it back to the foreign ministry, who heavily spun it to the local press, generating the headline ‘Foreign Minister abuses South African security forces’. That produced quite a commotion internally, with for years afterwards Black South Africans saying admiringly to me ‘Man, you really stuck it to them’. What I was a bit less prepared for was the hostile sea of Australian press greeting me when I flew back into Perth the next day, all consumed by the bilateral ‘row’ that I had provoked. The experience reinforced my long-held view that there were only two kinds of foreign affairs stories that ever interested the mainstream press – a perception that you had caused a row, or that you had engaged in some craven kow-tow.

Although in a sense the rest was history once the 1990 breakthrough had been made, the transition process was long and gruelling, and with many ups and downs along the way before the country’s first genuinely democratic election was held in 1994. Not all the government’s actions matched its rhetoric, with particular concern being the outbreak of major violence in major Black townships, with apparently well-founded allegations of overt security force incitement, which I certainly had good reason to believe after my own 1991 experience.

The Commonwealth, with Australia again playing a central role, responded by using sanctions again, this time with their lifting as a carrot rather than their application as a stick.  Sanctions were in fact progressively lifted as the apartheid system was unwound, non-racial sports administration achieved, a new constitution adopted and elections held. Australia played an active nuts-and-bolts role throughout this process, instituting a $30 million program to help with infrastructure and human resource development, and providing members to Commonwealth and UN observer groups involved in observing and defusing violence throughout the country, and in assisting in the electoral process.

I am sometimes still asked why it was that successive Australian governments, and in particular the Hawke Government, committed so much effort to resolving a South African situation so little of our own making. My short answer has always been that it lies in that instinct for good international citizenship which I continue to believe is part of our national psyche – despite periodic lapses in leadership by various governments (and oppositions) which ought to know better, and occasional disgruntlement from sections of the community, usually when under economic stress. The enforcers of apartheid, proclaiming their superiority to others on the basis of race alone, were not just another unpalatable regime, but beyond the civilized pale.  If we had washed our hands of the struggle against them, we would not only have failed in our humanitarian duty, but would have debased the very values which are at the core of our sense of human dignity.

The Commonwealth’s role as the main institutional vehicle, from the 1970s on, for analyzing, articulating and mobilizing effective pressure against that awful regime, must remain among its very finest achievements. While it has often struggled over the years to have equal influence on other major issues of human rights, democracy and development, there remains something quite distinctive internationally about a body which stands quite outside the US-China-Russia global power relationships; which brings together an extraordinarily diverse worldwide group of countries united by ties of history, language and culture; and which ,despite the periodic backsliding of some of its members – and South Africa under President Zuma unhappily continues to be a work in progress in this respect – does continue to be capable of applying peer group pressure to change the behaviour of those who have fallen short in observing the values of equality, democracy and decency on which the organisation is built.

This is why Anthony Low loved the Commonwealth so much; why there will continue to be big Commonwealth issues to address as this lecture series in his name continues; and why we can honour his memory by continuing to cherish those values of equality, democracy and decency, which this institution, for all its limitations, has done in the past and hopefully will continue to do in the future, so much to advance.

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1. W.David McIntyre, *The Significance of the Commonwealth, 1965-90* (London, Macmillan, 1991), p39 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bob Hawke, *The Hawke Memoirs* (Melbourne, William Heinemann Australia, 1994), pp. 320-21 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)