

Apparent inconsistencies in policy mask desire to protect British interests while working for change

Whitehall plays it by ear in Africa

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British policy in Africa must have seemed to many this week to be bafflingly inconsistent. A few weeks ago, when final arrangements for the visit to London of General Gowon, the Nigerian head of State, were being completed, the Government emphasized much more definitely than before, that it would not accept a settlement in Rhodesia against the wishes of the Africans.

Its supporters were told that trade with independent African countries was now more important than trade with Southern Africa; furthermore, Britain now gets one tenth of its oil from Nigeria.

The British Government appeared, therefore, for strong economic reasons if for no others, to have decided that the time had come to put its money on the African horse.

A few weeks later, however, they are feting in London Dr Marcello Caetano, the head of a Government which for over 10 years has doggedly declined to contemplate independence as the ultimate solution for its huge African territories. At about the same time British ships have been taking part in unusually large naval exercises off the Simonstown base in cooperation with the South African Govern-

ment, whose apartheid policy is anathema not only to Africans, but to the British themselves.

The apparent inconsistency can be—and has been—explained time and time again, this week in the House of Commons, and elsewhere. The chief argument used was that for the British Government to cooperate with another government—be that Portuguese, South African, or any other—does not mean approval of that government's policy.

But the real explanation why the Government seems to be tacking now in one direction and now in another is that the tide of change is flowing with differing strengths in differing areas in Africa.

Where a decision seems imminent and to depend directly upon the British Government, as over the acceptance of the Pearce report on African opposition to the proposed Rhodesian settlement, it made much use of the attitude of the independent African governments to support its policy.

But it ignored African attitudes over the naval manoeuvres with South Africa, where its decision, although a boost for the South African Government, can be claimed to have no direct connexion with the anti-apartheid struggle.

Moreover, the South African Government is for the present

still strongly entrenched, and British interests in South Africa, with investments of some £1,300m (about one tenth of Britain's total overseas investment), have actually over recent months increased with the rise in the value of gold.

In this constantly changing variety of situations in Africa British aims remained consistent enough: to work for a peaceful evolutionary change to independence for the African communities, while protecting British interests so far as possible during and after this prolonged and difficult transition. Meanwhile, however, the day-to-day policy is really to play it by ear.

They can fairly argue that the Labour Government was also open to accusations of striking opportunism over arms sales to South Africa, for instance, at a moment when the pound is under particular pressure.

In the current situation in Mozambique, which has stolen the limelight this week, the Government has been primarily trying to maintain good working relations with the Government actually in power, Portugal.

The British Government could hardly foresee that missionaries on the spot—the only source of eye witness evidence not controlled by the Portuguese authorities—would be able to arouse so much bitter criticism of Portuguese policy just now.