

# The one-way <sup>Gdn 4/2</sup> wind of change <sup>80</sup>

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WHEN Suprmac told the South African Parliament 20 years ago yesterday that a "wind of change" was blowing through colonial Africa, a widespread British reaction was one of surprise.

Not because of the fact of that wind: the veriest tyro in colonial affairs knew that most of West Africa was about to become independent and, if a little later, most of East and Central Africa. But because any prime minister could bring himself to state — with such evident approval — something so certain but so much at odds with orthodox mythology.

This held that decolonisation was the work, generally, of wicked mischiefmakers who should be, and probably could be, put down and rapidly disposed of. It was rather as though Mrs Thatcher were to state that investment in nuclear arms has become an investment in national suicide.

My own reaction was probably a common one. How could it have come about that the Lords of the Foreign Office had let this one slip? Or, if they had been brought to agree that the fact should be aired, by what means had our prime minister hauled them into the second half of the 20th century? The answer I suppose was that Suprmac hadn't bothered to consult them. An occasional tendency to avoid doing that was his sovereign virtue.

The speech, in any case, made a difference to the tone and temper of decolonisation. It applied a seal of official approval to the whole project. It gave our country a head-start over all rivals in the race for political adjustment to the realities of a post-colonial age.

What have we made of this advantage?

We the people, it seems to me, have made a great deal of it. No other imperialist people, surely, has ever accepted the loss of empire with as much good grace, sense, and even satisfaction. More, this "loss of Africa" has led for the first time in our history to a wide and intelligent interest in Africans. Whether in scholarly research, useful books, perceptive documentary films or newspaper commentary, the advances have been many.

At least, and to put it no higher, we have learned that Africans are humans like the rest of us: as good or as bad, as disgusting or as admirable. It is an enormous change from attitudes current in colonial times.

Can as much be said for

leading politicians? Twenty years ago it was general among Tories to affirm that all the pressures for decolonisation were part of a Soviet plot. (No, I am not for a moment suggesting that Moscow does not plot, or that its plots should not be resisted.) This was another aspect of orthodox mythology: nonsense, of course, but has it disappeared? Not if you read Hansard, where the same old stuff is still being trotted forth.

"The problem of South Africa," affirmed a noble lord (name of Lytton) on a recent occasion, "is associated with the Soviet drive throughout the whole length of Africa." Yet everyone really knows that the problem of South Africa has almost nothing to do with the Soviet Union, and almost everything to do with a system called apartheid.

Rather than having learned, our leaders seem to have forgotten the lessons of 20 years ago. Then it was a golden rule, in decolonisation, to select the man who was going to have the most power, and see to it that he succeeded with your approval and support, thus giving you the best chance of further influence.

You took him out of your prison, where he usually was, and backed him for the top job. Nkrumah, Kenyatta, Makarios... the list is long. All were lambasted in the Tory press as Communists or crooks or both; all became strong prime ministers, good friends and pillars of the Commonwealth.

Yet here, 20 years later, we have a Tory Government and its nominee, Lord Soames, doing their level best to ditch the chances of the obviously strongest candidate in the colony they still call Rhodesia. This man, as everyone really knows, is Robert Mugabe. But he has to be ditched "because he is a Marxist" (far less rude a word, as it happens, than was ever applied to Kenyatta and company): even though, as everyone similarly knows, he is the upright and courageous spokesman of the movement which, beyond any doubt, represents most of the majority of the black population. It is as though no last zephyr of Macmillan's "wind of change" has ever whispered in Mrs Thatcher's shell-like ear.

Old Suprmac and friends aimed, broadly, at arranging decolonisation on what Africans call the "neo colonial" pattern: saving the multinational economic content, that is, while conceding the political form. As a fall-back solution for Tory interests,

this was all right in the short run. But it has turned out to be a disaster; it has led to misery, mayhem, and precisely that very opening for Soviet influence which it was partly designed to prevent.

The case of Amin in Uganda is instructive, but also characteristic. Welcomed and encouraged by Prime Minister Heath because Amin had ousted the mildly radical Obote, Amin proceeded to destroy our position in Uganda and invite Moscow in. We are still waiting for Mr Heath to ask us to forgive him.

Often admirable in opposition, whether for foresight or humanity, Labour's African record in power has been simply pitiable.

What should they have done, what should they do now? Cutting corners, as I must, a valid answer remains. Britain still has a large and constructive role to play in Africa, as indeed in many parts of the Third World; but this role is only

one.

It is to widen the ground for a genuine nonalignment such as can help to extricate these bedevilled countries from the hammer-and-anvil situation of great-power confrontation. It is to promote a real nonalignment, an effective neutrality between the monsters.

Difficult, even impossible? Perhaps. The Whitehall establishment is universally of the view that Britain cannot play an independent role — in Africa or anywhere else. Mrs Thatcher, as we are well aware, is frantically of the same opinion.

Sadly, most of the important African leaders whom I know — "moderate" Nigerian, for example, or "radical" Mozambican — agree with her. They believe that we, unlike the French, have become a people without a mind and judgment of our own.

I wonder.

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