



## A JOURNALIST'S REMINISCENCES

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### *Background – Political*

One crucial element of the background against which the journalists covering de-colonisation were working was the speed at which events were taking place. To put this in context, it should be remembered that it was in 1957 that the Gold Coast became independent as Ghana – the first of the British, French and Belgian colonies to achieve that status. Three years later, 1960, the pace of constitutional change became dramatically fast. In that year, 17 African countries achieved independence (and of course the process continued during the next five or six years).

The speed reflected a conscious decision on the part of at least two of the colonial powers – the UK and France – that in politically realistic terms the move to independence was inevitable, and should not be delayed. It could of course be argued that many of the countries were not really ready for independence. (Nyasaland, now Malawi, was a case in point; at independence in 1963 there were only eight Africans with Administrative Grade posts in the civil service.) Delaying independence, however, would have been politically impracticable.

One other aspect of the political background was the position of South Africa, still under apartheid rule. It had a direct effect on the so-called High Commission territories (Bechuanaland, now Botswana, Swaziland and Basutoland, now Lesotho). For example, the capital of Bechuanaland was outside the country, in South African territory.

The position of South Africa had an indirect effect on British policy in the then Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, and resulted in a long delay in Southern Rhodesia achieving independence as Zimbabwe, and of course a great deal of racial stress. (The behaviour of British governments in handling South Africa was no tribute to their judgment.)

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Kirkman was Commonwealth Staff Correspondent of *The Times* from 1960 to 1964 and, additionally, Africa Correspondent from 1962 to 1964.

### ***Background – Practical***

We journalists were working in an era when there was no email. There were no mobile phones. There was no 24-hour television coverage, and no Internet coverage. This meant that reporters could cover events for 'tomorrow's paper', without concern that the news would have already reached their readers by the time the paper appeared. There was wide acceptance of 'off the record' briefings – NOT to enable information to be concealed, but to enable journalists to be fully briefed.

There was an 'inner circle' of those covering de-colonisation, the main members of which were Lionel Fleming of the BBC; Reg Steed of the *Daily Telegraph*; Patrick Keatley of *The Guardian*; John Dickie of the *Daily Mail*; Seaghan Maynes of Reuters, and Bill Kirkman of *The Times*. We met regularly (at least once a week) with officials (Philip Noakes of the Colonial Office, Harold Smedley and Eleanor Booker of the Commonwealth Relations Office) and ministers (particularly Iain Macleod, Colonial Secretary and Nigel Fisher, Parliamentary Secretary of the CRO.) We quickly realised that some of these – notably Macleod, Noakes, Smedley and Booker – had a very clear vision and a good ability to put policy across.

Notwithstanding the regular inner circle meetings, we did individually meet African politicians. Individual stories were possible. As an example: I produced as an EXCLUSIVE Julian Greenfield's alternative – and in fact abortive – plans for the Northern Rhodesia constitution (NOTE: When it appeared, I was telephoned by an official in the Federation's London office, who asked if my story was correct. When I replied: 'Of course it is' the man – whom I knew quite well – said. 'I was sure it would be – but no one has told us!')

We were working under considerable pressure, because a great deal was going on. To provide a sense of this, it is only necessary to note some of the main issues: Kenya-Kanu/Kadu tensions; Uganda (Buganda and other regions); Congo: Katanga's secession; OAU created; South Africa leaves Commonwealth. In short, there were constitutional conferences and problems on the ground.

The major issue during this period of rapid de-colonisation was the future of central Africa (the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland). It was a crucial issue on practical grounds: the Federation had never been tenable and the

differences between the three component states were enormous. It was crucial also on racial grounds: the resistance of the white population of Southern Rhodesia to acceptance of the political rights of the black majority was deeply ensconced.

### *Dysfunctional thinking*

Iain Macleod's vision was of fundamental importance. He saw the need to move forward in a way that ensured a continuing role for white minorities in central Africa, while allowing the territories to develop politically in a realistic way: advancing to majority rule. One factor which made the central Africa problem even more acute was the fact that responsibility for central Africa was divided between the CRO – responsible for the Federation and Southern Rhodesia – and the Colonial Office – responsible for the two northern territories. This was an example of dysfunctional thinking on the part of the British government, made worse by the fact that Duncan Sandys (Commonwealth Secretary) and Iain Macleod (Colonial Secretary) disliked each other. This dislike was confirmed to me, after I had left *The Times* and Macleod had left office, and I was preparing to interview Macleod for the Oxford Colonial Records Project. I asked him why he had chosen me as his interviewer. His reply was that he remembered me from his Colonial Office days, and he had read my book<sup>2</sup> and liked it. I said that as he had read it I would be interested in his opinion about whether I had been a bit unfair to Duncan Sandys. His reply, with not a moment's hesitation: 'You want to conquer any feelings of that sort'.

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<sup>2</sup> Kirkman, William P. *Unscrambling an Empire : A Critique of British Colonial Policy, 1956-1966*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1966.