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OD(79) 3rd Meeting

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CABINET

DEFENCE AND OVERSEA POLICY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a Meeting held at  
10 Downing Street on  
THURSDAY 5 JULY 1979 at 10.00 am

PRESENT

The Rt Hon Margaret Thatcher MP  
Prime Minister

The Rt Hon Lord Carrington  
Secretary of State for Foreign  
and Commonwealth Affairs and  
Minister of Overseas Development

The Rt Hon Geoffrey Howe QC MP  
Chancellor of the Exchequer

The Rt Hon Francis Pym MP  
Secretary of State for Defence

The Rt Hon Lord Soames  
Lord President of the Council

The Rt Hon Sir Ian Gilmour MP  
Lord Privy Seal

The Rt Hon John Nott MP  
Secretary of State for Trade

ALSO PRESENT

Lord Harlech

SECRETARIAT

Sir John Hunt  
Mr R L Wade-Gery  
Mr P J Fowler

SUBJECT

RHODESIA

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RHODESIA

The Committee had before them a note by the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary (OD(79) 10) attaching a Report by Lord Harlech on his consultations in Africa from 11 to 22 June and a memorandum by the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary (OD(79) 11) proposing a strategy and timetable designed to bring Rhodesia to legal independence by the autumn with the widest possible international acceptance.

THE FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH SECRETARY said that Lord Harlech's consultations had confirmed that no black African country would recognise Rhodesia on the basis of the present internal settlement. If we did so, we would be unlikely to carry even other Western countries with us. This would not be much help to Rhodesia but would seriously damage our interests in black Africa and elsewhere. Opposition to Bishop Muzorewa's government focused on defects in the constitution - particularly the blocking power of the whites - and on the fact that it had been worked out by an illegal regime and without the involvement of Britain as the responsible power. To achieve a settlement commanding a reasonable measure of international support we would need to impose changes in the constitution, agreed privately with the Rhodesians in advance but more than cosmetic in substance; to call a conference of all the parties, which would not of course produce general agreement; and finally to arrange a test of acceptability, preferably a referendum rather than fresh elections. Even this would not satisfy Zambia and Tanzania, and the war would be likely to continue. But a settlement which ended sanctions and brought wide recognition elsewhere should strengthen Rhodesia and gradually erode the position of the Patriotic Front to a point when the radical states would start to deny it their support. Many African states would be privately relieved if this happened. The memorandum set out the tight timetable necessary to reach a settlement before the point in November at which United Kingdom sanctions would lapse unless renewed. Its Annex set out the kind of changes needed in the Constitution. These were illustrative and we could be flexible about details. But the more substantive the changes the more chance we and Bishop Muzorewa would have of obtaining the wide international acceptance we both needed.

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LORD HARLECH said that his discussions in Salisbury had centred on the general need for changes in the constitution. He had made no specific suggestions. Mr David Smith, who represented the more moderate wing of the Rhodesian Front, had seemed ready to contemplate changes. But Bishop Muzorewa had, even in private conversation, defended the constitution as a product of consultation between blacks and whites which was well fitted to Rhodesia's needs, including the vital need to preserve the confidence of the whites. It looked as though the Rhodesian cabinet had decided to defend this line for the present. The Bishop must however be aware of the need for changes and at the end of the day he was likely to concede them in order to secure the prize of international recognition.

In discussion it was pointed out that we had withheld Rhodesia's independence only on the basis of the six principles. It was arguable in the light of the recent elections that all, including the fifth, were now satisfied. Four parties had completed on a basis of universal suffrage and had produced a 65 per cent turn-out. The Rhodesians had reason to complain that we were now raising a new hurdle in insisting on the need for changes in the constitution to obtain international acceptance. Some of the changes contemplated in the Annex to OD(79) 11, eg the reduction of white seats in the Lower House from 28 to 15 (rather than to, say, 20) were likely to destroy white confidence and destabilise Rhodesia while failing to satisfy the radical Africans and end the war. There was a danger that the attempt to strengthen Rhodesia by gaining international acceptance could end by doing her more harm than good. It was therefore vital, in pursuing the strategy proposed, not to block off the option of eventually declaring that with the elections Rhodesia had satisfied the six principles and must be given independence. If the proposed strategy failed we were likely to need this fall-back option in November. The strength of feeling in the Conservative Parliamentary Party and in the country was such that there could be no question of the Government laying an Order for the renewal of sanctions. It would not pass the House of Commons, much less the House of Lords.

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In further discussion it was emphasised that rightly or wrongly the rest of the world would not recognise Rhodesia on the present basis. The constitution was vulnerable to criticism and President Carter had publicly declared it unacceptable. The strategy proposed seemed to offer the only course which might produce a measure of the international acceptance Rhodesia needed and go some way to contain the damage likely to be caused to our own interests by the non-renewal of sanctions and the granting of legal independence to Rhodesia. But it should be pursued with great care, since it was not yet clear how much change in the constitution Bishop Muzorewa would feel able to accept; and he should not publicly accept any changes before the proposed conference, or the radical Africans would discount such concessions in advance and be encouraged to demand more.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said the Committee were grateful for the consultations undertaken by Lord Harlech and for his reports. They endorsed the general lines of the strategy and timetable proposed in OD(79) 11, on the strict proviso that in carrying it out we must not block off the fall-back option of declaring that since the elections Rhodesia had satisfied the six principles and could not therefore be denied legal independence. The constitutional changes we might propose should be further studied. They would need to be more than cosmetic but should not be such as to destabilise Rhodesia by a massive white exodus. It might well be better to modify the white blocking power by increasing the representation of the blacks than by too drastic a cut in that of the whites. The Committee would need to return to this subject after the Bishop's visit to London on 12-14 July and before the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting. Meanwhile, since the time available was so limited, the precise line to be taken by the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary in the House of Lords on 10 July, like the terms of our report to the Americans on that line and on the results of Lord Harlech's consultations, would need to be agreed in direct consultation between the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary and herself. The Opposition had called for a debate on Rhodesia. This should be conceded but deferred until as close to the Recess as possible.

The Committee -

Took note, with approval, of the Prime Minister's summing up of their discussion.

Cabinet Office  
6 July 1979

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