

THE RHODESIAN SITUATION

Comment by the Prime Minister, Mr. Harold Holt

From the outset, the Australian Government has held the view that the resolving of the problems which have arisen between the United Kingdom and Rhodesia was primarily the responsibility of the Government of the United Kingdom. Although constitutionally Rhodesia has been - and remains at law - a colony of the United Kingdom, there had been a special relationship between them. Rhodesia had, in practice, enjoyed a large measure of self-government in the conduct of its affairs. Indeed, for many years the then Prime Minister of Rhodesia had attended regularly conferences of Prime Ministers. It is understandable, therefore, that Rhodesia should have sought independence in a period when many parts of the British Empire with much less experience of handling their own affairs had moved into that status.

The crucial difference between Rhodesia and most other African territories is the racial composition of the population. As is well known, Rhodesia is composed of a comparatively small white minority of about 225,000 - a considerable number of whom are of British stock - and some four million Africans, many of whom are not native to Rhodesia but have been attracted to residence there by the employment opportunities offered by a growing and prospering economy.

Protracted negotiations for a mutually acceptable basis for independence were unsuccessful. An outcome was the declaration by the then Government of Rhodesia, led by Mr. Smith as Prime Minister, of the UDI (Unilateral Declaration of Independence). This action was agreed by the United Kingdom and other Commonwealth Governments to be illegal, and the Smith regime has since been regarded as an illegal regime with no constitutional status recognised by the United Kingdom, and the course of action followed by that regime from that time onwards has been branded by the Government of the United Kingdom as a rebellion. No Commonwealth country has "recognised" the Smith regime; indeed no country in the world has recognised it. When the United Kingdom Government, in an attempt to restore a situation of legality, imposed economic sanctions on Rhodesia and requested other Commonwealth countries to do so also, they unanimously joined in that process.

Successive Conferences of Prime Ministers have condemned the illegality and have considered courses of action which would assure the democratic rights and opportunities of the African majority in the country. At the most recent of these Conferences, held in September of this year, it was agreed that should further negotiations fail to produce an acceptable solution, an approach should be made by the United Kingdom to the United Nations for the application of selected mandatory sanctions.

The Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Mr. Wilson, made a final attempt at negotiation when - at his invitation - Mr. Smith met him on board HMS "Tiger". A document embodying a basis of settlement - which Mr. Smith initialled - was taken by Mr. Smith and Mr. Wilson to their respective colleagues for their consideration. The United Kingdom Government gave prompt approval, but the terms were rejected by the Smith regime.

As I understand the position from public statements made by Mr. Smith, the Rhodesian regime was prepared to accept constitutional arrangements which embodied the "six principles".

The United Kingdom Government has consistently and firmly asserted that acceptance of these principles is essential and fundamental to a grant of independence by the Parliament of the United Kingdom. On Mr. Smith's assertion, what proved unacceptable were the terms proposed for what has been described as "the return to legality". But these, in the eyes of the British Government, are critically important in themselves owing to the need for a free and fair test of Rhodesian opinion about the future constitution.

The Australian Government was deeply disappointed that the negotiations did not produce a mutually acceptable solution, but acceptance by both sides of a constitutional basis would be a substantial achievement in itself. Mr. Wilson, who had outlined the conditions of a return to legality to Commonwealth Prime Ministers, felt bound, of course, to adhere to the substance of these. Any significant departure from them would represent, in his eyes, a breach of his undertakings to his Commonwealth colleagues. He could only do so, in good faith, with their concurrence.

The United Kingdom Government, understandably, as part of the process of return to legality, requires the Rhodesian regime to submit to the Governor and makes conditions regarding the legal basis for control of the armed forces. It requires also a broadening of the representation in any Government subsequently appointed. Mr. Smith is reported as finding grave objections of principle in these courses.

Faced with the tragic consequences which must flow from a continuing and rigorous application of sanctions by members of the United Nations, we would still hope that solutions could be found as to the procedures to apply over an interim period. The whole future of Rhodesia and its people is at stake. The welfare, the happiness and prosperity of nearly four and a half million people are directly involved. If the economy of Rhodesia is shattered, over four million Africans suffer grave hardship as well as the white minority. The burden of economic reconstruction will fall heavily on the United Kingdom, in particular, and, in varying degree, on those Commonwealth countries willing and able to lend assistance. No one can foretell the disastrous extent of the consequences nor the ramifications, poisoning and embittering African relations and damaging indefinitely as to time and degree, the future of the whole of Southern Africa.

The Australian Government has been gravely troubled by these developments. We have given our support to the United Kingdom Government in its determined efforts to find a just solution. Restrictions operate over virtually all of our imports from Rhodesia, and our trade with that country is currently limited almost entirely to foodstuffs necessary for the African majority as well as the - largely European minority. We have already been applying voluntarily the sanctions now made mandatory by the Security Council.

We have been kept fully informed by the United Kingdom Government of the various developments as they have occurred.

Following the rejection of proposals emanating from the HMS "Tiger" discussions, I received a short cable purporting to come from Mr. Howman, who is described by the Smith regime as "Minister for Information", in which he made an explanation from the Rhodesian side of the failure of the "Tiger" talks and went on to say that Mr. Smith would be ready to meet me at any time and any place for discussion. In keeping with the consistent attitude of non-recognition which the Australian Government has maintained during the relevant period of office of my predecessor, Sir Robert Menzies, and throughout my own time as Prime Minister, I made no acknowledgment of this message. There were, however, references to it in a section of the Australian press which appear to have been derived from the self-styled "Rhodesian Information Service" in Australia. I made the contents of this cable known to the British High Commissioner in Australia for transmission to his Prime Minister.

On 14th December, I received a cable in code purporting to come from Mr. Smith himself, in which he invited me to send a fact-finding mission to Rhodesia to report to me on the position in that country. The substance of this was also conveyed by me to the British High Commissioner after consideration had been given to both cables by the Australian Cabinet.

Press reports emanating from Salisbury over the weekend are to the effect that Mr. Smith has cabled the Australian and New Zealand Prime Ministers inviting them to nominate members to a commission to test Rhodesian public opinion on constitutional proposals. The same reports state that Mr. Smith's Cabinet had announced it could accept the proposed changes, but not the British demands for the manner of implementing them.

At the Prime Ministers' Conference, I had stated my reservation on the proposal that an application should be made to the United Nations. I then expressed the view that this matter should be capable of solution inside the Commonwealth of Nations, and that we should pursue means of achieving this. However, in the event of failure of negotiations, I concurred on behalf of Australia in supporting a move to the Security Council for mandatory selective sanctions.

My Government regards the proposal that Australia and New Zealand should join in a commission which, on the face of it, is confined to those two countries, as disturbingly unrealistic. Any finding from such a restricted Commonwealth representation would be most unlikely to find acceptance from the Commonwealth as a whole, and, in any event, we could not contemplate such a course without the full knowledge and approval of the Government of the United Kingdom. The terms of reference of any commission would also need careful thought.

But we must not lose sight of the fact that sanctions are not an end in themselves. They have been imposed with a purpose, and that purpose is to lead the Rhodesians to come to terms with the United Kingdom so as to open the way to constitutional advance towards majority rule with full guarantee for both the majority and minority communities.

Australia will remain in constant touch with the Governments of the United Kingdom and other Commonwealth countries in the hope that a solution can still be found.

CANBERRA,
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