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Britain and Southern Africa

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By Peter Jay

We in the West have showed ourselves remarkably inept on occasions in seeming to support leaders and governments abroad who not only run their countries on the basis of principles and methods that were in total contrast with our own democratic beliefs, but whose regimes were also doomed in the end to catastrophic failure. Apart from the purely moral considerations of such a stance on the part of the West, it was a disaster as a practical policy.

What Britain is trying to achieve in Southern Africa is of special importance to my generation. Having turned 41, I can no longer think of myself as young. But I did grow up at a stage in the history of my country, and with my contemporaries in a certain mood, when we could throw off the international complacency, the imperial nostalgia and the moral insensitivity of the past. We recognized that the systematic and unashamed oppression of one race by another was morally indefensible; and its erection into the avowed creed of apartheid made it doubly offensive. We also recognized the accelerating pace of change in the world, together with its increasing complexity, to understand the interlocking nature of the global community and the often explosive interaction of events great distances apart.

Motives of pure self-interest and acquisitiveness, on the part of the more powerful nations, were out of place and indeed dangerous. There were—and still are—those who are inclined to channel the course of events into chaos, from which they believe their own power will benefit. And there are those, in contrast, who wish to ensure that change in each part of the globe should be for the good of its inhabitants and with their co-operation and choice.

This second philosophy may seem defensive; but it is in fact grounded in respect for human rights, particularly the right of self-determination, and in the wish



to maintain peace. The policy of the Western powers in Southern Africa, where human rights are continuously violated, where the peace has been shattered and where the threat of super-power conflict hangs darkly, is an example of that radical philosophy at work.

It is radical, because not so long ago self-determination was not a much regarded principle in international affairs, when the imperial age was in full swing and a greater proportion of the world than at any previous time was subject territory. Britain, of course, was stronger in Africa than any other nation. The last three decades, however, have seen a remarkable transformation. Over a period of a very few years, a large number of new nations were born. Certainly there was bitterness and conflict in many instances, and there was some reluctance in the colonizing countries to let go what they thought of as "their territories."

In Britain's case, order was established out of conflict, and colonial possessiveness was rejected as a policy. Britain also tried to ensure that in each new nation no vacuum was left for any other power with a taste for acquisition—for imperialism is still alive in certain quarters—to fill at their leisure. Self-determination, accompanied by positive preparation for self-government, was the key—not just as a high-sounding principle, but as a realistic and practicable goal.

The granting of independence to India in 1947 by Britain's labor government was the critical turning point in British attitudes. It was the first, as well as the boldest and largest, example of a new philosophy at work. Socialists have always rejected imperialism and colonialism on principle. It was, therefore, natural and inevitable—despite the daunting problems of the transition—that the first labor government with a clear majority in Parliament should have given the highest priority to setting the Indian sub-continent free.

African Independence

In Africa, the winds of change blew later,

more haphazardly, and with unmistakable strength. In most areas, Britain was able to prepare the colonies for independence more thoroughly and efficiently than was the case with India. The fact that this mainly occurred under conservative governments in Britain showed also how deep was the change of heart by this time.

On the whole, the transition was remarkably successful. In virtually every instance, the newly independent country was willing to join the Commonwealth of Nations (an association of states which had previously been British dominions or colonies). It is, outwardly, a curious grouping of countries now numbering 35, consisting of developed industrial countries such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Britain herself; developing producer countries such as Nigeria; developing consumer countries with large populations, such as India, Bangladesh, Kenya, Tanzania and Zambia; and other smaller nations without known resources. There are no exclusive or special political or even economic ties among the members of the Commonwealth. Nonetheless, they share something of a culture and something of a language, even if in some cases these may be secondary; and they meet regularly to talk about the problems of the world, mostly in the area of North-South relations, the relationship between the richest and poorest countries of the world.

The Commonwealth has proved a highly fertile and constructive body, sharing in a spirit of equality, mutual respect and understanding a frank and a positive attitude to problems that more formal international institutions cannot always achieve. Most importantly, it cuts across political, ideological, geographical, religious, ethnic and economic barriers which nowadays threaten to divide the world into mutually hostile and non-comprehending blocs. This general success in making the transition from empire to a free Commonwealth has, so far, escaped us in our dealings with Rhodesia and South Africa.

Majority Rule in Rhodesia

There is a history here of impotence and failure. Rhodesia was never governed by Britain when it first came under the British crown in 1923. It was given the status of a self-governing colony. And after years of pressure from successive governments in Britain on the white minority government to move decisively toward Black majority rule, Ian Smith unilaterally declared an illegal independence in 1965. In spite of repeated efforts by governments of both parties in Britain to press their policy, which included asking the United Nations for a mandate of sanctions against Rhodesia, Smith remained too blind—and Britain quite frankly too weak—for majority rule to be established in Rhodesia.

Smith thought he had achieved the stalemate he wanted. But in 1976 Henry Kissinger, then U.S. secretary of state, who had been alerted to the potential dangers of conflict in Africa by the civil war in Angola, directed his powers to the case of Rhodesia. It was Kissinger who achieved what no one else had managed to do. He secured a commitment from Smith—in the broadest terms—to work toward majority-rule for Rhodesia. When the Carter Administration took over in Washington, and David Owen became Britain's foreign secretary, it was decided, even though it seemed as though Kissinger's efforts had come to nothing, to make one more all-out effort to bring the white minority in Rhodesia to their senses and thus prevent the situation there from collapsing into uncontrollable turmoil and bloodshed.

The ground of the previous decade was littered with the bones of their predecessors' attempts; but it was quite clear that there was going to be change in Southern Africa and it was a choice between nature's brutal remedies and the possibility of a saner man-made transition. Secretary Owen's decision to give it one last try, and Secretary of State Cyrus Vance's and U.N. Ambassador Andrew Young's simultaneous determination to commit the U.S. in a

22 new interest in Africa, and to human rights as a principle in foreign policy, demonstrated high moral and political courage.

The Anglo-American Plan

What we are *not* trying to do in Rhodesia is to choose a leader for an independent Zimbabwe. In formulating a joint policy, what has now come to be known as the Anglo-American Proposals, the British and American governments have chosen the high ground of principle, avoiding the temptations that previous governments found too often irresistible in other troubled areas of picking the man who might appear the most malleable or Western-oriented.

The objectives of the Anglo-American plan are basically threefold: independence for Zimbabwe by the end of 1978, the election of a new government on the principle of one-man one-vote, and the creation of conditions of law and order in which all candidates can present their policies and the electorate can choose freely without fear. In order to achieve these objectives, first there must be an abatement of the civil war. Also, we must strive for a ceasefire. Talks with all the parties concerned, as well as with those who influence and support them, are essential. This has been our determined strategy from the beginning.

During the course of 1977, we failed to persuade the leaders of the Patriotic Front (Joshua Nkomo and Robert Mugabe) to accept our proposals, some essential features of which they found objectionable. Now, however, following an active period in which the presidents of the states on the front line of the fighting—Zambia, Mozambique, Tanzania and Botswana—have made their own assessment of the situation and have shared their conclusion with the Patriotic Front leaders, they are said to be inclined to accept our proposals, at least as a basis for future talks with Britain and the United States. In the meantime, events have moved on and Smith has produced an agreement signed in March with three of the Black leaders within Rhodesia—Bishop Abel Muzorewa,

the Rev. Ndabaningi Sithole and Chief Jeremiah Chirau—which has become known as the “Internal Settlement.” This has made it operationally necessary to adjust our own tactics for bringing about a majority rule in Zimbabwe.

Previously, the mechanism for pressing Smith to let drop the reins of government, once a successor government was in place, depended on lining up a solid front of the nationalist leaders and the front line states. This would have confronted South Africa as well as Smith with an orderly transition to majority rule—an offer they could not refuse. The alternative would have been a civil war, with all the attendant instability, economic destruction and bloodshed. The situation now is more complicated—even if the South African government and Smith recognized some objective considerations, it is politically more difficult for them to respond now that Muzorewa and Sithole have accepted the so-called internal settlement.

The South African government is answerable to its own white electorate, which creates its own political pressures; and white public opinion there is strongly of the view that Smith has done enough to fulfill his commitment to majority rule to earn their support.

On our part, we regard the internal settlement as grossly inadequate, and the resulting Smith-Muzorewa-Sithole government just as illegal as the previous Smith régime. But, while the Salisbury agreement has in no way changed our objectives, it inevitably effects our tactics. Hence the recent series of meetings in Africa involving Secretaries Vance and Owen and Ambassador Young. All parties have to be convinced that the Anglo-American proposals, or something close to them, hold the middle ground. The issue is enormously tough, and success is by no means assured. But that is no reason not to try. The fact that we have brought the matter this far should be evidence enough that we are determined to see it through to the end. It is in the interest of none of the parties to let that part of

the continent relapse into chaos and bloodshed.

Simultaneous with all this frenzied activity over Rhodesia has been the involvement of Western powers in the future of South-West Africa, or Namibia. Here, the issue is simpler for the West than Rhodesia or South Africa, because the basic conflict happens to involve only two, rather than several parties. But we shall continue to keep the Namibian issue alive. It could well be that success in Namibia will ease the way considerably toward a settlement of the Rhodesian problem, because it will show that negotiation and patience can succeed faster than guns and bloodshed in returning to the African people their birthright of independence and self-government.

South Africa

Here, the risks of violence and—in time—of outside exploitation are dangerously high. The humiliations engendered by institutionalized racialism, rationalized under the vile hypocrisy of apartheid, will inevitably drive people in increasing numbers to desperate action. For a long time now South Africans have been made manifestly aware of the disgust and contempt of world opinion for their system of oppression of the African majority by the white minority. What we have long hoped for, and continue to look forward to, is evolutionary change within South Africa that will lead—under the pressures that the outside world can extend—to the granting of full democratic and human rights to all the inhabitants of the country, without the loss of the partly developed infrastructure and economic buoyancy that the country already enjoys.

Indeed, we have to exercise care when dealing with the paranoid personality of white racism so that we do not provoke a mentality of such total isolation from world opinions and principles of human rights that the regime retreats even further from recognition of the inevitability of Black emancipation and eventual majority rule. We have to avoid a situation in which

white South Africans drive themselves into a mental fortress from which they will be unable to escape. Isolation feeds itself and breeds a sense of unreality and a mindless contempt for outside opinions, as the case of Rhodesia has already demonstrated. So we believe that closing doors totally on South Africa is the equivalent of giving up hope for change without a blood-bath.

During the course of 1977, there were signs that at least certain elements of white South African opinion were beginning to see the logic of evolutionary change. There was some movement toward a dialogue with other African states and toward partial integration in sport. The appearance of progress was, however, quickly shattered by the mysterious deaths in prison of political detainees. The death of Steve Biko was an appalling reminder of the intransigence and blindness of the South African authorities.

Biko was one of the most prominent of a new generation of South Africans who demand the early dismantling of apartheid, but without recourse to violence, and who are willing to suffer for their beliefs. His death was followed by further repressive measures, including the banning of citizens and organizations and the closure of newspapers. The silencing of those who speak for the majority in South Africa was a tragic step backwards, which makes it all the more difficult to advocate peaceful and principled transformation.

In writing about Britain's wish for change in South Africa, it is essential to note that England's trade with, and investment in South Africa, represent a huge stake in orderly change. But then that coincides with the interest of South Africa's Black citizens who will suffer terribly if violence becomes the only route to decency and majority rule. Our trade with the rest of Africa is growing fast, too, and exports are now as great as those to South Africa. Nigeria, for example, is now our biggest trading partner on the continent. But to put a complete stop to our trade with South Africa would still cause major problems for the British

industry and gravely dislocate our economy, as well as cause bitter privations to Black workers in South Africa.

This situation will not change overnight. In fact, it underlines the seriousness of the British government's commitment to evolutionary change in South Africa toward a system based on internationally acceptable principles. We are ready to use every bit of political and economic influence at our disposal to urge peaceful change there. We have, for more than 13 years, observed a voluntary arms embargo, and do not cooperate in the nuclear field. We have persuaded the nine countries of the European Economic Community to observe a code of business conduct in South Africa, one of the main purposes of which is to encourage the growth of free, non-discriminatory trade unionism and the equal treatment of workers irrespective of race.

We will maintain and strengthen our utter condemnation of apartheid, a system repugnant to the values we hold dear. But we continue to believe that we should try to communicate with South Africa and all South Africans. Only in this way can we hope to impress on the white community there the imperative need for early and far-reaching changes.

We shall continue to insist that the South African government must begin to take serious steps to dismantle apartheid, in the recognition that, if we do not, not only will the risks of explosion grow and our own credibility in Africa be undermined, but also human rights will continue to be denied in the most ruthless manner. □

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