THE FUTURE OF THE FEDERATION

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One fact stands out from the confusion and inconclusiveness surrounding the end of the Northern Rhodesian Constitutional Conference. The whole might of Britain has backed down before Welensky. The territory's future is still not clear; but all the portents of disaster are present, and there is virtually no sign of hope. Britain seems to be at her old trick of introducing a constitution which pleases nobody and upsets everyone. At the same time it seems incredible that Mr. Macmillan, that harbinger of the wind of change, and Mr. Macleod, that "great Christian gentleman", have completely lost their nerve and abandoned, without even a show of fight, the plan for an African majority to which they are committed in the eyes of the African and British publics alike and by the implications of innumerable undertakings of successive British governments. One is still, therefore, left wondering dizzily whether they have something up their sleeves.

It is not that politicians don't break their word, at least if they are Conservatives. But how could two such downy birds have blundered into a position where the most ignominious, undeniable scuttle, the most discreditable public about-face was forced upon them at the last moment by the pressure of Welensky, of 72,000 Northern Rhodesian Europeans and some 90 right-wing Conservative M.P.'s? After all, they must have foreseen when they decided—and there is ample evidence that this was decided several months ago—on an African majority, a Nyasaland type constitution, in Northern Rhodesia, that it would be hotly opposed by Welensky and the settlers, that these would be backed by Lord Salisbury and the right wing of the Conservative Party, and that, though the Rhodesian Selection Trust might be complaisant, it was unlikely to commend itself to Mr. Oppenheimer and Anglo-American. They must have known that they would be subject to every form of threat, pressure and appeal from the current rulers of the Federation to prevent a reform which, it must always have been perfectly apparent to anyone who knew anything about the subject, would make the continuation of the kind of white
supremacist Federation that Welensky wants impossible. They must have considered how to resist these threats, pressures and appeals and have decided that it could be done and was worth doing. They are not, when all’s said and done, babies. And it is virtually inconceivable that Welensky was able to surprise by some quite new unexpected and overwhelmingly powerful menace they could not withstand, because he has nothing of the sort up his sleeve. He cannot, like Mr. K., threaten to turn his rockets upon London, because he hasn’t got any. And yet, to all appearances, Mr. Macleod opened the Northern Rhodesian Conference a week or two ago in the firm expectation that it would recommend to him, in the wilful absence of the United Federal Party and Dominion Party delegations, a Nyasaland type constitution, that he would accept this advice, impose by his own legitimate authority such a constitution, and require the Federal government to accept it. To all appearances, he panicked in the face of the U.F.P. boycott, the “secret mission” of Mr. Greenfield, Federal Minister of Law, and the success of Mr. John Roberts, Northern Rhodesia settler leader, in whipping up 90 Conservative members to support the 1958 White Paper—an antiquated document from the Lennox Boyd era—which favoured “keeping power in civilised hands” and “keeping racialism out of politics”, and which—in the double-talk then prevalent—meant European supremacy and indeed still does. The proposition doesn’t make a lot of sense; but it is hard to see how anything else can be true, hard to resist the conclusion that, as ‘The Times’ put it on February 18th, “the British government have allowed themselves under pressure of events, to be hurried along the easy path of evolving intricate formulae to disguise what has happened.”

Precise details of the proposed, new revised constitution have, mysteriously enough, not yet been divulged; but it seems certain that they will encompass an upper (mainly European) roll, electing 15 members, a lower (African) one doing the same, and 15 further members to be elected by both rolls together. The exact effect this will have depends upon the qualifications specified and, in a country with so unnatural a distribution of population as Northern Rhodesia, upon the delimitation of constituencies. (Nothing has been leaked about the executive, which might afford a fruitful field for racial conflict and discrimination whatever the composition of the legislature.) This might just possibly result in a small African majority in the
Legislative Council; and it is even just possible too that Mr. Kenneth Kaunda and the other African leaders at the Conference might have accepted it if it had been presented clearly and openly to them in all its detail and, with this implication underlined, as Britain's firm and considered intentions at the outset. After all the secrecy and evasion, however, the backstairs intrigues with Sir Roy and the Federal Party, unless the new proposals contain important and hitherto unforeseen and undisclosed concessions to Africans, the only effect of the Conference will have been to show that Britain's policy is dictated from Salisbury, that Welensky wags Westminster. It is inherent in the situation that no constitution agreeable to the U.F.P. can be agreeable to the United National Independence Party, and vice versa. Britain must use her authority to enforce what she thinks just and right in the long term interests of Northern Rhodesia. And as long as it appears to the Africans and their leaders that everything submitted to them has been previously approved by Welensky behind closed doors, they will view it with, if possible, more suspicion than it deserves. It is hard to see how they can feel any confidence in the present British government or indeed in Britain at all.

The abandonment of principle and betrayal of trust involved in the manoeuvres which have taken place are evident if one recalls the undertakings given by the British government at the inception of Federation. Lord Munster, then Under Secretary of State for Colonies, said in the Lords on July 6th, 1953: "The charge that has been levied against the government in many quarters that Federation would delay or even bar the political advancement of Africans in the northern territories is without any foundation at all." And Mr. Lyttelton, the Colonial Secretary, said in the Commons on July 27th: "I cannot repeat often enough that the Federal constitution gives the Federal government no power whatever either to retard or accelerate the political advancement of Africans in any of the constituent territories; no power to interfere with the territorial government in this matter. I am thinking particularly, of course, of the northern territories. . . . For example we shall be discussing alterations of the constitution of Northern Rhodesia in September this year. . . . These discussions will be carried out and decisions reached without its being necessary to obtain any agreement from the Federal government. . . . It would clearly only be sensible that their views should be sought, but I assure
the House that their concurrence is not necessary for anything that we may decide. I give that as an illustration to bring home the point." Well, well, the point has certainly been brought home in the past few weeks. The Federal government has delayed the political advancement of Africans in Northern Rhodesia, the Federal government has interfered with the British as well as the territorial government, and Britain has regarded Federal concurrence as necessary to anything it may decide. It is hard to know too what has become of the Monckton Commission’s repeated warnings that the Federation as at present constituted cannot continue and that any Federation held together by force is bound to collapse.

True there is at the moment of writing a bare possibility that the arrangements for electing the 15 members by both rolls may, as has been said, be so manipulated as to provide an effective African majority of a sort that Kenneth Kaunda and Harry Nkumbula as well as Sir John Moffat could accept with a good grace. It is just conceivable that Macmillan and Macleod are using some mysteriously delicate footwork to outwit Sir Roy and will present the African and liberal leaders with such a solution after all. To do so would restore confidence; and one can, if one likes, cling to such possibilities as a minute chance of hope. It remains hard to perceive the reason for such mystification and delay. And if Britain has anything to offer the Africans of Northern Rhodesia except disillusion and betrayal, it is vitally important that this should be made clear quickly. The danger of an outbreak of violence which African leaders will be unable to control in the crowded Copperbelt centres is enormous and grows daily. Kenneth Kaunda’s position of authority cannot be indefinitely maintained on a basis of pure frustration. His eclipse and replacement by others—perhaps less wise and reasonable than he—would be disastrous.

What Welensky is working for is pretty evident. He hopes to be able to persuade the Federal Review Conference when it resumes later this year that significant liberalisation has taken place in both Southern and Northern Rhodesia, not forgetting the Monckton Commission’s remark that “no new form of association is likely to succeed unless Southern Rhodesia is prepared to make drastic changes in its racial policies.” He can then present the case that a majority of all the inhabitants of the territories desire a continuation of Federation, so that Federation shall be finally ratified and established, freed from all existing
restrictions on its freedom and given ‘dominion status’. In fact, Nyasaland, about which he doesn’t care a lot anyhow, will be free to secede, but the all-important Northern Rhodesia will, he hopes, be pinned down by a bogus liberal constitution. He may foresee some hard arguing from some of the African representatives at the Review Conference, and there probably will be plenty; but he is playing an inherently losing game—there are thirty-six Africans to every European in the Federation and nearly all of them are against Federation—for high stakes. He is concerned to keep Southern Rhodesia from leaving an association with a Northern Rhodesia too liberal for it (that is one with an African majority), and Northern Rhodesia from being free to secede from Federation with a Southern Rhodesia too European-dominated to suit its taste. He wants above all to preserve some sort of Federation of which to go on being the Prime Minister. These tactics are his best chance; and if the British government is ready to go on dancing to his tune, he might even bring his gamble off, for the time being.

It does not matter to this game that the alleged settlement in Southern Rhodesia is altogether meaningless, provides no significant liberalisation and has little chance of being accepted by Europeans, let alone Africans. Sir Edgar Whitehead must regard himself as expendable for the good of Federation, however little love he has for Sir Roy personally, as the affair is likely to bring about his fall. It is, after all, just a matter of papering over the cracks, and the paper need only stick till after the Review Conference. Sir Roy is strangely confident that he can set everything in order afterwards, if left to himself, that he has the strength to hold the whole world of Northern and Southern Rhodesia on his shoulders in one piece, if he can get permission to, by his mixed tactics of calling out European reservists and admitting Africans to railway restaurant cars.

The National Democratic Party’s repudiation of the Sandys constitution for Southern Rhodesia is therefore timely. It disposes of the myth of “drastic changes” there and makes this game a lot more difficult to play. Both this and the apparent deadlock in Northern Rhodesia only bring us back, however, as it were to square one. We are up against settler determination to impose Federation by a mixture of tyranny and chicanery that has been proving itself impossible ever since 1953; that had indeed been recognised as impossible by the Labour government which first considered Federation, by the time it fell in 1951. We
are back to the deadly, familiar opposition between white pretensions and black aspirations revealed by the disturbances of 1959. And we see that, after all, Britain has apparently learnt nothing, the settlers have learnt nothing, and the Africans have learnt to place little reliance on the words of white men, however fair they sound.

Further trouble and violence lie inevitably ahead, perhaps of the most protracted and tragic nature—and it will be no good blaming it on the Africans, who have been led to expect bread and look like getting stones—unless Britain awakes again to her true responsibilities. These are to free Northern Rhodesia immediately, as well as Nyasaland, and allow them both to decide their own futures. If this means the secession of Southern Rhodesia, this must be accepted. It will mean economic recession there, but this is better than the destructive disruption of the whole of Central Africa that will result from continuing Federation by force. Perhaps in adversity Europeans could learn to accept Africans as real partners, since they cannot do so in prosperity. If Southern Rhodesia can solve its own racial conflicts, there is no reason why it should not return, with an African majority, to join a Federation stretching beneficently from the Limpopo to the source of the Nile. Meanwhile there is no excuse for extending those racial conflicts to Northern Rhodesia through an enforced Federation of incompatibles, and Britain will be shortsightedly wrong if she supports this by surrendering to Sir Roy Welensky.

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