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Foreign and Commonwealth Office

London SW1A 2AH

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1 April 1980

Type for signature.

Dear Richard,

Rhodesia: Report of the Commonwealth Observer
Group

The Commonwealth Secretary-General wrote to the Prime Minister on 24 March, with a copy of the report of the Commonwealth observer group on the Rhodesian elections.
/ A copy of the letter and report are attached.

The general tone of the report is grudging: and the favourable references to the Governor's administration (page 74) are half-hearted. Nevertheless, the overall
/ conclusion is favourable. I enclose a draft reply which the Prime Minister may wish to send to Mr Ramphal.

In view of
8/22

(G G H Walden)
Private Secretary

Michael Alexander Esq
10 Downing Street
London

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Peace has been restored to Southern Rhodesia by means of a democratic exercise without historical precedent. Never before have elections been held at a time of tenuous cease-fire, without agreed battle lines, and with rival armies uneasily apart. That this proved possible redounds to the credit of all those involved.

In the extraordinary circumstances in which the elections were held, we could hardly have expected to find the levels of administrative propriety and public rectitude associated with the concept of free and fair elections at their ideal best, a level not always or everywhere achieved even in stable societies with long experience of democratic institutions. In the event, the degree to which they approached those levels was praiseworthy indeed.

We were able to observe the conduct of the campaign from its very early days until its culmination in the announcement of the results. We were also able to make intensive observations in all parts of the country. Our conclusions are therefore based on a thorough study of the totality of the process that allowed the people of Rhodesia to choose the government that will take their country to sovereign independence as Zimbabwe.

Inevitably, there were imperfections. In varying degree, the parties which sought the favour of the voters did face limitations on their freedom to campaign but not always to the extent suggested by official pronouncements or by aggrieved politicians. Curbs were sometimes imposed by party activists with or without the approval of their leaders. Sometimes they were the result of official action such as the arrest of candidates and party workers, restrictions on their electoral activity, and a selective application of emergency regulations. Sometimes they flowed from a less than impartial functioning of the principal agencies of government or an unwillingness to respond to higher authority.

The overall impact of these limitations on the ability of the parties to take their message to the voters was mitigated by the access which all parties enjoyed to make party political broadcasts and to advertise through the publicly owned broadcasting services, as well as being free to advertise in the privately owned press. None of the major parties seemed to suffer from a shortage of resources for the latter.

There were also some attempts to limit the freedom of choice of voters through various forms of intimidation. That there was a certain degree of violence and fear is incontestable. But the extent of intimidation was often exaggerated either for political purposes or as the result of incorrect or slanted information. Blame was not confined to any one quarter. Nevertheless, we firmly believe that its impact on the voters' freedom of choice was strongly countered, if not frustrated, by the widespread belief in the secrecy of the ballot.

The pattern of voting too, offers evidence in support of our assessment of the extent of intimidation. There had been no charges of any significant intimidation in Salisbury itself, yet the proportion of voters supporting ZANU(PF) in urban Salisbury was broadly the same as in those rural districts where intimidation on its behalf was alleged to have been at its most severe.

The system of proportional representation based on party lists further diminished the electoral impact of intimidation. Under this system, a massive shift in voter preference was required to make a significant difference in the number of seats gained by any one party at the polls.

We are completely satisfied with the integrity of the conduct of the poll in all its aspects, including the security of ballot boxes and the accuracy of the count.

Taken as a whole, it is our considered and unanimous view that the election offered an adequate opportunity to the parties to seek the favour of the electorate and sufficient freedom to the voters to exercise their franchise according to their convictions. We therefore reaffirm the conclusion of our interim report that the election was a valid and democratic expression of the wishes of the people of Zimbabwe.

That this proved possible in the circumstances of Rhodesia is to the credit of all: the Governor, the administration, the political parties, and above all to the people. We believe that the desire for peace and stability was the most potent factor in ensuring that progress continued without major setbacks along the course charted at Lancaster House.

We have in various parts of our Report commented adversely on aspects of the conduct of the Rhodesian administration. We are aware of the traumatic changes which the Lancaster House Agreement brought into prospect for those officials who found difficulty in making the mental adjustment it required. Our wide observations gave us the impression, however, that a large body of public servants preserved their professional integrity and demonstrated a high level of ability.

We have also been critical of some aspects of the administration of the Governor who had ultimate authority in the period of transition. We are conscious, however, of the very delicate role he was called upon to play in overseeing Rhodesia's passage to independence through democratic elections held during a necessarily imperfect cease-fire after a seven years war. He had supreme authority but few instruments of his own. His dependence on the local administration was decreed by the Lancaster House Agreement itself. His capacity to control developments rested on a fragile balance of forces. Throughout he had to act with the awareness that this equilibrium could be easily upset, and with disastrous consequences. When we were apprehensive of the consequences of some actions, either taken or in contemplation, we did not hesitate to convey our concerns to him. We believe that on certain matters we were able to offer timely counsel based on our own independent perception of events. The strong commitment of the parties to the Lancaster House Agreement and to the achievement of peace through elections, was a potent factor in keeping the process on course. It was the Governor's achievement that he was able to sustain their involvement in it through a

most testing period.

It has been our privilege to observe Rhodesia's election on behalf of the Commonwealth, and to have been able to serve the country as it took decisive steps towards its long deferred and cherished goal of independence. We concluded our work having seen the foundation for that independence firmly laid in fulfilment of the wishes of its people and the hopes of the entire Commonwealth.

We close our Report by paying our own tribute, which we believe will be widely echoed throughout the Commonwealth and beyond, to all those who, in different ways and at different times, contributed to Rhodesia's emergence as an independent Zimbabwe. Countless individuals and many countries have been touched by the tragedy of the past 15 years. In the end, the essential triumph has been that of the people of Zimbabwe themselves. Transmuting their suffering, their faith in the processes of peace has exceeded their courage in war.