



CHALLENGED COMMONWEALTH? THE DECOLONISATION OF RHODESIA

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Until the 1970s the Commonwealth of Nations was not an international organisation like any other. Its institutionalisation was still in process, and it had not been given a true meaning outside the association with its founder. In the 1960s, in spite of institutional changes, the Commonwealth remained the result of a decolonisation policy, rather than a true actor of international relations. The Rhodesian crisis happened at a time when the Commonwealth was institutionally vulnerable, as it was trying to assimilate the result of Britain's decolonisation policy in Africa and to find a meaning for itself beyond the reference to the imperial past.

What is commonly called the Rhodesian crisis covers a period which started with the unilateral declaration of independence [UDI] of the Rhodesian White minority government on 11 November 1965. But UDI was only the climax of turbulent and ambiguous relations between the territory and the imperial power. Because it emphasised the limits of imperial policy and put the decolonisation policy to the test, the Rhodesian crisis did not only have an impact on Rhodesia itself, but also on the Commonwealth.

The aim of this article is to show that the Rhodesian crisis was as much about finding a solution to the political and institutional crisis which opposed Britain and her rebel colony as about defining the meaning of Britain's decolonisation policy and of the Commonwealth, through a confrontation between the new Commonwealth that was emerging in the 1960s and Britain. The Rhodesian issue therefore goes far beyond the first dimension in so far as it questioned the very principles which had guided the decolonisation of the Empire.

After setting the historical background to understand why this colony quickly became marginal within the Empire, and more and more at odds with the evolution of the principles of the imperial policy after the Second World War, the article will analyse the reaction of Commonwealth members, the balance of power inside the organisation during the debates over Rhodesia and the way the Commonwealth's Rhodesian crisis was ended without the Rhodesian issue being actually solved.

I. Growing incompatibility: Rhodesia and the Commonwealth

An ambiguous status within the Empire

Rhodesia had a very particular position within the Empire. Indeed, the territory was never under direct control from London. Upon annexation in 1923, the new territory was given Crown Colony status and was granted self-government. The settlers directly took over from the British South African Company, which had ruled the territory since its creation. In spite of this legal status, Southern Rhodesia was a self-governing territory and a *de facto* dominion. For example, the territory fell into the scope of the Dominion Office which was dedicated to co-ordinating relations between Britain and the settler colonies and was never meant to be an administrator of the Empire like the Colonial Office. To add to the confusion, Rhodesia was invited to the imperial conferences which gathered the members of the British Commonwealth in the inter-war years, though only as an observer.

In spite of the rather extensive reserve powers the British government enjoyed under Southern Rhodesia's 1923 constitution, the autonomous government of the territory had been able to carry out policies which entrenched racial discrimination between the settler minority and the African majority. The principles of Britain's imperial policy as the Colonial Office developed them in the inter-war years were therefore never implemented in Southern Rhodesia.

The first and most significant piece of legislation in this respect was the Native Land Apportionment Act, which was adopted by the Rhodesian parliament in 1930. It reserved 50% of the arable lands for purchase by the White population, while 22% were reserved for purchase by the indigenous population. As trustee, the British government had the power to oppose,

through the Governor, laws which were detrimental to native populations. [PALLEY : 237]. The British government did not censor the bill, though dedicating more than half among the best arable lands for the sole use of the White population represented a rather unfair deal for the African population [PALMER : 147]. Nevertheless, the British government officials did discuss the bill, and insisted upon the need to add a “purely formal” amendment in order “to make it clear that, just as the natives will not be permitted to own or occupy land etc. in the proposed non-native ‘areas’ so non-natives will not be allowed to do so in the proposed native ‘areas’ ” [DO 35/354/3]. Though such an amendment did not actually change anything for the Black population, the fact that the subject was actually discussed and dealt with tended to show that the British government had not completely relinquished its role as trustee to the indigenous population. At the same time, the precautions taken also pointed to the British government’s growing concern about its own legitimacy to intervene in Southern Rhodesia’s affairs. Though it is not to be ignored that there were some converging views between British officials and Southern Rhodesian politicians, the British governments were nevertheless raising questions about the compatibility between Britain’s role as trustee and the new Southern Rhodesian policy [GRAY : 48-54].

Throughout the 1930s, when amalgamation between Southern Rhodesia and Northern Rhodesia (a Crown colony with a significant, though smaller, settler population, but for which the Colonial Office was responsible) was discussed, the issues of the dominant presence of White settlers in Southern Africa and of the parallel evolution of Britain’s imperial policy was a cause for concern.

The [revival of the] question of the amalgamation of Northern with Southern Rhodesia now is apparently due to the publication of the recent white Paper on Native policy in East Africa. The opposition of the Northern Rhodesia settlers to this policy has it seems led them to engineer the present request for amalgamation of Northern and Southern Rhodesia in order to enable them to escape from the native policy laid down in the white paper. [DO 35/423/5]

The British government was well aware at the time that Southern Rhodesia was more and more out of the scope of the imperial policy concerning the condition of the native population in Africa. Indeed, joining Southern

Rhodesia would have been a way for Northern Rhodesia to escape a policy based upon the principle that the interests of the native populations should be paramount [Cmd. 3573]. Nevertheless, in spite of this situation, the British government did not consider it had abdicated its role as trustee to the African population in Southern Rhodesia.

It may be desirable to make it clear that His Majesty's Government could not contemplate, in any circumstances that can be foreseen at present, completely relinquishing their responsibilities in regard to the native population of Northern Rhodesia. We are not prepared to do so at present even in regard to Southern Rhodesia... [DO 35/424/3]

The subject of amalgamation between Southern Rhodesia and Northern Rhodesia in the inter-war years raised a number of issues concerning the situation of the native population in Southern Rhodesia, as the gap between Britain's imperial policy and the Southern Rhodesian regime kept on growing throughout the 1930s. In 1934 for example, segregation was further entrenched as the Southern Rhodesian assembly passed the Industrial Conciliation Act, which reserved most skilled positions for the Whites.

Mr MacDonald [Colonial Secretary] said that the Colonial office policy was that natives should be free to advance to the highest posts in the administrative services, not only in the native areas but in the European areas also. Mr Huggins [Southern Rhodesia's Prime Minister] said that the Southern Rhodesia policy was due to the fact that the natives were not at present sufficiently reliable to be entrusted with responsible work. Sir Thomas Inskip [Dominion Secretary] agreed that at present there might be a lack of good material and that the inefficiency of the native might for the time being exclude him from general employment in the administrative service; but it was a very different matter to state definitely that certain posts in the Government Service should always be reserved for Europeans. [DO 121/97, July 1939]

This excerpt well illustrates the fact that the British government was more and more opposed to entrenching racial segregation in the colonies because it was contrary to its own imperial policy, while the Southern Rhodesian government was aiming at the opposite direction.

By the eve of the Second World War, it had become obvious that the British and Southern Rhodesian governments were pledged to different kinds of policies concerning the Native population. Britain's policy had evolved from Lord Passfield's memorandum on Native policy in Eastern Africa to Lord Hailey's report which stated that Africans should be given more responsibility in the conduct of the affairs of their own territories, implying that race was not a relevant criterion to determine who should exercise political power:

the maintenance of indirect rule is incompatible with the growth of a large educated native population. [...] the educated African will not endure to accept orders from his inferior in civilisation; he will not be content to see the government of his country in hands less qualified than his own, and he will not tolerate a judicial system that does not give the guarantees of British justice. [CO 847/13/16]

The British government never agreed to amalgamate the two territories of Southern Rhodesia and Northern Rhodesia mostly because of the native policy [HYAM & HENSHAW : 200]. At the same time, it never exerted its reserve power in Southern Rhodesia, mainly for fear of throwing Southern Rhodesia in the arms of South Africa and of losing influence in the region [DO 35/424/2]. The Southern Rhodesian government skilfully used these considerations to defend its policies and singularity in the name of the greatest imperial interest [DO 121/97, June 1939], making once again its position utterly ambiguous in the Empire.

Nevertheless, the British government did not give Southern Rhodesia full Dominion status and the status quo, though unsatisfactory, prevailed. Therefore, from the 1930s on, not only was Southern Rhodesia not submitted to the evolution of imperial principles for the colonies, but it was not concerned by the Statute of Westminster, which clarified British Commonwealth membership, either. Southern Rhodesia's status was therefore blurred, half way between that of a colony and that of a dominion, at the intersection of both policies.

Still imperial but no longer colonial: the evolution of Britain's imperial policy

The British government's imperial policy which was devised in the inter-war years aimed at extending the concept of the British Commonwealth to the whole Empire. Indeed, with Lord Hailey's report, Britain's attitude towards the African population went from a mere protective attitude to a more proactive one, aimed at enabling the local native peoples to govern themselves according to British values, applying the principles set out by Lord Durham in the 19th century and carried out in the settlement colonies since [HYAM 2010: 233]. Granting Southern Rhodesia full dominion status or independence implied a complete overhaul of the way the territory was governed to put it in compliance with Britain's imperial policy in the colonies, particularly after the Second World War. The Central African federation scheme, which eventually gathered Southern Rhodesia, Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland, was also conceived in this perspective by the British government, though the Rhodesian settlers, to the North and to the South of the Zambezi, had a completely different outlook:

Mr Clark, after studying Central African relations during his time in Salisbury, has always emphasised that by wise influence through the medium of the Central African council we can do much to encourage Southern Rhodesians to move gradually towards our conception of native policy. We believe that by strengthening the Central African co-ordinating machinery, we could exercise a more powerful influence. [CO 537/3608].

After the Second World War, Britain's imperial policy had evolved into a decolonisation policy and was more and more incompatible with colonial situations where a White, colonial minority governed over a vast majority of native African peoples. As the head of the African department of the Colonial Office, Andrew Cohen, stated it, "we are in fact at the end of the period during which we could rely on the White man's prestige to govern Africa" [CO 847/35/6].

After the war, colonial interests and imperial interests had therefore become clearly separated, not to say incompatible. From then on, negotiations over the independence of Southern Rhodesia were to be influenced by the ultimate objective of Britain's decolonisation policy: building new,

postcolonial relations with the future independent territories from the Empire that would make the Commonwealth as valuable an asset for Britain's prestige as the colonial Empire had been. Decolonising the Empire did not mean disposing of the Empire altogether, but disposing of the colonial shape of the Empire by changing the relationship between the metropolis and the former colonies from one of coercion to one of free association. The idea of building a postcolonial Empire was still present in the mid-1950s:

we may have faith that countries which have inherited, whether by blood or by upbringing, the British traditions and outlook on life will be more likely to work for peace and to exercise a healthy influence in international affairs. They will be able to do so more effectively if they are linked together in a single political association. [...] Their common past makes it likely that there will be a broad similarity in their approach to major international problems. This is the important quality which all the independent members of the Commonwealth have in common. [CAB 134/786]

This decolonisation policy was not envisaged in the short term, but as a process by which the territories would be made economically viable and the African populations trained to govern according to British values and principles. Such a policy was supposed to support Britain's influence in the world beyond the end of the colonial Empire.

Britain's commitment to such a decolonisation policy may also explain her governments' reluctance to grant independence – and give access to the Commonwealth – to a territory which had the potential of becoming a new South Africa and could jeopardise the building of privileged postcolonial relationships with the future independent states and their subsequent membership of the Commonwealth. The value of the Commonwealth for Britain was therefore an important aspect in her decision not to grant independence to Southern Rhodesia without any reform being carried out:

As you know, we accept that the ultimate responsibility for the decision on independence rests with the British Government; but as I explained to you, we are not prepared to take action which might precipitate resignations from the Commonwealth. I know that you have put forward your proposals in a genuine desire to be helpful.

However, I am sure you will realise that most, if not all commonwealth Governments would not consider that your proposals represented any significant advance – I think all of them would in fact take that view. Your proposals would therefore do nothing to reduce the likelihood of a crisis within the Commonwealth if we were to grant independence on that basis. [Cmnd. 2807]

The successive British governments' refusal to grant Southern Rhodesia full Dominion status or independence before the territory committed itself to the principles of Britain's imperial policy which would have allowed it to join the new multiracial Commonwealth of Nations ended up in Southern Rhodesia's government unilaterally declaring its independence from Britain on 11 November 1965.

II. A non-consensual Commonwealth

The meaning of the Commonwealth

By the end of the 1950s, it had become obvious that the pace of Britain's decolonisation policy in Africa had to be accelerated as a result of the anti-imperial trend in the international community and of the growing momentum of nationalist movements in Africa. The idea of a preparatory phase was abandoned in favour of immediate independence in order not to alienate the new nationalist elite which was bound to take over power from Britain.

This change of pace did not affect the meaning and aim of the decolonisation policy. The Commonwealth was still considered as a safety net not only for Britain, but also for the new African states. For Britain, it was supposed to make for the loss of the Empire by keeping privileged links with the former territories of the Empire and exert a certain influence on them. In a Cold War context, this was all the more important for Britain to show she could rally a growing number of states, or at least be instrumental in containing the expansion of communism. For the newly independent states which made their first steps in the international arena, it was a way of smoothing a brutal, unprepared transition from full dependence to independence. In both cases, the Commonwealth was a way to de-personalise their dependence, either on the former imperial power or on the former Empire.

By 1965, half Commonwealth members were African, whereas at the beginning of the decade there were only two African members. The apparent success of Britain's decolonisation policy which could be measured in terms of Commonwealth membership, tended to blur the actual meaning and importance of the Commonwealth. Indeed, far from supporting British positions, the Commonwealth had harshly attacked Britain's policy during the Suez crisis in 1956 or its support for South Africa when the latter finally decided not to join the Commonwealth again after becoming a republic in 1961. These two major events, even though they definitely cast doubts about Britain's actual power on the international scene and about the interest of the Commonwealth, did not go as far as fully redefining Britain's relation to the association. When Dean Acheson, the US Secretary of State, said in 1962 "Britain has lost an Empire but has not yet found a role" [BRINKLEY : 176], he reflected the difficulty for Britain to break with the idea of a post-colonial Empire which had underlain her imperial policy since the mid-19th century. The Commonwealth had actually no meaning for Britain beyond the imperial policy of decolonisation:

... it is worth mentioning that the concept of the new Commonwealth was a remarkable cushion for British public opinion and enabled it to accept, without bitterness or recrimination, the loss of an Empire and the relative change in Britain's position as a world power. [DO 161/262]

The arrival to power of a Commonwealth-enthusiastic Labour Party¹ in 1964, at a time when the outgoing Conservative party in power was raising questions about the interest of keeping Commonwealth links so strong, though without actually coming up with any firm conclusion [DO 161/262], cut short any reappraisal of the importance of the Commonwealth for Britain's international power. The interest of the Labour Party for the Commonwealth clearly had a third-worldist dimension, but was above all derived from the heritage of Attlee's government, which brought out the 1949 landmark reform by which allegiance to the British sovereign as head of state was no longer a condition for membership. In this perspective, the

¹ "Though we shall seek to achieve closer links with our European neighbours, the Labour Party is convinced that the first responsibility of a British Government is still to the Commonwealth." [LABOUR PARTY, 1964]

Labour government coming to power in 1964 was in keeping with the decolonisation policy of their predecessors. The Wilson government was accused by Richard Crossman of being engaged in “futile attempts to keep Great Britain great” [HYAM 2008 : 336]. And indeed, even in the midst of the Rhodesian crisis, on the eve of one of the most difficult Commonwealth meetings in 1966, the government was still having the leadership of the Commonwealth in mind: “In any case we cannot surely give way to African blackmail and retain leadership of the Commonwealth” [PREM 13/1124].

For the African countries joining the Commonwealth upon independence at the beginning of the 1960s, the meaning of the organisation was also ambiguous. The link with the past was obvious, but what it actually meant for the future was much less. Unlike former Asian colonies, joining the Commonwealth was for the newly independent African states a kind of routinised process automatically following their independence, just as their desire for independence had been somewhat forestalled by the imperial power which massively transferred power to the African colonies from 1959 on.

The Commonwealth did not have the same meaning for all of its members. It was defined as a multi-racial association for the first time in 1961 after South Africa left, and as the achievement of Britain’s decolonisation policy, it was a postcolonial organisation. But in their conception of the Commonwealth and the association it entailed, the members had obviously not moved on from the past: it was still an association between a former colonial power and former colonies. As the decolonisation policy was finding its limits in Rhodesia, the question of the meaning of the Commonwealth became a major stake of the Rhodesian crisis.

Two conceptions of decolonisation

By the mid-1960s, as the bulk of the African territories had become independent states, Southern Rhodesia was still a dependency. When the Central African federation was dismantled, Southern Rhodesia was given a new constitution (the 1961 constitution) which fell short of an independence constitution. Britain remained responsible for the territory, and particularly for African affairs. As more and more African colonies gained their independence, frustration grew in Southern Rhodesian ranks and the Rhodesian Front won the December 1962 general election on a platform

promising independence for the territory without changing the political regime. By the mid-1960s, the two governments were nowhere near a solution to the Rhodesian deadlock.

On the other hand, if Britain did not want to alienate the White Rhodesians who were crucial in finding a peaceful, consensual solution, she did not want to alienate the Commonwealth either. Though consistent in the spirit of Britain's decolonisation policy, those two objectives were growing more and more at odds with each other:

4. We are in a dilemma. We have two aims: one short-term and one long-term.
 - (a) Our short-term aim is to prevent a unilateral declaration. The consequences of such a declaration would not be merely disastrous for Rhodesia but would precipitate a grave crisis for us throughout Africa and in the United Nations. All indications are that African Commonwealth Governments would not in that event regard limited economic action as a sufficient response on our part and that they would press us to send troops. As we are not prepared to intervene militarily, we are liable to be widely held to be condoning a white Rhodesian rebellion. [...]
 - (b) Our long-term aim is to secure conditions under which independence can be granted on a basis acceptable to all sections of the population. If we appear to be retreating from this position, we run the risk of alienating African opinion in Rhodesia itself with the rest of the Commonwealth and the United Nations. On the other hand if we give the white Rhodesians the impression that we are determined to push ahead too far and too fast we shall certainly defeat our own short-term objective of preventing unilateral declaration." [CAB 21/5512]

Britain could not grant immediate independence to Southern Rhodesia without jeopardising her whole decolonisation policy because it would have undermined the Commonwealth. At the same time, though responsible, she had no more democratic legitimacy to force a decolonisation policy upon a government to which she had already transferred political power than when it came to censoring the Land Apportionment Act in the 1930s. In Britain's post-war conception, the fact of having transferred power to Southern Rhodesia did not entitle this territory to independence.

The problem raised by the decolonisation of Rhodesia tended to show that for Britain, independence and decolonisation covered two distinguished

concepts. Decolonisation was conceived as a process by which an existing political system was changed or reformed according to a number of values, be they British or Commonwealth values (as for Britain, British and Commonwealth values were still difficult to distinguish). The White population of Rhodesia was therefore to be considered as a part of the population of the colony, on a par with the African population, with no more rights than the latter:

We are dealing with communities that are different in almost every way except that they are resident, settled and permanent communities in the area in which they live. We must start on the basis that all these communities are African communities, that there are white Africans as well as black Africans, and that they not only have to learn to live together but—what is really more difficult—they have to live together during this transition period of adjustment from an automatic European superiority to one of real partnership and equality between the races. [HANSARD, 24 July 1952]

On the other hand, for the Rhodesian government as well as for the African states, decolonisation was more of a formality that was synonymous with transfer of power and independence. Such a conception derived from a view that the White population was not part of the rest of the colonial people, be they either considered as superior (in the White supremacist rationale), or alien (in the anti-colonial rhetoric of some Panafricanists).

By trying to defend its decolonisation policy, the British government was bound to satisfy no one: neither the Rhodesian government, which had no intention of reforming itself on the short term, or postpone an independence which they thought they deserved more than any other African territory; nor the African states of the Commonwealth which considered that decolonisation meant outright transfer of power to the African majority, a vision derived from the way they themselves had been granted independence. As for Britain, her view of decolonisation as a process tended to reveal a conception of the Commonwealth as the continuation of the same imperial policy by other means, i.e. spreading British values and principles of government and trying to influence the newly independent states this time not prior, but after independence:

To suggest that the old concept of the Commonwealth no longer has any meaning does not in my view mean that there is not a continuing

value to this country in our Commonwealth connections. On the contrary, I believe there is. Our past connections, the present use of the English language in Commonwealth countries, the widespread and increasing educational links and the many other links e.g. between professions, all seem to me to offer us a potent source of influence, which is of value to this country. [...] I suggest that there might be advantage in carrying out a study of what a new concept of the Commonwealth on these lines, which would of course be very much the culmination of a process lasting over the last ten to fifteen years, should involve ~~constitutionally~~ institutionally, where United Kingdom interests would lie in it and what policy we should pursue to obtain the maximum advantage for the United Kingdom from it." [CAB 21/5488]

On the eve of the Rhodesian crisis, not only was there no consensus on what the Commonwealth, and the association it entailed, meant, but neither Britain nor the African members had a truly post-imperial vision of the Commonwealth and of their relationships.

III. The Commonwealth's Rhodesian crisis

The opposition over NIBMAR ("No Independence Before Majority Rule")

During the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' meetings which immediately followed UDI, the opposition between the British government and the newly independent members of the Commonwealth essentially crystallised on the adoption of the NIBMAR slogan as a guideline for Britain's decolonisation policy in Rhodesia. Like his Conservative predecessor, Harold Wilson was committed to five principles which had been set out prior to UDI.

- 1) The principle and intention of unimpeded progress to majority rule, already enshrined in the 1961 Constitution, would have to be maintained and guaranteed.
- 2) There would also have to be guarantees against retrogressive amendment of the Constitution.
- 3) There would have to be immediate improvement in the political status of the African population.
- 4) There would have to be progress towards ending racial discrimination.

5) The British Government would need to be satisfied that any basis proposed for independence was acceptable to the people of Rhodesia as a whole.

[PAD/C152/5/2]

None of these principles ever mentioned the need to establish a majority government as a condition for independence. In spite of African pressure, Harold Wilson firmly refused to go beyond the five principles and adopt the NIBMAR slogan. After UDI in January 1966, he accepted to add a very consensual sixth principle by which the British government was to "ensure that, regardless of race, there is no oppression of majority by minority or of minority by majority." The British government opposed NIBMAR because the concept of a majority was too ambiguous: did it mean democratic majority or racial majority? About the NIBMAR slogan, Malcolm MacDonald called the attention of the government to

the tendency to insert "African" when he was last in London, and suggested that we should do what might be possible to discourage this tendency as being contrary to the multi-racial approach which is fundamental to British Government policy on Rhodesia... [PREM 13/1751]

Wilson therefore stuck to the obligation to grant independence to a government "acceptable to the people of Rhodesia as a whole" which was considered as much more inclusive and racial-blind than the idea of "majority". The fifth principle corresponded to the idea of decolonisation as a continuous process. Of equal importance was the fact that it also opened the option of granting independence to a White minority government as long as the Rhodesian population as a whole agreed to it. As Harold Wilson stated it during the September conference:

... if the people of Rhodesia as a whole were prepared to accept an independence settlement which did not give majority rule at the outset, but guaranteed steady progress towards majority rule, they would be able to say so [...] Under those circumstances there would be no independence before majority rule if the people of Rhodesia as a whole were found to be opposed to it. [CPM (66/2), 9th meeting]

From the British viewpoint, such an option was far more likely to convince the Rhodesian government to accept a decolonisation process. But this was totally unacceptable for the African states of the Commonwealth, for whom Rhodesia's decolonisation could only be conceived as a reversal of the balance of power. The fact that the British government refused to carry out a policy supported by the majority of the Commonwealth members appeared as a major setback – not to say humiliation – for their own nascent international role and even as a mark of contempt reviving the old relation between an arrogant imperial power and subjected peoples. The opposition between Britain and the African members of the Commonwealth evolved from a divergence on the policy to implement in Rhodesia to an opposition over principles, each party accusing the other of not being truly committed to postcolonial values. For the African members, NIBMAR was not just valid for Rhodesia: majority rule also had to be implemented in the Commonwealth if it was to make any sense as a postcolonial association. But the Commonwealth, though postcolonial, was never a collegial decision-making body and Rhodesia came under Britain's sovereignty. The ambiguity about what the Commonwealth actually meant and entailed was therefore one of the reasons why the Rhodesian crisis reverberated on the Commonwealth in the same colonial terms and in the same violent, confrontational way.

Britain in the dock: the trial of colonialism

When the Rhodesian government unilaterally declared its independence, Britain was condemned by her fellow Commonwealth members not only for not having done everything possible to avoid a UDI, but also for her role as an imperial power which had failed its responsibilities towards the native populations and allowed an ongoing colonial situation to last. Even prior to UDI, the African members of the Commonwealth had laid a particular emphasis on Britain's responsibility as a former imperial power, like the Zambian President, Kenneth Kaunda:

§ 18: I sympathise with the British people and the British government in the difficulties which lie ahead. But Britain made the decision to become a colonial power and burdened herself with these problems. If a nation chooses to become a colonial power, she must accept

responsibility for ensuring the right, the interests and the future of the people of the colonies. [SG 172/ZAM]

Even though no British government ever granted Dominion status or independence to Rhodesia, the failure of Britain's decolonisation policy considerably weakened her credentials as a modern postcolonial power inside the Commonwealth. The Rhodesian issue somehow became the debt of colonialism that Britain had to settle.

The two Commonwealth Prime Ministers' meetings organised after UDI, in 1966, were exceptional in the history of the Commonwealth. For example, the Lagos conference, which was organised immediately after UDI in January 1966 was a case in point: there was only one topic on its agenda which concerned the internal affairs of one of the members; it was organised for the first time not in London, but in an African state, Nigeria; and it was the first conference not to be organised by British services but by the newly created Commonwealth Secretariat.² Harold Wilson considered in his memoirs that the aim of these two conferences were to set up Britain's trial [WILSON : 195], not Rhodesia's. The seating plan of the Lagos conference tends to confirm this impression as the British Prime Minister was to sit in the middle of the table, flanked by the Zambian representative, facing the Nigerian chairman and the Secretary General, and surrounded by the other members [CPM (66) Lagos]. The other post-UDI summit conference of September 1966 was supposed to assess the results of the economic sanction policy Britain had presented as likely to overthrow the rebel regime "in weeks not months" during the Lagos conference. The atmosphere of this conference, which was held in London, was even worse as it confirmed the failure of Britain's solution to put an end to the rebellion.

A racially divided Commonwealth

The African members of the Commonwealth justified their own legitimacy to have a say in the decolonisation of Rhodesia by their proximity to the Rhodesian Africans. For example, Albert Margai, Sierra Leone's president,

² The member states agreed upon the creation of an independent Commonwealth Secretariat during the June 1965 Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting. Arnold Smith, a Canadian diplomat, was appointed Secretary General.

argued that only Africans could understand the stakes of the Rhodesian situation.

Answers such as this took no account of how deeply African felt on this whole subject: no one but an African could understand this [CPM (66), 3rd Meeting]

...no doubt it was also unfortunate for them that Rhodesia had not achieved independence before the Commonwealth had acquired many new members who had the interests of the Africans at heart. [CPM (66/2), 5th meeting]

By denying Britain and the rest of the old Commonwealth the ability to settle the matter in a fair way for the African population, some African members tended to operate a symbolic division in racial terms reflecting the same kind of separation as between the peoples of Rhodesia. In 1966, the discussions took a more and more colonial inspiration, in an organisation which was supposed to be postcolonial. Wilson was also accused of siding with the White minority in Rhodesia and condoning the rebellion to entrench the status quo. During the Lagos conference, the Zambian vice-president, Reuben Kamanga, considered that:

Behind the present crisis in Rhodesia lay ideas of racialism, colonialism, economic imperialism and the kind of sentimentalism that found expression in the concept of 'kith and kin'. [CPM (66), 2nd Meeting]

Pointing to considerations of "kith and kin" to define the way the Rhodesian situation had so far been handled amounted to accusing Britain of racialism and to introducing racial division inside the Commonwealth. Harold Wilson was actually directly accused of being a racist by the Zambian Foreign Minister after the September 1966 conference [PAD 152/3/51/02, CPM London, 5th meeting]. Britain's policy was deeply resented by the African members of the Commonwealth and assimilated to that of the Rhodesian government itself. Albert Margai even compared Harold Wilson to Ian Smith, the Rhodesian Prime Minister.

All this did not encourage him or give him confidence in the handling of the situation by Mr. Wilson (he almost said Mr. Smith: the two seemed to him almost synonymous). [CPM (66/2), 5th meeting]

In all these speeches, it was more Britain's role as a colonial power than Britain's role as a postcolonial member of the Commonwealth which was criticised. But the frustration generated by Britain's refusal to use force against the regime or to adopt the NIBMAR slogan only blurred Britain's position and revived the old coloniser / colonised opposition. Never before the Rhodesian crisis had the Commonwealth been so divided along racial lines. The pressure exerted by the African states on Britain during the two 1966 conferences aimed as much at forcing solution on Britain as at reversing the balance of power inside the Commonwealth simply by turning the tables. Forcing a solution upon the former colonial power was also a way of making their own independence and equality of status a reality by imposing an African majority government, the same African majority government Britain refused to impose as a pre-condition for the independence of Rhodesia. The racial division of the Commonwealth also tended to show that the association between Britain and the African states did not go beyond the reference to their past relations.

Getting beyond colonial struggle?

If Rhodesia had long been considered as likely to fail the decolonisation policy and the building of privileged relations with the new Commonwealth members, the Commonwealth itself was more and more considered as a constraint on Britain which was likely to fail any solution to the Rhodesian issue. If Wilson presented a rather low profile during the Lagos conference, trying to win the confidence of his fellow-members on his economic sanction policy, he joined his African counterparts on the coloniser/colonised battleground, though not in the role he was expected to play:

Modification of British policy to meet Commonwealth views are accepted only as a basis for demanding more. He was placed in an impossible position vis-à-vis his domestic public opinion, a position that no Prime Minister around the table could tolerate. All the countries represented at the table had gained their independence from Britain. What was sometimes overlooked was that Britain too was independent. "We are being treated as if we were a bloody colony". There were indignant protests and Mr. Wilson said: "All right, I withdraw the 'bloody' ". The Meeting adjourned at 10.15 p.m. [PAD 152/3/51/02, 2nd meeting]

First, he countered accusations of still being a backward colonial power by reminding quite undiplomatically that the African states did not gain their independence on their own, but that it was given to them. In doing so, he crushed the myth of the liberation of colonised peoples and took the credit for being a true positive actor of decolonisation. He also hinted that decolonisation was not imposed on Britain but freely consented as part of her imperial policy. Then by claiming he was being treated like a colony, he reversed the roles and accused the African members of behaving like the colonial power they were indicting. The postcolonial consensus upon which the Commonwealth was built was therefore broken as both Britain and the African states reverted to colonial attitudes, implying that their relations were not inspired by considerations about equality of status and mutual respect, but by a colonial-type struggle. Wilson also showed that he was even ready to jeopardise the Commonwealth to defend Britain's position, which marked a change in Britain's priorities. While there had been four Commonwealth conferences between 1964 and 1966, Commonwealth heads of government did not meet again until January 1969, mainly because Britain was reluctant to face her Commonwealth partners again while two rounds of talks (in 1966 and in 1968) with the Rhodesian regime were still bearing the hope that a negotiated solution could be found.

The Rhodesian crisis brought about a crisis inside the Commonwealth which ended up in a reappraisal of what the Commonwealth meant for Britain:

In calculating our interests, the maintenance of the Commonwealth association is an important factor to be weighed, but not the only one. It is important, therefore, that other Commonwealth countries should not be lulled by the impression that, however offensive and difficult they may be, Britain can always be relied on in the last resort to ensure that the Commonwealth is sustained. We are not prepared to sustain the Commonwealth at any price to ourselves. This has become apparent to other Commonwealth countries in the course of the Rhodesian negotiations and has had a healthy effect; they themselves have been forced to ask whether the break-up of the Commonwealth would be a matter of comparative indifference to them and have answered in the negative. [CAB 129/129]

The British government did not contemplate to leave the Commonwealth but questioned its importance in Britain's identity. From the much dreamt-of post-Empire, the Commonwealth was now considered for what it was, i.e. an international organisation that was not vital but merely useful. The Rhodesian crisis, because of the issues it raised and the reaction it provoked inside the Commonwealth, was therefore instrumental in helping Britain to shape her identity beyond the reference to the Empire. With Britain's overt and official detachment from the Commonwealth, the African members no longer suspected the organisation of still being British or dominated by Britain. Britain emerged from the Rhodesian crisis as a regular member: as she did not claim any leadership or special influence on the organisation, her position could no longer be assimilated to that of the imperial power whose domination was overthrown by the liberation and independence movements. The Rhodesian crisis actually helped Commonwealth members to draw a line between the imperial past and the postcolonial future.

During the next Commonwealth conference, in January 1969, the attitude of the Tanzanian president, Julius Nyerere, well illustrates the new postcolonial consensus the members were to build their future relations upon. Nyerere had broken diplomatic relations with Britain in 1965, had not attended the 1966 Commonwealth meetings and had strongly condemned Britain's policy in Rhodesia. His attitude in 1969 as he came back to Commonwealth meetings was more conciliatory.

Dr. Nyerere said that he was not arguing for immediate majority rule in Rhodesia but for the principle of no independence before majority rule. If Britain and Mr. Smith were saying that the people of Rhodesia were not ready for independence, and that in the meantime the colonial situation should be maintained, he himself would not disagree on principle although he might disagree on techniques, timing, etc.
[CPM (69), 5th meeting]

By considering things at the level of principles, Nyerere admitted that Britain and the African states actually shared the same values and objectives in the devising of their solution to the Rhodesian issue. He went as far as accepting the possibility of a continuation of colonial rule until majority rule was established, which, from the perspective of a freedom fighter, would have been unconceivable in the first half of the 1960s. This meant that

imperial rule by Britain, and thus Britain's decolonisation policy, was considered as compatible with the principles shared by all Commonwealth members. Nyerere's attitude during the 1969 conference, which was lauded by Harold Wilson in his memoirs [WILSON : 594], was certainly instrumental in bringing together Commonwealth members as he recognised that, in spite of their deep disagreement over policy [and particularly over the last round of talks between Britain and the Smith regime which, he considered, could only entrench the status quo], the principles of Britain's decolonisation policy and the Africans' concerns about the future of Rhodesia were not different in kind.

As a conclusion it can be said that through the Rhodesian crisis, and in spite of it being unsettled at the beginning of the 1970s, Britain and the African states somehow decolonised their own relations and in doing so, they made the Commonwealth move forward from an association mainly defined through the reference to the imperial past to a fully-fledged international organisation. Their mutual interest in continuing the Commonwealth was stronger than the suspicions linked to their own past identities, which the Rhodesian issue had revived. The fact that the members stopped struggling over who should actually "own" the Commonwealth paved the way to a new, independent definition of the organisation. The Rhodesian crisis acted as a catalyser of the postcolonial transition of the Commonwealth. As a matter of fact, the first declaration of Commonwealth principles, the Singapore declaration of 1971, both symbolised the emergence of the Commonwealth as a truly independent international organisation and the new unity between members beyond past struggles and stakes.

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