

## LABOUR AND CENTRAL AFRICA

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THE crisis in Central Africa, which many of us believed was bound to break around our heads in 1960, has come earlier than we thought. And the point of explosion has proved, after all, to be Nyasaland. When I was in the Federation fifteen months ago, I did not realize how imminent was the explosion there. Certainly there was restiveness in Nyasaland. Nearly all the people I met of all races—African M.P.s and members of provincial councils, chiefs, European missionaries and Asians, too—pressed upon me how genuine were African fears of Federation and how much the normally happy relations between Africans and government officials had deteriorated as a result. I remember, too, a hectic evening spent in the Ndirande Club at Limbe, being delightfully entertained by a large number of Africans who, after plying me with refreshments, drew their chairs round in a ring and argued with me for two hours excitedly, but always courteously, on the question of whether Nyasaland should secede from the Federation. They brushed aside my plea that it was far more constructive for them to back the Labour Party's policy of trying to liberalize and democratize the Federation as a condition of its continuance. They clearly thought I was living in a dream world, and in the end I was disconcerted when, after what I felt was an eloquent and unanswerable plea to them not to divide the African cause inside the Federation by contracting out, they cheered to the echo the simple and emphatic interjection by Mr. Wellington Chirwa (then a Federal M.P.): "We will never accept the Federation. We intend to secede."

The truth is that neither I, nor any of us in Britain, had realized the extent to which Federal (i.e. Southern Rhodesian) power was spreading through the Protectorates, robbing them of their traditional sense of security and bringing African fears to boiling point. Recent events, which have revealed the true intentions of the Federal Government, have proved that the Africans had a better assessment of the situation than we had. And that assessment has driven them to take action on their own behalf in the belief that no-one else is likely to take it for them. The challenge which faces us now is therefore threefold. First, how can we save Nyasaland from becoming another Cyprus, in which the

legitimate demands of the African people become lost to view in a vicious round of violence and counter-violence? Secondly, what are the principles with which we should approach the 1960 review of the future of Federation? And thirdly, how can we, as practical politicians, ensure that those principles are carried into effect?

None of these problems is easy to solve. If we are ever to solve them, we must get certain basic facts clear. To begin with, we must not allow our assessment of the Nyasaland situation to be bedevilled with talk of either Communist or Mau Mau plots. Of course, the return of Dr. Banda to Nyasaland last July has contributed to the flare-up of the crisis there, because he is a single-minded and effective exponent of secession. I talked to him in the House of Commons just before his return, and it was clear to me then that he was implacable on this issue. I tried on him, too, my argument that the Africans in all three territories in the Federation should concert their strength in order to improve the Federation rather than abandon it. He listened politely enough, but I sensed he was not impressed. He, like the Africans I met in Nyasaland, obviously believed that the encroachments of the Federal Government had already gone so far as to endanger the development of Nyasaland as an African State, and he was determined to save what he could from the spread of White dominance. Whether we agree with this approach or not, it is a perfectly legitimate political aim.

It is clear, also, that the Accra Conference has contributed to the developments in Nyasaland—but not in the crude way that Sir Roy Welensky believes. I know from the reports I have received from British M.P.s who were present at Accra that this was far from being a Communist-run show. On the contrary, Mr. Tom Mboya, as Chairman, was scrupulously careful not to let the Russian and Chinese fraternal delegates dominate the proceedings to the detriment of British or American representatives. No, Accra had a different significance from this. It was the symbol of the spread of African rights in an African continent. The presence there of representatives of African movements all over Africa, some of them in government and some still fighting for the barest recognition, gave a tremendous impetus to the claim of "Africa for the Africans". But from all the reports it would seem that this claim is still being advanced, not in the narrow sense of "Black racialism", but in the unanswerable form of the demand for full democratic rights for all peoples.

The net of African nationalism is steadily tightening round the last two remaining enclaves of rich, White settler privilege—Kenya and the Central African Federation—and inside these enclaves the Europeans are making a last desperate bid to apply different conditions for African advance than are now accepted in the rest of Africa. These areas with large European minorities, or with strong economic White interests, *do* present special problems which will need all our tact and understanding to solve without violence—on either side. But certainly there is no hope of solving them unless we first clear hypocrisy out of the way and face the realities. The worst enemies of multi-racialism or ‘partnership’ are those who elevate temporary political expedients like a qualified franchise into a permanent constitutional principle, and so make ‘partnership’ a synonym for the indefinite denial of African democratic rights.

It would appear that some of the Europeans in Kenya are beginning to realize this. For all its faults, the organization of moderates launched by Mr. Michael Blundell has produced a statement with one important virtue: it recognizes that Kenya is a state in which eventually the African majority must dominate. Once this goal is accepted by Europeans and the correct principles taken as the basis of discussion, agreement about the rate of progress towards the goal becomes much more feasible. Unfortunately, in the Central African Federation there is no sign yet of an equivalent recognition among the Europeans of this fact. If there were, the last thing they would be pressing for at this moment would be greater powers for the Federal Government and early independence from Westminster. If there is one thing which history makes clear (as events both in South Africa and Southern Rhodesia have proved) it is this: to grant independence to a territory while power is in the hands of a racial minority is not progress towards democracy, but a retreat from it. The very inability of even self-styled “enlightened” European leaders like Sir Roy Welensky to realize this simple truth proves that they are not fit to exercise the greater political powers for which they are clamouring.

Indeed, looking back at the behaviour of the Federal leaders over the past six years, the fears of those of us who doubted the wisdom of rushing through Federation so quickly have been fully justified. It pleases Sir Roy to attack the Labour Party as descending “to any level to damage the Federation”. But the Federation has been damaged, perhaps irretrievably, by those

who have used it merely as a stepping stone to dominion status, who have lost no opportunity of weakening Colonial Office control over the two protectorates and who have pressed greedily for bigger and quicker transfers of power to the politically entrenched White minority. In this way they have kept African fears at fever-point. The contempt they have shown for those fears, their refusal to modify their demands by one jot in order to allay them, show that their desire is not for a policy of partnership at all. And now they are reaping the harvest of African resistance in Nyasaland.

Equally tragic has been the folly of the British Government in supporting, and even encouraging, Federal ambitions over the past six years. The agreement signed in 1957 between the Colonial Secretary, Mr. Lennox Boyd, and Sir Roy Welensky as Federal Prime Minister was a gratuitous contribution to African fears. The agreement not only enhanced the status and prestige of the Federation by granting it increased responsibility for external affairs—at a time when the whole experiment was less than four years old and was still very far from being accepted by the Africans—it contained a more sinister element. This was the famous declaration that the British Government recognizes the existence of a ‘convention’ whereby the Government “in practice does not initiate any legislation to amend or repeal any Federal Act or to deal with any matter included within the competence of the Federal Legislature, except at the request of the Federal Government.” The purpose of this ‘convention,’ the two statesmen declared, was to clear up any “doubts” about the purpose and effect of Article 29(7) of the Federal Constitution, which provides that “nothing in this constitution shall effect any power to make laws for the Federation or any of the Territories conferred on Her Majesty by any Act of the Parliament of the United Kingdom.” Thus the aim of the “convention” was to present any critics of the Federation who might succeed the present British Government in office with the *fait accompli* of virtual Federal independence. And, indeed, Sir Roy went back to Salisbury to assure his jubilant European audiences that he had “dished the Labour Party.”

Such a convention has not, of course, statutory authority. It cannot over-ride Article 29. Nonetheless it is an indication of the extent to which Sir Roy has been steadily mobilizing his forces to make political war on any British Government which did not give him his own way. It is an indication, also, of the

open way in which the British Government has sided with the present rulers of the Federation against the views of the African majority. Another example of this bias was, of course, given by the Colonial Secretary when he over-rode the objections of the African Affairs Board to the Federal Franchise Bill. Thus the stage has been set for the present troubles which arise directly from the growing African belief that the Colonial Office had no longer the will or the power to protect African rights and that their only hope was to organize to protect themselves.

Over the past eighteen months the British Labour Party has become increasingly alarmed about these developments. In the first few years of the Federation's life, despite the Party's strong objection to the imposition of Federation, there was a genuine acceptance inside the Party of the need to try and make it work, partly for economic reasons and partly, too, because the Party hoped that progressive racial policies operating in the Protectorates would help to liberalize the Federation as a whole. But, following the British Government's treatment of the African Affairs Board, the mood has changed. In March, 1958, the Party issued a statement which spelt out in precise terms the conditions on which alone it believed the Federation could endure. These included "an unequivocal statement that the objective of the Federation is complete democracy and equal rights for every citizen"; the revision of the Federal franchise "to ensure genuine African representation in the Federal Parliament"; and the rapid elimination of racial discrimination in social relations, industry and education. And it added sternly that: "It will be by reference to the progress made in these matters that the Labour Party will decide its attitude at the conference which is to review the future of the Federation in 1960."

The issue between the Labour Party and Sir Roy Welensky is, therefore, clearly joined. The Labour Party does not only (as the statement also points out) stand by the Preamble to the Federal constitution which provides that Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland shall continue as separate Protectorates "for as long as their respective peoples so desire." It has also laid down the principle that the very existence of the Federation is still conditional. This implies a power of interference by the British Parliament to ensure that those conditions are met, a right which Sir Roy Welensky would bitterly repudiate. Indeed Labour Members have also been sharply reminding the Southern Rhodesian Government that its self-governing status does not give

it *carte blanche* to treat its African population as it likes. For a long time the powers of the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations under Sections 28 and 30 of the Southern Rhodesia Constitution Letters Patent, 1923, to veto measures which unfairly discriminate against African citizens, have fallen into disuse. But Labour Members are now invoking them against the Unlawful Organization Bill, the Preventive Detention Bill and the amendment to the Native Affairs Act recently introduced into the Southern Rhodesian legislature. Although the motion calling on the Secretary of State to exercise these powers is an unofficial back-bench one, it has nonetheless been signed by a large and representative group of Labour M.P.s.

It is clear, therefore, that both main political groupings in the British Parliament are taking up their positions in readiness for the 1960 review. And it is against this background that the troubles in Nyasaland must be considered. The Africans there have launched a new and lively agitation for secession because they believe it is their only hope. Faced with this, the British Government had two alternatives: either to suppress African agitation and thus risk forcing it into patterns of violence and underground terror; or to seek to allay it by offering the Africans constitutional means of defending themselves. The obvious way of doing this was by speeding up the constitutional reforms already promised for Nyasaland. Indeed, Lord Perth, Minister of State for Colonial Affairs, was due to visit Nyasaland for constitutional talks at the very time that the disturbances began. If the British Government was ready to redress the balance of power between African and European in the Federation, and so allay African fears, it would have jumped at Lord Perth's visit as a heaven-sent opportunity. Instead, to the consternation of the Labour Opposition, it announced that Lord Perth's visit was to be postponed because it had decided that "against this background of violence and unrest . . . the proposed constitutional talks cannot at present be held." The Labour Party denounced this as the old, old imperialist tactic of refusing reforms until unrest breaks out and then using the unrest as the excuse for not introducing the reforms. Mr. James Callaghan, from the Labour front bench, reminded the Government that an all-party parliamentary delegation to the Federation had recommended unanimously as long ago as 1957 that "a bold increase in representative government in the Territories" was urgently necessary! But in vain.



Was the Government's action due to stupidity or something more sinister? In the debate on Nyasaland on March 3rd, the Colonial Secretary revealed that he had very different ideas about constitutional reforms for Nyasaland than either the Opposition, or the African representatives with whom he had had informal talks, had been led to believe. "I have repeatedly made it clear to the House," he said, "that the Nyasaland Constitution, which came into being in 1956, would have to run until May, 1960, when the life of the present legislature expires." Challenged as to exactly what that meant, he added: "We would agree well before May, 1960, on what the changes thereafter were to be." Labour M.P.s were quick to point out that this would be too late to give the Africans effective representation at the 1960 review. Only one interpretation can be put on this policy: that the Government is not sorry to see trouble flare up in Nyasaland, for the disturbances enable it to suppress the African National Congress just as it is beginning to grow in strength, to introduce sweeping emergency powers and to suspend constitutional talks.

Equally irresponsible and provocative was the Government's action (again taken in the teeth of Labour protests) of allowing Federal (i.e. Southern Rhodesian) forces to be drafted into Nyasaland. This was followed by a further affront to the British Parliament in the deportation by Federal immigration authorities of Mr. John Stonehouse, M.P. The fact that he had been deported from a British Protectorate, Northern Rhodesia, when on his way to visit another Protectorate, Nyasaland, brought home sharply the extent to which the powers of the House of Commons are being undermined. The Commonwealth Relations Office hurried out a document to prove that the Federal Government was within its legal powers, since the Federal constitution gives it sole jurisdiction over immigration policy. Again the Labour Opposition called on the Government to protest against this action, tabling a motion declaring that "the entry of a citizen of the United Kingdom into a British Protectorate should be not subject to the veto of the Federal Government." But in vain. The Government's determination to enforce the authority of the Federal Government at every stage has only strengthened the demand of the Labour Party (made in its statement of March, 1958) that in 1960 "there should be a review of the powers of the federal and territorial governments so that the position of the Protectorates is safeguarded."

It is because of the partiality persistently shown by the British Government that the Labour Party views with deep scepticism the stories of a "massacre plot," first revealed to an astonished Commons by the Colonial Secretary on March 3rd and later, under pressure from the Opposition for more facts, "substantiated" in a White Paper. But by now the Labour Party was thoroughly alarmed by the revelations of the Government's mood. We know from bitter experience over Cyprus how skilled this Government is at obscuring its own designs by drawing red herrings of "violence" across the trail. The Labour Party promptly, therefore, trumped the Government's card by offering to co-operate in sending a parliamentary commission to Nyasaland to investigate the background to the disturbances. The Government at first refused this out of hand, but, under the pressure of public opinion, was compelled to make some gesture of reasonableness. It therefore announced the appointment, not of a parliamentary commission, (which would have confirmed the responsibility of the House of Commons for Federal affairs), but of an independent inquiry under a High Court judge. On March 25th last, the Labour Party issued another statement, welcoming the setting up of this commission, but urging that it should have adequate powers. The announcement since then of the powers of the commission proves, alas, that they will be far from adequate. The commission will sit in private; it will not have the right to compel the attendance of witnesses; worst of all, those implicated in the inquiry will not be entitled to be present when evidence is being given against them and nor will their legal representatives. They will not even be allowed to know the specific charges brought against them. It is a parody of an inquiry. The only ray of hope lies in the chairman, Mr. Justice Devlin, a man of fearless judgment and formidable intellect. If any good comes of the inquiry, it will be because he has triumphed over the difficulties its limited powers put in his way.

What, then, of the future? Clearly, the position in Nyasaland will remain one of stalemate until the commission has reported. But, whatever the commission finds, the political needs of Nyasaland remain unchanged. Even if it can be proved that unrest there is beginning to take illegal forms, the solution is still the same. The African people must be allowed to organize politically, and the African National Congress is the obvious political instrument for this purpose. It is the wildest folly that it should be banned. Moreover, as the Labour Party points out in its recent



statement, the need for constitutional progress in Nyasaland is greater now, not less. Constitutional reforms, guaranteeing a majority of elected Africans in the Nyasaland legislative council and the appointment of African ministers equal in numbers to those of other races, must be put in hand immediately—before, not after, the 1960 review. Talks along these lines with African leaders should start at once. The “state of emergency”, advanced as an excuse for not holding them, must be lifted. Those against whom criminal charges can be advanced should be brought to trial; the rest must be released.

But, thanks to the folly of the British Government, even these measures may no longer be enough. The Africans no longer have confidence that dominion status is not going to be imposed on them, just as Federation was. The people of Nyasaland have the right to know that, if they wish to leave the Federation, the British Government does not intend to keep them in it against their will. Personally I still believe that the secession of Nyasaland from a Federation continuing broadly on the old lines would be a gesture of defeat—that what we must aim at is keeping our forces intact until 1960, when the whole position must be fundamentally reviewed. But our only hope of doing this is to assure the Nyasalanders *now* that when 1960 comes, secession will be on the agenda if by then they still insist on it.

On March 24th, the Government informed Parliament that it would be shortly putting forward proposals on the best way of preparing for the Federal review. And it promised that Parliament would be associated “in an appropriate way” with any machinery that might be set up. So far so good. Welcoming this news, the Labour Party has suggested that a parliamentary commission should be appointed immediately to examine the background of all the issues involved, and it insists that such a commission “*should consider every possible alternative for the people of the three territories.*” Stormy days lie ahead. The only way in which we shall weather them is if the British Parliament re-asserts its full authority and comes to this tragic situation with an open mind, ready to give due weight to the mounting anxieties of the African people and to take any steps that may be needed to set them at rest. It is for this that the Labour Party fights and it is prepared to face all the consequences.