

The Role of the Commonwealth Prime Ministers Meeting (CPMM) in resolving the Rhodesia question: The Unrecognised State, 1966-1969

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The CPMM, currently known as the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), is an international summit conference and is part of a broader international organisation, the Commonwealth of Nations. In its early years, the CPMM met at irregular intervals, but it changed to meet biennially from 1971 onwards. The leaders discuss international issues and key challenges relevant to them. Rhodesia, which was earlier known as Southern Rhodesia and is currently known as Zimbabwe, became the most significant item on the CPMM agenda in the mid-1960s. Indeed, it drew the world's attention as the conflict was between a white minority government and the black majority population of Rhodesia. This dispute was over whom should control the government and it took more than a decade (until 1980) to resolve. Rhodesia had a unique status under the British Empire. Before the break-up of Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland (Central African Federation) in 1964, Rhodesia was a self-governing colony with the right to hold elections based on minority white control. In November 1965, Ian Douglas Smith, who had succeeded as the Prime Minister of Rhodesia in 1964, and his political party, the Rhodesia Front (RF), announced the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) of Rhodesia without any legal recognition by the colonial power, Great Britain. After the UDI, Britain and most other United Nations members insisted that Rhodesia could only become a sovereign and recognised state based on majority rule. Original research of this problem investigates and explores how the CPMM dealt with this divisive issue and worked to achieve a settlement. The originality of this research lies in its exploration of primary sources, especially from the Commonwealth Secretariat Archives. It is arranged according to a chronological structure and adopts an historical approach, reconstructing events in the past. This paper will focus on the problem in the late 1960s, when three CPMMs were held (two in 1966, one in 1969).

Background to the Rhodesia problem

Geographically, Rhodesia/Zimbabwe is located in the southern part of the African continent. It was surrounded by South Africa to the south, Zambia (formerly North Rhodesia) to the north, Botswana (formerly Bechuanaland) to the west and Mozambique (a Portuguese colony until 1974) to the east. Previously, Rhodesia's territory was known and shaped by the river of Zambezi and Limpopo that flows in the north and south (Samkange, 1968). It became known as Rhodesia in honour of its pioneer in 1895, Cecil John Rhodes, the British imperialist described by Lapping (1985, p. 446) as both 'creative and

destructive'. Rhodesia afterwards became an enclave for white settlers of the British Empire in the nineteenth century. A series of wars occurred in 1893, 1896 and 1897 that involved white and black races which later divided them as master and servant (United Nations, 1975). The white Rhodesians fought in the name of the British Empire, engaging in war for about fourteen years and taking about 30,000 lives (Moorcraft, 1990). In 1939, the population of white settlers in Rhodesia was approximately 63,000 which, when compared to the native black population, gave a ratio of about one to 25 (Kennedy, 1987).

Regarding the status of Rhodesia, in 1922 there was a referendum organised by the British Government to determine whether this region was to be governed by South Africa or as a Crown Colony linked to London (United Nations, 1975). In 1923, 8,774 whites voted for Rhodesia to have responsible government under Crown Colony whilst 5,989 voted to join with South Africa. The constitution of 1923 did not grant Rhodesia full self-governance, so ultimate sovereignty still remained with the British Government. Nonetheless, Rhodesia had a unique status; although a colony, it was a self-governing country like Canada, Australia and New Zealand (Lapping, 1985). Later, in 1953 the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland was formed, joining together Northern Rhodesia, Nyasaland and Southern Rhodesia (Rhodesia). Initially this federation was opposed by the white settlers, as they thought it might increase the Africans' power but eventually they accepted it as it could avoid the influence of the Colonial Office in London and strengthen Central Africa. On the other hand, the African nationalists opposed the Federation which survived for less than a decade before collapsing in 1964. As a result, Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) achieved independence. Based on this circumstance, in 1965, Southern Rhodesia dropped 'Southern' and became simply 'Rhodesia'. Notwithstanding this, the United Nations (UN) and the British Government refused to recognise the name Rhodesia and the UN officially called the region Southern Rhodesia (United Nations, 1975). This author prefers to use Rhodesia for convenience sake and because it is most used in the literature.

The CPMM and the Rhodesia Problem, 1961-65

The CPMM replaced the old Imperial Conference in May 1944. It was made up of the Prime Ministers from the British Empire and Commonwealth of Nations. In October 1948, the term 'British Empire' was discarded and this organisation was re-named 'the Commonwealth of Nations' (<http://secretariat.thecommonwealth>). The CPMM was organised by the Commonwealth Secretariat, an independent permanent body established in 1965, which worked in collaboration with the host country. Commonwealth meeting works worked on the basis of consensus (Smith, 1970). As stated by the Agreed Memorandum, Article III, Paragraph 3, Functions of the Secretariat, the Commonwealth Prime Ministers had authorisation to give further consideration to the roles and functions of the Commonwealth Secretariat (The Commonwealth Secretariat Archives, 1997/029). In 1964 the CPMM clarified that the Secretariat 'would be available *inter alia* to disseminate factual information to all member countries on matters of common interest [and] to help in co-ordinating cooperation with the host country in the preparations for future meeting of Commonwealth Heads of Government' (*The Guardian*, 1964, p. 5).

Rhodesia issue was one of the items on the CPMM agenda although Commonwealth members agreed that Britain had the legal authority to finalise this issue. In 1961 the crisis in Rhodesia became serious after the United Federal Party (one of Rhodesia's political parties) supported the limitation of African members in parliament (*The Times*, 1961). In 1961, Ian Douglas Smith, described as, 'an ardent advocate of white rule' (*The Times*, 1961), saw this as an opportunity to form his own party, the Rhodesian Front (RF) as a platform from which to call for full independence under white supremacists. Moorcraft (1990, p. 12) revealed that Smith wanted authority for the RF to proclaim sovereignty for Rhodesia. In December 1962, the RF won the election after defeating the United Federal Party. Winston Field of the RF became Prime Minister with Smith as his Deputy (*The Telegraph*, 2007). Later, on 13 April 1964, Smith succeeded Field to become Prime Minister of Rhodesia after Field had failed to gain independence for Rhodesia. Field had concluded that his position as the Rhodesian Prime Minister was no longer sustainable. He had failed in two negotiations with Britain, in July 1963 and January 1964, to claim

independence for Rhodesia. The majority of RF ministers were aware that Field had not supported the papers of the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI). Flower (1987, pp. 21-25) noted in his memoir that, 'I would see for myself that the consensus of opinion was overwhelmingly against UDI, and he had made it clear to his colleagues that he would not take the responsibility as Prime Minister to declare UDI against all the weight of professional advice in the papers.' Furthermore, RF Ministers were against Field's decision when meeting Britain during the 1963 conference at Victoria Falls in discussion about the dissolution of the Federation with Malawi (Nyasaland) and Zambia (Northern Rhodesia). They alleged that he opposed the party principles in insisting Rhodesia's independence after the dissolution from the Federation. Field, as well as his Ministers, knew however that Britain would not guarantee independence to Rhodesia if they did not make any changes in certain particulars of the Constitution of 1961 (Flower, 1987). In 1961 the Constitution stated that, 'the inclusion of Declaration of Rights and new franchise based on educational, property and income qualifications which would result in a Legislative Assembly composed of 50 European and 15 African members and which theoretically was supposed to bring about transition to African rule over an indeterminate period of years'. This referendum was accepted by the European electorate but rejected by the African nationalists as it only showed the existence of Africa. In fact there was still segregation and repression in legislation (United Nations, 1975). On the last day of Field's office as the Prime Minister, he again asserted that the real reason for his dismissal was because he was against the UDI (Flower, 1987).

The independence talks for the future of Rhodesia continued between the Rhodesian government under Smith, and the British Labour government under Premier Harold Wilson, who came to power in October 1964. Smith was the more radical and determined. Watts (2012, p. 19) says that his, 'mind-set that was parochial and quite impervious to British views'. Eventually, the British defined the basis for granting independence to Rhodesia as being the so-called 'five principles' set out below:

1. 'The principle and intention of unimpeded progress to majority rule already enshrined in the 1961 Constitution would have to be maintained and guaranteed,

2. There would also have to be guarantees against retrogressive amendment of Constitution,
3. There would have to be an immediate improvement in the political status of the African population,
4. There would have to be progress towards ending racial discrimination,
5. The British Government would need to be satisfied that any basis proposed for independence was acceptable to the people of Southern Rhodesia as a whole' (United Nations, 1975).

These five principles were rejected by Smith and his government; the failure of talks with Britain led him to announce the UDI on 11th November 1965. Wilson asserted in the House of Commons on the day of the UDI that this proclamation was 'an illegal act, its rebellion against the Crown and against the Constitution, and its treason' (Young, 1967, p. 306). Thereafter, Rhodesia was seen by Britain as an unrecognised state with a government that was illegal.

The Rhodesia issue became a tremendous dilemma for the British government. It was difficult to take military action against the white Rhodesian settlers or to protect the indigenous black Africans. Britain's failure to take decisive action caused negative reactions, especially from the African Commonwealth countries. Britain was accused by the African members of avoiding implementing force against the white Rhodesians who they saw as 'kith and kin'. Parsons (1988, p.354), a former political agent serving in Bahrain at the time of the UDI, said that, 'Some have assured me that they would not have obeyed orders to fight against their compatriots, as they saw them, in Southern Rhodesia.' The UDI was a major challenge to practising a liberal democratic programme of decolonisation. Smith's actions led the British, and subsequently the United Nations, to implement sanctions against Rhodesia (Coggins, 2006) as the best way to end his regime. In the following year, 1966, Rhodesia and the UDI were the main items on agenda in the CPMM in Lagos which had hoped to settle through diplomatic negotiations and approved economic sanctions.

Rhodesia, the Unrecognised State, 1966-1969

January 1966: CPMM in Lagos and CPMM in London

'This was the first meeting called to deal with a single political issue and was devoted entirely to the question of Rhodesia' (The Commonwealth Secretariat Archives, 2006/141). According to Ingram (1969, p. 17), the CPMM in Lagos was totally different to the previous conference as it mainly focused on Rhodesia, to the exclusion of other issues. He noted however that this issue had already been discussed during the CPMM in 1964 when the Commonwealth Heads of Government questioned the British government on the progress of Southern Rhodesia's independence (Ingram, 1969). The Lagos meeting was described by Abubakar Tafewa Balewa, the Nigerian Prime Minister, as an emergency meeting to discuss the main problems that could divide Commonwealth relations. Meanwhile, Lee Kuan Yew, the Prime Minister of Singapore, said that this meeting was unforgettable as it was the first time the Prime Minister of Great Britain had travelled in a foreign country to meet his counterparts, the Heads of Commonwealth Governments in discussing the important issue from one of its colonies (The Commonwealth Secretariat Archives, 1997/006). All previous commonwealth summits had been held in London. The purpose of the meeting was discussed in detail for ending the rebellion, developing co-operation among those who opposed Smith, providing assistance to Zambia (which was vulnerable to Rhodesian pressure), and framing a constitutional rule for a future Rhodesia (The Commonwealth Secretariat Archives, 2006/141). The Commonwealth Working Party of officials, as the part of the CPMM discussed two matters in detail: (i) the efficiency of economic sanctions in Rhodesia (by looking to Zambia as a country that could help enforce them); and (ii) assistance from the Commonwealth in training the African Rhodesians (The Commonwealth Secretariat Archives, 2006/141). The Commonwealth members were involved in discussion and offered solutions but agreed that decisions on Rhodesia and UDI issues were Britain's legal responsibility as the colonial power (The National Archives, DO 161/413).

The CPMM in Lagos was very challenging, particularly for the Commonwealth Secretariat in organising the meeting together with the Nigerian Government. As

Arnold Smith, the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth Secretariat noted, the 1966 Lagos meeting was the first which the Commonwealth Secretariat organised and serviced (The Commonwealth Secretariat Archives, AS/S/073). He expressed his feelings of anxiety in handling the work since the Commonwealth Secretariat was a new body. He took the responsibility together with the host country and tried to provide a good service during the conference (The Commonwealth Secretariat Archives, 1997/029). This meeting hoped that the Rhodesia issue could be handled democratically while avoiding harm to multiracial relations between its members, especially those from East and Central Africa (The Commonwealth Secretariat Archives, 1997/006). They rejected the discrimination on racial grounds in the economic, political, social and education contexts that simply give advantages only for the minority. Such practices can only damage freedom and human rights (The Commonwealth Secretariat Archives, 1997/006). The Prime Ministers also wished that the issue of Rhodesia could be solved by equality and justice, letting the Rhodesian people have the opportunity to make contributions in all sections of the community based on their potential. This would ensure the Rhodesian people had the advantages without having any discrimination or injustice (Smith, 1970).

Since the election in 1962, the Rhodesia issue became the key factor threatening Commonwealth unity. Britain realised that if it granted independence to Rhodesia on anything less than majority rule, it would stir up feelings of dissatisfaction, mostly from the African countries (McWilliam, 2003). The reactions from the Commonwealth members were varied. Some of them insisted that Britain apply military force; London should suspend the constitution and take political control after implementing a new democratic system. Ghana and Tanzania were absent from the meeting and even broke off diplomatic relations with London due of their frustration with the British policy in dealing with the Rhodesia problem (The National Archives, DO 161/413). Zambia was the country that felt most stressed with the Rhodesia crisis, because sanctions also impacted on her indirectly. Zambia condemned British policy and urged Britain to impose force speedily to stop the rebellion. Australia, as an Old Commonwealth member did not send any leaders but instead an observer (The National Archives, DO 161/413). In contrast, Canada as part of the Old Commonwealth, showed her concern by offering to be a mediator between Britain and Rhodesia (Shackleton,

2003). It was admitted by Carl Watts that Canada applied a 'pro-active approach' in dealing with Rhodesia compared to other Old Commonwealth members including Britain (Watts, 2008).

In dealing with the Rhodesia problem, the Prime Ministers agreed to take several measures:

1. 'To appoint two continuing committees composed of representatives of all Commonwealth countries to meet with the Secretary General in London. The first will review regularly the effect of sanctions and the special needs which may from time to time arise in honoring the Commonwealth's undertaking to come to the support of Zambia as required. The second will coordinate a special Commonwealth programme of assistance in training Rhodesian Africans as set out below,
2. The Sanctions Committee will recommend the re-convening of the Prime Ministers' when they judge that this is necessary. In any case, the Prime Ministers agreed to meet again in July if the rebellion has not been ended before then,
3. The Sanctions Committee will advise the Prime Ministers if it considers action by United Nations is called for,
4. Some Prime Ministers indicated that they reserved the right if need arises to propose mandatory United Nations action under Articles 41 or 42 of Chapter VII of the Charter. This statement was noted by the other Heads of Government' (The Commonwealth Secretariat Archives, 2006/141).

The Commonwealth Heads of Government asserted in Lagos that Rhodesian independence must be based on the 1965 communiqué that stated 'the principle of one man one vote' as the basis of democracy in Rhodesia (The Commonwealth Secretariat Archives, 2006/141). The initial actions taken by the Commonwealth meeting focused on the imposition of economic sanctions without using any force. This was in line with British policy.

September 1966: CPMM in London

Eight months after the Lagos meeting, in September 1966, the CPMM was held in London. This meeting retained the Lagos objective to stop the rebellion immediately if possible. Its aim was to review and discuss the effectiveness of sanctions that had been imposed on Rhodesia based on a report provided by the Commonwealth Sanctions Committee. The report showed that only certain sanctions were effective whilst other sanctions were less efficient to stop Smith's regime. For instance, the British's representative of the Commonwealth Sanctions Committee revealed that imports into Rhodesia had been cut to 50%. Also, Rhodesia's exports were reduced nearly one third and it became half at the end of 1965. The continuous of diplomatic pressures by Britain and the rest of the Commonwealth governments had influenced other states to enforce sanctions. Moreover, Britain intended to increase export sanctions to 75% to put further pressure on Rhodesia's trade. Notwithstanding this, it could not be confident about its original hope that sanctions would be affective within a short period (the 'quick kill'), because there were gaps in the embargoes and some imports to Rhodesia continued. Oil sanctions were less effective than others, partly because Rhodesia received oil from its sympathetic neighbours, South Africa and Portuguese-ruled Mozambique. Hence, the Commonwealth Sanctions Committee suggested that the UN needed to take mandatory sanctions limiting oil supplies to Rhodesia. Financial sanctions were also seen not to be effective, although the sanction was supported internationally. The regime could carry on some international transactions with the assistance of South Africa. Britain convinced the Commonwealth Sanctions Committee that, even though sanctions looked quite slow to effect political regime, in the end the prospect for the Rhodesian economy was bleak. The cost of living in Rhodesia had increased two-and-a-half fold since the UDI (The Commonwealth Secretariat Archives, 1997/027).

Britain did not condone the illegal regime, but was seen as over-optimistic on the effectiveness of sanctions and the Commonwealth Sanctions Committee asserted that voluntary sanctions would not be enough to bring the regime down. Instead, Smith's regime showed that it was popular with whites. Zambia had grave doubts on the effectiveness of the sanctions and deemed that they would only be effective if they were mandatory. In the previous meeting in Lagos, Zambia again suspected that Britain was reluctant to take effective

measures against Smith's regime. Nonetheless, Zambia supported sanctions to try to ensure they worked and trusted that Britain could safeguard Zambia's economy. Once again, differences of emphasis were clear among Commonwealth states. Some of them supported the British policy of continuing the economic sanctions, whereas others thought that the regime could only be stopped by stronger measures (The Commonwealth Secretariat Archives, 1997/027). The CPMM in London in 1966 decided that if, by 30th November (a year after Rhodesian UDI) no settlement was achieved, Britain and the Commonwealth would appeal to the UN to impose mandatory economic sanctions (Smock, 1969). The British Government reiterated that any settlement for Rhodesian independence must be based on six principles. There was one additional principle attached to the previous five principles. This addition stated that, 'the need to ensure that, regardless of race, there is no oppression of majority by minority or of minority by majority' (*The Times*, 1966).

1969: CPMM in London

This meeting was about three years after the last meeting in London in 1966. Again, Rhodesia was on the main agenda and was discussed in relation to two important matters: (i) the Commonwealth Sanctions Committee report; and (ii) a solution based on the principle of No Independence without Majority Rule (NIBMAR) (The Commonwealth Secretariat Archives, 2009/084). It had been hoped that the Rhodesian issue would not dominate the meeting, but it remained important, especially to African states. There was an increase of internal violence, with the involvement of guerrilla forces, in Rhodesia. A report from the Commonwealth Sanctions Committee had been circulated to all Commonwealth governments, commenting on the implementation of sanctions which had been the outcome from the Lagos meeting in 1966 (The Commonwealth Secretariat Archives, 2009/084). The aim of the Commonwealth was to develop non-racial societies and assist economic development but was hindered by disputes between races in Africa. Rhodesia's illegal regime marked a political act against the African people and bolstered apartheid in South Africa. This was against what had been hoped for: to bring justice and equality to all African people and their right to self-determination as embodied in the United

Nations Charter and in the Declaration of Human Rights (The Commonwealth Secretariat, 2006/141).

The Heads of Government refused to approve any negotiation meeting between the British Government and the illegal regime, but diplomatic contacts went on and Harold Wilson had met Smith on two occasions. They first met on board the Royal Navy ship, HMS Tiger, in December 1966, but failed to make any progress. They met again, off Gibraltar on 8th October 1968 through the night on board another Royal Navy ship, HMS Fearless (Smock, 1969). As Smock (1969) stated, that there were certain reasons why Smith met Wilson: he feared that Rhodesia's economic situation and her foreign reserves were being damaged by the sanctions started in 1965, especially after the mandatory sanctions introduced by the UN since May 1968. For his part, Wilson wanted to end the long-running Rhodesia problem, feared sanctions were working too slowly and hoped for some diplomatic compromise. Both of these meetings were about how to provide Rhodesia's independence. 'Two tentative agreements were arrived at by Mr. Wilson and Mr. Smith at H.M.S "Tiger" and H.M.S "Fearless" in December 1966 and October 1968 respectively providing for Southern Rhodesian's independence under a white minority government based on a constitution with a qualified franchise which held out the prospect of eventual majority rule'. Both proposals were rejected by the Rhodesian government, but talks continued into 1969, until Smith's government made constitutional changes that included decreasing the African members of the House of Assembly from 15 to 8 which was another affront to the principle of majority rule (The United Nations, 1975)

During the CPMM in 1969, the Commonwealth Heads of Government rejected the latest 'Fearless Proposals' for a settlement of Rhodesian independence, as negotiated by Wilson and Smith, which would have given independence without immediate majority rule. The British Government guaranteed that the policy in NIBMAR was unchanged but the rest of the Commonwealth Heads of Government were sceptical about the Fearless Proposals (The Commonwealth Secretariat, 2006/141). The resolutions of the CPMM in London in 1969 show two different perspectives between the Commonwealth Heads of Government and Britain. The discussion showed that most of the Commonwealth Heads of Government asserted that Rhodesian independence could only be achieved by

majority rule when they welcomed with the British Government's proposal of NIBMAR without Fearless Proposals. On the other hand, the British Government considered the views from the meeting but, still insisted with the Fearless Proposals were compatible with the six principles. The British Government felt that the Rhodesian people could be given the opportunity to decide for themselves in choosing the future government and that it was worth a (hopefully-short) delay to majority rule. If the Rhodesian people had fully chosen the six principles then the British Government was within its commitment with the NIBMAR (The Commonwealth Secretariat, 2006/141). But Smith's behaviour suggested Wilson was over-optimistic about dealing with Rhodesia.

Conclusion

The CPMM played an important part in discussing the Rhodesia crisis in the 1960s, allowing all members to express their views, but the issue also almost tore apart the Commonwealth, because the issue of racial discrimination stirred strong emotions. The proclamation of the UDI in 1965 led Rhodesia to become an unrecognised state after Ian Smith failed to acquire legal independence from the British Government. Thereafter sanctions were imposed on Rhodesia which weakened the illegal regime but failed to put an end to Smith's rebellion. The Commonwealth meeting helped bring about UN implemented mandatory economic sanctions but, even when combined with Wilson's readiness to negotiate with Smith, these failed to bring about an end to UDI. To its credit, the CPMM adhered to the principle of No Independence without Majority Rule as the final result for any settlement, but such a solution would not be achieved until 1979-80.

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