

AFRICA AND THE BRITISH ELECTORATE

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THROUGHOUT that lowering night of the General Election I was in the radio studio on a long circuit to North America, "interpreting", as the fulsome phrase goes, whatever trends appeared. The task, however dispiriting, was at least simple. As the hours dragged by, one felt rather like one of Napoleon's junior officers giving a running commentary on Waterloo.

At one point in the debacle the remark came from our side that the dissolution of the Labour Party's hopes "would be taken as a blow by great numbers of people in Africa". There was a 3,000-mile-off pause at the other end, and then the interlocutor said: "I don't get you. How does Africa come into your election set-up over there?"

How indeed, one might have replied. The next few days did not provide much of an answer. One of the extra pangs of that post-election hang-over was the broad satisfaction, even exultation, with which the result was hailed overseas by such as Sir Roy Welensky and Winston Field, who lost no time in making clear their relief at a narrow escape. To be sure, this came as no surprise to those who pay some heed to the African scene; and to those who do not, it passed unnoticed. The fact was, and is, that Africa as an election issue had wholly failed. Failed is perhaps not the right word. In the broad picture of the campaign, it never got off the ground at all.

There were some commentators, chiefly myself, who came in for some pained and occasionally angry reproof from the Labour side for criticising the campaign as trivial at the best, and sometimes even evasive. I said myself before the polls that for the great Parties of Britain to present the case for the future in terms of City share-pushing or the purchase tax on washing machines was to treat the electorate as a crowd of solely avaricious and self-interested introverts, a fantastic state of affairs in the world of today. The Tories set this rather contemptible pace with their slogan of "Prosperity", but Labour fell only too readily into line. The high commands of both sides actually appeared to take pains to avoid emphasis on the great contemporary international theme, of which Africa was an essential part—not

by any means the only one, but in some ways the biggest.

There were regional exceptions; some of the candidates chose on their own responsibility to point out that every elector was simultaneously giving a vote in trust for the voteless Africans who, in their anxieties, could look for help to nobody else. There were constituencies where the word "Hola" was something more than just an easy heckling-word to interject. But on the whole Labour failed to challenge the Conservatives on the issues where they were palpably vulnerable—Suez, Kenya, Central Africa—insisting instead on competing in fields where the Tories were pretty well impregnable: fiscal matters, domestic stability, and so on. In other words, the broad strategy of the campaign ignored or avoided most things that could be considered moral issues or questions of fundamental human principle. To the evergreen argument that "no election is ever won on an international or colonial issue" one can only say: of course not, since these issues are never properly presented.

It surprised some of us, for example, that a really vigorous effort was not concentrated with all the top-level Socialist resources on Mid-Bedfordshire, where Alan Lennox-Boyd was balanced on a majority of less than 4,000. To have defeated the Colonial Secretary in his own constituency would not only have compensated greatly for having let him get away with Cyprus and Kenya and Nyasaland in the House but would, one cannot help feeling, have been quite possible. Instead, he was permitted to boost his majority by more than 1,000. The fact that he has finally shifted his activities from the Colonies to the Breweries does not diminish the unhappy effect of this.

So Labour lost, crushingly. That it probably deserved to can be small consolation to those in Africa who had so eagerly hoped otherwise. The question must arise now: does Africa mean anything at all to the broad mass of the British electorate?

Of course it is an impossible question to answer objectively: I myself have been told over and again that I am the last person to try to do so; preoccupied as I am with overseas affairs and indeed earning my bread and butter from their consideration, I get furiously impatient with those who think wholly in terms of washing-machines. Obviously Africa means something to the British electorate; and increasingly so, as the problems of the continent intrude themselves more and more dramatically into the British conscience. Equally obviously it does not mean

anything like enough. Africa means something to the City, to several religious groups, notably the Church of Scotland, and to the public that goes to big-game movies. It means something to readers of the 'Observer', the 'News Chronicle', and the political weeklies. It is probably fair to say that it means a great deal more to them this year than it did last, and last year than it did the year before. It is still, in all conscience, little enough.

No individual can presume to assess a national attitude except in terms of his own limited experience of it; my own has to derive largely from reactions I find to my own work. African controversies produce reactions more deeply felt and emotional, and at the same time less widespread, than for any of the more familiar cold-war issues. Until the state of emergency in the Federation, no African situation had produced any reaction comparable to that over Cyprus, for example, which is reasonable enough since no comparable body of British troops was involved. In any case, the real answer to any sort of public engagement in a political problem is in its treatment by the Press, and it is part of the character of the British Press that it is almost impossible for any colonial issue to interest a Fleet Street news editor until it has begun to express itself in violence. This is, of course, a truism. A drop or two of blood shed here and there (however irrelevant to the main argument) is worth more column-inches to a colonial question than a year of patient politics; the implications of this are serious. There are probably a million Englishmen who think of the late Kenya troubles (when they ever do) as something grotesque and incomprehensible and orgiastic for every one who knows even superficially what the devil it was all about. While the Press carries a big load of responsibility for this semi-frivolous public attitude, it is not easy to know what to do about it. Even serious journalists, painstakingly well-informed on the African subjects, even the Basil Davidsons and Oliver Woods, know the difficulties of introducing analytical articles that cannot be "pegged", as they say, to the news that someone has got himself slashed with a panga somewhere.

Naturally this explains the curiously erratic and spasmodic pattern of African coverage in the British Press. It also explains the problem with which we are faced every time an endemic situation momentarily solves its frustrations by exploding, in trying to explain, every time anew, the basic facts behind this

particular melodrama. The resulting over-simplifications satisfy nobody, and frequently do as much harm as good.

This is perhaps not invariably true. Last year's violent affray in Nyasaland was in itself so shocking to ordinary British opinion—and its repercussions through the Devlin Commission and the subsequent public argument so prolonged—that time and opportunity were provided for a fairly thorough explanation of the whole impasse of the Federation. Probably ten times more ordinary British citizens are at least *aware* of a Central African problem now than ever were twelve months ago, albeit in a vague and baffled way. (It is for this reason that the Labour Party's inability to capitalise on this during the Election seems the more unfortunate.)

Similarly nothing for a long time managed to project South Africa into the British consciousness until the Cato Manor affair in Durban during the summer. It was not, I feel, a particularly significant incident, nor more explicitly symbolic of the situation than many others; nevertheless, the news broke accompanied by one particularly dramatic photograph which was front-paged by almost every English daily paper, and for a while imaginations were seized. There was a photograph of what were unmistakably women being bludgeoned by what were unmistakably policemen. It served to rouse people more immediately than any of us had been able to do for years with our endless written polemics about the Union, and for a while South Africa was worthy of heated discussion. For a while—until the next time.

The British attitude towards South Africa is extremely typical. Even the most cynical cannot deny that the British electorate is aware of South Africa, that the name suggests an emotion of bitter dislike, and that apart from a handful of professional apologists you will find no one prepared to defend the Nationalists. Popular newspapers no longer feel it necessary to define the word "apartheid" with an explanatory footnote (and if you don't think that this is an advance, you should have tried to write about the Union a couple of years ago). In general terms, South Africa lurks somewhere in the British subconscious as an evil, as the symbol and apotheosis of intolerance, as the inexplicable paradox of the Commonwealth theme. Here and there it occurs to some people to do something about it—I was myself surprised on my last return from the Union to find the Boycott idea already germinating in many unexpected quarters. It would be absurd to say that the Boycott has yet even begun to

impinge on the buying habits of anything but the tiniest minority —yet last week, when my wife was buying grapes in our little neighbouring Chelsea greengrocer and stipulated “Not South African, please”, the old lady in the shop said: “That’s funny, you’re the fourth person this week who’s said that”.

There is a long way to go. Not every territorial problem is as comprehensible as that of South Africa. The question of the Federation, while gradually rising to the surface, is still deeply confused. Sir Roy Welensky, on his frequent appearances in the United Kingdom, is a different political animal from the laird of Salisbury. Sir Roy giving avuncular tongue to his Press Conferences, Sir Roy making deprecating gestures on the television, gives the impression of making “partnership” a real word. To connoisseurs of the cosy approach, Sir Roy in England is by way of being a success. He has had his work cut out counteracting the more articulate follies of Lord Malvern, but by and large he has done it, on personality. After the Election he can now argue, I suppose, that his reward is at hand.

This is not intended to be a defeatist, or depressing, picture. Compared with the picture of public opinion a year or two ago it is, indeed, encouraging. Where the British public is informed on African issues, it is almost invariably on the right side. That it is not yet well enough informed is to a great degree our fault, whose job it is to enlighten; and to that extent an improvement is certain, since every year there are more of us qualified to do so.

There is no use in those of us who feel committed to the African cause disguising our discouragement and regret at the turn events have taken at the polls. Our work will be that much harder, and longer. I do not think it will be shirked.

