

The Commonwealth Conference

CONFERENCE OF CONFLICT

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FROM March 1961 to September 1966 there were six conferences of Commonwealth Premiers, one every year except in 1963, but made up with two conferences in 1966. The long gap between the last two conferences was due to the continued desperate attempts of Harold Wilson to get a suitable 'formula' which Ian Smith would accept as a 'solution' for the illegal regime, which is based on white minority rule.

Harold Wilson was so confident that the complicated formula which emerged from the talks on board HMS Fearless last October would be acceptable to Ian Smith that he did not bother to postpone the date of the conference any further. In the event, Smith and his 'Cabinet' raised objection to some of the basic proposals put forward, and Wilson was obliged to face the conference without any agreement.

Rhodesia was the main issue of conflict in the conference of September 1966, taking up most of the time. The final communiqué then made clear that the great majority of Commonwealth Premiers were utterly opposed to the Wilson policy on Rhodesia. This time only two days were set aside for the conference discussion on Rhodesia, but during the eight days of January 7-15 there were many unofficial meetings, and in the last two days it was the most controversial subject which gave rise to fierce debate in drafting the final communiqué.

However, there was far more public interest in the activities outside the conference in opposition to the Wilson policy on Rhodesia than the discussion inside. The brazen step taken by Smith to order the illegal Rhodesian flag to fly above Rhodesia House in the Strand (not far from the British Parliament, and within sight of Government buildings and offices in Whitehall) caused deep resentment.

In response to the growing indignation, Jim Brookshaw, a leading young communist, made a precarious climb to the top and tore down the flag. The police restored it, but a few days later it was torn down again by two young climbers. This time it was witnessed by a huge demonstration which had marched from Hyde Park to occupy

Rhodesia House in protest. They were prevented by a massive police barrier, but it took several hours to disperse the demonstrators.

Before the first day of the conference there was an all-night vigil outside the hall, daily pickets in which Africans and British citizens joined hands, and a large group of well-known writers occupied Rhodesia House while the conference was in session. No less than 700 police were mobilised to guard the conference hall and to break up the numerous protest demonstrations. No wonder *The Times* correspondent in Rhodesia made the comment:

The conference did not attract great attention here, though the London demonstration outside Rhodesia House and South Africa House made headlines. (*The Times*, January 17, 1969)

What did the conference achieve on Rhodesia? It was known in advance that the British Government reserved its sole prerogative to deal with this problem. Commonwealth Premiers could express their views, but they had no right to decide British policy. All the same, even this was of considerable value, if only to underline once more that the Wilson policy was in open defiance of the majority of Commonwealth countries.

The 'Fearless' proposals were opposed by 23 out of the 28 Commonwealth countries at the conference—only Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Malawi, and Malta were in favour. True, there were some others (like Malaysia and Singapore) that made a somewhat conciliatory stand, but there was no doubt of the general view. This was made clear in the first reference in the final communiqué on Rhodesia, which condemned political repression of the Africans and the 'increasing trends towards an apartheid system' and made clear that the 'heads of government reiterated the principles and objectives affirmed at their four previous meetings.'

There was a forthright condemnation of the 'Fearless' proposals. They were declared 'unacceptable as the constitution of an independent Rhodesia, and should therefore be withdrawn.' But as soon as the conference was over, Wilson declared that 'the door was still open' and the proposals were still 'on the table' for Ian Smith to pick up at any time.

Wilson did not deny he was breaking the NIBMAR pledge ('no independence without majority rule') but again repeated the old confidence trick of aiming for 'a settlement consistent with the six principles laid down by successive British Governments.' There is nothing in these principles which guarantees 'unimpeded progress to majority rule.' Even if Smith took no steps to prevent this, it would take more than 30 years to achieve it in present conditions.

Wilson did make one small concession. If the proposed Royal Commission felt unable to decide whether the proposals met with the wishes 'of the Rhodesian people as a whole' it would be free to recommend any alternative method, including a referendum, to test Rhodesian opinion. The majority of Commonwealth Premiers gave a clear answer (recorded in the communiqué) to this empty gesture:

Many heads of government urged that this could only be carried out through the normal democratic process of election or referendum, and doubted whether adequate safeguards for free political expression and verification of the results could be provided as long as the rebel government remained in power.

President Kaunda still urged that British military force should be used to overthrow the illegal Smith regime, and again offered Zambia as a base for these military operations. President Nyerere warned that Tanzania would leave the Commonwealth if a settlement was made on the basis of the 'Fearless' proposals. At the same time, it seems clear that the Zimbabwe freedom fighters will intensify their armed liberation struggle to end white minority rule.

They are not alone. The weekend after the conference of Commonwealth Premiers there was a far more important conference in Khartoum, organised jointly by the Afro-Asian Solidarity Movement, the Liberation movements in southern Africa and in Portuguese Guinea, and the World Peace Council. It is only in the context of this united struggle that white minority rule will come to an end.

The conference of Commonwealth Premiers was not confined to discussions on Rhodesia. It approved the British-sponsored resolution of November 1967 on the Middle East, adopted by the UN Security Council. There was a general exchange on disarmament, but also serious concern on the military situation in south-east Asia; and Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore will have a conference in May to consider concerted action.

There were sharp exchanges on the problem of Asian immigration to Britain from East Africa. When their countries became independent they were urged to retain their British passports. The governments of Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, are pledged to a policy of 'Africanisation', but have long urged all non-Africans to become naturalised citizens of their country.

On almost every issue there is little or no unity within the Commonwealth. As long as Britain is the centre of a vast imperialist system there will be sharper conflicts, and the solution will only be found by united action of the millions within the Commonwealth against the common enemy.