

Thatcher - and Many Still Active Tories - Did Support Apartheid

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I am delighted that Sir Patrick Wright, former head of the Diplomatic Service, [has confirmed](#) that Margaret Thatcher did support apartheid. There has been a polite media airbrushing of this aspect of Tory history. For the first two years of my life in the FCO I spent every single day trying to undermine Thatcher's support for apartheid. As I [published last year](#) of the FCO's new official history:

Salmon acquits Thatcher of actually supporting apartheid. I would dispute this. I was only a Second Secretary but the South Africa (Political) desk was just me, and I knew exactly what was happening. My own view was that Thatcher was a strong believer in apartheid, but reluctantly accepted that in the face of international opposition, especially from the United States, it would have to be dismantled. Her hatred of Mandela and of the ANC was absolute. It is an undeniable statement that Thatcher hated the ANC and was highly sympathetic towards the apartheid regime.

By contrast the Tory FCO junior ministers at the time, including Malcolm Rifkind and Lynda Chalker, shared the absolute disgust at apartheid that is felt by any decent human being. The Foreign Secretary, Geoffrey Howe was somewhere between these two positions, but very anxious indeed not to anger Thatcher. South Africa was an issue in which Thatcher took an extreme interest and was very, very committed. Not in a good way.

British diplomats were almost banned from speaking to any black people at all. Thatcher favoured the Bantustan or Homelands policy, so an exception was made for Gatsha Buthelezi, the Zulu chief who was regarded as anti-ANC and prepared to oppose sanctions and be satisfied with a separate Zulu "homeland" for his Inkatha movement and essentially accept apartheid exclusions. That may be unfair on him, but it was the policy of the UK government to steer in that direction. Our Consulate General in Johannesburg was permitted to talk to black trades unionists, and that was our main angle in to the black resistance movement. These contacts were made by the excellent Tony Gooch and Stuart Gregson, and before them the equally excellent Terry Curran, then my immediate boss in London. Neither Terry nor Tony were "fast-track" public school diplomats. None of those talked to black South Africans at all.

I flew off the handle when I discovered, when dealing with the accounts of the Embassy in Pretoria/Capetown (a migratory capital), that the British Ambassador, Patrick Moberly, had entertained very few black people indeed in the Residence and the vast majority of Embassy social functions were whites only. In 1985 most of the black people who got in to the British Ambassador's residence in South Africa were the servants. I recall distinctly the astonishment in the FCO that the quiet and mild-mannered young man at the side desk had

suddenly lost his rag and got excited about something that seemed to them axiomatic. Black people as guests in the Residence in Pretoria? No, Craig, I was told, we speak with black people in Johannesburg. Different culture there.

Wright's account collaborates mine both in general and in detail, eg on being banned from any contact with the ANC. Eventually we managed, as a tentative first step and unknown to No.10, to arrange a meeting, ostensibly by accident in the margins of a conference, between myself and a brilliant young man from the newly launched trades union federation named Cyril Ramaphosa. I wonder what happened to him? I was the recipient of his justified ire at Tory government policy.

Tories who actively supported apartheid are still very influential in the Tory party, notably the St Andrews Federation of Conservative Students originating group, including Michael Forsyth. Even David Cameron's contacts with South Africa in this period are a very murky part of his cv. It is important the Tories are not allowed off the hook on this. The moral taint should rightly be with them for generations.

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