

Southern Rhodesia Problem

We then went on to suggest how these principles should be applied to Southern Rhodesia and British Guiana. The Southern Rhodesian situation is a very dangerous and difficult one. Southern Rhodesia has been self-governed for a good many years in domestic matters. Its Government is responsible to a Legislature which is elected by only a small minority of its population, largely those of European descent. The constitutional responsibility for a change in the situation rests with the Government of the United Kingdom, and all of us at the Conference recognized that the authority and responsibility for leading Southern Rhodesia as well as other colonies to complete independence must continue to rest with Great Britain. There was no difference of opinion on this point. The leaders of the African countries in particular attached great importance to the point that it was Great Britain and not the present Government of Southern Rhodesia which had this power and responsibility.

There have been many suggestions in recent months — and this was referred to in our discussions — that the Government of Southern Rhodesia might seek to issue a unilateral declaration of independence without regard to the views of the African parties in that country or the views of the United Kingdom Government. We made it clear in our communiqué that the other governments of the Commonwealth would not be able to recognize the validity of any such unilateral declaration of independence. That was subscribed to unanimitously 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 felt 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 be prepared 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 progress 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".