

REPLY TO NIGERIA'S INVITATION TO CONFERENCE ON RHODESIA

STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER  
(The Rt. Hon. Sir Robert Menzies, Kt., Ch., Qc., Mp.)

I have written to the Prime Minister of Nigeria, the Rt. Hon. Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, informing him that, under the existing circumstances, Australia is not in favour of the convening of a special Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference on Rhodesia.

I told Sir Abubakar that, because of our deep respect for him, and for his high character and motives, we had given careful consideration to the invitation to the Conference. I then outlined the reasons for our attitude to the proposed conference.

I pointed out that we have publicly stated that we regard the Unilateral Declaration of Independence by the Smith Government as illegal.

We have refused diplomatic recognition of the new regime.

We continue to believe, and to say, that any constitutional settlement in Rhodesia must be on the basis of a steady progress towards majority rule and the removal of measures of racial discrimination.

We believe that in preparation for the achievement of an African majority there should be an active educational programme, to which many of us might contribute.

We have strongly supported the financial and economic sanctions imposed by Britain, and have ourselves imposed sanctions covering 93% of our Rhodesian imports.

We believe that, if extensive economic measures are adopted by a sufficient number of nations, the persuasive pressure so generated will induce a return to the Conference table.

But we are deeply and publicly opposed to the proposals, made by some Commonwealth members, for the use of armed force. We are not aware of any evidence that Rhodesia contemplates any armed attack upon any other country. We would regard the assembling of non-Rhodesian forces on the frontiers of Rhodesia as needlessly provocative and dangerous.

The vital interests of Zambia, for example, can be protected only if peace is maintained.

It is necessary to ask what the purposes or likely results of a special conference would be.

The Australian Government believes that the government of Britain has behaved with firmness, expedition, and good sense; and that its resistance to the use of arms to enforce a constitutional settlement is sound.

But several Commonwealth countries are publicly demanding that armed force be used, and by Britain. Some of these countries seem to have deeply and passionately committed themselves.

Under these circumstances, a Prime Ministers' Conference would in our view be unlikely to do more than record and emphasise differences. No unanimity of view could be achieved, and considerable bitterness would be disclosed. This would be a terrible price to pay for the convening of a conference upon a problem in relation to which, as the last Prime Ministers' Conference unanimously reaffirmed, "the authority and responsibility for leading her remaining Colonies, including Southern Rhodesia, to independence must continue to rest with Britain."

My Government has consistently opposed the giving of any Commonwealth orders to Britain as to how she should exercise that authority and discharge that responsibility. To have her, in effect, attacked and threatened at a special conference, would be a grave departure from proper practice in a Commonwealth gathering. It would also open the door to a new era in Commonwealth relations, the abandonment of the old sound rules of non-intervention in the affairs of other Commonwealth countries, and the encouragement of those outside nations and groups which are ever ready to fish in troubled waters.

My government does not, as it now sees the matter, wish to involve itself in a process which would prove so disastrous, not only to the Commonwealth but to Australia, which would run a grave risk of having its views distorted or misinterpreted.

CANBERRA

December 28, 1965.

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