

INTRODUCTION

An integral feature of the Accord reached by Commonwealth Heads of Government at Lusaka in August 1979, and the ensuing Lancaster House Agreement was the decision to hold free and fair elections in Southern Rhodesia, properly supervised under British Government authority, and with Commonwealth Observers.

Accordingly, our Group was constituted by the Commonwealth Secretary-General to observe the elections, and we were given the following Terms of Reference:-

"The Observer Group will observe and report to Commonwealth Heads of Government on all relevant aspects of the organisation and conduct of the elections in Southern Rhodesia held pursuant to the agreement at the Lancaster House Conference. Their function will be to ascertain in their impartial judgement, whether, in the context of the Lusaka accord and the Lancaster House Conference, the elections were free and fair. In furtherance of this objective, it will be competent for the Group to bring to the attention of the administering authorities from time to time such matters as they consider pertinent."*

We came to our task deeply conscious of the importance that Commonwealth Heads of Government attached to it. At their meeting in Lusaka they had laid the basis for the Lancaster House Conference that was to agree on arrangements to bring Southern Rhodesia to freedom as Zimbabwe. We were called upon to determine whether the election, which was a critical part of those arrangements, was, indeed, conducted and supervised freely and fairly. A special trust therefore devolved on us.

Our mandate gave us no executive or supervisory role. We were to observe, and arrive at a decision on the basis of our observations. We were aware, however, that the spirit of the discussions at Lusaka and of subsequent consultations among Commonwealth Governments did not enjoin on us a passive attitude. The proper discharge of our responsibilities required us to share fully in the Commonwealth commitment to ensure that the election we were to observe would be so organised and conducted as to pave the way for Rhodesia's emergence to freedom in peace. This obliged us to use our good offices, where possible, towards the attainment of the objective of a free and fair election, while remaining true to our status as Observers.

* Relevant excerpts from the paper containing our Terms of Reference, agreed by the Commonwealth Committee on Southern Africa on 14 December 1979, appear as Annex 1. The Commonwealth Committee on Southern Africa, established by Heads of Government several years ago, met regularly throughout the Lancaster House Conference and on two occasions while the Group was in Rhodesia, on 15 and 21 February, 1980.

Southern Rhodesia has no parallel in the annals of decolonisation, within the Commonwealth or outside it. We were conscious, therefore, of the unique chapter of history it was our duty to witness.

When Commonwealth leaders met in Lusaka in August 1979 they did so against the sombre background of an escalating civil war which was threatening to become an international flash-point and which the internal settlement of 3 March 1978 had failed to end. Their accord on measures to bring Rhodesia to independence on the basis of majority rule was a high water mark in Commonwealth diplomacy, and a significant vindication of the value of Commonwealth summit conferences. Lusaka set in train the processes that brought the major protagonists in the Rhodesian conflict to Lancaster House where they engaged in what was perhaps the longest unbroken conference on the constitutional future of a country. Within Rhodesia, the war continued to be waged with ferocity, even as the belligerents joined Britain in signing the agreement that the conference ultimately produced. The agreement covered the terms of an independence constitution, a cease-fire, and pre-independence arrangements leading up to the election (the pre-independence arrangements and the Cease-fire Agreement appear as Annex 2).

Elections preceding independence had been the pattern for the evolution of many colonies to nationhood. But the circumstances attending this election were vastly different from those with which the world is familiar. It was taking place in the immediate aftermath of a bitter civil war which had deeply scarred the country. It was to be held within eight weeks of a cease-fire between armies that had been fighting each other for seven years. The armies had not been disarmed; nor had their suspicion and mistrust of each other been dispelled. Not surprisingly, the cease-fire was to prove somewhat fragile. Martial law continued to be in force, and normality was far from being restored. In many parts of the country, the writ of government had ceased to run.

The psychological legacy of years of war was as palpable as some of its physical consequences were visible. More than half a million people had been uprooted from their homes and were living behind barbed wire in "protected villages". An even larger number, estimated at about 750,000 had left their villages to seek sanctuary in shanty towns on the outskirts of cities. Another 228,000, or about the same number as the white community as a whole, were refugees in neighbouring countries. Almost all adult whites had acquired arms, and many, including women, went about their daily lives carrying them. Hotels offered safe storage for guns more frequently than for valuables.

Two of the main political parties contesting the election had just become legitimate after years of proscription. Most of their leaders had only shortly before returned to the country after long years of enforced exile. The country's media had only recently been permitted to mention their names, and censorship continued to apply to anything which was deemed, even remotely, to affect security.

Britain had just resumed responsibility as the colonial power, signifying an end to the state of rebellion. This was marked by the arrival of the Governor, Lord Soames, and his installation in Government House in Salisbury. But the British presence was minimal; its power rested on the compliance of an undisturbed administrative and security structure dominated by whites who had

loyally served the previous regime. The Ministers who had been in authority had agreed not to exercise their ministerial functions; they continued to use their official designations, draw their pay, occupy official houses and enjoy perquisites of office even as they took to the hustings.

Such was the setting for the election we were to observe. It was clear from the outset that in measuring the extent to which it was a valid test of the people's choice, there were no ready-made yardsticks and it would be unrealistic to apply criteria appropriate for elections elsewhere in conditions of peace, stability and orderly political behaviour.

We functioned on behalf of all Commonwealth Governments but did not represent any of them. We served in our personal capacities and were drawn from eleven countries and from four continents. We came from diverse backgrounds and assembled a variety of experience, including experience of the organisation and conduct of elections. We were accompanied to Rhodesia by 22 Assistants. After protracted negotiations with Government House, we were joined by 30 additional Assistants for the period of the poll, instead of the 55 we had sought (Relevant correspondence appears as Annex 3). Observers and Assistants alike enjoyed the same high level of access and facilities for the proper observation of the electoral process and the poll itself. The Commonwealth Secretariat provided a multinational team to assist the mission.

The election in Rhodesia drew perhaps the largest number of international observers present at any election in the world. We were by far the largest group and spent the longest time in the country. We were independent of other observers, though we were happy that many of them sought us out to share their observations with us. Our mandate came from the Heads of Government of the 42 Commonwealth member states, and our genesis lay in their collective decision at Lusaka.

What impressed us most profoundly soon after our arrival in Salisbury was the deep desire for peace on the part of people in all walks of life. This impression, gained in our first few days, was reinforced throughout our stay. The desire for peace transcended racial and political divisions, acute as these were. We felt this was a good augury for the election whose successful completion could be expected to lead the people of Rhodesia to independence.