Calculated Outrage: Rethinking Sharpeville's Significance in British Foreign Policy

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Chapter I - Introduction

I

On the 21st of March 1960, 'a crowd of several thousand Africans gathered at the police station in the Sharpeville African township' in a peaceful protest.[1] This was in response to the Pass Laws introduced by the South African National Party (NP) earlier that month.[2] In the early afternoon, at Sharpeville police station, seventy-five policemen were overwhelmed by the size of the protest.[3] According to some of the police, the protestors began throwing stones and, in response, the 'inexperienced constables began firing their guns'.[4] Other police claim to have heard an order to "shoot the ringleaders".[5] The police opened fire with approximately seven hundred shots.[6] Many individuals were shot in the 'legs, body, or head'.[7] This massacre resulted in sixty-nine deaths and potentially more than one hundred and eighty injuries.[8]

'The guns of Sharpeville echoed across the world, and nowhere except among totalitarians was there any doubt about the true nature of what had occurred.'[9] The riots caused by the massacre resulted in 'the proclamation of a state of emergency' in the Union of South Africa.[10] According to the United Nations Security Council, it caused 'strong feelings and grave concern aroused among Governments and peoples of the world'.[11] The massacre resulted in 'international friction' and risked endangering international peace and security.[12] Boehmer argues that the massacre 'revealed to the world' the 'horrors of the apartheid system'.[13] Twenty-nine member states raised a complaint concerning "the

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[1] Harold Macmillan, *Pointing the Way, 1959–1961* (Harper, 1972), p. 166.
[2] Archbishop Desmond Tutu and others, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, III (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 1998), p. 528.
[3] London, The National Archives of the UK (TNA), DO 35/10582, *Commission of Enquiry into the Occurrences at Sharpeville (and other places) on the 21st March 1960: Submissions Presented to the Commission on behalf of the Bishop of Johannesburg*, Vol. 1, 15 June 1960, p. 1.
[4] Tutu and others, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, III, p. 535.
[5] TNA, DO 35/10576, *Report of the Langa Commission of Enquiry* (Union of South Africa), English Translation, 2 June 1961, p. 97.
[6] TNA, DO 180/1, 'Sharpeville: 'No Evidence of a Common Intent to Attack Police'', *The Cape Argus*, 24 January 1961.
[7] TNA, DO 35/10582, *Commission of Enquiry into the Occurrences at Sharpeville (and other places) on the 21st March 1960: Submissions Presented to the Commission on behalf of the Bishop of Johannesburg*, Vol. 1, 15 June 1960, p. 138.
[8] Ibid, p. 1.
[9] Albert Luthuli, *Let My People Go* (McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1963), p. 222.
[10] TNA, DO 35/10582, *Commission of Enquiry into the Occurrences at Sharpeville (and other places) on the 21st March 1960: Submissions Presented to the Commission on behalf of the Bishop of Johannesburg*, Vol. 1, 15 June 1960, p. 1.
[11] UN Security Council, *Question Relating to the Situation in the Union of South Africa*, Resolution 134 (1960), adopted at the 856th meeting, 1 April 1960 (S/RES/134(1960)), p. 2.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Sam Matthews Boehmer, 'Questionable Allies: British Collaboration with Apartheid South Africa, 1960–90', *The International History Review*, 46.1 (2024), pp. 102–119 (p. 102) <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2023.2250804>

large-scale killings of unarmed and peaceful demonstrators".[14] According to Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Sharpeville brought apartheid 'under the spotlight and was debated for the first time by the United Nations Security Council.'[15] As a result, Catsam claims that the massacre 'propelled South Africa and apartheid into the international consciousness unlike any previous moment'.[16]

Literature on Sharpeville therefore has a tendency to frame Sharpeville as a 'turning point' in South African international history.[17] Reeves claims that 'history will recognise that Sharpeville marked a watershed in South African affairs'.[18] Irwin adds that it 'undeniably changed the calculus of the apartheid question'.[19] It was to the point that 'it briefly looked as if the whole edifice of apartheid was about to crumble.'[20]

This global response put British foreign policy in a difficult position. According to Irwin, the massacre put 'the moral, political, and economic support of […] London in serious jeopardy for the first time.'[21] Britain faced 'a sharp dilemma between two conflicting United Kingdom (UK) interests.'[22] Whitehall retained 'important stake in maintaining good relations with South Africa' but recognised the consequences of the apartheid regime.[23]

This watershed narrative therefore raises a problem: if Sharpeville was truly transformative, Britain's hesitation to enforce policy against South Africa becomes questionable. Dubow critiques this, claiming that 'the 1960–1 period has for too long been seen as a moment of crisis where no other alternatives were realistic or possible.'[24] Gurney challenges one of the most frequently cited consequences of Sharpeville – the founding of the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) – arguing it

[14] UN Security Council, Resolution 134 (1960), (S/RES/134(1960)), p. 1.
[15] Tutu and others, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, III, p. 534.
[16] Derek Charles Catsam, *Struggle for a Free South Africa: Campus Anti-Apartheid Movements in Africa and the United States, 1960–1994* (Taylor & Francis, 2024), p. 99.
[17] Håkan Thörn, *Anti-Apartheid and the Emergence of a Global Civil Society* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 127–128.
[18] Ambrose Reeves, 'The Sharpeville Massacre - A watershed in South Africa', *South African History Online*, 65.25 (2013), pp. 1–9 (p. 8) <http://www.sahistory.org.za/topic/sharpeville-massacre-watershed-south-africa-reverend-ambrose-reeves> [Accessed 10 February 2026].
[19] Ryan W. Irwin, *Gordian Knot: Apartheid and the Unmaking of the Liberal World Order* (Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 42–43.
[20] Daniel J. Feather, *British Cultural Diplomacy in South Africa, 1960–1994* (Springer International Publishing, 2024), Chapter 2.
[21] Irwin, *Gordian Knot*, pp. 42–43.
[22] TNA, PREM 11/3163, 'Policy towards South Africa: The United Nations Items', Serial Number 111/59, 17 December 1959, p. 1.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Saul Dubow, 'Were There Political Alternatives in the Wake of the Sharpeville-Langa Violence in South Africa, 1960?', *Journal of African History*, 56.1 (2015), pp. 119–142 (p. 142) <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853714000644>

was already underway through the Boycott Movement.[25] Dubow contends that Sharpeville was not a singular turning point but one factor among many shaping policy responses.[26]

Some scholars argue that Western caution over sanctions predated the Sharpeville Massacre, showing reluctance rather than a shift.[27] If British policy was shaped by decolonisation, Cold War pressures, and Commonwealth restructuring before March 1960, the massacre becomes an accelerant rather than a singular cause. In reality, Sharpeville functioned as a catalyst that exposed existing contradictions in British policy towards South Africa without transforming it. Chapter II will examine when British internal deliberations shifted, and whether archives support the idea that Sharpeville caused change or merely exposed preexisting tensions.

Whether Sharpeville constituted a turning point depends on the prior question of if Britain was capable of shifting policy at all. The debate over how Whitehall shaped outcomes and if it merely reacted to external pressures determines how much explanatory weight Sharpeville carries for policy change. Literature surrounding British policy portrays Whitehall as reacting to pressures, therefore neglecting its role in shaping the outcomes. It is described as being part of the general 'international audience', calling it a reactor to Sharpeville.[28] Britain is portrayed as attempting to 'avoid passing any judgement on South Africa's domestic affairs'.[29] Therefore, the events that followed the massacre are described as reactions to Commonwealth pressure or the AAM. Britain is depicted as a passive member of the Commonwealth that gradually aligned itself with the AAM, leading to a slow but decisive shift in its policy against apartheid.[30] However, other scholars claim that Britain was advocating for the Union, with Schaffer arguing that Britain saw the white South African population as a "responsibility of Great Britain".[31] Critics like Boehmer and Schaffer frame Britain as defending its interests instead of intervening.[32] Boehmer claims that South Africa actually reveals 'darker

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[25] Christabel Gurney, '"A Great Cause": The Origins of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, June 1959–March 1960', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 26.1 (2000), pp. 123–144 (p. 143), doi:10.1080/030570700108414.
[26] Saul Dubow, 'Macmillan, Verwoerd, and the 1960 'Wind of Change' Speech', *The Historical journal*, 54.4 (2011), pp. 1087–1114 (p. 1088) <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X11000409>
[27] Sam Slator, *International Diplomacy, the Global Anti-Apartheid Campaign and the UN Response* (Oxford Brookes University Press, 2024), p. 60.
[28] Nancy L. Clark and William H. Worger, *Voices of Sharpeville: The Long History of Racial Injustice* (Taylor & Francis, 2023), p. 230.
[29] Daniel J. Feather, 'Keeping Britain 'in the Fore': The Establishment of the British Council in South Africa and Its Contribution to the 1960 Union Festival', *Journal of Imperial & Commonwealth History*, 50.4 (2022), pp. 757–788 (p. 777) <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2022.2057738>
[30] Rodrigo Fracalossi de Moraes, 'Transnational Activism and Domestic Politics: Arms Exports and the Anti-Apartheid Struggle in the UK–South Africa Relations (1959–1994)', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 17.4 (2021), pp. 1–21 (p. 3) <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orab023>
[31] Gavin Schaffer, 'The Limits of the 'Liberal Imagination': Britain, Broadcasting and Apartheid South Africa, 1948–1994', *Past & Present*, 240.1 (2018), pp. 1–44 (p. 14), DOI:10.1093/pastj/gty005.
[32] Schaffer, 'The Limits of the 'Liberal Imagination'', p. 14.

legacies of colonialism that continued to shape British policies'.[33] Similarly, Stevens critiques the literature for placing too much significance on the AAM in bringing an end to apartheid.[34] South African policy was 'at odds' with British policy and was consequently abandoned by the British government, implying that Britain did not challenge Pretoria.[35]

This makes it difficult to determine whether Britain was merely reactive or shaped its policies in favour of Pretoria. This raises the question of if British actions influenced the political landscape in the immediate aftermath of Sharpeville, an issue explored in detail in Chapter III.

Nowhere is this tension between passivity and agency more contested than in South Africa's exit from the Commonwealth in 1961. If Britain was reactive to external pressure, the exit would be an inevitable consequence of international pressure; but if Britain was involved, its position becomes more complicated. Historical literature refers to South Africa's exit from the Commonwealth as an 'expulsion' resulting from Sharpeville.[36] Graham argues that 'the international campaign […] achieved its first major success' against apartheid.[37] Irwin calls it 'the first time a nation was forcibly removed from an intergovernmental institution'.[38] This narrative suggests that Sharpeville and apartheid as a whole 'made a mockery of the inter-racial composition of the Commonwealth', leading to pressure for South Africa to leave.[39] Mansergh claims that the Commonwealth Prime Ministers had to ask whether they would be more united without Pretoria.[40] Lodge identifies Sharpeville as the reason why 'in effect South Africa had been nudged out of the Commonwealth.'[41]

Mole claims that it would be wrong to say that South Africa was "expelled" from the organisation.[42] de Moraes agrees and writes that 'South Africa withdrew its application to rejoin the Commonwealth'.[43] Feather adds that external pressure from members of the Commonwealth led to

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[33] Boehmer, 'Questionable Allies', p. 102.
[34] Simon M. Stevens, 'The External Struggle against Apartheid: New Perspectives', *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development*, 7.2 (2016), pp. 295–314 (p. 299) <https://doi.org/10.1353/hum.2016.0011>
[35] Laura Evans, 'Contextualising Apartheid at the End of Empire: Repression, 'Development' and the Bantustans', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 47.2 (2019), pp. 372–411 (p. 372) <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2019.1605705>
[36] Rob Skinner, '"Every Bite Buys a Bullet": Sanctions, Boycotts and Solidarity in Transnational Anti-Apartheid Activism', *Moving the Social*, 57 (2017), pp. 97–114 (p. 103), DOI:10.13154/mts.57.2017.97-114.
[37] Matthew Graham, 'Campaigning Against Apartheid: The Rise, Fall and Legacies of the South Africa United Front 1960–1962', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 46.6 (2018), pp. 1148–1170 (p. 1148) <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2018.1506871>
[38] Irwin, *Gordian Knot*, p. 55.
[39] Graham, 'Campaigning Against Apartheid', p. 1158.
[40] Nicholas Mansergh, *South Africa 1906–1961: The Price of Magnanimity* (Taylor & Francis, 2022).
[41] Tom Lodge, *Sharpeville: An Apartheid Massacre and Its Consequences* (Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 174–175.
[42] Stuart Mole, *The Commonwealth, South Africa and Apartheid: Race, Conflict and Reconciliation* (Routledge, 2023), p. 48.
[43] de Moraes, 'Transnational Activism and Domestic Politics', p. 6.

Verwoerd's decision to withdraw.[44] Verwoerd's 'stubborn refusal to accept [the] possibility of black Commonwealth diplomats' became such a point of contention that it appeared Pretoria would be expelled from the Commonwealth.[45]

The contention in the literature comes from a lack of clarity in Britain's role in South Africa's exit. Hayes claims that the multi-racial nature of the Commonwealth put pressure on the UK and South Africa to incite an exit for Pretoria.[46] UK Prime Minister Harold Macmillan's failure to devise a formula to keep South Africa in the Commonwealth represented 'a grievous political defeat'.[47] Yet, Macmillan privately reassured Verwoerd that bilateral relations would continue regardless of Commonwealth membership.[48] Whether Britain attempted to distance itself from South Africa or manoeuvred Pretoria's position in the Commonwealth remains under-researched. Chapter IV will therefore look at the British government's internal calculations during this period to analyse whether the Sharpeville Massacre had a significant effect on British diplomacy in the Commonwealth.

There is a lot of contention in the scholarship over whether Britain's strategic interests changed after Sharpeville. On one hand, Boehmer argues that Britain withheld a consistent policy towards South Africa from 1960 to 1994, claiming it was shaped by economic interests and Cold War rhetoric.[49] Britain 'attempted to dress up self-interest with claims of sanctions' adverse impact upon black South Africans', when 'their real fears concerned the impact upon Britain's domestic economy.'[50] Mole notes that 'in many respects it [was] business as usual' after the massacre.[51] Dubow claims that Whitehall's anti-apartheid posture was more to do with reputation over principle; Macmillan was more ashamed of being associated with South Africa than the morals of the relationship.[52] This meant that policy was far more conciliatory towards Verwoerd than the literature suggests.[53]

On the other hand, Lodge claims that 'British policy was multifaceted' after the massacre and that Whitehall aimed to work with apartheid's opposition.[54] Feather agrees that 'Britain and South Africa were naturally moving towards a mutual separation' after Sharpeville.[55] However, Feather

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[44] Daniel J. Feather, 'British Policy Towards Military Cooperation with the Republic of South Africa, 1961–1975', *International History Review*, 41.4 (2019), pp. 729–752 (p. 734), doi:10.1080/07075332.2018.1472128.
[45] Saul Dubow, 'The Commonwealth and South Africa: From Smuts to Mandela', *Journal of imperial and Commonwealth history*, 45.2 (2017), pp. 284–314 (p. 298) <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2017.1294790>
[46] Frank Hayes, 'South Africa's Departure from the Commonwealth, 1960–1961', *International History Review*, 2.3 (1980), pp. 453–484 (p. 467) <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.1980.9640222>
[47] Dubow, 'The Commonwealth and South Africa', p. 298.
[48] Graham, 'Campaigning Against Apartheid', p. 1160.
[49] Boehmer, 'Questionable Allies', p. 103.
[50] Boehmer, 'Questionable Allies', p. 115.
[51] Mole, *The Commonwealth, South Africa and Apartheid*, pp. 64–65.
[52] Dubow, 'Macmillan, Verwoerd, and the 1960 'Wind of Change' Speech', p. 1101.
[53] Dubow, 'Macmillan, Verwoerd, and the 1960 'Wind of Change' Speech', p. 1099.
[54] Lodge, *Sharpeville*, p. 175.
[55] Feather, *British Cultural Diplomacy in South Africa*, Chapter 2.

notes how 'Britain's broader strategic interests were an important consideration in the continuation of UK-SA military relations.'[56] This dismantles a 'multifaceted' narrative and brings into question the policy structure of the UK after Sharpeville.[57] Scholarship is lacking in reconciling these positions, thus Chapter V will address Britain's longer-term policy after the massacre and question whether 'multifaceted' is an accurate description.

The literature's reliance on the AAM taking a role in ending apartheid compounds the problems listed above. By treating civil society as the primary avenue for change, scholars inadvertently provide cover for British governmental action, obscuring how much Whitehall managed public pressure. Secondary literature on the AAM is broadly focused on transnational activist movements and treats British civil society as the primary agent pushing the government against South Africa. Stevens acknowledges this, claiming that 'it has become a cliché to observe that the global AAM was one of the […] most successful transnational movements of the twentieth century'.[58] Skinner and Konieczna recognise this tendency and instead say that 'civil movements [exist] in relation, in collusion with or in opposition to the state' and add that states play a crucial role in mobilisation against apartheid.[59] Some scholars counter-argue that the AAM's sanctions campaign had 'minimal effect on UK government policy'.[60] The AAM largely failed to achieve anything political, instead only "embedding anti-apartheid into the liberal consciousness of the British".[61] Instead, Skinner argues, it functioned as 'a mask for political inaction'.[62]

Boehmer documents Britain's blocking role for sanctions, noting that 'both the United States and the United Kingdom used their Security Council veto to significantly limit the scope of these sanctions, and the impact they could have'.[63] The British government managed, rather than responded to, public pressure. Feather argues that even the concessions seemed to operate on terms set by the government, not activists.[64]

The question of how international condemnation translated into British policy change post-Sharpeville is unresolved. Dubow notes that Britain abstained on the UN Security Council resolution

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[56] Feather, 'British Policy Towards Military Cooperation with the Republic of South Africa', p. 746.
[57] Feather, 'British Policy Towards Military Cooperation with the Republic of South Africa', p. 734.
[58] Stevens, 'The External Struggle against Apartheid', p. 295.
[59] Rob Skinner and Anna Konieczna, 'Introduction: Anti-Apartheid in Global History', in *A Global History of Anti-Apartheid: 'Forward to Freedom' in South Africa*, ed. by Rob Skinner Anna Konieczna (Springer International Publishing, 2019).
[60] Stevens, 'The External Struggle against Apartheid', p. 307.
[61] Matthew Graham, 'International Solidarity at the Grassroots: A Case Study of the British Anti-Apartheid Movement', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 50.1 (2024), pp. 133–151 (p. 133) <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2024.2370654>
[62] Skinner, '"Every Bite Buys a Bullet"', p. 103.
[63] Boehmer, 'Questionable Allies', p. 103
[64] Feather, 'Keeping Britain "in the Fore"', p. 780.

condemning the killings, before supporting the General Assembly's position the following month.[65] Therefore, Chapters IV and V will also analyse how the international response to the massacre affected British policy towards South Africa, if at all.

The historical narratives of Britain's response to Sharpeville call it a 'turning point' or 'decisive movement' without properly interrogating these claims. This raises an issue of what the British political narratives truly were in response to Sharpeville. Primary analysis of British documents will address these issues by examining how Whitehall justified its policies, rather than relying on retrospective assessments of apartheid's eventual decline. Through examining deliberations before and after the massacre, it will become clear that Sharpeville functioned as a catalyst that exposed contradictions in Whitehall's strategic calculations, rather than causing policy change. Instead of being reactive or passive, British policy was actively driven by economic interests, Commonwealth obligations, and strategic concerns. British archives do not record a turning point in policy; rather, they record a government working hard to ensure that as little turned as possible.

[65] Dubow, 'Were There Political Alternatives in the Wake of the Sharpeville-Langa Violence in South Africa, 1960?', p. 126.

Chapter II - Before Sharpeville: Continuity or Disruptions of British Policy

I

Since the Sharpeville Massacre is presented as a 'turning point' in British policy towards South Africa, it is important to challenge the view that it forced Britain to reassess its relationship with Pretoria. British policy in the months and years preceding March 1960 reveals a government following strategy that struggled to allow action against apartheid. Britain's economic and military interests in South Africa combined to produce a policy of deliberate ambiguity: it professed concern for racial equality while shielding Verwoerd's government from international pressure. Moreover, many of the pressures attributed to Sharpeville – growing boycott movements, Afro-Asian condemnation at the United Nations (UN), and rising domestic disillusionment – were underway before the massacre occurred. What Sharpeville has often been credited with disrupting was, in reality, already under strain. In order to understand why Sharpeville changed so little, it is crucial to understand what Britain was already doing.

British policy towards South Africa was shaped by tension between moral concerns and strategic, economic, and Cold War interests. Despite an awareness of apartheid's injustices, Britain consistently prioritised strategic ties over ethics. South Africa was a member of the 'Sterling Area' and 'the major gold-producing country in the world'.[66] According to Boehmer, Britain was anxious about potential loss of trade, which prevented it from taking meaningful action against apartheid.[67] In February 1960, the Commonwealth Secretary warned that if relations 'were to deteriorate to the point where the South Africans considered leaving both the Commonwealth and the Sterling Area', it would have serious economic consequences.[68] Similarly, pre-Sharpeville defence policy reveals that military cooperation was crucial to Whitehall.[69] Britain therefore prioritised strategic assets, such as its naval port in Simonstown.[70]

Boehmer cites the 'Soviet influence in southern Africa' as a prominent reason for British anxiety at the time.[71] The UK viewed Africa as central to a struggle against communism, taking note

[66] London, The National Archives of the UK (TNA), PREM 11/3163, 'South Africa', February 1960, p. 1.
[67] Sam Matthews Boehmer, 'Questionable Allies: British Collaboration with Apartheid South Africa, 1960–90', *The International History Review*, 46.1 (2024), pp. 102–119 (p. 103) <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2023.2250804>
[68] TNA, PREM 11/3163, Treasury Chambers, Great George Street. S.W.1, 'Message to the Prime Minister', 17 February 1960.
[69] TNA, PREM 11/274, 'Annex I: Note on United Kingdom Policy in Regard to South African Defence Policy', 21 May 1952, p. 3.
[70] TNA, PREM 11/274, 'Union of South Africa - Defence Policy', D.52 Meeting Minute, 2 September 1952.
[71] Boehmer, 'Questionable Allies', p. 103.

of its 'crucial importance' in 'an ideological battle'.[72] Macmillan's correspondence with Verwoerd reveals that Britain's priority is the 'struggle against the communist powers'.[73] Shaped by this perspective, in his memoirs, Macmillan describes a moral dilemma in guiding nations toward the West.[74] While the government sought 'good relations with South Africa', it acknowledged that the Union could 'make life very unpleasant' for High Commission Territories, highlighting a tension in UK interests.[75] Britain recognised 'the rising flood of African nationalism'.[76] Despite this growing international pressure, Britain prioritised geopolitical interests.[77]

Hence, despite acknowledging the challenges of apartheid, strategic and geopolitical priorities outweighed any commitment to intervention. Britain's support of South Africa was a deliberate policy choice to retain the strength of the weakening British Empire. Because these interests could not be publicly acknowledged, Britain developed a rhetoric of concern which did not produce action.

Similar to the Sharpeville Massacre, historians such as D.R. Thorpe have placed an overly large significance on Macmillan's 'Winds of Change' speech on the 3rd of February 1960 in diverting British policy towards South Africa.[78] Delivered two months before Sharpeville, the speech did not fundamentally alter policy. Yet, Macmillan's biographer D.R. Thorpe calls it a "key moment", but this overstates its importance and instead reflects a narrative-driven hindsight.[79]

The speech acknowledged the growing political liability that it was to support South Africa particularly in the age of independence for African countries.[80] The speech primarily focused on the 'winds of change blowing in from Ghana, Kenya and the Federation'.[81] Macmillan's speech urged "old" Commonwealth nations to embrace cooperation with newly independent ones.[82] The speech was not a pivotal moment or a change in British policy, but an acknowledgement of where the diplomatic tide was turning. This is evident in Macmillan's attempts to keep positive relations with Verwoerd; the

[72] TNA, PREM 11/3163, 'Policy towards South Africa: The United Nations Items - Detailed brief for Prime Minister's Party', 2 March 1960, p. 14.
[73] TNA, PREM 11/3163, 'Line to be taken with Dr Verwoerd', 17 December 1959, p. 1.
[74] Harold Macmillan, *Pointing the Way, 1959–1961* (Harper, 1972), p. 157.
[75] TNA, PREM 11/3163, 'Policy towards South Africa: The United Nations Items', Serial Number 111/59, 17 December 1959, p. 1.
[76] TNA, PREM 11/3163, 'Line to be taken with Dr Verwoerd', 17 December 1959, p. 1.
[77] TNA, DO 35/10621, 'Draft Minute to the Prime Minister - Relations with South Africa: the United Nations Item on Apartheid', 8 February 1960, p. 3.
[78] Saul Dubow, 'Macmillan, Verwoerd, and the 1960 'Wind of Change' Speech', *The Historical Journal*, 54.4 (2011), pp. 1087–1114 (p. 1089) <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X11000409>
[79] Ibid.
[80] TNA, PREM 11/3163, 'Policy towards South Africa: The United Nations Items', Serial Number 111/59, 17 December 1959, p. 2.
[81] TNA, PREM 11/3116, 'Letter to Harold Macmillan from John Maud', 28 April 1960, p. 7.
[82] TNA, PREM 11/3163, Inward Telegram to Commonwealth Relations Office from Cape Town, No. 106, 4 February 1960.

speech uses very tame language and speaks diplomatically about issues in South Africa, maintaining a democratic decorum.[83] The speech confronted the issues that the nations "must face squarely that a considerable difference of outlook lies between [the UK and South Africa] at the moment."[84] The Commonwealth Secretary praised his speech as handling the delicate situation with South Africa effectively.[85] British newspapers also praised the speech for its realism and noted the discomfort it caused in the South African government.[86] Macmillan claims in his memoirs that the speech was intended to be neutral and blames the British press for selectively highlighting provocative phrases like "wind of change."[87]

The speech's consequences were more modest than historical accounts suggest. R.H. Belcher states that 'the effect of the speech was very great and suggested a change of vote to follow', suggesting officials anticipated a shift in UN voting on apartheid.[88] However, the memorandum claims that 'a change in our vote […] would not […] add significantly to the risks we now run', framing any shift as minor rather than a fundamental break.[89] Abstention was presented as cautious, with 'an abstention, if that is agreed, will be less drastic than many now expect'.[90] The speech was a symptom of a broader global shift against South Africa, not its cause. In noting this, Dubow claims that 'Winds of Change' speech 'did not fundamentally alter course' of the UK, 'it merely trimmed its sails.'[91]

Boycotts against South Africa are often cited as being an active response to the Sharpeville Massacre, but boycotts of goods were underway before Sharpeville.[92] Lodge points out that it had formed more than three months before the massacre.[93] *The Guardian* reported people calling the boycotts a "success" before Sharpeville.[94] An article in New Statesman writes of "a mammoth petition expressing detestation of the South African government's policies."[95] Macmillan confirms this, adding later that many people had favoured a boycott before his tour of South Africa in February.[96]

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[83] TNA, PREM 11/3073, 'Macmillan's Speeches, The United Kingdom, the Commonwealth and World Affairs', 3 February 1960, p. 48.
[84] TNA, PREM 11/3072, 'Points which the Prime Minister might make in Replying to Dr. Verwoerd about the Territories', 4 February 1960.
[85] TNA, PREM 11/3073, 'Message to Prime Minister from Commonwealth Secretary', 6 February 1960, p. 26.
[86] TNA, PREM 11/3073, 'South Africa Fortnightly Summary, Part I', 27th January – 9th February 1960, p. 21.
[87] Macmillan, *Pointing the Way*, pp. 159–160.
[88] TNA, DO 35/10621, R.H. Belcher, 'Vote on Apartheid', 16 March 1960, p. 1.
[89] Ibid.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Dubow, 'Macmillan, Verwoerd, and the 1960 'Wind of Change' Speech', p. 1089.
[92] TNA, CO 936/604, 'Majority Vote for Boycott Likely', *The Times*, 7 March 1960, p. 46.
[93] Tom Lodge, *Sharpeville: An Apartheid Massacre and Its Consequences* (Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 237.
[94] TNA, CO 936/604, 'Boycott "A Success": Aid to Africans', *Guardian*, 21 March 1960, p. 59.
[95] TNA, CO 936/604, 'The Boycott and After', *New Statesman*, 18 March 1960, p. 57.
[96] Macmillan, *Pointing the Way*, p. 163.

Afro-Asian critics introduced boycotts of South African goods and withdrawal of representatives from the Union as early as February 1960.[97] Supporting South Africa was seen as 'a very grave embarrassment in [Britain's] other international relations.'[98] Britain began to feel concerned about the 'positive support for South Africa and apartheid' in early March that year because of this growing opposition.[99] The downside of Britain's alignment with South Africa was that it was becoming increasingly controversial to align with the Union. In a brief for the Prime Minister, it is noted that 'avoidance of any official criticism of their racial policies' involved 'a heavy cost' to the reputation of the UK.[100] Within the ongoing growth of decolonisation, the price of supporting South Africa became 'even heavier' because of the 'relative immaturity and impatience' of Ghana and Nigeria.[101] The UK was forced to question how long it could support the South African regime.[102] On the 2nd of March, before the massacre had taken place, records acknowledged that 'the case for reviewing [the] policy towards South Africa' is 'stronger than it has ever been.'[103] Notably, this was because the Commonwealth and UN had an increasing number of independent African nations.[104] While South Africa was important, relations with newly independent countries were equally if not more important.[105] Britain tried to 'not get at odds with this Committee' on racial issues.[106] Although, Macmillan makes an 'explicit condemnation of the boycott movement' against South Africa in a report on relations with South Africa.[107] He claims that "boycotts will never get you anywhere" and he did not believe in 'refusing trade with people because you may happen to dislike the way they manage their internal affairs'.[108] Hence, the boycott movement, akin to the 'Winds of Change' speech, demonstrates that the perceived movement against South Africa as a result of Sharpeville existed before March 1960.

[97] TNA, PREM 11/3163, Inward Telegram to Commonwealth Relations Office from Cape Town, No. 106, 4 February 1960.
[98] TNA, PREM 11/3163, 'Policy towards South Africa: The United Nations Items', Serial Number 111/59, 17 December 1959, p. 1.
[99] TNA, PREM 11/3163, 'Policy towards South Africa: The United Nations Items - Detailed brief for Prime Minister's Party', 2 March 1960, p. 14.
[100] Ibid, pp. 1–2.
[101] Ibid, p. 2.
[102] TNA, PREM 11/3163, 'Policy towards South Africa: The United Nations Items', Serial Number 111/59, 17 December 1959, p. 3.
[103] TNA, PREM 11/3163, 'Policy towards South Africa: The United Nations Items - Detailed brief for Prime Minister's Party', 2 March 1960, pp. 3–4.
[104] TNA, PREM 11/3163, 'Policy towards South Africa: The United Nations Items', *PM*, 60.2, 5 January 1960.
[105] TNA, PREM 11/3163, 'Policy towards South Africa: The United Nations Items - Detailed brief for Prime Minister's Party', 2 March 1960, p. 14.
[106] TNA, PREM 11/3163, 'Policy towards South Africa: The United Nations Items', *PM*, 60.2, 5 January 1960.
[107] TNA, PREM 11/3073, 'South Africa Fortnightly Summary, Part I', 27th January - 9th February 1960, p. 22.
[108] Ibid, p. 21.

Despite this external pressure and cultural shift, Britain's conduct at the UN revealed that its diplomatic behaviour was evasive rather than shifting. Due to South Africa's strategic value, Britain's criticism of apartheid was limited to retain relations with Pretoria. The UK had a 'non-racial' policy, according to Foreign Secretary Selwyn Lloyd, who spoke in the UN about how there is 'no inherent superiority of one race over another.'[109] However, 'at no point did the government suggest how this abhorrence and determination would translate into real change.'[110] Whitehall instead maintained this non-racial rhetoric while shielding South Africa from condemnation.

In order to keep Pretoria on good terms, Britain avoided speaking to leaders of the opposition parties, such as the ANC, viewing such interactions as embarrassing and contrary to South Africa's wishes.[111] This therefore implied a policy not only making exceptions for the South African government, but actively compromising non-racial policy in order to support Pretoria. The ANC criticised this as being 'part of a campaign to whitewash the reputation of the Nationalists at a time when the world's criticism [had] been sharpened against Apartheid.'[112] This suggests that Britain's performative condemnation was ineffective and counterproductive - giving the apartheid regime some international legitimacy at the moment global opinion was turning against it.

Despite historians claiming that Sharpeville was the dawn of widespread foreign condemnation, South African racial policy sparked discussions before the massacre took place.[113] British policy before the massacre reveals a calculated ambiguity, Macmillan privately acknowledged the 'delicate operation' of criticising apartheid while maintaining Commonwealth unity.[114] He had an awareness of the domestic pressure to condemn apartheid and how it clashed with these strategic motives to restrain.[115] Foreign Office documents reveal that Britain abstained from a vote over racial discrimination at the UN: this was simply damage control, as negative votes "caused […] serious harm" to relations with non-white Africa.[116] The UK adopted a policy of non-intervention to keep close relations with South Africa. The Foreign Office excused discrimination issues as a domestic issue.[117] It notes that 'the United Kingdom Government could not make a frontal attack on the present policy governing promotions and appointments, since this would be resented by the South African

[109] TNA, PREM 11/3073, 'Congressional Record, Proceedings and Debates of the 86th Congress, Second Session.', 106.26, 16 February 1960, p. 2410.
[110] Boehmer, 'Questionable Allies', p. 104.
[111] TNA, PREM 11/3071, 'Note for the Record on Macmillan's Visit to South Africa by J.B. Johnston', 23 January 1960, p. 1.
[112] TNA, PREM 11/3071, 'Copy of Circular issued by the African National Congress', 31 January 1960.
[113] Boehmer, 'Questionable Allies', p. 104.
[114] Macmillan, *Pointing the Way*, p. 150.
[115] TNA, DO 35/10621, 'Draft Minute to the Prime Minister - Relations with South Africa: the United Nations Item on Apartheid', 8 February 1960, p. 2.
[116] Ibid.
[117] TNA, FO 371/153583, K.J. Uffen, 'Apartheid', 7 April 1960, p. 1.

Government as intervention in a domestic matter.'[118] Whitehall cites Article 2(7) of the UN Charter, to protect itself against responsibility for intervention in these policies.[119]

Rather than confronting apartheid, Britain softened its language and avoided appearing aligned with opposition groups. One telegram draft edits 'discrimination' to 'racial separation' to soften the language.[120] Similarly, Britain tried to 'avoid appearing to identify [itself] with the opposition party in South Africa.'[121] Correspondence shows that instead of openly condemning apartheid, Whitehall wanted to demonstrate that 'a different racial policy' could also be effective without intervening.[122] Macmillan notes that while the UK may not be able to support a racialist government for long, it made the decision to abstain in a vote at the UN against discrimination in South Africa.[123] South Africa relied on a British veto to shield it from Security Council action, the UK obliged.[124]

Hence, despite international opposition prior to the Sharpeville Massacre, Britain was willing to risk its reputation for the sake of keeping South Africa in British interest. Whitehall was quick to claim sympathy for those affected by racial discrimination, but it was slow to act – or even speak – against it.[125] The front by the UK was designed to ease criticism against inaction without disturbing its relationship with South Africa.

Therefore, British policy before Sharpeville was characterised by continuity rather than change. Strategic, economic, and Cold War interests sustained a policy of inaction. Despite internal and external pressure, policy remained ambiguous. This continuity reflects the question of what Sharpeville changed; and whether it challenged British policy at all.

[118] TNA, PREM 11/274, 'Annex I: Note on United Kingdom Policy in Regard to South African Defence Policy', 21 May 1952, p. 3.
[119] TNA, DO 35/10621, Note Addressed to 'Mr Clark', 31 July 1959, p. 2.
[120] TNA, PREM 11/3163, 'Line to be taken with Dr Verwoerd', 17 December 1959, p. 2.
[121] TNA, PREM 11/274, 'Annex I: Note on United Kingdom Policy in Regard to South African Defence Policy', 21 May 1952, p. 3.
[122] TNA, PREM 11/2908, 'D. L. Cole to 'David', Commonwealth Relations Office, PM's Tour Abroad', 16 February 1960.
[123] TNA, PREM 11/3163, Inward Telegram to Commonwealth Relations Office from Cape Town, No. 106, 4th February 1960.
[124] Ibid.
[125] Dubow, 'Macmillan, Verwoerd, and the 1960 'Wind of Change' Speech', p. 1111.

Chapter III - Calculated Outrage: Immediate Reactions to the massacre

I

The British government's immediate response to the Sharpeville Massacre presents a tension between condemnation and political calculation. In the aftermath of the killings, the House of Commons spoke of harsh anti-apartheid rhetoric, but this outrage did not translate into meaningful policy. Britain was faced with navigating the United Nations (UN) and a Commonwealth whose unity depended on careful diplomacy and strategic choices. The UK prioritised not 'antagonising South Africa and threatening the future of the Commonwealth', despite the decision being "not very noble" – according to Macmillan.[126] Instead of opposing South Africa, Britain used a policy of intentional inaction. Britain's response to the massacre remained largely rhetorical, as the manoeuvring prioritised relationships over justice.

In the days following Sharpeville, the reaction in Whitehall was visceral. 'International outrage at the Sharpeville Massacre increased pressure on Britain to condemn South Africa.'[127] As news of the massacre reached the House of Commons, language became heavily anti-apartheid. Dubow argues it was only a Labour motion that prompted a statement, taking Whitehall over three days to respond.[128] Yet, a concern is emphasised in statements that 'it has been made absolutely clear that British opinion is opposed to apartheid' and that Sharpeville marked a "dividing line in history".[129]

Macmillan describes Whitehall's reaction as 'immediate' in his memoirs, which demonstrates how critical the moment after Sharpeville appeared to be.[130] Macmillan refers to a 'strong public and Parliamentary opinion […] sincerely detesting the apartheid policy'.[131] Members asked for the government to have 'courage to speak up against the brutal oppression' in South Africa.[132] Within the *Votes and Proceedings*, the House urged to 'protest in the strongest possible terms […] to convey the abhorrence of the British'.[133] Some members of the House compared the situation to Nazism in Germany, claiming that the House 'cannot possibly be muted in our condemnation of political

[126] Saul Dubow, 'Macmillan, Verwoerd, and the 1960 'Wind of Change' Speech', *The Historical Journal*, 54.4 (2011), pp. 1087–1114 (p. 1111) <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X11000409>
[127] Ibid.
[128] Ibid.
[129] London, The National Archives of the UK (TNA), CO 936/601, 'Union of South Africa (Racialist Policies)', 8 April 1960, p. 788.
[130] Harold Macmillan, *Pointing the Way, 1959–1961* (Harper, 1972), p. 167.
[131] TNA, PREM 11/3109, Draft Message to Mr Menzies, Undated (April 1960), p. 833.
[132] House of Commons, Hansard's Parliamentary Debates: Union of South Africa (Riots), 620, 22 March 1960.
[133] TNA, PREM 11/3109, *Votes and Proceedings of the House of Commons*, No. 84, 24 March 1960, p. 291.

philosophy'.[134] Godfrey Nicholson was a prominent Conservative MP that spoke against the events in Sharpeville, calling for 'something definite' instead of a 'fresh condemnation of human folly', and expressing hope that the debate would lead to 'a change of policy, and a change of heart, in South Africa.'[135] The debate concluded by 'deploring the present racialist policies' and urges the British government to convey concerns at the upcoming Prime Ministers' Conference.[136]

Macmillan described Sharpeville as the beginning of a 'turning point' of race relations.[137] Just a week after the massacre, Macmillan announced that Britain 'rejects the idea of any inherent superiority of one race over another', claiming that 'policy, therefore, is non-racial.'[138] However, Macmillan's response adopts a diplomatic tone, framing Sharpeville within broader "race relation" concerns in a multi-racial Commonwealth.[139] Mole points out that the Commonwealth was hesitant to debate apartheid, because Whitehall was worried that Ghana and India would speak strongly against it.[140] By stressing that Prime Ministers "could in no sense be looked upon as exercising judicial functions" yet had a "right and duty to discuss", he avoids direct condemnation, reflecting prioritised Commonwealth unity over explicit criticism of South Africa.[141]

However, this condemnation was simply verbal and not official. In reality, condemnation of apartheid remained limited to individuals rather than policy. Britain was desperate 'to preserve relations with South Africa' and instead suggested that the international community had little influence over apartheid policy.[142] This verbal condemnation, however, masked a very different posture.

Immediately following Sharpeville, British MPs discussed sending aid to victims, but engagement quickly waned.[143] Compensation for British citizens soon became the priority.[144] While Mr Wade spoke of being 'prepared to grant financial and other aid to the victims of the bloody tragedy', in practice claims were delayed two years and restricted to British nationals.[145] This selective concern contrasts sharply with the broader violence described in victims' testimonies.[146] This reveals that Whitehall

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[134] TNA, CO 936/601, 'Union of South Africa (Racialist Policies)', 8 April 1960, p. 812.
[135] Ibid, p. 783.
[136] Ibid, p. 843.
[137] Macmillan, *Pointing the Way*, p. 166.
[138] TNA, PREM 11/3109, 'Union of South Africa (Security Council Meeting)', 28 March 1960, p. 177.
[139] TNA, PREM 11/3112, 'Staff Meeting of Commonwealth Prime Ministers', 10 May 1960.
[140] Stuart Mole, *The Commonwealth, South Africa and Apartheid: Race, Conflict and Reconciliation* (Routledge, 2023), p. 52.
[141] TNA, PREM 11/3112, 'Staff Meeting of Commonwealth Prime Ministers', 10 May 1960.
[142] Simon M. Stevens, 'The External Struggle against Apartheid: New Perspectives', *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development*, 7.2 (2016), pp. 295–314 (p. 307) <https://doi.org/10.1353/hum.2016.0011>
[143] TNA, PREM 11/3109, *Votes and Proceedings of the House of Commons*, No. 84, 24 March 1960, p. 291.
[144] House of Commons, Hansard's Parliamentary Debates: Riots, 620, 24 March 1960.
[145] TNA, DO 119/1468, Snijman and Smullen, 'RE: Sharpeville Claims: Ref. S. 729v', 10 November 1962, p. 1.
[146] TNA, DO 119/1468, 'Concerning John Fani', 5 May 1961, p. 1.

prioritised legal obligations to its own citizens rather than confronting the systemic injustice that Sharpeville exposed.

The extent of Britain's deference to Verwoerd is most starkly revealed in a telegram from Verwoerd to Macmillan, he thanks Macmillan for 'the prompt action taken […] in response to [his] personal request' of delaying the UN meeting.[147] Macmillan's willingness to 'carry as our burden a good deal of political odium' suggests that he had an awareness it would attract criticism, yet he believed a 'long view' was necessary, prioritising strategic relations with South Africa above international pressure.[148]

This deference shaped Britain's approach to the UN Security Council. Officials stated that 'it is very much in our interests that further and more dangerous debate in the Security Council should be avoided'.[149] The 'minimum objective' was 'to keep matters away from Council for at least a few weeks remaining until Prime Ministers' Meeting'.[150] The committee went as far as to attempt to omit Sharpeville from the agenda.[151] British officials further reframed international criticism as itself destabilising, warning that proceedings 'may further inflame the situation in the Union', labelling condemnation of apartheid the problem rather than apartheid itself.[152] Additionally, Britain tried to narrow the scope of any unavoidable discussion. Officials argued that 'a less harmful result would be secured by seeking to prevent the debate from ranging widely over the Union's internal affairs'.[153] Britain was delaying debate and actively attempting to shape outcomes before momentum for stronger UN action – such as sanctions – could take place. This is evident in how policymakers warned that 'if we are to forestall the danger of an adverse response […] the message should go as soon as possible.'[154]

UN Security Council Resolution 134 framed Sharpeville as an international crisis, citing 'large-scale killings of unarmed and peaceful demonstrators' and linking unrest directly to apartheid.[155] Macmillan faced the difficult task of not dividing the Commonwealth on South African policies.[156] Due to South Africa's importance to the UK, Macmillan attempted 'to steer a middle course.'[157] Hence,

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[147] TNA, PREM 11/3109, Verwoerd to Macmillan, PM Personal Telegram T283A/60, 2 April 1960, p. 81.
[148] TNA, PREM 11/3109, Prime Minister Personal Minute to Home Secretary, Serial No. M81/60, p. 259.
[149] TNA, PREM 11/3109, UK Mission in New York to Cape Town, 'Disturbances in South Africa', Telegram, 7 April 1960, p. 57.
[150] Ibid.
[151] TNA, PREM 11/2908, Outward Telegram from the Commonwealth Relations Office, 6 April 1960.
[152] TNA, PREM 11/3109, Washington to Foreign Office Minister, Prime Minister Personal Telegram 1267/60, 29 March 1960, p. 160.
[153] TNA, PREM 11/3109, Commonwealth Relations Office to Cape Town, Outward Telegram No. 264, 29 March 1960, p. 122.
[154] TNA, PREM 11/3109, 'South Africa and the United Nations', 9 April 1960, p. 43.
[155] UN Security Council, *Question Relating to the Situation in the Union of South Africa*, Resolution 134 (1960), adopted at the 856th meeting, 1 April 1960 (S/RES/134(1960)), p. 1.
[156] Macmillan, *Pointing the Way*, p. 167.
[157] Ibid.

Feather argues that 'Britain continued its previous policy of deflecting international criticism of South Africa at the UN.'[158] This policy was particularly difficult as the question of voting for inscription came up; Whitehall either risked making it difficult to invoke Article 2(7) on future occasions, or risked upsetting Britain's African allies and public opinion.[159] The House's concern was that 'a vote against inscription would be regarded as a vote for the shootings.'[160] Diefenbaker warned that "failure to be outspoken was tantamount to acceptance of apartheid," directly challenging British caution.[161] This risked 'serious effects on our relations with African countries'.[162]

The decision to not oppose inscription reflected the careful diplomatic posture. Saying that Britain "shall not vote against inscription" while affirming that UN "interference […] is contrary to the Charter" reveals two simultaneous strategies: legal reservation paired with political pragmatism.[163] Boehmer points out that instead Whitehall strove for peaceful negotiation and "prodding the South Africans".[164] The language consistently avoids moral endorsement, instead emphasising influence – with terms like "husband her influence" and "moderate Resolution" – suggesting a priority on managing outcomes rather than taking a firm stance.[165]

Britain intentionally framed Sharpeville as 'a domestic matter which the Council is not competent to discuss', revealing how the principle of state sovereignty functioned as a tool against intervention.[166] This same logic shaped Whitehall's approach to the principle of non-intervention, which officials used as a shield against scrutiny.[167] Officials relied on a 'strict interpretation of Article 2(7)' to declare an intervention inadmissible.[168] Beyond UN non-interference rules, the British were likely swayed more by the Commonwealth convention of avoiding mutual criticism.[169] Britain excused its inaction using the Commonwealth 'tradition of non-interference'.[170] The concern throughout the documents that indicate a belief that intervention 'might be invoked […] to justify UN interference

[158] Daniel J. Feather, 'Keeping Britain 'in the Fore': The Establishment of the British Council in South Africa and Its Contribution to the 1960 Union Festival', *Journal of Imperial & Commonwealth History*, 50.4 (2022), pp. 757–788 (p. 773) <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2022.2057738>
[159] TNA, PREM 11/3109, 'Draft Telegram to Foreign Office', 27 March 1960, p. 192.
[160] TNA, PREM 11/3109, Foreign Office to Washington, Prime Minister Personal Telegram Serial No. T257/6, 27 March 1960, p. 199.
[161] TNA, PREM 11/3112, 'Staff Meeting of Commonwealth Prime Ministers', 10 May 1960.
[162] TNA, CAB 128/34/21, Conclusion Former Reference: CC (60), 29 March 1960, pp. 3–4.
[163] TNA, PREM 11/3109, Commonwealth Relations Office to Cape Town, Outward Telegram No. 264, 29 March 1960, p. 122.
[164] Sam Matthews Boehmer, 'Questionable Allies: British Collaboration with Apartheid South Africa, 1960–90', *The International History Review*, 46.1 (2024), pp. 102–119 (p. 103) <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2023.2250804>
[165] TNA, PREM 11/3109, 'Draft Telegram to Foreign Office', 27 March 1960, p. 192.
[166] TNA, PREM 11/3109, H.S.H. Stanley, 'Riots in South Africa', 26 March 1960, p. 230.
[167] Malhotra, 'Apartheid and the United Nations', p. 140.
[168] TNA, PREM 11/3109, New York to Foreign Office, 26 March 1960, p. 242.
[169] Mole, *The Commonwealth, South Africa and Apartheid*, p. 32.
[170] TNA, PREM 11/3109, 'Union of South Africa (Security Council Meeting)', 30 March 1960, p. 113.

with United Kingdom's territorial policies' shows Britain protecting its own colonial practices.[171] Article 2(7) functioned less as a neutral legal principle and more as a strategic tool to balance humanitarian pressure, imperial interests, and international reputation.[172]

This diplomatic response continued in the UK's careful abstention of Resolution 134. Britain's decision to abstain from voting on the Resolution reveals a prioritisation of neutrality.[173] Officially, the government framed its abstention as challenging the UN overstepping its role: The Foreign Minister John Profumo argued that 'the resolution went beyond the scope of the Security Council.'[174] This approach suggests a legalistic justification for the abstention, but instead Britain's stated aim was 'the alleviation of tension […] and the restoration of internal order', a phrase that notably prioritises stability over justice.[175] Nicholson's claim that 'salvation […] can come only from within' rejects the notion of external intervention.[176]

Equally significant, however, is the government's concern over the use of the veto, which went beyond a simple abstention. Britain looked for a 'vital interest in vetoing [a] resolution on South Africa', reflecting that the idea was carefully considered.[177] Officials feared that a veto would trigger 'a special session of the General Assembly'.[178] However, there were inconsistencies in this reasoning, as it was noted that Britain 'did not hesitate to use veto against [a] resolution […] condemning Suez intervention.'[179]

Central to Macmillan's middle-course approach was a prioritisation of Commonwealth unity over decisive condemnation. According to Macmillan, the concern 'was how to deal with the matter in the UN without leading to a break-up of the Commonwealth'.[180] He notes that he was 'not unduly swayed by the Parliamentary situation' and instead felt that his 'greatest duty' lay with 'the Commonwealth point of view'.[181] Officials warned that discussing 'internal racial problems' could

[171] TNA, PREM 11/3109, Foreign Office to Washington, Prime Minister's Personal Telegram T264/60, 28 March 1960, p. 173.
[172] TNA, PREM 11/3109, 'Draft Message to Dr. Verwoerd from the Prime Minister', April 1960, pp. 45–46.
[173] Dubow, 'Were There Political Alternatives in the Wake of the Sharpeville-Langa Violence in South Africa, 1960?', p. 125.
[174] House of Commons, Hansard's Parliamentary Debates: Union of South Africa (Security Council Resolution), 621, 6 April 1960.
[175] TNA, FO 371/153583, 'Speech by the Secretary of State made in the Wirral', 2 April 1960, p. 3.
[176] TNA, CO 936/601, 'Union of South Africa (Racialist Policies)', 8 April 1960, p. 786,
[177] TNA, PREM 11/3109, Cape Town to Foreign Office, Inward Telegram to Commonwealth Relations Office, 9 April 1960, p. 48.
[178] TNA, PREM 11/3109, New York to Foreign Office, P Dixon, 30 March 1960, p. 101.
[179] TNA, PREM 11/3109, Cape Town to Foreign Office, Inward Telegram to Commonwealth Relations Office, 9 April 1960, p. 48.
[180] Macmillan, *Pointing the Way*, p. 167.
[181] TNA, PREM 11/3109, 'Message from Prime Minister to Mr Menzies', PM Personal Telegram T285/60, 3 April 1960, p. 76.

'aggravate tensions' in the Commonwealth.[182] Ultimately, Britain's abstention was therefore not neutrality, but a calculated effort to keep positive relations with South Africa, while avoiding a definitive stance on apartheid. Macmillan notes that the government made amendments in British statements about South Africa to 'avoid emphasising the "particular incidents"'.[183] Notably, official documentation of the massacre was significantly watered down, claiming instead to 'deeply regret the loss of life' rather than 'deplore' in the earlier references.[184] This shows a subtle but crucial shift back to Britain's diplomatic approach to Verwoerd.

Archival records show the British government echoing the South African perspective in official records, noting that if the police had not fired, 'they would certainly have been overwhelmed' and that 'the police were forced to open fire'.[185] Records also indicate that Verwoerd was a difficult individual and Whitehall did not want to upset him, noting that he 'has a maddening capacity for closing his mind when he wants to'.[186]

Britain's immediate response to Sharpeville reveals that the government was aware of the moral weight of the massacre yet consistently chose strategic interest over action. Despite being labelled a 'turning point', parliamentary condemnation was loud but fleeting. What emerged across every aspect of British response – including parliamentary rhetoric, attitude at the UN, the watering down of documentation, and the narrow restriction of compensation – was a strategic effort to manage Whitehall's appearance while preserving crucial state relations. The immediate result of Sharpeville did not, in any meaningful sense, prompt Britain to reassess its connection with apartheid South Africa.

[182] TNA, PREM 11/3109, 'Macmillan to Kuala Lumpur', PM Personal Telegram T286A/60, 5 April 1960, p. 69.
[183] TNA, PREM 11/3109, Foreign Office to Washington, PM Personal Telegram T2758/60, 29 March 1960, p. 140.
[184] TNA, PREM 11/3109, 'Union of South Africa (Security Council Meeting)', 28 March 1960, p. 176.
[185] TNA, PREM 11/3109, 'Aide Memoire', From the Embassy of the Union of South Africa, 25 March 1960, p. 255.
[186] TNA, PREM 11/3116, Letter to Harold Macmillan from John Maud, 28 April 1960, p. 6.

Chapter IV - The Illusion of Action: The 1961 Commonwealth Crisis

I

'I would implore hon. Members to […] do nothing outside the House that would drive the South African Government out of the Commonwealth, for that I should regard as an absolute tragedy for them and for us.'

– Gordon Nicholson[187]

There is an assumption by historical accounts that South Africa was expelled from the Commonwealth as a result of Sharpeville.[188] This claim is misleading, according to Dubow.[189] While Sharpeville intensified international pressure within the Commonwealth, the main causes of withdrawal predated the massacre. South Africa's republican ambitions and the growing incompatibility between apartheid and a multi-racial Commonwealth strained Pretoria's membership. Sharpeville was a catalyst for conversation about apartheid in the Commonwealth, but it did not cause 'expulsion'.[190]

South Africa's exit from the Commonwealth 'represented a clash between […] institutional racism and an increasingly multiracial organisation'.[191] As early as December 1959, British officials acknowledged that 'in the expanding Commonwealth, which stands for multi-racial co-operation, [Pretoria's] extreme policies of racial discrimination [are] a source of weakness.'[192] The document suggests that the Commonwealth would be 'closer-knit were the ugly duckling out of the nest'.[193] British officials therefore discussed an exit long before Sharpeville occurred, undermining narratives that the massacre caused the Commonwealth crisis.[194]

The republic question further illustrates this issue of South Africa's withdrawal being a domestic policy change rather than an ad hoc response to the crisis. Verwoerd announced on the 20th

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[187] London, The National Archives of the UK (TNA), CO 936/601, 'Union of South Africa (Racialist Policies)', 8 April 1960, p. 794.
[188] Ryan W. Irwin, *Gordian Knot: Apartheid and the Unmaking of the Liberal World Order* (Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 54–55.
[189] Saul Dubow, 'The Commonwealth and South Africa: From Smuts to Mandela', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 45.2 (2017), pp. 284–314 (p. 298) <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2017.1294790>
[190] Stuart Mole, *The Commonwealth, South Africa and Apartheid: Race, Conflict and Reconciliation* (Routledge, 2023), p. 48.
[191] Ibid.
[192] TNA, PREM 11/3163, 'Policy towards South Africa: The United Nations Items', Serial Number 111/59, 17 December 1959, p. 2.
[193] Ibid, p. 4.
[194] TNA, PREM 11/3072, 'Telegram to C.R.O.', 2 February 1960, p. 2.

of January 1960 that he intended to hold a referendum on becoming a republic.[195] After the vote favoured a republic, Verwoerd wanted to ensure that Pretoria could remain in the Commonwealth.[196] Some British officials note that 'it would be very valuable to Verwoerd […] to be able to say that he had assurance that other members would agree to Republican South Africa continuing membership of the Commonwealth.'[197] Verwoerd expressed South Africa's desire to remain in the Commonwealth but without external interference in its internal affairs.[198] Macmillan was careful to maintain diplomatic ambiguity, concluding his January 1960 visit by emphasising that 'the strength of the Commonwealth lay in the flexible co-operation, in pursuit of common ends and purposes, of independent countries who were not expected or obliged to agree on every subject'.[199]

Roe-Crines points out that 'the nationalist steps towards becoming a white-dominated independent republic' was a 'drift away from the values of the Commonwealth.'[200] The Commonwealth's multi-racial character made South Africa's continued membership philosophically untenable, while Verwoerd's republican ambitions seemed to indirectly push for departure.[201] The crisis was therefore already in motion before Sharpeville occurred.

The Republic Bill and its implications for Commonwealth membership became a more contentious issue in the months following Sharpeville.[202] Verwoerd held a position of confidence, claiming that the influence of other nations would ensure South Africa's continued membership if it became a republic.[203] This confidence was not shared; John Maud's letter to Macmillan cautions that continued membership 'cannot be taken for granted', noting that the decisive factor would be 'an assurance from the other Commonwealth countries that, if Dr. Verwoerd wins the referendum, South Africa will be able to remain a member'.[204] Maud adds that 'the republican card is an ace that can only be played once', suggesting Verwoerd misjudged his timing and may have sabotaged his position.[205]

The referendum, held on the 5th of October, produced a majority of seventy-four thousand votes in favour.[206] Following the referendum, Verwoerd appeared determined to seek assurance that

[195] TNA, PREM 11/3072, 'Inward Telegram to Commonwealth Relations Office', 23 January 1960, p. 1.
[196] Mole, *The Commonwealth, South Africa and Apartheid*, p. 54.
[197] TNA, PREM 11/3072, 'Inward Telegram to Commonwealth Relations Office', 23 January 1960, p. 3.
[198] Harold Macmillan, *Pointing the Way, 1959–1961* (Harper, 1972), p. 290.
[199] TNA, PREM 11/3073, 'South Africa Fortnightly Summary, Part I', 27th January – 9th February 1960, p. 21.
[200] Andrew S. Roe-Crines, '"The Wind of Change": A Rhetorical Political Analysis of Harold Macmillan's 1960 "Decolonization" Speech', *British politics*, 19.1 (2024), pp. 46–63 (p. 51) <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41293-023-00234-1>
[201] TNA, PREM 11/3163, 'Policy towards South Africa: The United Nations Items', Serial Number 111/59, 17 December 1959, p. 4.
[202] Tom Lodge, *Sharpeville: An Apartheid Massacre and Its Consequences* (Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 174.
[203] Macmillan, *Pointing the Way*, p. 285.
[204] TNA, PREM 11/3116, 'Letter to Harold Macmillan from John Maud', 28 April 1960, p. 8.
[205] Ibid.
[206] Macmillan, *Pointing the Way*, pp. 289–290.

Commonwealth membership would be resolved at the March 1961 Prime Ministers' Meeting.[207] Verwoerd made clear that South Africa's membership rested on 'the existence of positive common interests'.[208] Verwoerd argued that Commonwealth decisions should be 'governed by the same considerations' that had guided South Africa when other nations sought membership, insisting that his government had "never felt justified to permit [its] views on the internal conditions or policies of those countries to influence [its] decisions".[209] By citing precedent from other nations, Verwoerd opposed moral objections, leading the Prime Ministers to initially see 'no reason' to deny the request.[210] Dubow characterises Verwoerd's position as naive, arguing that his refusal to acknowledge the incompatibility between apartheid and Commonwealth values brought matters to a 'point of no return'.[211]

After failing to find common ground with other officials, 'Australian and British diplomats advised the South African to withdraw his application'.[212] Lodge claims that Verwoerd 'had been nudged out of the Commonwealth.'[213] However, Dubow argues that this was actually a triumph for Verwoerd, because he did not need to make concessions on apartheid.[214] When framed this way, the exit becomes less a defeat and more a strategic retreat on favourable terms.

While the republic question was reaching its conclusion, the international landscape was shifting. The aftermath of Sharpeville led to increased international pressure that made South Africa's position in the Commonwealth more difficult. Irwin claims that Sharpeville 'changed the calculus of the apartheid question' and put London and Washington's support of apartheid 'in serious jeopardy for the first time.'[215] As previously noted, Irwin goes as far to say that South Africa was 'expelled' from the Commonwealth.[216] Shortly after the massacre, protesters gathered outside the South African embassy in London, and on 27 March a rally of twenty thousand people assembled in Trafalgar Square, organised by the Labour Party.[217] The Sharpeville Massacre created a 'political setting' for the boycott

[207] TNA, PREM 11/3537, 'Letter from Dr. Verwoerd to Mr. Macmillan', 26 January 1961, p. 1.
[208] TNA, PREM 11/3537, 'EN Clair's Inward Telegram to Commonwealth Relations office', 20th November 1960, p. 2.
[209] Macmillan, *Pointing the Way*, p. 291.
[210] TNA, PREM 11/3537, 'BF6.3.61: Commonwealth Membership', 24 February 1961.
[211] Dubow, 'The Commonwealth and South Africa: From Smuts to Mandela', p. 298.
[212] Lodge, *Sharpeville*, p. 174.
[213] Lodge, *Sharpeville*, pp. 174–175.
[214] Saul Dubow, 'Were There Political Alternatives in the Wake of the Sharpeville-Langa Violence in South Africa, 1960?', *Journal of African History*, 56.1 (2015), pp. 119–142 (p. 142) <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853714000644>
[215] Irwin, *Gordian Knot*, pp. 42–43.
[216] Irwin, *Gordian Knot*, pp. 54–55.
[217] 'Sharpeville Massacre protest, 27 March 1960', *African Activist Archive*, <https://www.aamarchives.org/archive/history/boycott-movement/pic6006-sharpeville-massacre-protest-27-march-1960.html> [accessed 20 March 2026].

movement, it is 'unlikely that so many thousands of people would have attended the Boycott meeting at Trafalgar Square on 30 March' if not for Sharpeville.[218]

Beyond domestic protests, opposition to apartheid was growing into organised international networks with political leverage. The American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations Executive Council (AFL-CIO) approved 'the boycott by consumers of all South African raw materials and manufactured goods,' and the action was 'strongly supported in Jamaica, many parts of Africa, Western Europe, Scandinavia, and throughout the British Isles.'[219] According to scholarship, the boycott movement caused a further 'international commotion'.[220] Irwin calls it 'the internationalisation of the apartheid dilemma', claiming that new international networks formed to pressure South Africa.[221] Gurney notes that historians say the shootings 'transformed the boycott movement into the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM).'[222]

Within the Commonwealth itself, pressure was focused against South Africa. The massacre and its subsequent riots became a significant conversation at the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference.[223] In Kuala Lumpur, for example, there was a 'firm indication of disapproval of the denial of human rights.'[224] Verwoerd underestimated the strong negative feelings aroused by his actions, apartheid, and the Sharpeville tragedy.[225] Luthuli claims that protest against Verwoerd was inevitable; 'Had there been an attempt to accommodate Dr. Verwoerd's wild dream, the end of the Commonwealth would have been in sight because of a basic betrayal of the things the Commonwealth stands for.'[226] Mansergh calls the exit 'in the interests of Commonwealth unity.'[227]

Macmillan privately recognised that there was 'a real danger that, if we try to keep the Commonwealth intact by keeping South Africa in, we shall lose other members'.[228] British officials in Cape Town urged Macmillan to write to Verwoerd, arguing he needed 'maximum leverage to move

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[218] Nancy L. Clark and William H. Worger, *Voices of Sharpeville: The Long History of Racial Injustice* (Taylor & Francis, 2023), p. 237.
[219] TNA, FO 371/146553, 'Statement by the AFL-CIO Executive Council on Boycott of South African Goods', 14 February 1960.
[220] Rodrigo Fracalossi de Moraes, 'Transnational Activism and Domestic Politics: Arms Exports and the Anti-Apartheid Struggle in the UK–South Africa Relations (1959–1994)', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 17.4 (2021), pp. 1–21 (p. 6) <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orab023>
[221] Irwin, *Gordian Knot*, pp. 39–40.
[222] Christabel Gurney, '"A Great Cause": The Origins of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, June 1959–March 1960', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 26.1 (2000), pp. 123–144 (p. 143), doi:10.1080/030570700108414.
[223] TNA, PREM 11/2908, 'Extract from letter No. POL.4/43/3 from C.M. Anderson, New Delhi to Mr. D.W.B. Hunt, C.R.O. London.', 5 April 1960.
[224] TNA, PREM 11/3109, Inward Telegram from Kuala Lumpur to Commonwealth Relations Office, Telegram No. 181, 31 March 1960, p. 109.
[225] Macmillan, *Pointing the Way*, p. 285.
[226] Albert Luthuli, *Let My People Go* (McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1963), p. 231.
[227] Nicholas Mansergh, *South Africa 1906–1961: The Price of Magnanimity* (Taylor & Francis, 2022).
[228] TNA, PREM 11/3109, Prime Minister Personal Minute to Home Secretary, Serial No. M81/60, p. 260.

the Union in a sensible direction' and warning of the potential for 'widespread international sanctions.'[229] South Africa was essentially being pushed out of the Commonwealth by other members. This hostile atmosphere created conditions in which withdrawal became Verwoerd's most ideal option, meaning the exit was instead chosen with coercion, rather than a forced expulsion.

Britain's reluctance to condemn South Africa was financially motivated, and this shaped how far London was willing to push Pretoria.[230] The growing AAM noted that South Africa's exit from the Commonwealth threatened significant trade preference losses at 'a time when the international boycott is still spreading'.[231] Whitehall was desperate to keep its relations with Pretoria.[232] Lodge points out that 'an inter-departmental cabinet committee was formed […] to ensure that relations with South Africa should not be disrupted' and that 'it would meet 26 times in 1961 alone.'[233] Strategic importance in South Africa was crucial, several documents estimate UK direct investment in South Africa at £650 million out of a total of £900 million, making South Africa one of Britain's most significant overseas investment destinations.[234] Macmillan expressed a concern about the state of the Commonwealth, saying that once it 'begins to disintegrate I feel it is really finished', showing a fear of strategic and power loss.[235] Gordon Nicholson notably worried that Whitehall could "be laid the charge that [it] lightly destroyed the Commonwealth."[236] This is significant as it reflects a concern about the risk of South Africa leaving the Commonwealth as a strategic matter, rather than a moral response to the events in Sharpeville.

Despite this public pressure to remove South Africa, Britain remained supportive of Pretoria's position within the Commonwealth. Dubow goes as far to argue that Verwoerd could have stayed in the Commonwealth if he welcomed Macmillan's accommodation.[237] After Sharpeville, Britain notably stopped using language of expulsion as opposed to increased.[238] Whitehall wanted to 'contribute to an alleviation of tension in South Africa' instead of condemning apartheid.[239] Verwoerd complimented Macmillan in November 1960 for the lengths he went to keep South Africa in the Commonwealth.[240]

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[229] TNA, PREM 11/3109, Cape Town to Commonwealth Relations Office, Telegram, 8 April 1960, p. 52.
[230] TNA, CO 1032/24, 'Appendix A', 21 February 1961, p. 1.
[231] AAM Archive, Bodleian Library, 'South Africa Out of the Commonwealth - What now?', 1961, p. 23.
[232] Lodge, *Sharpeville*, p. 175.
[233] Ibid.
[234] TNA, CO 1032/24, 'Appendix A: South Africa as a Republic Outside the Commonwealth United Kingdom Action', 21 February 1961, p. 6.
[235] TNA, PREM 11/3109, Prime Minister Personal Minute to Home Secretary, Serial No. M81/60, p. 259.
[236] TNA, CO 936/601, 'Union of South Africa (Racialist Policies)', 8 April 1960, p. 782.
[237] Dubow, 'Were There Political Alternatives in the Wake of the Sharpeville-Langa Violence in South Africa, 1960?', pp. 141–142.
[238] TNA, PREM 11/3537, 'Outward Telegram from Commonwealth Relations Office', 14th November 1960, p. 2.
[239] TNA, PREM 11/2908, Outward Telegram from Commonwealth Relations Office to Kuala Lumpur, Telegram No. T286A/60, April 1960, p. 1.
[240] TNA, PREM 11/3537, 'Note to the Prime Minister from Duncan Sandys', 9th November 1960.

In a telegram to Ottawa, Macmillan expressed this idea more blatantly, claiming, 'I know that you are hoping, as I am, that some way can be found to keep South Africa in the Commonwealth.'[241] There were concerns from Ottawa and Whitehall that Mr Diefenbaker, who opposed apartheid, might 'either antagonise Dr. Verwoerd or stimulate the new members' to speak more firmly against Verwoerd.[242]

Macmillan's private correspondence reveals he was publicly deferring to sovereignty while privately acknowledging that apartheid was corroding Commonwealth unity.[243] Macmillan notes; 'I am very anxious, as I know you are, to find a way of keeping them in the Commonwealth.'[244] Macmillan claims to 'feel a real difficulty about ejecting South Africa on the grounds of her racial problems.'[245] Britain had a heavy capital investment in South Africa, and Verwoerd 'knew that Britain was not going to risk these binding attachments.'[246] In his memoirs, Macmillan argues that an expulsion of South Africa would not bring benefit to the non-white population in the Union and that the only way to change policy would be by managing South Africa within the Commonwealth.[247] He argues that expelling South Africa would abandon millions who could not make their voices heard, rather than helping them.[248] Marquand echoes a similar sentiment, claiming it would make it more difficult for the UK to support those suffering under apartheid.[249] Similarly, Mr Braine claimed that Britain "cannot force South Africa to give up policies which are repugnant to us […] all we can do is to persuade her."[250]

Macmillan's reflections stand in contrast to the strategy of the official documents. He expressed 'deep regret' that Commonwealth ties with South Africa would be severed after fifty years and described a 'heavy responsibility of presiding over so tragic a break.'[251]

South Africa withdrew its application rather than face rejection. This reinforces that leaving was a choice that Verwoerd made in response to the atmosphere in the room, not a punishment. South Africa's departure from the Commonwealth was not triggered by Sharpeville. The republic question and preexisting policy tensions had sparked the discussion of withdrawal. Sharpeville increased the urgency for conversation about racial discrimination. Britain failed to keep South Africa in the

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[241] TNA, PREM 11/3537, Harold Macmillan, Outward Telegram from Commonwealth Relations Office to Ottawa, 17th November 1960.
[242] TNA, PREM 11/3537, 'Letter from Ottawa about South Africa and the Commonwealth', p. 2.
[243] Macmillan, *Pointing the Way*, p. 171.
[244] TNA, PREM 11/3537, 'Letter from the Prime Minister to Mr. Diefenbaker', 18 November 1960, p. 1.
[245] TNA, PREM 11/3537, 'Prime Minister's Personal Telegram Serial No. 78/61', 6 January 1961, p. 3.
[246] Saul Dubow, 'Macmillan, Verwoerd, and the 1960 'Wind of Change' Speech', *The Historical Journal*, 54.4 (2011), pp. 1087–1114 (p. 1110) <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X11000409>
[247] Macmillan, *Pointing the Way*, pp. 287–288.
[248] TNA, PREM 11/3537, 'Letter from the Prime Minister to Mr. Diefenbaker', 18 November 1960, p. 4.
[249] TNA, CO 936/601, 'Union of South Africa (Racialist Policies)', 8 April 1960, p. 825.
[250] House of Commons, Hansard's Parliamentary Debates: Union of South Africa (Racialist Policies), 621, 8 April 1960.
[251] Macmillan, *Pointing the Way*, p. 300.

Commonwealth but ensured that the exit cost Pretoria as little as possible. Boehmer captures this contradiction well, describing Britain as 'intent on protecting its historic colonial connections with a state that had written apartheid into law'.[252] Therefore, the aftermath of the massacre hastened South Africa's withdrawal, but it did not cause it.

[252] Sam Matthews Boehmer, 'Questionable Allies: British Collaboration with Apartheid South Africa, 1960–90', *The International History Review*, 46.1 (2024), pp. 102–119 (p. 115) <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2023.2250804>

Chapter V - Limits of Condemnation: British Policy After Sharpeville

‘Britain’s relationship with South Africa continued with relatively few alterations from 1960, […] right up to 1990.’

– Sam Boehmer[253]

The Sharpeville Massacre provoked an international outcry that, on the surface, put Britain’s association with Pretoria under strain. The departure of South Africa from the Commonwealth was praised as a great achievement against apartheid, and the intensification of boycotts seemed to show that the international community was organised. However, these developments were short-lived and superficial. Despite the outcry, British policy remained substantially unchanged after Sharpeville. Economic and military cooperation that defined the pre-Sharpeville partnership continued undisturbed. Whitehall worked to counter the boycotts and diplomatic isolation that might have forced a change.[254] Britain was not prepared to lose a key strategic partner, ensuring that the relationship survived in all but name.

South Africa’s exit from the Commonwealth is presented as a triumph for the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM). Despite this, consequences for Pretoria were far more limited than some scholarship implies. According to Graham, ‘South Africa’s withdrawal from the Commonwealth did not have the desired long-term impact.’[255]

The AAM regarded South Africa’s departure as ‘a great defeat for Verwoerd’ and a victory for ‘the non-white peoples of South Africa’.[256] However, the AAM was concerned that South Africa would retain economic benefits of the Commonwealth.[257] It wanted Britain to ‘end all preferences to South Africa’.[258] This was a logical concern, as Lodge argues that Verwoerd felt that his relationship with Whitehall would instead ‘become easier’ now that Britain no longer had to try to seek approval from

[253] Sam Matthews Boehmer, ‘Questionable Allies: British Collaboration with Apartheid South Africa, 1960–90’, *The International History Review*, 46.1 (2024), pp. 102–119 (p. 104) <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2023.2250804>
[254] Boehmer, ‘Questionable Allies’, p. 102.
[255] Matthew Graham, ‘Campaigning Against Apartheid: The Rise, Fall and Legacies of the South Africa United Front 1960–1962’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 46.6 (2018), pp. 1148–1170 (p. 1159) <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2018.1506871>
[256] AAM Archive, Bodleian Library, ‘South Africa Out of the Commonwealth - What now?’, 1961, p. 22.
[257] Ibid.
[258] AAM Archive, Bodleian Library, ‘South Africa Out of the Commonwealth - What now?’, 1961, p. 24.

the Commonwealth.[259] Verwoerd gave no indication of changing policy in South Africa.[260] As Washington Secretary of State Dean Rusk notes, the resolutions 'hardened the South African position'.[261] Prime Minister Alec Douglas-Home echoes this in a statement made the same year: the more pressure was put on South Africa, the more stubborn it became.[262]

In reality, Commonwealth departure left the financial partnership undisturbed.[263] 'Verwoerd had gambled correctly' that the exit 'would not affect South Africa's links with Britain.'[264] Dubow calls it 'a personal triumph' for Verwoerd.[265] Britain operated with 'understanding and patience', trying to retain economic relations with Verwoerd.[266] Whitehall had previously argued that South Africa should remain closely associated, not only through the Commonwealth, but also through membership of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the 1932 Ottawa Trade Agreement.[267] Whitehall continued 'to give [Pretoria] preferences' because of these agreements.[268] The UK aimed 'to maintain flexibility to act in its own best interests due to its significant stake and close links with South Africa'.[269] The UK was willing to support South Africa, because it feared losing Pretoria from the 'Sterling Area'.[270] Due to this, trade between the two nations continued, and even increased, after the departure.[271]

Ultimately, South Africa's exit from the Commonwealth amounted to little more than a change in title. Britain's economic and strategic interests ensured that its collaboration with Verwoerd remained, exposing a gap between words and policy.[272] The Commonwealth departure had failed to alter Pretoria's affiliation with Whitehall, so the question becomes whether the international boycott campaign that followed could succeed where diplomatic pressure had not.

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[259] Tom Lodge, *Sharpeville: An Apartheid Massacre and Its Consequences* (Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 174–175.
[260] London, The National Archives of the UK (TNA), PREM 11/3536, 'Report on South Africa: Part I', 3 July 1961, p. 1.
[261] TNA, PREM 11/4487, 'Record of Conversation Between the United States Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, and British Foreign Secretary Lord Home', 30 September 1963, p. 1.
[262] TNA, PREM 11/4487, 'Record of a conversation between the Prime Minister and the President of Tanganyika at 10. Downing Street', 13 December 1963, pp. 1–2.
[263] TNA, CO 1032/24, 'Appendix A: South Africa as a Republic Outside the Commonwealth United Kingdom Action', 21 February 1961, p. 3.
[264] Graham, 'Campaigning Against Apartheid', p. 1160.
[265] Saul Dubow, 'Were There Political Alternatives in the Wake of the Sharpeville-Langa Violence in South Africa, 1960?', *Journal of African History*, 56.1 (2015), pp. 119–142 (p. 142) <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853714000644>
[266] TNA, CO 936/605, Foreign Office to Tunku, Prime Minister Personal Telegram Serial No. T398/60, 14 July 1960, p. 2.
[267] TNA, CO 1032/24, 'Appendix A: South Africa as a Republic Outside the Commonwealth United Kingdom Action', 21 February 1961, p. 2.
[268] Ibid, p. 5.
[269] Ibid, p. 8.
[270] Ibid, p. 3.
[271] Lodge, *Sharpeville*, p. 175.
[272] Simon M. Stevens, 'The External Struggle against Apartheid: New Perspectives', *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development*, 7.2 (2016), pp. 295–314 (p. 307) <https://doi.org/10.1353/hum.2016.0011>

The international response to Sharpeville generated criticism but limited action from the British government. Following widespread condemnation of the massacre, rallies in the UK voted for continued boycotts of South African goods, not a *beginning*.[273] While the massacres intensified existing protest movements and drew widespread condemnation, Whitehall refused to convert its rhetoric into actual policy, and the material effect of international pressure proved more modest than its advocates claimed.

The AAM praised the post-Sharpeville boycott campaign as raising a 'new and important awareness in Britain about conditions in South Africa.'[274] Selwyn Lloyd adds that the Sharpeville shootings led to 'official action to boycott South African goods'.[275] Thus, the massacres raised the pressure on the UK for its partnership with Verwoerd due to the boycott campaign.[276] However, Whitehall retained its stance that a 'change of policy will not come by dictation from abroad'.[277]

Many nations 'declared a total boycott on trade' with South Africa.[278] There was a conference in Addis Ababa in which all independent African nations agreed to boycott South Africa more generally, calling for 'a total war on all fronts' against South Africa.[279] An agreement was made for 'a complete economic and diplomatic boycott' from all states before July 1960.[280] Kenneth Mackenzie of *The Scotsman* claimed that the boycotts 'transformed what were only vague fears into real and immediate threats', predicting a potential loss of '£20 million' per year.[281]

Bearing this in mind, Whitehall notes that 'various boycotts did only negligible damage in 1960 to South Africa's trade'.[282] Therefore, Stevens believes that 'the anti-apartheid movement's campaign for sanctions had minimal effect on UK government policy.'[283] Despite the initial blockage, many who removed funds out of South Africa became frightened for financial instability and brought their money back into the country.[284] The AAM claimed that the achievements of the boycotts 'remain small when related to the present situation in South Africa.'[285] Customer boycotts

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[273] TNA, CO 936/604, 'London Rally Votes for Continuing Boycott: Trafalgar Square Crowds Silent Tribute to S. African Dead', *The Times*, 28 April 1960, p. 74.
[274] AAM Archive, Bodleian Library, 'The Programme of the Anti-Apartheid Committee', April 1960, p. 1.
[275] TNA, CO 1031/3863, Ian Macleod, Personal Telegram from Secretary of State for the Colonies to All Governors, 'South African Boycott', 22 April 1960, p. 3.
[276] TNA, DO 35/10621, 'South Africa: Representation at the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting', 4 May 1960, p. 4.
[277] TNA, FO 371/153583, 'Speech by the Secretary of State made in the Wirral', 2 April 1960, p. 3.
[278] TNA, CO 936/604, Patrick Keatley, 'Industrial Boycott a Step Nearer: Socialist Lead on Apartheid', *Guardian*, 1 November 1960, p. 121.
[279] TNA, CO 936/603, 'Mr A O Adjei, calls a 'Total War on All Fronts'', 15 August 1960.
[280] TNA, CO 936/604, 'Boycott of South Africa Proposed: Addis Ababa Move', *Daily Telegraph*, 21 June 1960, p. 91.
[281] TNA, CO 936/604, Kenneth Mackenzie, 'Ghana Boycott Shocks South Africa', *The Scotsman*, 9 August 1960, p. 110.
[282] TNA, CO 852/1976, 'Brief for Consultation Under G.A.T.T. Article XII 4(b)', July 1961, p. 2.
[283] Stevens, 'The External Struggle against Apartheid', p. 307.
[284] TNA, PREM 11/3536, 'Report on South Africa: Part I', 3 July 1961, p. 2.
[285] AAM Archive, Bodleian Library, 'The Programme of the Anti-Apartheid Committee', April 1960, p. 1.

produced very 'minor successes in terms of their impact upon policies'.[286] Official reports suggested the boycott had only a slight material effect on trade, reporting no change in purchasing habits.[287]

Whitehall describes the 'pressure to disavow, or not to appear to support apartheid' to the point that it was in 'a dwindling minority' on its approach.[288] Britain's UN delegation acknowledged this tension directly, admitting that despite its 'very strongly felt opposition to the racial policies of the South African Government', features of the resolution made it impossible to vote with the majority of the Security Council.[289] Whitehall insists that there should be 'no doubt' that Britain 'remain[s] strongly opposed to the policies of apartheid'.[290] This encapsulates Britain's broader position throughout the period: rhetorically distancing itself from Pretoria while refusing to translate it into policy. In Macmillan's address to Malayan Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, he claims that Whitehall's anxiety about the conditions in South Africa matches that of the public, but that Whitehall has 'grave doubts whether a trade boycott will achieve the ends you have in mind.'[291] The Secretary of State, Ian Macleod, claimed in a speech that boycotts often produce 'precisely the opposite result to that intended.'[292] Activist-driven sanctions often produce ambiguous results because, as warned by Barnard and Luiz, these measures can unintentionally benefit the elite of the sanctioned country.[293] Similarly, he also notes in a telegram to the Commonwealth governors that he does not believe in policies of boycotts.[294] Due to this stance, Britain actively strove to limit and dissuade boycotts against South Africa.[295]

Britain's response to Sharpeville – or lack thereof – consisted of condemning apartheid in strong terms while working to undermine the boycotts that might have given those words practical force. According to Dubow, British direct investments in South Africa even increased to nearly thirteen percent, despite previously being around ten.[296] This pattern extended beyond trade, when pressure shifted to military relationship and formal sanctions, Whitehall employed the same rhetorical concession strategies.

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[286] Rob Skinner, '"Every Bite Buys a Bullet": Sanctions, Boycotts and Solidarity in Transnational Anti-Apartheid Activism', *Moving the Social*, 57 (2017), pp. 97–114 (p. 109), DOI:10.13154/mts.57.2017.97-114.
[287] TNA, CO 936/604, 'Liverpool has a Mixed View of that Trade Boycott', *Liverpool Post*, 1 April 1960, p. 79.
[288] TNA, DO 35/10621, 'Apartheid and the United Nations', 1 September 1960, pp. 1–2.
[289] TNA, FCO 45/964, Telegram from New York to Foreign Office, Telegram No. 1198, 8 August 1963, p. 1.
[290] TNA, FCO 45/964, Telegram from New York to Foreign Office, Telegram No. 1198, 8 August 1963, p. 3.
[291] TNA, CO 936/605, Foreign Office to Tunku, Prime Minister Personal Telegram Serial No. T398/60, 14 July 1960, p. 1.
[292] TNA, FO 371/153583, 'Speech by the Secretary of State made in the Wirral', 2 April 1960, p. 2.
[293] Helena Barnard, and John M. Luiz, 'The South African Economic Elite and Ownership Changes in Foreign Multinationals' Assets During and After Apartheid-era Sanctions', *Journal of World Business*, 59.5 (2024), pp. 1–13 (p. 11) <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jwb.2024.101555>
[294] TNA, CO 1031/3863, Ian Macleod, Personal Telegram from Secretary of State for the Colonies to All Governors, 'South African Boycott', 22 April 1960, p. 3.
[295] TNA, CO 1031/3863, 'Boycott of Trade with South Africa', 1960, p. 6.
[296] Dubow, 'Macmillan, Verwoerd, and the 1960 'Wind of Change' Speech', p. 1110.

British rhetorical condemnation of apartheid stood in contrast to its continued economic and military alignment with South Africa. Instead of turning international pressure into policy, Whitehall worked to neutralise sanctions and preserve its strategic and financial interests in South Africa.

The main reason that Whitehall did not want sanctions to be placed was because it would expose Britain 'to the risk of losing defence facilities in South Africa which are still of importance'.[297] Before the massacre, nearly a third of South Africa's exports went to the UK.[298] Economic interests were, therefore, 'a crucial point in maintaining British financial exposure.'[299] South Africa even saw 'an increase in reciprocal trade' after the massacre.[300] Whitehall was desperate to avoid economic sanctions, to the point that when the issue was raised in 1963, it noted that Britain would 'have to veto' a sanction resolution at the United Nations (UN), which would cause 'irreparable damage to relations' with other countries.[301] Their concern was that sanctions could become too severe.[302] Whitehall strove to achieve a 'more moderate solution' against South Africa.[303] This moderation was deliberate. Britain explicitly sought a resolution that would 'have some effect but would not be too extreme', reflecting an effort to appear responsive to the external pressure without imposing meaningful consequences on Pretoria.[304]

Defence was a major aspect of Britain wanting to keep relations with Pretoria, noting that the 'overriding objective is to maintain good relations with South Africa on matters of defence.'[305] Douglas-Home raised his concerns in the House of Commons that 'an arms embargo would be wrong' because of the risks that it posed for relations with South Africa.[306] Documents refer to the Simonstown Agreement, a 1955 naval cooperation treaty providing the UK with defence cooperation, as one of the prominent reasons to keep military association with South Africa.[307] The Agreement allowed access to a naval base in the Cape, which was essential for monitoring Soviet naval activity in the South Atlantic. This was of particular importance after the closure of the Suez Canal, with records noting that the naval facilities were invaluable for keeping positive trade relations.[308] Britain continued providing South

[297] TNA, PREM 11/5113, 'South Africa and the United Nations', 3 April 1963, p. 14.
[298] TNA, CO 852/1976, 'Now that South Africa Has Left', *Financial Times*, 16 March 1961.
[299] TNA, CO 1032/24, 'Appendix A: South Africa as a Republic Outside the Commonwealth United Kingdom Action', 21 February 1961, p. 6.
[300] TNA, PREM 11/3536, 'Report on South Africa: Part I', 3 July 1961, p. 2.
[301] TNA, PREM 11/4487, 'South Africa (C.P. (63) 6, 8 and 10)', 11 November 1963, pp. 1–2.
[302] TNA, PREM 11/4487, 'Record of Conversation Between the United States Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, and British Foreign Secretary Lord Home', 30 September 1963, pp. 1–3.
[303] TNA, PREM 11/4487, 'South Africa (C.P. (63) 6, 8 and 10)', 11 November 1963, pp. 1–2.
[304] TNA, PREM 11/4486, 'Extract from record of conversation at Admiralty House', 23 July 1963, p. 1.
[305] TNA, PREM 11/4486, Message to the Prime Minister from BS, 22 June 1961, p. 1.
[306] TNA, PREM 11/4487, Extract from Hansard, 'South African Supply of Arms', 19 December 1963, pp. 1437–1438.
[307] TNA, FCO 46/605, 'The Simonstown Agreement', 24 April 1970, p. 2.
[308] TNA, FCO 46/605, 'Annex A: Value of Facilities Provided under the Simonstown Agreement to British and Western Defence Interests', 24 April 1970, p. 3.

Africa with supply ships, naval aircraft and other equipment in order to protect the Cape sea routes.[309] Hence, Whitehall continued its military agreements with Pretoria, with transitions for military costs as large as £12 million.[310]

The only change in military policy after the Sharpeville Massacre was a keener awareness of the export of weapons that 'might be associated with internal repression.'[311] The supply of weapons for the South African military remained constant, but the caveat was that they could not be used for internal affairs.[312] Douglas-Home noted that any weapons supplied to South Africa should not be used against the black population, but that a supply of weapons should continue.[313] Hence, there was a continued provision of arms which were 'well within the categories' that Whitehall could allow.[314]

Britain's response to Sharpeville, when stripped of its diplomatic language, amounted to a defence of South Africa's strategic value. Britain focused primarily on keeping the status quo; arms sales continued, trade expanded, and sanctions were vetoed. Strategic interest overrode any genuine commitment to challenging apartheid after the massacre. Lodge's discussion of various military and intelligence operations in South Africa demonstrates that Britain sought to operate within the country, noting that 'an inter-departmental cabinet committee was formed […] to ensure that relations with South Africa should not be disrupted'.[315] It was not until the mid-1980s that Britain shifted its position in any meaningful way, thus demonstrating that the Sharpeville Massacre had little to no impact on British economic and military policy in South Africa.[316]

Sharpeville did not transform British policy by any means. Beneath the diplomatic language of repugnance and regret, Whitehall protected its interests in South Africa. Britain vetoed sanctions, sustained its arms trade, and preserved its financial ties. The gap between Britain's public rhetoric and private conduct had become something of a policy in itself. Regardless of intense international condemnation, Britain was determined to maintain the status quo. Sharpeville merely changed the language used in Whitehall, but it did not change what Britain was prepared to do - or more accurately, not do.

[309] TNA, PREM 11/4487, 'South Africa (C.P. (63) 6, 8 and 10)', 11 November 1963, p. 1.
[310] TNA, PREM 11/4487, 'Message to the Prime Minister', 20 December 1963, p. 1.
[311] TNA, PREM 11/4486, 'Secret: Export of Arms to South Africa', 1963, pp. 1–3.
[312] TNA, PREM 11/4486, 'Extract from record of conversation at Admiralty House', 23 July 1963, pp. 1–2.
[313] TNA, PREM 11/4487, Extract from Hansard, 'South African Supply of Arms', 19 December 1963, p. 1438.
[314] TNA, PREM 11/4487, 'Message to the Prime Minister', 20 December 1963, p. 1.
[315] Lodge, *Sharpeville*, p. 175.
[316] Boehmer, 'Questionable Allies', p. 104.

Chapter VI - Conclusion

I

Scholarship on Sharpeville has uncritically reproduced the narrative that the massacre was a 'watershed' moment for international opposition to South Africa.[317] Many accounts go as far as to characterise Sharpeville as a "turning point" in South African history.[318] In contrast, primary archival analysis reveals that Sharpeville effectively caused no significant policy changes from the United Kingdom towards South Africa.

As argued, economic and strategic interests in the Union were crucial to British policy before the massacre took place.[319] Britain was focused on keeping political strength in the Cold War climate.[320] Despite existing Whitehall anxiety about discrimination in apartheid, British policy remained supportive of Pretoria.[321] Similarly, Sharpeville did not create new pressures; it intensified existing ones. External pressure was already placed on Whitehall for its relations with South Africa.[322] The boycott movement pre-dated the massacre and was not caused by it.[323]

The gap between Britain's public condemnation and private diplomacy was not incidental, it was Britain's primary policy towards Pretoria. Even though Whitehall responded to the massacre with parliamentary outrage, it was short lived. Whitehall avoided full condemnation by abstaining at the United Nations (UN).[324] It deliberately watered down its language to keep a friendly association with South Africa.[325] Britain's words became softer, not stronger, in the weeks after the massacre, believing that 'there is nothing to be gained by public condemnation.'[326]

South Africa's exit from the Commonwealth was by no means a triumph against apartheid precipitated by Sharpeville. South Africa was not 'expelled' because of Sharpeville, despite what scholarship suggests.[327] Instead, South Africa's withdrawal was a carefully considered move – mostly

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[317] Håkan Thörn, *Anti-Apartheid and the Emergence of a Global Civil Society* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 127–128.
[318] Saul Dubow, 'Were There Political Alternatives in the Wake of the Sharpeville-Langa Violence in South Africa, 1960?', *Journal of African History*, 56.1 (2015), pp. 119–142 (p. 119) <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853714000644>
[319] London, The National Archives of the UK (TNA), PREM 11/3163, 'Policy towards South Africa: The United Nations Items', Serial Number 111/59, 17 December 1959, p. 1.
[320] TNA, PREM 11/3163, 'Line to be taken with Dr Verwoerd', 17 December 1959, p. 1.
[321] TNA, PREM 11/3163, 'Policy towards South Africa: The United Nations Items', Serial Number 111/59, 17 December 1959, p. 1.
[322] TNA, PREM 11/3163, 'Policy towards South Africa: The United Nations Items', PM, 60.2, 5 January 1960.
[323] Harold Macmillan, *Pointing the Way, 1959–1961* (Harper, 1972), p. 151.
[324] TNA, PREM 11/3598, Telegram from Macmillan to Menzies, Telegram Serial No. T212A/61, p. 39.
[325] TNA, FCO 45/964, Telegram from New York to Foreign Office, Telegram No. 1198, 8 August 1963, p. 2.
[326] House of Commons, Hansard's Parliamentary Debates: Union of South Africa (Racialist Policies), 621, 8 April 1960.
[327] Saul Dubow, 'The Commonwealth and South Africa: From Smuts to Mandela', *Journal of imperial and Commonwealth history*, 45.2 (2017), pp. 284–314 (p. 298) <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2017.1294790>

in response to the republican question and its place in the multi-racial Commonwealth – which had been in discussion months before the massacre took place.[328] Britain kept an active effort to keep South Africa in the Commonwealth, despite the growing pressure.[329] Verwoerd instead left on his own terms, without making any concessions to apartheid, and Britain voted against the Afro-Asian resolution.[330] The 'expulsion' narrative is therefore a myth, particularly as Britain ensured that it cost Pretoria very little and did 'not affect South Africa's links with Britain.'[331]

In the long term, British policy did not change in any significant way as a result of Sharpeville. Whitehall opposed putting sanctions on South Africa despite international pressure.[332] In reality, 'boycotts did only negligible damage' and trade with South Africa persisted.[333] Britain kept military relations, providing arms, and receiving access to the Cape route.[334] Instead of condemning apartheid, Whitehall aimed to avoid 'unnecessary provocation' of the Union.[335] Hence, British relations with South Africa continued 'with relatively few alterations from 1960 right up to 1990'.[336] The only change Sharpeville produced was linguistic: Britain used more careful wording, but did not change its overall action.

Sharpeville revealed the contradictions in Britain's policy towards South Africa, but it did not lead to any significant changes to that policy.[337] The global tide was already pulling away from South Africa, and Britain was merely changing its language to accommodate for it.[338] In historical narratives, the term 'watershed' should be replaced by calling it a 'focal point' that reveals British policy towards South Africa at the time, as this more accurately frames its role in scholarship. Framing Sharpeville as pivotal reduces Britain's complicity with the apartheid structure amid global and local condemnation.

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[328] Macmillan, *Pointing the Way*, p. 153.
[329] TNA, PREM 11/3537, Harold Macmillan, Outward Telegram from Commonwealth Relations Office to Ottawa, 17th November 1960.
[330] Macmillan, *Pointing the Way*, p. 291.
[331] Matthew Graham, 'Campaigning Against Apartheid: The Rise, Fall and Legacies of the South Africa United Front 1960–1962', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 46.6 (2018), pp. 1148–1170 (p. 1160) <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2018.1506871>
[332] TNA, CO 936/604, 'Making Boycott Effective: U.N. Powerless', *Guardian*, 22 April 1960, p. 82.
[333] TNA, CO 852/1976, 'Brief for Consultation Under G.A.T.T. Article XII 4(b)', July 1961, p. 2.
[334] TNA, FCO 46/605, 'Annex A: Value of Facilities Provided under the Simonstown Agreement to British and Western Defence Interests', 24 April 1970, p. 2.
[335] TNA, DO 35/10621, 'Draft Minute to the Prime Minister - Relations with South Africa: the United Nations Item on Apartheid', 8 February 1960, p. 3.
[336] Sam Matthews Boehmer, 'Questionable Allies: British Collaboration with Apartheid South Africa, 1960–90', *The International History Review*, 46.1 (2024), pp. 102–119 (p. 104) <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2023.2250804>
[337] Albert Luthuli, *Let My People Go* (McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1963), p. 271.
[338] Saul Dubow, 'Macmillan, Verwoerd, and the 1960 'Wind of Change' Speech', *The Historical journal*, 54.4 (2011), pp. 1087–1114 (p. 1088) <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X11000409>

Thus, 1960 was only a 'moment of crisis' in causing hesitation for Britain's public declaration for racial equality.[339]

Far from being a catalyst for change, British archival evidence suggests that Sharpeville barely shifted the needle on Whitehall-Pretoria relations. Instead, Britain attempted to preserve the status quo with Verwoerd. In reality, Sharpeville was a moment when the gap between Whitehall's words and its actions became visible, but not a moment where that gap closed.

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[339] Dubow, 'Were There Political Alternatives in the Wake of the Sharpeville-Langa Violence in South Africa, 1960?', p. 142.

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