

*Commonwealth Conference*

commonwealth would not be able to recognize the validity of any such unilateral declaration of independence. That was subscribed to unanimously by all governments around the table.

In my own statement at the conference I had suggested that it might strengthen the hand of the British government and might support the moderate elements among Southern Rhodesian voters if all governments at the conference would let it be publicly known that this was their stand, that many of us feared that unconstitutional action by a minority in Southern Rhodesia would gravely diminish Southern Rhodesia's international status, might lead to economic and political internal difficulties and might also lead to disaster and violence and attempts to organize—this was mentioned at the conference as a possible result if something was not done—a Southern Rhodesian government in exile. We felt that such an exacerbation of differences would be a tragedy for all concerned. All the commonwealth leaders, I repeat, agreed that it would be prudent at this time to take such a stand on this matter and to make it public so there could be no misunderstanding anywhere about the position we would have to adopt if such a desperate and illegal measure were taken.

We also decided to express publicly, and this is in the communiqué, our welcome of the decision of the British government that for Southern Rhodesia, as for other territories, the existence of sufficiently representative institutions would be a condition of the granting of independence to such a territory. Most of us, including myself, expressed the view that an independence conference should be convened which the leader of all parties in Southern Rhodesia should be free to attend—the expression “should be free to attend”, which is in the communiqué, is of some significance because some of the leaders are not free to attend anything at the present time—and that the object of this conference would be to seek agreement on the steps by which Southern Rhodesia might proceed to independence within the commonwealth, we all hope, and I am now quoting from the communiqué, “at the earliest practicable time on the basis of majority rule”.

Of course when you mention the word “time” you really get to the heart of the difficulty, because it is a problem not of objective but of timing. I think we all appreciate that rash and premature action in these matters can cause trouble. We have had some experience of that in recent years. But it was the feeling of the conference, and I

shared this feeling after listening to the views expressed, that the greater danger was not speed but delay, and that unless some early progress is made in Southern Rhodesia the African majority might be driven increasingly to despair and to the acts of desperation that despair can engender.

Moreover, Mr. Speaker, I was very impressed by the warning given by one of the most moderate African leaders that the continued imprisonment of Mr. J. Nkomo and Rev. N. Sithole and many of their associates would weaken the control that the more responsible African leaders have over their followers and would drive the latter toward increasing extremism. I therefore put forward the suggestion that the commonwealth conference should issue a reasoned appeal that the African leaders in Southern Rhodesia be released as a contribution toward the holding of those discussions that must take place soon, and on which the hope for agreed and early achievement of independence must inevitably be based. Most of the other prime ministers associated themselves with this idea, and this appeal is included in the communiqué.

At the same time we called upon all leaders and their supporters of both races to exercise moderation and abstain from violence. In this connection I was very impressed by the emphasis placed by the African representatives at the conference on the importance of allaying the fears of the white minority in Southern Rhodesia, perhaps by saying something in our communiqué to reassure them about their security, and to let them know that their co-operation would be essential in the development of an independent state. We agreed to the inclusion of this point in the communiqué.

I have gone in some detail into this question of Southern Rhodesia because as I suggested at the conference it is of importance far beyond the interests of its people. What is done about it has now become a symbol, and the stand the commonwealth leaders decide to take on this matter is likely to be, and I am sure will be, considered a test of the seriousness of the commonwealth members about a principle which we have all adopted and on which we now stand.

Perhaps I should mention also, Mr. Speaker, that on behalf of the government I stated we would be glad to provide technical facilities or resources to help in the training of Africans from Southern Rhodesia to take on the new responsibilities of administration, if that should be desired and if those concerned