

THE BELGIAN CONGO

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DURING the latter part of the 19th century the Congo Free State—the sole property of King Leopold II of Belgium—was mostly known by the shocking tales of the exploitation of Africans there. Charges of maladministration were not only levelled, but also proven, once provoking the resignation of Governor C. Janssen, in protest against the high-handed methods of the King's agents in the Congo. Public opinion and indignation, in Belgium as in other countries, decided the Belgian Senate to take over the Congo Free State on November 15th, 1908.

If the transfer of power took place without ceremony, Belgium at once took measures to ensure a fair and enlightened administration of its new colony, in real agreement with the high humanitarian principles that Leopold II had never ceased to profess, but had been unable to bring into practice. It must be admitted that the result is outstanding in colonial Africa. Though the Belgian Government and Belgian business men and industrialists had no such colonial experience as either Great Britain or France, they have achieved what can well be called a unique state in Africa.

Former Governor-General, M. Pierre Ryckmans, has stated on more than one occasion that the corner-stone of the Belgian policy in the Congo is: "*The Belgian Congo is a black man's country*". This does not mean that Europeans are unwelcome; far from it. But the Congo Governor's first duty is to look after the welfare and the future of the Congolese. Whites are welcome provided they are willing to contribute an important tax, the proceeds of which *must* be spent in the Congo for local development. Any white unable to cover his expenses is at once shipped home, thus preventing the creation of a class of poor whites—which is anywhere a serious barrier to African advancement. In the Belgian Congo neither whites nor Congolese have any political rights or vote. Hence the Government's paternalistic policy can be said to be able to operate quite freely. Similar conditions exist elsewhere in the African continent, usually to the detriment of the Africans. Not so in the Congo. Why? How?

There is little doubt that the Belgian administration, taking control of the Congo following upon a long period of fierce denunciations of shocking abuses by the King's agents, has been, from the beginning, anxious to do better. The Governor and his aides have watched with great attention the measures taken by their great neighbours, especially France and Great Britain. They have not been slow to notice how the mere grant of political rights without an accompanying improvement in the material well-being of the Africans does not lead to happy relations.

We often hear of paternalism in colonial administration in Africa—but nowhere is it so evident as in the Belgian Congo. The reason is probably to be found in the general attitude of industry towards its black workers. In this field Belgian industrialists are certainly far in advance, in their practices, of their colleagues elsewhere in Africa. In Elisabethville, for instance, the seat of the huge *Compagnie Minière du Haut-Katanga*—exploiting the same copper deposit found in the Copper Belt of Northern Rhodesia—workers' salaries are graded in some twenty-one classes. By improving their skill Congolese workers can pass from a lower to a higher classification, with correspondingly increased wages. And the company is helping them in this, by providing free classes daily after work. Attendance by the workers is entirely free, yet average regularity is above 90 per cent. These courses are given by white workers who have spent the whole day at their job, and they are not paid for this "service". Yet, they, too, seldom miss their classes. When I inquired on the Copper Belt whether similar courses existed, the only answers I received amounted to: "Why should we do it?" This attitude, no doubt, partly accounted for troubled labour conditions at the time.

While in Elisabethville, I was shown around the workers' town on the mine's compound by a young man who had gone through a complete builder's course. One of the buildings he showed me with pride was a neat nursery school, a nice one room affair. He pointed out the beams inside the roof: "Do you see these names? When we completed this school, as part of our regular training, the general manager of the *Cie. Minière* came to inspect it. He congratulated us on our work, then said: 'There is one more thing I wish you to do. Write your names on these beams. Later on people will remember you, and you'll be able to show also what you built!'" Such a comprehension

of the value of the human element in labour by management is unique in Africa. It explains a great deal of the general contentment in the Belgian Congo too. Alone also in Africa the administration has fully realized the waste and the blunder of "*migrant labour*", which compels hundreds of thousands of workers to live in huge compounds—*without their families*. By law, in the Belgian Congo, industry is compelled to provide for the family accommodation of its workers and every married worker must reside with his family. In cities, workers are even encouraged to buy and own their houses.

Yet, even in the Congo, events in Asia and elsewhere in the great continent are penetrating the minds of the Congolese, even though very few of them so far, have been allowed by the administration to seek further training abroad. Last year, especially, has seen many events pointing to the need for change and emphasizing the demand for quicker reforms in the Congo.

Already in his annual Governor-General's speech to the Government Council in 1955, M. L. Petillon had pointed out: "For the Congo of today, the essential question is—I must stress it—that of human relations between white and black". He took occasion to condemn rash action by some of the settlers, quoting the words of Governor-General Eboué (an African, in French Equatorial Africa): "If there are some who don't agree with our chosen policy, we won't bear them any grudge. They are at liberty to leave us and we will bid them a courteous good-bye".

Early in 1956 M. A. A. J. van Bilsen, professor at the Institute Universitaire des Territoires d'outre-mer, in Brussels, published a 29 pages "*30 years' plan for the political emancipation of the Belgian Africa*". He pointed out that Belgian empiricism had so far produced no doctors, veterinaries, engineers, high civil service workers or army officers. He stated clearly that paternalism was out of date, having no difficulty in showing what had happened to other colonial powers unwilling to read the signs of the times. His suggestion is a federation between Belgium on the one hand and a great Congolese Federation on the other. He went so far as to suggest that the Belgian Government ask the United Nations to offer its help and suggestions in hastening and ensuring the realisation of such a plan. His plans would necessitate the usual democratic freedoms for the Congolese, and the introduction of a regular political life in a land where such notions have long been dampened.

Almost at the same time the Roman Catholic Episcopate made a Declaration, affirming that "*the rights of the natives must have priority*". It studied also such problems as private property—labour and its remuneration (any difference in wages solely based on a racial difference would be unfair)—trade unions—human relations and, last of all, political emancipation (all the inhabitants of a country are in duty bound to contribute actively to the general welfare. They have the right to take part in the conduct of public affairs).

Last July the Belgian Socialist Party, now in power with the Liberal Party, while admitting all that had been achieved so far in the Congo, made plain that what is needed now is a strong change in the general policy: *from economics, welfare and paternalism, the way must now lead to social and political development*. From its seven-point Action Programme we extract the following: "Full practical freedom of association, meeting and press. The establishment, first in the urban centres, of local assemblies elected by universal suffrage. The establishment, at a later stage, of provincial assemblies by universal suffrage. The gradual extension of local and provincial powers . . . Colonists should only be supported as far as their enterprises and services contribute to the emancipation of the natives, and to the development of a harmonious community life . . . Primary education should become compulsory for girls as well as for boys¹ . . . Revision of the labour legislation in connection with the number of working hours, holidays with pay, labour inspection, health insurance. The creation of consumers' co-operatives, and the creation of a social council in which capital and labour are equally represented . . ."

Such pronouncements, coming from responsible Belgian voices, are certainly worth noting. Many of the suggested reforms run well ahead of actual conditions in British Africa, for instance, except in West Africa. But 1956 *heard for the first time the authentic voices of the Congolese themselves, thinking aloud about their future*. In July, *Conscience Africaine*, an African-owned newspaper in Leopoldville, printed a *Manifesto*, prepared by a group of Congolese évolués.² Compared with similar declarations of

¹ Primary and secondary education has traditionally been entrusted to the Missions—Roman Catholic and Protestant, which received similar grants. Recently, however, "lay" schools have been opened up in the Congo; they are open to Congolese and European children alike. This experiment is proving satisfactory. Two Universities exist also; one directed by Roman Catholic teachers, the other, at Elisabethville, by the State.

² Educated Congolese.

nationalist leaders elsewhere in Africa, the *Manifesto* is entirely without anger. It takes for granted that the Belgians can be trusted to do what is right once they see the light. Its demands are moderate, without any racialism. Its aim is a Congolese nation, "composed of Africans and Europeans", while it affirms "we want to be civilized Congolese, not black-skinned Europeans." The *Manifesto* rejects "the principle of 'equal but separated', as hurtful", and says: "the Belgians must understand as of now, that their rule in the Congo will not last forever". But the authors of the *Manifesto* reject the use of political parties as well as any recourse to violence. Its prime aim is to weld the Congolese into a real nation: "We believe that it is perfectly possible for heathens, Catholics, Protestants, Salvationists and Moslems to agree on a program of common welfare which respects the principle of natural ethics engraved into the hearts of all men . . . This program can best be realized by the united Congolese with sincere respect for every one's beliefs". Such a mild and moderate declaration may have startled some hard-boiled settlers; it must certainly have pleased the administration, and given it the feeling that its efforts were appreciated and not useless.

But how representative of the Congolese nation were the writers of the *Manifesto*? One month after its appearance another group added its voice: The ABAKO, a cultural association of the Ba-Congo people (western Congo). Its tone was different, far less tolerant of Belgian rule and far less patient.

Abako criticizes the *Manifesto* for its disdain of "the means by which a country is led . . . Is it possible for one to participate in the government of a country while by-passing politics? . . . *The contest among parties, although dangerous, is very necessary in a democracy*". All the various above-mentioned documents have a good deal to say about economic progress. Abako, while supporting the *Manifesto* in its demands for far higher wages for African workers, is quite vocal as to the big business men whose "social works are in reality only reinvestments of profits . . . to distract the tourists and to mislead the visitors". Abako is equally vocal against the regime "which has earned for the Congo the title of empire of silence". They fully agree with Mr. A. van Bilsen who has written: "I believe . . . that political maturity precedes in many cases the capacity to administer", but Abako will have nothing to do with any "30 year plan". "It is today that we must be granted freedom, rather than to set it back thirty years

hence''. The Ba-Congo leaders realize that the Congo is a heterogeneous agglomeration of people and so they too, seek a Congolese Federation. They affirm, however, that such a Federation can never become part of the Belgian territory—as French Togoland, for instance, is part of the French Union. Because of the Congo's size, and its amazing wealth especially, they see their future not as another province of Belgium, but rather as a partner in some Belgian Commonwealth, on an equal footing with the mother-country.

There is no doubt that the Governor-General and his administration have not been caught napping. They have long realized that the Congo could not escape the wave of emancipation sweeping across the African continent. Already in the larger centres some representative assemblies have been set up, with elected members. Some months ago in Leopoldville, I learned much about such developments, which have brought to the fore a number of outstanding Congolese men until then often unknown to the administration.

The Governor is well aware of the growing demand for political life, the desire for a fuller life than is possible under an enlightened paternalism, however well-meaning and generous. *On both sides there is certainly a great deal of goodwill.* The recent visit of King Baudouin has evoked a natural and ready response, enthusiasm even, among a great many Congolese, who have not forgotten the King's rebuke to those Europeans who want to treat Africans as second-class individuals. It is to be hoped that Belgian political parties will rise to their unique opportunity and allow the Congo to become another Ghana.