

RHODESIA

Statement by the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Menzies

Cabinet yesterday, after a complete review of the proposals of the Prime Minister of Nigeria for a special Commonwealth Conference on Rhodesia, reaffirmed its view, which I had already announced, that such a conference should not be attended by Australia as a participant. We will ask Sir Abubakar Balewa to permit our High Commissioner to Nigeria, Mr. Cumes, to attend as an observer only.

We have taken our decisions on this matter on a ground of important principle, adherence to which is in our opinion of the greatest importance to the long-term future and interests of Australia and of the Commonwealth. We put them in this order because -

1. Our prime duty is to Australia.
2. If the modern Commonwealth, on the initiative of some or many of its members, begins to claim the right to intervene in and give orders in relation to matters which are the proper concern of some individual member of the Commonwealth, good relations cannot long continue, nor can the present Commonwealth structure long endure.

As I have previously pointed out, the last Prime Ministers' Conference in 1965 unanimously declared (not for the first time) that "the authority and responsibility for leading her remaining colonies, including Southern Rhodesia, to independence must continue to rest with Britain."

Britain having the sole authority and responsibility, is it for the rest of us to give instructions to Britain as to how she is to use her authority and discharge her responsibility?

My Government strongly believes that it is not. For if Britain can be instructed or coerced by the Commonwealth - or most of its members - in a matter which is, by concession, hers and hers alone to deal with, then Australia can some day be instructed or coerced on some matter in which the sole jurisdiction resides with Australia.

We emphasise this. It is the essence of our case, and the basis of our attitude. We state it not simply as something affecting the present Australian Government; it will be of continuing importance for all future Governments in our country.

There need be no misapprehension about our attitude towards the events in Rhodesia. We have not given either orders or advice to Britain. We have supported her actions by similar actions in the fields of non-recognition, in economic and financial sanctions. We are opposed to the use of force for compelling a constitutional settlement. We wish to see, by proper degrees and with reasonable preparation, a majority of African voters in Rhodesia. We hope that Rhodesians themselves will become willing to reopen negotiations with Britain to achieve this result.

We are not a party principal in this matter; our prime responsibilities and problems are nearer home. With great respect to the distinguished convener of the Special Conference, we cannot see any useful result flowing from it. If all the Commonwealth countries take the same view as Britain does (and as we do), there is no occasion for a special conference to record that fact.

If, as seems painfully clear, there are Commonwealth countries which will be satisfied by nothing less than armed force directed against Rhodesia, with all its dreadful consequences for Africa and for the relationship of the races in that country, the conference could not do more than expose great differences and create much bitterness, with all the distortions and even misrepresentations which such a state of affairs would inevitably produce.

It will then be seen that we base our decision upon what is to us a great principle, and also upon the immediate practical considerations which I have endeavoured to state.

CANBERRA,
6th January, 1966