PORTRAIT OF A FAILURE: SIR ROY WELENSKY

FRANK BARTON
Former Editor of the "Central African Post", Northern Rhodesia

WHEN Roy Welensky succeeded Lord Malvern as prime minister of the Central African Federation, destiny placed in the burly ex-engine driver's hands a chance given to few men of few nations. For, although it was Malvern who became the Federation's first prime minister, it was Welensky to whom the real task fell of forging the three territories of Southern Rhodesia, Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland, with their conflicting loyalties and widely different ways of life, into a new nation. During Malvern's two years in office the task was essentially one of ironing out the manifold administrative kinks in the new Establishment, of constructing a civil service and a pattern of development. Everyone knew that once Malvern had supervised this, he would hand over his power and his opportunity to the younger, more imaginative and better equipped Welensky. How has his successor handled his inheritance?

It remains for the historians to record—and some of them are already recording it—that in the three years since Welensky assumed political direction of the Federation, the racial situation has deteriorated to the point of despair; that the Federation has cried out, and still cries out, for a leader who will—even at this late hour—act with a vision and a drama which can save the situation and lead all the 7,500,000 peoples of the new State away from the rot of revolt and repression and towards the accomplishments of a genuinely shared society.

Why has Welensky failed? He had the courage to succeed; he had neither the vision nor the intelligence. A consummate politician who reached his peak and made his reputation in Northern Rhodesia without the responsibility of a portfolio, he has remained an eye-to-the-ballot politician at a time when real statesmanship is the crying need of Central Africa.

The thirteenth son of a Lithuanian Jew and his Afrikaner wife who trekked by ox-wagon from the Union to a Rhodesia that barred no holds, Welensky was born "on the wrong side of the tracks" in Salisbury. His family lived just above the borderline of poor whites. His first job, at 15, was as a storekeeper, but it was not long before, like his brother Ben, he was "on the rail-

ways", first as a fireman and later as a driver.

At 21 he married a good-natured, strong-willed Scots-Afrikaner girl who used to serve him tea in a Bulawayo café. For 30 years, all the way up the ladder, she has been his constant sheet-anchor. In a land not renowned for its happy home life, the Welenskys have remained the traditional devoted couple. Their circle of friends may have widened to include such places as Chequers and Clarence House, but it has not, since they reached the top, excluded so much as the humblest ganger they knew in the old days.

Bulawayo then, as now, was the railway headquarters of the Rhodesias, and it was not long before the young Welensky began to take an active part in the growing White railwaymen's trade union. He still believes it was this that made the railway bosses banish him to the "black north"—to Broken Hill, the bleak lead and zinc mining town in Northern Rhodesia. In those years of the early 'thirties, he did not fit easily into the life of the mining camp and railway club. There was a strong fascist element in the town, most of it made up from the South African Afrikaner miners. Welensky would have no part of them. Once he went to the engine shed to take his train out and found the cab plastered with anti-semitic obscenities—directed at his part Jewish blood. It is curious that a man who has endured such discrimination should be the main pillar of the discrimination practised against millions of non-Whites in the Federation.

Welensky's personality and organising ability, however, soon got the better of the rowdies. He revived the defunct branch of the railway workers' union, and soon the bosses 700 miles away in Bulawayo were wondering if they had done the right thing in ever sending him north. But it was too late. Welensky was on a road from which there was to be no return. His trade union was to send him to the Northern Rhodesia Legislature, which in turn was to become the springboard for a seat at the Commonwealth premier's conference table.

He was still engine driving and leading his union between parliamentary sessions. By the beginning of the war, he was accepted by all the White workers of Northern Rhodesia—i.e. the miners and railwaymen—as their leader; and chewing his nails in apprehension at the power the man wielded, the governor of the day made Welensky Director of Manpower. His main job was to keep the copper mines producing. Probably to coat

the bitter pill of a trade union leader working with the bosses, in 1941 Welensky formed the Northern Rhodesia Labour Party, and it immediately became the biggest group in the Legislature outside of the British Colonial officials. Characteristically, it was a labour party modelled on its South African counterpart, formed to fight competition from the Africans.

Now began the incredible seven year rule of power without responsibility. Welensky ruled the Council from the back benches. He gave portfolios to his subordinates, but though a member of the Cabinet Executive Council, he refused to accept a ministry himself. Nobody could understand what his game was. It soon became clear. Without a portfolio he was subject to no responsibilities, no questioning in the Legislature. If he had taken one, he would have by inference have aligned himself with the Colonial Office officials. And for the role he was about to play—flaying them at every possible opportunity—that would have been impossible. Far better to sit in the committee-roomed Executive where he could mould decisions in all the ministries, and then return to the back benches and berate the portfolio holders in his best gallery-playing style.

It worked like a charm. Between 1946 and 1953, when he entered the Federal Parliament, he built a reputation far beyond the borders of Northern Rhodesia as a champion of the settlers and the man who could be relied upon to give the Colonial Office better than he took. There is no doubt that, besides appealing to the public, these tactics paid off in practical results, for Welensky squeezed more and more out of a reluctant Whitehall until, although still in the minority, the unofficial members of the Executive Council could outvote the officials. When Federation was finally imposed, Welensky became second-in-command to Sir Godfrey Huggins and took, one fancies with a wink, the portfolio of transport, which gave him control over the Rhodesia Railways.

Certainly a part of his success has been due to his treatment of, and thus his treatment by, the Rhodesian Press. He is on first-name terms with dozens of Rhodesian, South African and English newspapermen. He has cultivated their friendship until it is a model of what the relationship of a politician on the make and the Press should be—always "good for a quote", always "ready to play ball". When his car breaks down on the way back from Government House and he accepts a lift from an unknowing motor-cyclist, he makes sure that this "human interest" tit-bit

finds its way into the eager hands of the reporters; when a flustered airport manager produces a cup of tea for him during a terminal building press conference, the busy eyebrows will rise, and Welensky will enquire about "tea for the gentlemen of the Press"? When none can be produced at short notice, he purses his lips and gently refuses to drink his own.

A great deal of his success, and the thing that may hasten his downfall, is the over-fine art he has developed of being all things to all men. To the Afrikaner he will recall his Afrikaans mother; to the ultra-Britishers, England becomes "home" for him; to the European trade unionist he is "one of you"; he even tried to tell the Africans of turbulent Nyasaland that he "was as much an African as you." It did not go down very well.

He has a rare, gracious streak which, unlike many of the other sides he arranges to catch the light, is genuine. His sworn enemy in the last Federal Parliament was Nyasaland's Wellington C. Chirwa, who needled him more effectively and more often than the rest of the opposition put together. But after returning from a Commonwealth Prime Minister's Conference in London, he confessed to friends that he considered Chirwa more capable than Nkrumah.

Though posing as a humble man, he does not like being humbled. Northern Rhodesia civil servants who crossed him, intentionally or otherwise, have counted the cost high. He has been known to have the Chief Secretary and another senior government official standing outside his office in Lusaka like guilty fourth-formers waiting to see the headmaster. His vanity is quick to rear at a slight.

He is capable of incredible inconsistencies which in a more mature political society would seriously handicap him. An example of this occurred during the recent Federal General Election when a thoughtless Dominion Party spokesman said that in certain circumstances his party might disregard the courts in the interpretation of the constitution if they were returned to power. Welensky, who badly needed an election gimmik, seized upon this and played it to the full, talking about the sanctity of law and British regard for it. Yet five months earlier, he had hinted darkly at another 'Boston tea-party' unless Britain played ball with him in 1960 when the Federation seeks more autonomy. What he actually said was that if the 1960 talks failed, "then I personally would not be prepared to accept that Rhodesians have less guts than the American

colonists".

It was during the Garfield Todd crisis last year that the true worth and colour of Welensky emerged, and on this alone he can be condemned out of hand as a leader to whom words like partnership are no more than eleven letters in the alphabet. One word from Welensky during the Todd affair and the situation —for Todd—would have been saved. But Welensky chose to let the Southern Rhodesia premier roast on the spit and, when he was nearly done, declare that the issue was one of personalities, not principles.

For his relations with the Africans, there is little to be said. The simple truth is that, born and bred in the country though he is, he understands them no better than he does the Eskimoes. Only lately has the truth slowly broken upon him that he cannot carry them with him on the same tide of oratory, bluff and charm that won and keeps for him the bulk of European support.

He has been told by Whitehall that he has two years in which to produce evidence that the Africans can be won over to accepting Federation, and his dilemma is to accomplish this without antagonising the Europeans. Up to the Todd affair, he had the stature to have attempted and, perhaps, achieved this racial double. He threw away the chance, and his conduct recently has confirmed his failure. By his stern handling of the Nyasaland emergency, where as Minister of Defence he despatched European troops from both Rhodesias, he may have gained the support of the bulk of the European population of the Federation, but he has surely antagonised for all time the 2,660,000 Africans of the protectorate, and the rent in the Federal fabric that has appeared in its most picturesque corner is likely to spread that much more rapidly southwards.

What of his future? As the Black nationalists spur on the White nationalists, he is likely to lose more and more ground, and by the time the Federation's big hour strikes in 1960, when he will go to London to seek dominion status, the shaky foundations of the Federal State may be insufficient to support him any longer. As the racial situation deteriorates, the Dominion Party will gather strength.

Welensky was at his strongest and most effective as a leader of the opposition. The way things are going in Central Africa today, he may very well find himself in that position again.