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National Headquarters:

JAN SMUTS HOUSE
P.O. Box 31596
Braamfontein
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Brief Report No. 21

THE-1979 COMMONWEALTH CONFERENCE - THE TRIUMPH OF QUIET DIPLOMACY

The Commonwealth has, in the past two decades, faced several major upheavals which threatened its very existence. The omens for the Commonwealth Conference held in Lusaka in early August 1979 were probably as bad as in 1961 when South Africa's continued membership caused deep divisions in the association. Once again, the Commonwealth has confounded the prophets of doom and emerged from the Lusaka Conference with a degree of cohesion which was considered virtually unattainable before the meeting. This is largely attributable to the painstaking diplomatic process which preceded the Conference.

The diplomatic groundwork

The flood of predictions about a major split at the Lusaka Conference rested on the assumption that the British Conservative Government would be bent on making good its commitments regarding the lifting of sanctions against Zimbabwe Rhodesia, thus inviting a head-on collision with particularly the African member states who would countenance no such move.

The Tory election manifesto (the British general election was held on 3 May 1979) stated that the next British Government would have a duty to lift sanctions, return Rhodesia to legality and ensure international recognition, if the six principles, which all British governments have supported, "are fully satisfied after the present Rhodesian general election" (in April 1979). In the Tory view, only the sixth principle was still in question before the election, viz. that a Rhodesian settlement should be generally acceptable to the people as a whole. Mrs. Margaret Thatcher, during her election campaign, confirmed that a Conservative government "shall be honour bound" to lift sanctions and end the illegality, if Rhodesia conformed with the six principles. The Conservative Party's official observers at the Rhodesian election, led by Lord Boyd, found that the election was, in the prevailing circumstances, fair and free. The sixth principle was thus, in effect, met.

Opposed to the Tory stance was black Africa which recognised the Patriotic Front as the legitimate representatives of the Rhodesian people and which gave its blessing to the war against the Rhodesian regime.

Against this background, the Thatcher Government embarked on an extensive diplomatic offensive to avert a showdown over Zimbabwe Rhodesia at the Commonwealth Conference. Lord Harlech, a seasoned politician and diplomat, was despatched to Africa to seek common ground on Zimbabwe Rhodesia and to launch a new initiative aimed at an all party conference. Sir Antony Duff, a senior diplomat, was sent to sound out the Muzorewa Government. The British Government also cleared its Conference strategy with the Carter Administration and its partners in the European Economic Community.

As the Conference neared, Australia and New Zealand cautioned Britain on the dangers of recognising the Muzorewa government. The Australian and Canadian Prime Ministers also played their part in setting the scene for the Conference by visiting key African member states of the Commonwealth en route to Lusaka.

The "other" side was equally active on the diplomatic front. In May, a special delegation of Commonwealth High Commissioners in London warned the British Government against recognition of the Salisbury Government, pointing to the "political shockwaves" this could release. Prior to the Lusaka Conference, the five Frontline States and Nigeria reportedly formulated a secret three-point plan for economic and diplomatic sanctions against Britain and prepared a refusal to support any future British initiatives on Zimbabwe Rhodesia, if Mrs. Thatcher failed to give an unequivocal assurance that she would not lift sanctions or recognise the Muzorewa government at any time after the Commonwealth Conference.

There was, however, a conciliatory gesture : the six states did not oppose further round-table discussions between the various parties to the Zimbabwe Rhodesia conflict. Another encouraging sign for Britain was the Organisation of African Unity's Monrovia summit which, while recognising the Patriotic Front as the sole "legitimate" party, gave general support to the idea of new negotiations on Zimbabwe Rhodesia, in preference to the unyielding war - only solution advocated by the Patriotic Front. These conciliatory decisions were probably not unrelated to Britain's diplomatic endeavours outlined above.

It was very noticeable that Britain began toning down its previously stated commitments on Zimbabwe Rhodesia as the Lusaka Conference approached. First, the Thatcher Government let it be known that it had deferred any decision on the lifting of sanctions until after the Conference. Second, while reaffirming her determination to "proceed with vigour" to resolve the Zimbabwe Rhodesian logjam, Mrs. Thatcher acknowledged that "we must and will take account of the wider international implications". Third, Britain began insisting on a new condition for recognising the Muzorewa Government, viz. amendments to the constitution. This condition was apparently the result of Lord Harlech's talks with Black African leaders, where he reportedly found agreement on three main points : cognizance had to be taken of the changes in Zimbabwe Rhodesia following the April election; the country's constitution was unacceptable in certain respects; and a solution had to emanate from the British Government. No achievement on these matters was clearly no mean achievement for Lord Harlech. It however required Britain to shift its position, too.

The Lusaka deal

Mrs. Thatcher's address to the Commonwealth Conference seemed to confirm that the diplomatic ground had been carefully prepared. She told the 40-odd member nations that Britain's aim was to bring Zimbabwe Rhodesia to "legal independence on a basis that the Commonwealth and the international community as a whole will find acceptable". There was no suggestion of Britain lifting sanctions or recognising the Muzorewa Government.

President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania also made a remarkably conciliatory speech, which could hardly have been coincidental.

Against the background of these pronouncements and the preceding quiet diplomacy, it was not altogether surprising when, on the fourth day of the Conference, a basic formula for a Zimbabwe Rhodesian settlement was approved. It was devised by Mrs. Thatcher, President Nyerere, President Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia, Australia's Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser, Jamaica's Prime Minister Michael Manley and the Nigerian representative, Henry Adefope. The new outline noted that Britain had accepted

constitutional responsibility for granting legal independence to Zimbabwe Rhodesia under a revised majority rule constitution which had to be approved at a conference of all parties involved in the conflict. The constitution, it is important to mention, would include safeguards for minorities. The next step would then be free and fair elections under British authority and Commonwealth scrutiny.

Underlying the formula is clearly the idea that the Black African leaders would be able to persuade the Patriotic Front to attend the proposed constitutional talks and that Britain would manage to deliver the Muzorewa Government. In this, the various sides have already succeeded, with both the Patriotic Front and the Muzorewa Government agreeing to attend an all-party conference in London in September. The conference will really be the acid test of the Lusaka agreement, and it remains to be seen whether Britain and the African states would then also be able - or willing - to persuade or coerce the warring parties to come to an agreement on the constitution - and also subsequently to accept transitional arrangements.

Although the Lusaka agreement is yet to face its crucial test (and there are no substantial grounds for optimism about the prospects at this stage), this does not detract from the fact that it represented a significant diplomatic coup for Mrs. Thatcher at her first major international conference as Prime Minister. Perhaps the "Iron Lady" revealed the simple secret of her success when she told reporters in Lusaka: "I am not as hard as you thought".

Other Issues

It should finally be pointed out that although Zimbabwe Rhodesia dominated the Lusaka Conference, it was not the only issue discussed. The Commonwealth leaders spent several hours pondering the complexities of the political state of the world, and they paid particular attention to Southeast Asia, the boat people, the relationship between rich and poor nations and programmes for industrial and technical co-operation. Inevitably, South Africa and Namibia came in for some particularly harsh comment. A three-page Lusaka Declaration on Racism and Racial Prejudice pledged Commonwealth members to "work together for the eradication of the infamous policy of apartheid". South Africa was castigated for its "continued refusal" to implement the United Nations proposals for Namibia's independence, and the National Assembly in Windhoek was condemned to illegality.

DR. DEON GELDENHUYS

Assistant Director : SAIIA

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