

Britain's Relation with South Africa

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Nigerian Forum, March-April 1987, Nos 3&4

A great deal of the historical studies of the Anglo-South African relationship are based on the premise that Britain won the war in South Africa in 1902 but was impotent in the face of local white assertion. The main aim of this paper would be to try to show the reasons for this surrender of imperial power or the abstinence from the exercise of power when situations clearly call for action on the part of Britain.

White-ruled South Africa cannot like Angola be painted as a neo-colonial victim rather it should be seen as a variant of colonial power. Consequently, it is my contention that Britain should be held responsible for the present uncivilised and inhuman government in South Africa because by conferring self-government on South Africa in haste it became an imperial guarantor of a policy based on a foundation of repression rather than on liberal British policy which gave preference to direct rule by the 'Natives' under the surveillance of the imperial government. In fact, Britain had a jaundiced view of the South African government and knew all along that it had veered off towards the wrong lines of political development and needed to be compelled to fall in line with civilised form of government. Surprisingly, it took the inglorious position of persistently using subtle measures aimed at influencing and persuading it to build up pro-British system of government and administration. This, for instance, was the situation which constrained Stanley, the High Commissioner in South Africa to warn that the British connection "hangs on a slender thread".

Britain, though had an enormous leverage on South Africa, continued to fumble and vacillate in its policy towards South Africa. It held the Union in awe and placed a very high premium on continued Africaner membership of the British Empire. However, South Africa also had a great deal of respect for Britain because of an obvious reason which was clearly stated by a mining magnate Sir Abe Bailey in 1933 when he wrote that "the Yellow Peril" (i.e. the Japanese designs) was "one of the best arguments for the maintenance of the Union's connection with the British Commonwealth for only in this way will they (South Africa) continue to enjoy the protection of the British Navy".

Britain cannot claim not to know the path on which South Africa had chosen to develop. There were very clear indications to that effect and successive British officials who visited South Africa pointed these out in their reports. For example, in his report on his political impression of the situation in South Africa after his visit in 1934 Sir William Hankey, the Secretary to the British Cabinet pointed out that the intention of the whites was to retain power for the foreseeable future and to exercise it for their own benefit. South Africa also made its intentions clear when in spite of protest against irregularities in recruitment it appointed Professor Eiselen, a leading *apartheid* theorist and advocate, as Secretary for Native Affairs instead of another candidate with a long and distinguished career in the service. There followed a plethora of laws and detailed administrative measures which were designed to regulate almost every aspect of human contact between peoples of the different ethnic groups. Africans, coloured and Asian peoples faced with the fact of the repressive and retrogressive laws and the appalling disregard of their rights and dignity looked up to Britain for deliverance but when this was not forthcoming they resigned themselves, at first reluctantly, to working towards -forceful overthrow of the Africaner Government. Up till this point in time when the conscience of the world had not yet been awakened to the offensive and exclusivist ideology of the South African regime the policy of British governments towards South Africa was based on traditional and emotional ties rather than being determined by South Africa's racial and obnoxious policies.

It is partly because of persistent international hostility to South Africa, and partly because of the pathetic decline of international power of Britain that made it to seek to change the nature of its link with the South African government from that of a bilateral relationship to a combined western position. In other words, British world power has dwindled to such an extent that it can hardly take any action on the South African question unless it is part of the decision of the western countries. Britain's strategy of trying to spread the burden of association with South Africa by promoting common perception among western countries is also partly aimed at preventing itself from being pressurised into taking measures, which may be inimical to the interest of the racist South African government. It is instructive to note that when Mrs. Margaret Thatcher grudgingly agreed to limited sanctions against South Africa she also stated that her support for the measure was conditional on their being approved by the EEC Summit when she knew very well that EEC countries were looking for a lead from Britain because of her traditional ties with South Africa. Thus the European veneer of civilised and humane government has been scratched by the unyielding position taken by Britain and the Western countries on South African issue.

Fortunately, if even Britain had wanted to ignore the situation in South Africa it could not because of the prominence given to it by black African states and international organisations such as the United Nations (UN), the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and the Commonwealth. There is need to have a closer look at some of these international organisations that have influenced the policy of Britain towards South Africa.

First, the UN, where there was condemnation of South Africa on the grounds of its *apartheid* system and its illegal occupation of Namibia. African states continued to use international agencies like the UN *Anti-apartheid* Committee to a considerable effect. African states are committed to the elimination of *apartheid* and tend to judge other states on their attitude towards this inhuman and degrading system. No country, not even the United States, would want to endanger its international reputation by openly supporting South Africa. In fact, Britain would be completely isolated if inspite of international criticism it continues to defend South Africa's internal policies.

Second, for a long time now the Commonwealth conferences have been the arenas for British humiliation because its policies tend to give support and comfort to the South African government. At a Commonwealth Conference in 1977, for instance, when African states threatened to boycott the 1978 Commonwealth Games if countries that have sporting links with South Africa participated in it "each government agreed after a negotiation to combat the evil of *apartheid* by withholding any form of support for, and by taking every practical step to discourage contact or competition by their nationals with sporting organisation, teams or sportsmen from South Africa". More recently, Nigeria's withdrawal from the 1986 Commonwealth Games because of Britain's opposition to Sanctions against the *apartheid* regime led to a massive boycott of the Edinburgh Commonwealth Games. This action which was initiated by Nigeria hurt the pride of Britain.

Third, the OAU helped a great deal to legitimise the liberation movements and gave them an international status.

Fourth, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) continues to make effort to appeal to the conscience of the big powers and the western countries who have sought to subsume the issues in the East-West cold war by creating fora for the education of its 101-member states on the odious system of *apartheid*.

International organisations achieved tremendous success in its educational role by slowly but steadily changing international attitudes towards *apartheid* and Britain has come to recognise and accept that there

was need for at least an overt condemnation of the vile regime in South Africa.

Britain has in its relation with South Africa hesitated to put into use its toughness or at least its well known skill in diplomacy and has to the surprise of African states hung on the tenuous issue that if it imposes a comprehensive sanction on South Africa it would face economic crisis. Let me hasten to point out here that it is an overstatement that if the large British mining companies no longer operate in South Africa and if South Africa no longer supplies 'vital' minerals many British industries would be crippled. Those who take this line of argument lose sight of the fact that demand could change and new sources of the so called vital minerals could be found. For example, a country could explore for new sources, or develop those which are known but remain unexploited or stockpile available supplies. In addition, stock of exploitable minerals could change according to price, technology and successful exploration. Besides, there are substitutes for some South African minerals such as copper, nickel, iron, phosphate, sink, silver and lead.

The impact of oil which South Africa does not produce affects virtually all aspects of the British economy and is therefore far more important than minerals such as platinum, chrome, gold and manganese. Nigeria who is at the forefront in the struggle against *apartheid* has not only oil but also uranium, coal and iron ore. There is uranium also in Katanga, Zaire and in Malagasy Republic while Ghana, Zaire and Zimbabwe have gold in commercial quantity. In addition, Ghana and Tanzania have diamonds. Thus the extent of Britain's dependence on South African minerals has been grossly exaggerated.

The uncertainty expressed and the assumption made by the opponents of sanctions that South Africa holds or can have a formidable economic grip on Britain is therefore hypocritical and untenable. This has led some scholars to express the fear that British and United States transnationals who have a monopoly of information on strategic minerals might artificially create either shortage or surplus on the market and thus make super profit and use the condition brought about by their action to substantiate the "unique character" of South African reserves.

Mrs. Margaret Thatcher's opposition to comprehensive economic sanctions against South Africa is not founded on logic and her recent actions and utterances were principally aimed at accentuating racism and anti-black feeling in British society. It is difficult to defend, for example, the recent British Cabinet decision to selectively demand Visas from travelers from countries that have predominantly black and brown population without asking for the same requirement from racist white South Africa that has ceased to be a member of the Commonwealth. It is also wrong for Britain and some Western countries to attach a single ideological label to states which support the struggle to bring the *apartheid* regime to its knees. It is only countries like Britain who believe in the racist ideology or pretend the incomprehension of the situation in South Africa that often claim that it is a bulwark against communism. It must be pointed out here that if the ANC does not have a significant support of the liberals and the conservatives in Britain, it is not because it seeks membership only among the communists, who have shown genuine interest in and commitment for its cause but because the non-communists do not see anything wrong in the ideology and practice of *apartheid*. *Apartheid* is a state instituted system and therefore any state or organisation however good its conditions of employment may be cannot avoid serving as a prop to the hideous system if it has and maintains economic link with it. It is doubtful whether Britain expects to be appreciated when it says it abhors *apartheid*. At best it ritualistically condemns *apartheid* policies of South Africa without taking action to hasten its abolition.

There is need for Britain to examine more critically its relation with South Africa which has been based on the old fashioned capitalist self-interest and racial bigotry and redeem her image in black states by supporting the struggle for self-determination and majority rule in South Africa.