

Zimbabwe Dialogue

Eight months after the rebellion in Rhodesia the British Government has reached the stage of holding "talks about talks." To clarify the issues we present an imaginary eavesdropped dialogue between a British optimist and a Zimbabwean realist.

So you think these talks can succeed?

Yes, I hope so.

In doing what?

In reaching a negotiated settlement, of course.

An independence settlement? Without selling out the Africans?

Yes; the Prime Minister has made it quite clear that he won't accept a settlement which doesn't satisfy the six principles, and they guarantee African rights.

Ah, the famous six principles. Do you think they mean anything?

Of course they do. They've been the basis of British policy right from the start.

Exactly. Because they can mean whatever Wilson chooses to make them mean. You don't imagine that they were ever intended to be more than an intangible but unexceptionable defence against charges that Britain refused to state its terms, do you? A defensive negotiating gambit. But in any case, you've read the blue book on the "negotiations" before UDI I take it. In which case you would agree that the principles imply independence before majority rule?

Certainly, but only with guarantees of unimpeded progress to majority rule, no retrogression, and so on. They're foolproof. No adequate guarantees — no independence.

Constitutional guarantees? Blocking thirds and so on?

That kind of thing, yes. But of course the details still have to be negotiated.

Nonetheless, you consider that you could justifiably grant independence to Rhodesia while it is still effectively controlled by the whites. I see. But what about the fifth principle?

Well of course the fifth principle is the most important. We won't grant independence unless it is acceptable to Rhodesia as a whole.

I'm sure we both remember that vague phrase "as a whole" was one that Smith rather rashly agreed to in his talks with Home in September 1964. But whatever it means, I suppose you would at least agree that it includes a majority of the Africans?

I suppose so.

But what evidence is there that a majority of the Africans would ever agree to the grant of independence before majority rule? The Nationalists, for instance, are quite adamantly against it.

Yes, but we don't know how much support the Nationalists really have. We haven't tested the fifth principle yet.

O.K., it isn't proven either way, yet. But if you've read Cmd. 2807 you must admit that about the only thing Smith and Wilson agreed on was that most Africans, if fairly consulted, would probably prefer Nkomo and his policies to Smith and his. It's implicit in almost every thing that was said. So your fifth principle

appears to make nonsense of the basic assumption underlying the others, i.e. independence before majority rule.

Under the present set-up perhaps. But I still don't see why the Africans shouldn't accept a reasonable settlement containing the guarantees that we're trying to get Smith to concede.

You'd agree, surely, that any such settlement would imply trusting the whites not to act unconstitutionally in order to prevent a transition to majority rule?

Well naturally in any settlement there has to be an element of trust, otherwise you'll never get anywhere. You have to be realistic.

So you trust them eh? And you expect the Africans to trust them? On what grounds do you base this trust?

Because however much I may disagree with Smith's views, I think he's basically a decent man who will keep his word.

Honest Ian. Of course. But I didn't ask you about him; after all, Prime Ministers can only do what their supporters will let them do. What makes you think the whites will let him keep his word? Can you really imagine him handing calmly over to Nkomo, without a struggle, just because the constitution said he must? Have you forgotten what happened to Todd, to Whitehead, to Welensky, to Field, to Butler when they so much as hinted that they might, one day, allow a black man to take over Rhodesia?

Yes I know about them; but if we get a constitution which guarantees majority rule the whites won't have any option.

Have you forgotten that on May 7 last year there was an election? There were two parties and they both stood for indefinite white supremacy. The only significance was that the RF had made clear that it was prepared to act unconstitutionally to preserve that supremacy and the RP had made clear that it wasn't. The whites overwhelmingly voted for the RF and rejected the RP. All 50 seats, remember?

O.K. but they didn't know what they were voting for.

Father, forgive them . . . Have you also forgotten that the RF subsequently tore up the constitution and replaced it with a completely different document eliminating the only previous real safeguard for the Africans? That they did this solely and specifically to prevent any transition to majority rule from taking place? And that the vast majority of the whites either supported them or at least acquiesced?

Of course I know that; but UDI was an emotional episode. There were special circumstances.

Exactly, including three main ones which won't apply in the future if you get your way:

1, they were a British dependency; 2, they knew that severe economic consequences would follow; and, most important, 3, majority rule wasn't even remotely imminent.

Well, I still don't think they'll tear up a constitution again. We could build in automatic sanctions if they did, or even provide for UN intervention, in a treaty, for instance.

Well, if no one's prepared to fight them now, there's no reason to suppose that anyone will, in say, 10 years time when they'll be armed to the teeth even more than they are at present. And if you think Rhodesia's trading partners in Europe are going to go to all the trouble of destroying a lucrative relationship which they loathe doing now anyway, merely because yet another African government has breached its constitution in some way, or been overthrown by a (white supremacist) military coup, I'm afraid you're being very naive. But on reflection I incline to agree with you that they probably won't tear up their constitution; they probably wouldn't need to.

I don't follow you.

Well, the South African Act of Union, for instance, had "constitutional guarantees" for African rights. Come to that, the constitution of Mississippi has actually been "guaranteeing" one man one vote for over a hundred years. And neither of these governments have even had to act unconstitutionally in order to render these "guarantees" completely meaningless.

Well, we can learn from this. We'll get a much better constitution as a result.

Look, all I'm trying to tell you is that a constitution is just a piece of paper. Even Smith agrees with me here — he told Wilson that he wasn't interested in "paper safeguards". If you have effective power in a country — and in the final analysis that means the control of the police and the armed forces — you can tear up that piece of paper, like Rhodesia; or ignore it, like Mississippi; or amend it, like South Africa; or get round it, like Ghana. Power and paper are two very different things, and I wish I thought Harold Wilson was aware of the fact.

Harold's all right. He's highly intelligent. He has said again and again that he is determined to fulfil his responsibilities to the Africans; and he has spent millions of pounds on sanctions and helping Zambia. Surely this proves his good faith. And his policy has been absolutely consistent all along.

Certainly only a fool would claim that he fully understood Harold Wilson. But there are plenty of things that make me doubt either his good faith or his intelligence. And as for consistency, there have only been three constant factors that I can think of — no force, sanctions and the principles.

Exactly, and what's more they make up a perfectly sound policy. What can you criticise there? Did you want a bloodbath? Did you want him to give up straight away without sanctions? Would you like us to abandon the principles?

Well, the principles are meaningless so let's leave them out. That leaves us with a choice between force, sanctions or surrender. Now, why do you think he chose sanctions?

Because they were the best way of achieving the desired result. Both force and surrender were out of the question.

Half right. He couldn't use force because they'd make a fuss at home, and he couldn't do nothing because they'd make a fuss abroad. Therefore, sanctions; but the decision to apply sanctions, therefore, was taken without really considering whether they would work or not — that is to say, not merely damage the economy, but bring about a transition to majority rule.

So you would have used force?

Reluctantly, yes, though by now it's somewhat

academic. After all, in strictly theoretical terms there are only two logical ways of resolving the anomaly of responsibility without power, i.e. Britain's plaintive but impotent status vis-à-vis Rhodesia for the last 76 years. You can either get rid of the responsibility or you can assume the power. By ruling out force (at a time, incidentally, when Smith had made it quite explicit that economic threats would not deter him from UDI) Wilson has already, by implication, opted for the former. It's only natural. Whatever else he may feel about Rhodesia we can be quite certain that the very last thing he wants, in a global and particularly a European context, is any long-term commitment in Southern Africa. He is obviously aching to get rid of the responsibility.

I defy you to cite anything he has said or done which indicates that he is prepared to sell out the Africans.

And I defy you to read Cmd. 2807 and then to tell me that if Smith had accepted Britain's final offer in Salisbury and in the last telephone conversation he would not have been able to maintain white supremacy for as long as he chose.

Then why didn't he?

Because fortunately the RF were too stupid and hysterical to see where their true interests lay, and saved Wilson from carrying through his betrayal by forcing Smith into UDI. We can't guarantee they will bail Wilson out like this again.

Well, he was trying to prevent UDI. But when it happened he did what he had always said he would do — imposed sanctions.

Yes, but remember that it was only after UDI that he said why he was imposing sanctions. Before then he had, no doubt deliberately, left the impression that sanctions were to be a gesture of disapproval only, a punishment for being a naughty boy. Look, try to get it out of your head that Wilson has ever had a policy. He has made a series of ad hoc decisions in the light of the pressures of the moment, domestic and international. The reason he never stated his goals before UDI was because he never had any goals. Sheer terror of great big Smithy with his Croydon-ful of whites and his squadron of Hunters has been the dominant characteristic. And, of course, equal terror of the great British public, with its Kih-Klux-Kin tribal loyalties. The trouble with Wilson, though, is that he is such a brilliant propagandist he really seems to believe his own propaganda. Rather like Smith, in fact. So it's quite likely that by now he really imagines that he has had a consistent policy, that these talks really can end in an honourable independence, and so on. He may even believe this incredible gibberish about "majority rule by achievement".

Well, for heaven's sake, what's wrong with that? Surely you are not in favour of immediate majority rule — it's obvious that — admittedly through no fault of their own — the Africans just aren't ready for it. Don't you believe in responsible government? Haven't you drawn any conclusions from what has been happening recently in independent Africa? I admire your idealism, but do try to be a little realistic.

What a good Rhodesian you are! No, of course I don't accept that the Africans aren't ready for it; they have more trained men than almost any other country in the continent except Ghana. I agree, I am not in favour of immediate majority rule — but only because the whites aren't ready for it and they would fight, or panic and get out or something, and there would be chaos.

All right, things may be bad now, but surely Wilson is still right to ensure that they will

only get better, by insisting on majority rule by achievement?

By "achievement" you mean, like Wilson, qualifying for the "A" Roll?

Yes; some form of qualified franchise, anyway. A country will obviously be better governed if its voters have to show some form of merit and responsibility in order to vote.

Oh dear, this is another ludicrous anomaly in Wilson's case. Look, when Rhodesians say "merit" and "responsibility" they mean "money" and "education". You see nothing paradoxical in the Labour Party solemnly proclaiming that only the rich and the educated should be allowed to vote? In any case, there are no rational grounds for believing that money and education confer some mysterious quality called "political responsibility". Verwoerd, Adolf Hitler and Lord Salisbury, for instance, would qualify easily for the "A" Roll, while Jesus Christ and Mahatma Gandhi wouldn't. Finally, please try to realise that money and education are not things that Africans "achieve". They are things that the employers and the government respectively give to them or withhold from them. For instance, if you suddenly cut African wages to a maximum of £100 per annum, you would find that overnight no one would have any "merit". Conversely, if you spent millions of pounds rushing them all through secondary school, they would all suddenly acquire "responsibility". This is clearly absolute nonsense; and I can't understand whether Wilson is being naive or cynical in pretending to believe it. Like this utterly fantastic idea of his that the grant of independence before majority rule could conceivably lead thereafter to a peaceful transition to majority rule. Or these talks? Naive or cynical? I don't know. It can't be anything else.

Even if I agree with you about the no independence before majority rule business, I think the talks may still have value with more limited objectives. For instance, they might produce a split in the Rhodesian Front; Smith could then shed his extremists and lead a new moderate coalition. This would then be a new political force on the scene with whom one really could negotiate seriously.

Ah! this exquisite Wilsonian idea that Smith is a "moderate"!

Stop damning everyone. You must admit that, whatever his faults, Smith really is less intransigent than, say, Lardner-Burke or Harper.

Less intransigent about means certainly. But what evidence is there that his political ends are any different from theirs — white supremacy for the foreseeable future? It's just that he is bright enough to prefer to get what he wants by talking nicely than by suffering economically. A few "concessions", a token return to "constitutional government", a general election (on the present or a similar franchise, of course) or a rigged Royal Commission or something, to "satisfy" the fifth principle, and if he then gets independence with himself still in effective power, it won't matter in the least what "concessions" he may or may not have made, the whites will be sitting pretty for as long as they like.

You are suggesting that all the whites are extremists. This just isn't so.

Of course not all. But you can't deny that a large majority of the whites are prepared to go along with the Rhodesian Front. And you shouldn't forget, even if Wilson does, that the sole policy and raison d'être of the RF is, and has always been, to oppose the 1961 constitution on the grounds that it would lead to "precipitate" majority rule — in other words to maintain white supremacy for as long as possible

by all possible means. It is a profoundly racist organisation. If you don't believe me, read their manifesto; read the records of their last Congress; read the resolutions they debated there; read their leaders' speeches; study their election posters; read Mr. Nicolle's views on racial segregation in last month's New African; study Smith's total intransigence on Land Apportionment, and finally re-read Cmd. 2807 where he actually admits that "when they themselves lost power, civilised government would have gone out of the window for ever". None of this is even surprising, when you remember that Rhodesia's "native policy" and racial attitudes have always been far closer to South Africa than to normal British colonies. But they do make it ridiculous to suppose that as long as the RF — or its components under another name, but anyway a majority of the Europeans — remain the dominant political force in Rhodesia, indefinite white supremacy will not remain official government policy.

Do you then think that nothing of value can emerge from these talks?

Well, as long as the Southern Rhodesia (Independence) Act isn't actually signed, I suppose there's always hope. Depending on what effect sanctions have, which could be considerable by, say, September, the best that could possibly emerge from the talks might be a simple withdrawal of UDI, i.e. back to 10th November last year. This is clearly Smith's first fall-back position — in his own words: "the Europeans would seek to entrench themselves under the 1961 constitution" (failing independence). But if, at the same time, Britain formally renounced the previous "convention of non-interference in Rhodesia's internal affairs", this would, at least, constitute a slightly new situation which Britain might be able, slowly and painfully, to exploit.

Do you think this will happen?

No. As I said, I don't think Wilson is prepared to bear the responsibility for Rhodesia much longer, let alone indefinitely.

So what do you think will happen?

Smith will win, of course, and Wilson will no doubt shed bitter tears as he hands over four million more British subjects to apartheid. But this process needn't necessarily take the form of a dirty deal with Smith. Wilson would probably prefer this because it would be easier than the alternative to present to his electorate as a victory for his statesmanship. If he thinks he just can't bring this off, however, I suppose he will do a sort of Palestine — admit failure, wash his hands of the whole business, and turn it over to the UN who, needless to say, won't be able to do anything effective about it in view of Smith's military strength. Either way Wilson will have sold out the Africans. Still he might not. It depends how many people show him that they are aware of what he is doing and of the implications of granting independence before majority rule, and are prepared to make life unpleasant for him if he goes on doing it — back-benchers, constituencies, unions, Commonwealth Prime Ministers, Americans, and so on.

Do you think they will?

No. Relatively few people are really interested in Rhodesia, are they?

So after the sell-out, what then?

Remember the Viljoens?

The white couple that were murdered? Yes. Tragic.

And prophetic.