

MR. STOWE

Further Review on Rhodesian Oil Sanctions


In his Private Secretary's letter of 21st May the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster refers to a question in the House from Mr. Alex Lyon about the Government's intentions on a further review of Rhodesian oil sanctions and asks for advice on which Minister is responsible for bringing the matter for collective decision.

2. The saga of the various proposals for a further inquiry into sanctions-breaking represents an unfinished piece of business although it had virtually ground to a halt even before the election was called. In theory there are three questions which now require decision:-

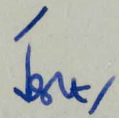
- (a) Which Minister should take the lead?
- (b) Should there be a further inquiry?
- (c) If so, what form should it take?

3. If the Prime Minister wants Ministerial advice on the case for a further inquiry I think this should come from the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary. (The Lord Chancellor and the Lord President played leading roles under the previous Administration for rather special, and Parliamentary, reasons.) It is the FCO which is responsible for Rhodesia, which serviced the Bingham inquiry; and which contains most of the relevant knowledge and expertise. It would also be the best placed Department to co-ordinate the Government's input if there were to be any new inquiry.

4. My own view, however, is that a further inquiry would serve no useful purpose and that it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to devise a satisfactory procedure for it. Such an inquiry would add little on the substance of sanctions-breaking to what is in the Bingham Report: it would be essentially a trial of the political reputations of a few Labour Ministers for their actions in the late 1960s; it would revive an awkward international issue at the wrong time; it would tend to place the United Kingdom alone in a dock when other countries, particularly France, were flagrantly turning a blind eye to sanctions



evasion; and it would raise very difficult issues in relation to the internal workings of Governments and the production of Cabinet documents. The House of Lords decisively rejected the previous Government's proposal to get round these difficulties by a Special Commission and there would be even greater difficulties over a "Commons-only" inquiry. However these are matters on which the Prime Minister may prefer to have the advice of the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary if she agrees that he should take the lead. Consideration of how an inquiry would be conducted (which raises difficulties which the previous Government failed to solve) need only arise if in fact the present Government decides that there is a strong case for going ahead with one.


(John Hunt)

29th May 1979