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Commonwealth capitulation

The most serious casualty of the Commonwealth debacle in Coolom, Australia, is not the people of Zimbabwe, who have waited in vain for the organisation to assert its professed democratic values, but the Commonwealth itself.

No one should have expected a voluntary grouping of 54 members operating by consensus to shift an obdurate dictator. But the compromise cobbled together yesterday – in which Australia, South Africa and Nigeria will decide whether to suspend Zimbabwe, depending on the conduct of next week's elections – will prove inconsequential.

Britain and Canada led the predominantly white group that wanted to suspend Zimbabwe immediately. That would almost certainly have provoked the expulsion of Commonwealth election observers from Zimbabwe. Their impact is modest but the presence of outsiders restrains the thugs and encourages voters to turn out.

More importantly, had the African members had the courage to uphold the Commonwealth's principles of democracy, transparency and civil rights – first enunciated in Harare in 1991 – Zimbabwe's fate could have been very different. Unequivocal condemnation by his neighbours when the crisis emerged nearly two years ago might have made President Robert Mugabe think

again. Sustained diplomatic pressure would have turned the screw. If Mr Mugabe still refused to budge, suspension from the Commonwealth should have followed.

This process, however, would have been as much a test for Zimbabwe's Commonwealth neighbours as for Mr Mugabe. He would have lost no time in pointing to their own shortcomings. The outcome of Mozambique's own election is open to challenge. Malawi's government is riding roughshod over its judiciary. Lesotho and Swaziland have autocratic regimes. In this unsavoury company, Mr Mugabe can expect his excesses to get no more than a mild reprimand.

There will be a high price to pay. All African leaders subscribe to the principles on which the continent's much-vaunted economic recovery programme is based. But for most, this is no more than lip service. The architect of that programme, South Africa's Thabo Mbeki, must now regret he did not lead condemnation of the man who has now sabotaged his plan.

The Commonwealth will doubtless survive this crisis, as it has survived others, if only because none of its leaders will have the energy to propose its dissolution. But by surrendering its credibility it has lost its heart. And by compromising on its principles, it has lost a critical *raison d'être*.