

THE CENTRAL AFRICAN LIBERALS

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The peculiar problem facing liberals in Central Africa is to devise a procedure whereby the European minorities can progressively share power with the African majorities in a way that maintains the standards of government and the confidence of the racial groups in one another. In the past the favourite device has been communal electorates, the theory being that if minorities were guaranteed representation in the legislature, and eventually the government, it should lead to a reconciliation of conflicting viewpoints. However, experience of the working of communal electorates has not supported this theory. So far from easing communal fears, separate representation seems to have had the effect of emphasizing the individuality of the different communities and of hardening their attitudes.

The selective franchise on a common roll is the new approach to this great problem. The mechanism of the common roll is a rigid sieve that, in the first instance, lets through Europeans and Africans (and Asians) in proportions corresponding roughly to the existing balance of power; but, at the same time, the franchise qualifications provide a slow-working, but automatic, device by which the dominance of the European minority is progressively diminished. In theory, the Europeans will gradually reconcile themselves to their reduced position during this transition period. But the scheme poses a crucial question: will the European community really carry through a policy which reduces it to a political minority? Or, to consider it from an African viewpoint: will the process proceed far enough and fast enough to satisfy African aspirations? It is my view that, left to themselves, the Europeans will stop short of the final step which puts them in a minority, and might even refuse to concede any substantial powers to Africans; instead they will attempt to consolidate a liberal oligarchy. It seems to me that this is essentially what is happening in Central Africa today.

Let us review the evidence for this interpretation. The first significant fact is the range in the political spectrum of European political opinion. With the possible exception of the Capricorn groups, whose influence is negligible, all political leaders subscribe to the doctrine of European leadership and control into the foreseeable future. The differences between them revolve

round the question of how Africans are to find political expression within this overall framework. The trials of Mr. Garfield Todd give point to this argument. His quarrel with the United Federal Party turned on nuances of paternalism, with the difference that he tried to make his paternalism acceptable to Africans and to breathe some life into the concept of partnership. When the electorate was finally allowed to pronounce a verdict on this policy, it erased utterly Mr. Todd and his party from the political scene, and not content with this, greatly strengthened the Dominion Party opposition, who consider even the Welensky brand of liberalism irresponsible.

The detailed provisions of the Southern Rhodesian and Federal franchises are by now well known; some of the implications are perhaps less well appreciated. Although the franchise qualifications are so similar, the Southern Rhodesian scheme is more liberal in its immediate impact, since the special roll electors vote for the same candidates as the general roll electors, and so have an opportunity to exert some electoral influence sooner (though only up to 20% of the general roll). In the Federal scheme, by contrast, the special roll electors can merely vote for reserved African seats (in the enlarged Assembly: 2 in each of the Northern Territories and 5 in Southern Rhodesia), with the whole general roll voting concurrently. Now the striking feature of these franchises, and particularly of the Federal one, is that they concede no political influence to Africans now, but instead make an offer for 15 or 20 years hence, when a significant number might be expected to have acquired the necessary income and educational qualifications. The urgent political problem of winning co-operation of the current group of African leaders—especially before the constitutional review of 1960—is being met by the offer of a long post-dated cheque. It is not uncommon for politicians to claim advance credit for their forthcoming electoral programmes, but the self-congratulation of the United Federal Party on its promise to share power in 20 years time is surely unique in this genre. Sceptics might be pardoned for holding that if the United Federal Party is afraid to share power now, it will find equally valid reasons for not doing so in 15, 20 or 40 years time; especially when Sir Roy in his public expositions of the scheme has laid such emphasis on the fact that the European two-thirds majority will enable the franchise to be modified at any time before it is threatened, should his “kindergarten in democracy” not be accounted a success. Meanwhile, if African

co-operation is lost now, can it be won again in 20 years time?

The conclusion must be that not even the liberal wing of European opinion, which happens to be in power in both the Southern Rhodesian and the Federal Parliaments, has any intention of sharing power now, let alone sponsoring franchises that will automatically eclipse its ascendancy, however gradually. A deliberate plunge over the borderline would have to be taken, and this can only happen if liberal opinion grows stronger than it is today. In the Union the trend has been in the opposite direction, with the progressive restrictions to the Cape franchise as milestones along the way. In Southern Rhodesia before federation there was a similar trend of narrowing the basis of African political representation. It is unnecessary to go so far as to label this the 'natural' direction for an independent race-defined oligarchy, but it is evident that this tendency exists. The liberals in the Federation are proposing to open their oligarchy wider than has ever been contemplated in South Africa or the old Southern Rhodesia, but there is no attempt to entrench this liberalism in the Constitution while they are in the mood and they still have the power, and the way is left clear for an easy retreat when the cheque falls due for payment.

A noteworthy feature of this policy of selective enfranchisement is the implicit theory about the Africans who will thus be absorbed into the oligarchy. The aim of the franchise is to select the more responsible (and civilized) elements in the African population who, it is hoped, will behave in a non-racial manner by joining in the existing party system. The experiment will be accounted a 'success' if the enfranchised Africans identify themselves with the oligarchy in this way, but a 'failure' if they form an African group of their own which challenges European supremacy. The present African representatives in the Federal Assembly have been branded in this way by Sir Roy Welensky, and on these grounds he has justified his refusal to take any of them into his ministry.

Such a reaction reveals the basic flaw in the present policies of the Central African liberals. They are orientated towards the European electorate, and all their efforts are bent towards winning White support for their liberal paternalism. Such an emphasis is misdirected, for they are trying to mould the shadow and not the substance. On this question the European electorate is like a puppet: it dances to the drums of African politics. The existence of a strong body of liberal European opinion depends on

the way in which African politics develop. If African leaders can be induced to co-operate with the liberals, the very success of such a policy will win for them more White converts; but if they reject the tenets of European liberalism, then its White supporters will take fright and adopt more extreme views of racial dominance. Liberal leaders do not appear to have seen this connection. Neither in their policies nor personally have they gone out of their way to win African support. It is open to doubt whether African acceptance can be won for the political system envisaged by Central African liberals; but it is surely foolhardy not even to make the effort. The condition on which a European dominated oligarchy might win acceptance from the bulk of Africans is the vigorous social and economic integration of the two races, not merely in petty matters like the removal of discrimination in public transport and hotels, but on fundamental issues like integrated schooling and the removal of all colour barriers in industry. It is conceivable that by working actively for equality in these spheres Africans might become reconciled to a junior partnership in the political sphere. Yet in their speeches the leaders of the United Federal Party emphasize their belief that the two races could live together economically and politically without integration. If the preceding analysis is valid, this attitude cannot fail to react disastrously on the prospects of the liberals: intransigent African leaders will frighten and harden the European community, and the liberals will be replaced by a tougher breed.

This is a gloomy conclusion. It has been argued that although the main liberal strain of European opinion in Central Africa is only aiming at the establishment of a White oligarchy with African support, it is likely to fail even in this endeavour through a failure to understand properly its own position. It is acting a fallacy in trying to win support only from the European community, whereas success depends fundamentally on obtaining African agreement for its view of society. But for the optimists two imponderables should be noted. First, the multi-racial Constitution Party, though not daring to contest the Southern Rhodesian elections, may still conceivably become a significant force. Secondly, a British Government is still in a position to play a crucial role in the affairs of Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland—should it be so minded.