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## **'Why does Africa matter and what should be our aim?' British foreign policy, the Commonwealth, and the 1965 East and Central African Heads of Missions meeting**

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## **‘Why does Africa matter and what should be our aim?’ British foreign policy, the Commonwealth, and the 1965 East and Central African Heads of Missions meeting**

‘We had survived the worst of the “African Decade” with surprisingly little damage.’<sup>1</sup> This was the verdict of a report written by the British Commonwealth Relations Office recording the first meeting of Britain’s Heads of Missions (Ambassadors and High Commissioners) in East and Central Africa in May 1965. Of course, within a few months, Rhodesia’s unilateral declaration of independence (UDI) would shatter this optimistic portrayal of successful British decolonisation in Africa. But at this moment in mid-1965, multiple British officials held this view.<sup>2</sup> The minutes of the Heads of Missions meeting give a unique insight into the thoughts and ambitions of a select group of senior diplomats as they offered their ideas about policy and assessed Britain’s historical and contemporary relationships with Africa. The countries included were Burundi, the Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia.

This article offers a detailed account of the 1965 Heads of Missions meeting. Ruth Craggs has highlighted the value of studying international conferences as ‘geopolitical events.’<sup>3</sup> She and Martin Mahony argue too that conferences are ‘intimately connected to questions of power’.<sup>4</sup> Although very different, meetings of diplomats were also key sites of debate, revealing issues of concern, structures of policymaking, and power dynamics. The British Heads of Missions meeting should be seen in this light. At this meeting, ‘questions of power’ can be seen in three ways: firstly, the meeting was an expression of power relations between different government departments in

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<sup>1</sup> Commonwealth Relations Office (CRO), ‘Report on Meeting of British Heads of Missions in East and Central Africa’, 22 July 1965, The National Archives, Kew [henceforth, TNA] DO 191/236/18.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Stanley to Walsh Atkins, 5 January 1965, TNA DO 213/73/3; Fowler to Walsh Atkins, 18 February 1965, TNA DO 213/73/7.

<sup>3</sup> Ruth Craggs, ‘Postcolonial geographies, decolonization, and the performance of geopolitics at Commonwealth conferences,’ *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, 35, no. 1 (2014), 50.

<sup>4</sup> Ruth Craggs and Martin Mahony, ‘The Geographies of the Conference: Knowledge, Performance and Protest,’ *Geography Compass*, 8, no. 6 (2014), 415.

Whitehall; secondly, it reinforced the diplomats' sense of their position as supposed 'experts' on Africa, more advanced and rational than the Africans with whom they worked; thirdly, it revealed an official consensus that Britain was the more powerful partner in relationships with Africa, able to exert influence through ongoing bilateral relationships and the Commonwealth. Such concern with influence and expertise made heads of missions, or 'men on the spot,' key figures in British policy in the region and thus deserving of more attention than they are often granted by historians.

The 1965 meeting is particularly revealing because of its timing in connection with decolonisation. As Sarah Stockwell has argued, '[d]ecolonization was a staggered process in which flag independence marked a starting rather than an end point in a European retreat.'<sup>5</sup> This article examines how British policymakers attempted to come to terms with the new circumstances of a rapidly decolonising world. Mid-1965 can be seen as a liminal moment in the history of Britain's relations with East and Central Africa: although most of the region had formal independence, Rhodesia's future remained very much open, as did the question of how relationships between the former metropole and newly independent African states would evolve. The significance of this moment can be overlooked by historians who, knowing that Britain would fail to sustain close relationships with Africa, see this as an immediate outcome of independence. Yet it is important to recognise that this was a time when multiple, if limited, options were available as the British government sought to reconfigure relationships and preserve influence in former colonies.<sup>6</sup> Although these options were always constrained by Britain's economic weaknesses, the choices of Africa elites, and the actions of white minority regimes, still there were choices to be made about when, where and how to prioritise relationships with Africa. If the British government

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<sup>5</sup> Sarah Stockwell, *The British End of the British Empire* (Cambridge, 2018), 233.

<sup>6</sup> See for example *ibid.*; Poppy Cullen, *Kenya and Britain after Independence: Beyond Neo-Colonialism* (Basingstoke, 2017); Marco Wyss, *Postcolonial Security: Britain, France & West Africa's Cold War* (Oxford, 2021).

decided not to invest in African relationships, this could have had substantial impact: when the British 'did not have the funds or the inclination to provide Tanzania with substantial amounts of money and military material', the country turned away from Britain and looked to other international partners on both sides of the Cold War.<sup>7</sup>

The British government's broader African concerns in mid-1965 were the former settler colonies of South Africa and Rhodesia, as well as the Portuguese colonies. In all these areas, British policy attempted to balance competing interests. In South Africa, the British government was trying to sustain significant economic and strategic interests while not condoning apartheid.<sup>8</sup> Despite the Labour government stating its intention not to sell weapons to South Africa, after only a few weeks in office, they allowed planned arms sales to go ahead, with financial incentives taking precedence over moral sentiments.<sup>9</sup> Britain also attempted to walk a diplomatic tightrope by maintaining good relations with NATO ally Portugal as well as independent African states which criticised Portugal's continuing colonialism.<sup>10</sup> In January 1965, one diplomat based in Africa had argued 'that we must radically review our whole policy towards Portugal.'<sup>11</sup> Yet in March, when 'a more critical public line' was considered, officials raised fears that Anglo-Portuguese relations, valuable for trade, NATO links, and military staging facilities, would be 'seriously undermined if we were to adopt an openly hostile attitude to Portugal's colonial policy' and so this should be avoided.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, in Rhodesia, British policymakers attempted to balance African opinion

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<sup>7</sup> Timothy H. Parsons, *The 1964 Army Mutinies and the Making of Modern East Africa* (Westport, CT, 2003), 166.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel J. Feather, 'British Policy Towards Military Cooperation with the Republic of South Africa, 1961–1975,' *The International History Review*, 41 (2019), 729–752.

<sup>9</sup> John W. Young, 'The Wilson government and the debate over arms to South Africa in 1964', *Contemporary British History*, 12, no. 3 (1998), 62–86.

<sup>10</sup> Glyn Stone 'Britain and Portuguese Africa, 1961–65', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 28 (2000), 169–192.

<sup>11</sup> Dar es Salaam to CRO, 11 January 1965, TNA PREM 13/2298.

<sup>12</sup> Dodson to Le Quesne, 18 March 1965, TNA FO 371/181975.

against white settler views and secure a compromise that would avoid a UDI.<sup>13</sup> They recognised that the effects of a UDI on Britain's relationships with Africa would be highly damaging, and that African states would not accept unfettered white minority rule. But growing recognition of the difficulty of preventing a UDI led to increasing contingency planning.<sup>14</sup> These issues were connected as South African and Portuguese support for Rhodesia was crucial in allowing the latter to seriously contemplate UDI. Yet, as Sue Onslow argues, the British government 'miscalculated' the Portuguese and South African position and thus did not fully comprehend the danger.<sup>15</sup> More widely, British policies in Africa centred on preserving influence and limiting communist involvement.<sup>16</sup>

The Commonwealth appeared to offer a vehicle for continuing relationships with former colonies, and the 1965 meeting reveals the extent to which the Commonwealth was valued differently by officials in the region and in Whitehall. Harold Wilson's Labour government was enthusiastic about its potential, arguing in their 1964 election manifesto that 'the first responsibility of a British Government is still to the Commonwealth.'<sup>17</sup> However, their early enthusiasm quickly waned.<sup>18</sup> Part of the reason is that rather than being dominated by Britain and the former Dominions, the Commonwealth rapidly developed its own character, substantially shaped by its

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<sup>13</sup> See Richard Coggins, 'Wilson and Rhodesia: UDI and British Policy towards Africa,' *Contemporary British History*, 20 (2006), 363-381; Carl Peter Watts, *Rhodesia's Unilateral Declaration of Independence: An International History* (Basingstoke, 2012); Manuele Facchini, 'The Millstone Around Our Necks': Harold Wilson and the HMS Fearless Conference (9-13 October 1968)', *Contemporary British History*, 28 (2014), 274-293.

<sup>14</sup> See Philip Murphy (ed.), *British Documents on the End of Empire Project*, Series B, Volume 9, *Central Africa*, Part II, *Crisis and Dissolution 1959-1965* (London, 2005), 515-521.

<sup>15</sup> Sue Onslow, 'Resistance to the 'Winds of Change': The Emergence of the 'Unholy Alliance' between Southern Rhodesia, Portugal and South Africa, 1964-5,' in L. Butler and S. Stockwell (eds.), *The Wind of Change: Harold Macmillan and British Decolonization*, (Basingstoke, 2013), 220.

<sup>16</sup> Timothy Andrews Sayle, 'A great list of potential mistakes': NATO, Africa, and British efforts to limit the Global Cold War,' *Cold War History* 16, no. 1 (2016), 27.

<sup>17</sup> Labour Party manifesto, 1964, quoted in Philip Murphy, 'Britain and the Commonwealth: Confronting the Past—Imagining the Future', *The Round Table*, 100 (2011), 268.

<sup>18</sup> S. R. Ashton, 'British Government Perspectives on the Commonwealth, 1964-71: An Asset or a Liability?,' *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 35 (2007), 73-94.

new African and Asian members.<sup>19</sup> These members often used the Commonwealth as a forum to criticise Britain. The 1964 Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting was a case in point, where British policies towards Rhodesia came under sustained attack, even though British planners had attempted to limit discussion of the issue.<sup>20</sup> These criticisms continued into the 1965 Commonwealth meeting, held just a month after the Heads of Missions meeting discussed here.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, as the British government grappled with growing economic problems, difficult choices had to be made about where to direct effort and resources.<sup>22</sup> Despite the failure of Britain's first attempt to join the European Economic Community, the more significant European and American partnerships increasingly overshadowed – and sometimes complicated – those with former colonies.<sup>23</sup>

The first sections of the article introduce the different departments involved in the meeting, and its participants. Next, the article considers questions raised before the meeting about Africa's significance, then turns to the discussions themselves. These are divided into two main sections, reflecting the core topics discussed: Southern Africa and the Cold War; economic aid and the Commonwealth. The final section considers the meeting's conclusions and the proposals which were followed up in its aftermath.

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<sup>19</sup> See Sue Onslow, 'The Commonwealth and the Cold War, Neutralism, and Non-Alignment', *The International History Review*, 38 (2015), 1059-1082; Philip Murphy, *The Empire's New Clothes: The Myth of the Commonwealth*, (London, 2018).

<sup>20</sup> Carl Watts, 'Moments of tension and drama': The Rhodesian Problem at the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meetings, 1964–65,' *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, 8 (2007); Arnold Smith with Clyde Sanger, *Stitches in Time: The Commonwealth in World Politics* (London, 1981), 10-1.

<sup>21</sup> Watts, 'Moments of tension and drama.'

<sup>22</sup> Chris Wrigley, 'Now you see it, now you don't: Harold Wilson and Labour's foreign policy 1964-70', in R. Coopey, S. Fielding and N. Tiratsoo (eds.), *The Wilson Governments 1964-70* (London, 1993), 123-124.

<sup>23</sup> On such complications, see for example Lindsay Aqwi, 'Macmillan, Nkrumah and the 1961 Application for European Economic Community Membership,' *International History Review*, 39, no. 4 (2017), 575-591; Alex May, 'The Commonwealth and Britain's Turn to Europe, 1945–73,' *The Round Table*, 102, no. 1 (2013), 29-39.

## Structures of policymaking

The Heads of Missions meeting is instructive as a case-study of foreign policy-making in the British government in the mid-1960s. It shows that the institutional structures of Whitehall shaped policy debates, something all studies of British foreign policy need to take into account.<sup>24</sup> British foreign policy-making in 1965 was divided between the Colonial Office, Foreign Office (FO), and Commonwealth Relations Office (CRO). These were effectively multiple foreign ministries which ‘coexisted uneasily.’<sup>25</sup> The Colonial Office supervised the few remaining colonies. The CRO and FO managed other relations, their responsibilities divided between Commonwealth and ‘foreign’ states. The CRO appointed High Commissioners to Commonwealth countries, while the FO sent ambassadors to ‘foreign’ states.<sup>26</sup> The fact that the CRO was a separate institution with its own staff encouraged the idea that there was, or should be, a specific set of British interests related to the Commonwealth. High Commission staff and officials working in the CRO also benefitted from regular meetings between Commonwealth diplomats and resulting access to and exchange of information.<sup>27</sup> As Lorna Lloyd has argued, the CRO ‘symbolised the importance Britain attached to the Commonwealth, and by its nature thought not just in terms of British interests but also approached particular issues from the perspective of the Commonwealth as a whole.’<sup>28</sup> This was a very different remit from that of the FO.

The 1965 Heads of Missions meeting makes clear that the CRO was not an especially powerful government department. Its opinions did not carry the same weight as those of the more

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<sup>24</sup> See Andrew Holt, *The Foreign Policy of the Douglas-Home Government: Britain, the United States and the End of Empire* (Basingstoke, 2014); John W. Young, *Twentieth-Century Diplomacy: A Case Study of British Practice, 1963-1976* (Cambridge, 2008).

<sup>25</sup> Holt, 148.

<sup>26</sup> All Commonwealth countries exchange High Commissioners rather than Ambassadors.

<sup>27</sup> Onslow, ‘Commonwealth and Cold War’, 1076.

<sup>28</sup> Lorna Lloyd, *Diplomacy with a Difference: The Commonwealth Office of High Commissioner, 1880-2006* (Leiden, 2007), 187.

prominent FO. This finding is supported by the reflections of former diplomats. As one official from the CRO later recalled, ‘we were always in second place . . . to the Foreign Office.’<sup>29</sup> While the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations, Arthur Bottomley, continued to have a seat in the Cabinet, he was less important there than the Foreign Secretary.<sup>30</sup> The CRO did not have the long pedigree of other Whitehall departments. Its first incarnation was the Dominions Office, set up in 1925 for the white Dominions.<sup>31</sup> In 1947, following the independence of India and Pakistan, the Dominions Office was replaced by the CRO. It underwent a rapid expansion thereafter as other colonies gained independence and the CRO rather than the Colonial Office became responsible for relations with them. This led to tension with the FO, where some held the opinion that people in the CRO were over-promoted because of the need to fill posts quickly.<sup>32</sup>

There was also another department heavily involved in foreign policy. The Labour government had created the Ministry of Overseas Development (ODM) on coming to office in 1964, headed by prominent Cabinet member Barbara Castle.<sup>33</sup> This removed aid questions from the other departments, most prominently the CRO, and meant that such issues were now decided within the ODM.

There was recognition at the time that this division of overseas policy-making could be problematic. In February 1964, the Plowden Report of the Committee on Representational Services Overseas was published. The report made clear that ‘the division of the world for representational purposes into Commonwealth and non-Commonwealth countries impedes the

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<sup>29</sup> Jane Barder interview with Leonard Allinson, 5 March 1996, British Diplomatic Oral History Project, Churchill Archives Centre, Churchill College, Cambridge [BDOHP].

<sup>30</sup> John W. Young, *The Labour Governments 1964-70, Volume 2: International Policy* (Manchester, 2003), 8.

<sup>31</sup> There was a Dominions Department in the Colonial Office from 1907: J. A. Cross, *Whitehall and the Commonwealth: British Departmental Organisation for Commonwealth Relations, 1900-1966* (London, 1967), 17.

<sup>32</sup> Jane Barder interview with Alan Campbell, 19 January 1996, BDOHP.

<sup>33</sup> See Barrie Ireton, *Britain's International Development Policies: A History of DFID and Overseas Aid* (Basingstoke, 2013), 28-39.

development and execution of a coherent foreign policy.’ It encouraged a merger between the FO and CRO as ‘the ultimate aim’ though this did not recommend this immediately.<sup>34</sup> At its suggestion, a unified Diplomatic Service was created on 1 January 1965. Debates about merger continued, but it was expected to take up to twelve years.<sup>35</sup>

It was in this context that regional consultation across departments became increasingly important. In October 1964, arrangements were made by the FO and CRO for meetings bringing together the heads of missions in different regions.<sup>36</sup> Separate events were to be held every other year in London to cover East and West Africa, with the possibility of discussions in the region in the intervening years. A meeting in Dakar, Senegal of the West Africa representatives took place in January 1965. The May 1965 meeting was the first for East and Central Africa. It was an attempt to share knowledge and experience between Whitehall departments which covered the same region but had different personnel, resources, and priorities. As will be seen, however, the separation of departments was partly responsible for the British government’s de-prioritisation of Africa after the end of empire.

## **Participants**

The key participants at the meeting were the High Commissioners from Kenya, Malawi, Rhodesia, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia; Ambassadors from Burundi, the Congo, and Ethiopia; and the Consul-General from Mozambique.<sup>37</sup> Scholarship on British foreign policy can sometimes focus exclusively on politicians and ‘treat ambassadors as incidental to the real story.’<sup>38</sup> Britain’s

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<sup>34</sup> Report of the Committee on Representational Services Overseas (London, February 1964), 12.

<sup>35</sup> Young, *Twentieth-Century Diplomacy*, 32-36.

<sup>36</sup> Regional Consultation among Her Majesty’s Representatives, Summary of Arrangements laid down in Mr R. A. Butler’s Circular Despatch No. 018 of February 14 and in Mr. Patrick Gordon Walker’s Circular Despatch No. 0151 of October 29, 1964, TNA DO 213/152/1.

<sup>37</sup> Mozambique remained a Portuguese colony so had a lower level of British representation.

<sup>38</sup> Michael F. Hopkins, Saul Kelly and John W. Young, ‘Introduction’, in Hopkins, Kelly, and Young (eds.), *The Washington Embassy: British Ambassadors to the United States, 1939-77*, (Basingstoke, 2009), 1.

postcolonial diplomatic representation in Africa has received particularly limited scholarly attention, with the notable exception of work by Anthony Kirk-Greene.<sup>39</sup> In fact, and as a number of studies of influential Ambassadors and High Commissioners make clear, diplomats were crucial players in Britain's foreign policy.<sup>40</sup> As the Plowden Report argued, 'acquiring a position of influence is pre-eminently a function of the Ambassador or High Commissioner himself.'<sup>41</sup> The role had particular importance in countries where power was held by a small elite and the Ambassador or High Commissioner was in direct contact with them.<sup>42</sup> This was the case in much of East and Central Africa at the time. Posts in newly independent states were also thought 'to require special resources of character, personality and technical proficiency.'<sup>43</sup> Diplomats' personalities mattered too because of Britain's increasingly straightened economic circumstances which meant that there were fewer resources on offer and greater reliance on 'soft power.'

Given the importance of heads of missions, it is worth considering who these men were (Table 1).<sup>44</sup> They came from a variety of posts, some having previously worked in the region, others recently arrived. They were of a similar age, in their late 40s to early 50s. For most of them, this was their first posting as High Commissioner or Ambassador. It was therefore an important post for them, likely to determine future careers and progression, and the pinnacle of their careers to date. This fits with Kirk-Greene's analysis of a much wider sample of British diplomatic representatives in Africa. He shows that Africa was often a first High Commissioner or

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<sup>39</sup> A. H. M. Kirk-Greene, 'Accredited to Africa: British diplomatic representation and African experience, c. 1960–95,' *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 11 (2000), 79-128.

<sup>40</sup> See for example, Michael F. Hopkins, 'Focus of a changing relationship: The Washington embassy and Britain's world role since 1945', *Contemporary British History*, 12, no. 3 (1998), 103-114; Rogelia Pastor-Castro and John W. Young (eds.), *The Paris Embassy: British Ambassadors and Anglo-French Relations 1944-1979* (Basingstoke, 2013).

<sup>41</sup> Report of the Committee on Representational Services Overseas, 43.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>44</sup> There were no female officials recorded as attending the meeting.

Ambassadorial posting and/or last post before retirement, and that African posts were rarely among the most prestigious.<sup>45</sup> There were two exceptions. Malcolm MacDonald in Kenya was not a career diplomat but a former politician, with extensive experience in high-level positions as well as diplomatic roles.<sup>46</sup> John Johnston in Rhodesia had previous experience working as a High Commissioner. In the eyes of the British government, the Rhodesia posting was particularly significant and thus they had a more experienced diplomat there.

[Table 1 here]

The size of the missions varied considerably. High Commissions in Africa were often larger than Embassies, leading to some resentment from FO staff.<sup>47</sup> The largest High Commission was Kenya with thirty-four diplomats, and the smallest Malawi with ten. By comparison, the largest Embassy was in the Congo which had a respectable twenty-one diplomats, while both the Burundi and Mozambique Embassies had only three British diplomats apiece.<sup>48</sup> These figures speak to the different weight the British government placed on individual countries, and thus impacted the standing of the heads of missions. Most of them had experience of working in Africa, which was not always true of the diplomats posted there.<sup>49</sup> This prior experience was largely in North or West Africa. Notably, all the High Commissioners had previously worked in Africa, compared to only one Ambassador. Another aspect of their experience was the length of time the heads of missions had spent in their current post. . Here, MacDonald was again the outlier: he had been sent to Kenya as its final Governor in January 1963 and unusually remained after independence as its only Governor General before being appointed High Commissioner. Two

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<sup>45</sup> Kirk-Greene, 100.

<sup>46</sup> See Clyde Sanger, *Malcolm MacDonald: Bringing an End to Empire* (Liverpool, 1995).

<sup>47</sup> D. M. McBain interview with J. K. Hickman, 18 December 1995, BDOHP.

<sup>48</sup> *The Foreign Office List and Diplomatic and Consular Year Book 1965* (London, 1965); *The Commonwealth Relations Office List 1965* (London, 1965)

<sup>49</sup> Kirk-Greene. For the Kenyan example see Cullen, *Kenya and Britain*, 45-66.

others, David Hunt (Uganda) and John Russell (Ethiopia) had been in post longer, since 1962. Most of the group, however, had taken up their posts in 1964. Those with more experience and leading larger missions were generally more vocal and spoke with more confidence in the meeting. The voices of Robert Fowler (Tanzania), Johnston, MacDonald, and Russell come through loudly in the minutes, while John Bennett (Burundi) and Brian Heddy (Mozambique) left a smaller trace in the record.

The careers of these men had been shaped by decolonisation. Some were former colonial officials seeking validation of earlier careers. MacDonald had previously been Colonial Secretary, while Johnston and W. B. Leslie Monson had moved to the CRO from the Colonial Office. Most were grappling with working in newly-independent countries. Three (David Cole, Hunt, and Monson) were the first High Commissioners after independence and therefore had the job of negotiating the transition period; three others (Bennett, Fowler, and MacDonald) were the second heads of mission and one (Michael Rose) the third Ambassador since independence. This was not always an easy position to be in, and several British heads of missions in the region had already been asked to leave by their host governments, while Fowler in Tanzania would be later in 1965.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, their mindsets had been substantially shaped by their experiences of colonial rule and decolonisation. As Philip Murphy has shown, British officials often continued to hold ‘deep-seated racial attitudes’ towards Africans.<sup>51</sup> They shared a positive view of the British Empire, having begun their careers at a time when decolonisation in Africa appeared a distant prospect. Frequently, their ideas about Africans were based on long-held colonial assumptions and a

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<sup>50</sup> Garner to MacDonald, 20 July 1965, Malcolm MacDonald Archive, Durham, 53/1/85-90.

<sup>51</sup> Philip Murphy, ‘Acceptable Levels? The Use and Threat of Violence in Central Africa, 1953-64,’ in Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo and António Cosat Pinto (eds.), *The Ends of European Colonial Empires: Cases and Comparisons*, eds. (Basingstoke, 2015), 185.

confidence that Britain, through her colonial past, knew and understood ‘African’ interests.<sup>52</sup> Many believed too that British guidance was necessary for newly-independent states, and that colonial development could seamlessly shift into post-colonial.

In addition to the heads of missions, representatives of various government departments were also present for parts of the meeting. These included officials from the Treasury, Ministry of Defence, Cabinet Office, British Council, Joint Intelligence Service, and Central Office of Information.<sup>53</sup> The Colonial Office was later rather upset that none of its representatives had been invited; it seems that the other departments had simply forgotten it.<sup>54</sup> The session on aid was led by Andrew Cohen, Permanent Under-Secretary at the ODM. Cohen was former head of the Africa division in the Colonial Office, Governor of Uganda, and UN representative.<sup>55</sup> His was therefore a significant voice in Britain’s Africa policy. The opening and closing sessions had the most high-profile attendees. Saville Garner, Permanent Under-Secretary at the CRO, was in the chair, and Paul Gore-Booth, Permanent Under-Secretary at the FO, was present at the closing session. Two Ministers attended one session each: Cledwyn Hughes, Minister of State at the CRO, spoke at the opening session, and George Thomson, Minister of State at the FO, gave closing remarks. Otherwise, those planning the meeting ‘hope[d] to steer clear of Ministerial attendance.’<sup>56</sup> Presumably, this was in order to facilitate the ‘intimate and informal’ atmosphere the civil servants

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<sup>52</sup> Cullen, *Kenya and Britain*, Chapter 3.

<sup>53</sup> Meeting of Heads of Missions in East and Central Africa, 17-21 May 1965, [hereafter, Meeting] TNA DO 191/236/15.

<sup>54</sup> Axworthy to Wade-Gery, 1 June 1966, TNA DO 213/152/106.

<sup>55</sup> R. E. Robinson, ‘Cohen, Sir Andrew Benjamin (1909–1968)’, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-32478>, accessed 24 May 2021.

<sup>56</sup> Chadwick to Garner, 29 April 1965, TNA DO 213/152/41.

hoped for, with minimal briefing material.<sup>57</sup> It also echoed the style of the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meetings.

The meeting took place over five days between 17-21 May 1965. Sessions were held in the mornings and on two afternoons to give the diplomats time for other meetings whilst in London.<sup>58</sup> For Johnston, the event offered 'excellent cover' for travelling from Rhodesia and holding talks with ministers without having to make a separate trip.<sup>59</sup> Cole used the week to schedule nine other formal engagements plus more informal meetings.<sup>60</sup> Diplomats were enmeshed in personal and professional networks, and trips to London such as that for the Heads of Missions meeting offered an opportunity to (re)activate such connections. The relationships which diplomats cultivated in the countries to which they were accredited were crucial, but this does not negate the importance of their networks and connections around Whitehall, which diplomats also needed to sustain.<sup>61</sup> While some of those involved in the Heads of Missions meeting would have been meeting for the first time, others would be reconnecting with friends and colleagues, both in and outside of the formal sessions. Though impossible to trace, diplomats' social activity underwrote their formal interactions. Craggs has highlighted the importance of informal spaces like bars and clubs to sustaining the work of international conferences, and such informal networking and socialising was also important among civil servants and diplomats who had briefly returned to the

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<sup>57</sup> Aspin to Joy, 5 May 1965, TNA DO 213/152/51; Chadwick to Walsh Atkins, Watson, Hamilton, Clark, 7 May 1965, TNA DO 213/152/60.

<sup>58</sup> Chadwick to Garner, 29 April 1965, TNA DO 213/152/41.

<sup>59</sup> Johnston to Chadwick, 7 May 1965, TNA DO 213/152/70.

<sup>60</sup> Visit to London of Mr D. L. Cole, Itinerary, no date but May 1965, TNA DO 213/152/76.

<sup>61</sup> See for example Whitney to Cole, 14 May 1965, TNA DO 213/152/86.

metropole.<sup>62</sup> Reflecting this, a social event was built into the meeting programme: the ‘traditional cocktail party,’ hosted by the FO ‘as a sign of integration’ between the FO and CRO.<sup>63</sup>

### **Does Africa matter?**

In the run up to the meeting, several of the diplomats questioned the significance of Africa to Britain and made clear that this was the key issue they wanted the meeting to address. As Cole asked: ‘Why does Africa matter and what should be our aim?’<sup>64</sup> The most articulate and detailed request for such a discussion came from Johnston:

Is it possible to identify any general strategy which, even if it cannot be made public, will make sense to us on the ground? ... there is a real need, in my view, to try and grapple, at the meeting of Heads of Missions, with the problem of evolving or of formalising some general long term policy towards Africa, to the promotion of which we can all feel we are bending our efforts together. I think it is important for the general morale and conduct of our diplomatic relations all over the continent, that missions should not feel that our only policies are hand-to-mouth ones evolved out of the embarrassments of particular situations.<sup>65</sup>

Johnston’s letter suggests that diplomats working in Africa did not have a clear sense of what British policy towards Africa was or, indeed, if such a policy existed. British foreign policy was frequently pragmatic rather than based on long-term planning, but Johnston reveals a frustration with this kind of reactive policymaking, no doubt increased by his difficult position in Rhodesia.<sup>66</sup>

Johnston was not alone in wondering about Africa’s significance to Britain. The CRO replied that his letter ‘falls on receptive soil as there is a good deal of head scratching in London at the present time on all African questions.’<sup>67</sup> In February 1965, as these letters were being exchanged, the Cabinet Defence and Oversea Policy (Official) Committee set up a Sub-Committee

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<sup>62</sup> Ruth Craggs, ‘Hospitality in geopolitics and the making of Commonwealth international relations,’ *Geoforum*, 52 (2014), 94-6.

<sup>63</sup> Chadwick to Walsh Atkins, Watson, Hamilton, Clark, 7 May 1965, TNA DO 213/152/60.

<sup>64</sup> Cole to Watson, 2 April 1965, TNA DO 213/152/32.

<sup>65</sup> Johnston to Walsh Atkins, 2 February 1965, TNA DO 213/152/11.

<sup>66</sup> Holt, 16.

<sup>67</sup> Walsh Atkins to Johnston, 9 February 1965, TNA DO 213/152/13.

on Africa to create ‘a comprehensive study of our interests and future policy in Africa.’<sup>68</sup> Again, the implication is that these were not widely or well known. The Sub-Committee’s discussions were held concurrently to the Heads of Missions meeting and continued thereafter.<sup>69</sup> Several of those involved in the Sub-Committee took part in the Heads of Missions meeting and so would have transferred ideas in both directions as the future of British policy towards Africa was debated across the British government.

The opening session of the meeting was intended to address these concerns. Cledwyn Hughes, Minister of State at the CRO, began the meeting with a speech giving his reasons for thinking that Africa mattered. Here, he distinguished between ‘political and material interests.’ The political interests were most significant: Southern Africa, the Cold War, and UN. In Southern Africa, particularly Rhodesia, Hughes foresaw ‘the danger of a major cleavage between Africa and the West . . . and – worst threat of all – of outright Black-White confrontation.’<sup>70</sup> On the Cold War, Hughes suggested that ‘in the short term at least Africa is of real importance to both West and East’ as they competed for influence. Influence meant votes at the UN where African representation had grown from eight members in 1958 to thirty-four in 1964.<sup>71</sup> As for Britain’s ‘material’ interests in Africa, Hughes highlighted the raw materials Britain sourced in Africa, British investment, and the substantial number of British citizens either living or serving in

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<sup>68</sup> Minutes of a meeting of the Sub-Committee, 10 February 1965, TNA CAB 148/46/1.

<sup>69</sup> See TNA CAB 148/46 and TNA CAB 148/47.

<sup>70</sup> Opening Statement by Cledwyn Hughes, 17 May 1965, TNA DO 191/236/15.

<sup>71</sup> Andrew Cohen, “A difficult, tedious and unwanted task” Representing the Central African Federation in the United Nations, 1960-1963,’ *Itinerario*, 34 (2010), 106.

Africa.<sup>72</sup> Most significant was the ‘massive . . . bilateral economic aid’ Britain sent to Africa.<sup>73</sup>

Notably, the ‘material’ interests were mostly found in Commonwealth Africa.

Despite this roster of reasons why Africa mattered to Britain, in the final section of his speech, Hughes’ tone changed:

To end without qualification would, I am afraid, be to mislead you. For those of us in the Government who have to look at the world as a whole, it is no good denying that, despite its immense size, Africa is only of relatively [sic] importance in any global appreciation of British or Western interests.

There were stronger interests in other regions, especially Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. Britain’s ‘serious economic difficulties,’ meant that ‘unpleasant decisions may have to be taken’ to limit both aid and the ability to intervene militarily.<sup>74</sup> While in January 1964 the British military had intervened in response to mutinies in Tanganyika, Uganda and Kenya, such action was no longer likely.<sup>75</sup> For all his concern with Africa, Hughes concluded that in comparison with other foreign policy interests, Africa’s significance was limited.

### **Southern Africa and the Cold War**

In much of the discussion that followed, there were two core issues: the Cold War and Southern Africa. These were linked, as British policies towards Southern Africa increased negative African views of Britain and the West. MacDonald acknowledged that Britain ‘would be attacked particularly on racial matters,’ and that ‘on Rhodesia, the Portuguese Territories and South Africa

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<sup>72</sup> There was also a private ‘restricted meeting’ planned as part of the meeting for the High Commissioners from Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda about the British communities in the region: Chadwick to MacDonald, 4 May 1965, TNA DO 213/152/49. Minutes of this meeting were not included with the rest, it was not mentioned in the summary, and no record of it has been located

<sup>73</sup> Opening Statement by Cledwyn Hughes, 17 May 1965, TNA DO 191/236/15.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> See Parsons, *1964 Army Mutinies*.

Britain was vulnerable.’<sup>76</sup> These issues shaped British relations with all newly independent African governments which demanded majority rule and an end to colonialism. Garner (CRO) argued however that ‘[i]n Rhodesia we deserved more credit than we usually obtained. We had prevented unilateral independence; Mr. Smith was now ready to negotiate to avoid it.’<sup>77</sup> Garner was closely involved in policymaking towards Rhodesia, and clearly believed that the British government was trying its best to resolve the situation, and that their achievements, such as they were, should be appreciated by African governments.<sup>78</sup> Although in May 1965 there was a sense that ‘the threat of a U.D.I. may have somewhat receded,’ this also represented a clear attempt to put a positive spin on Britain’s position.<sup>79</sup>

There were no new initiatives for Rhodesia proposed at the meeting. Because Rhodesia was such a significant issue, policy was made at the highest levels, and the diplomats here seem to have had few suggestions, though there was some debate on the potential use of force. Whether or not this could have been successful, Wilson’s government had already ruled it out except in a few unlikely circumstances.<sup>80</sup> MacDonald, however, used to being involved in high-level decision-making in his earlier career, argued that ‘Kenya would expect us to impose a solution by force if negotiation broke down, and would accuse us of racial discrimination if we did not.’ Britain’s reputation in Africa was at stake, particularly as British troops had previously militarily intervened in African colonies, including in Kenya during the Mau Mau Rebellion. Johnston, however, considered it ‘unthinkable that we should send British troops into Rhodesia.’ His view was in line with broader government thinking and was confirmed by Hughes, who described the use of force

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<sup>76</sup> Meeting, item 1, TNA DO 191/236/15.

<sup>77</sup> Meeting, closing session, TNA DO 191/236/15.

<sup>78</sup> See Joe Garner, *The Commonwealth Office 1925-68* (London, 1978), 383-393.

<sup>79</sup> Murphy, ed., *BDEEP, Central Africa, Crisis and Dissolution*, 528.

<sup>80</sup> See Carl Watts, ‘Killing Kith and Kin: The Viability of British Military Intervention in Rhodesia, 1964-5,’ *Twentieth Century British History*, 16 (2005), 382-415; Coggins, 363-381.

as ‘perilous and unpalatable.’ Johnston, whose frustration with his position in Rhodesia had been clear before the meeting, continued to reflect that in many of his contributions. Notably, he opined ‘that the African Nationalists in Rhodesia were dis-united, ill-led, and incapable of taking over the government of a highly sophisticated country.’<sup>81</sup> While in line with many views in Cabinet at the time, this very critical view of African nationalism suggests that Johnston’s sympathies in Rhodesia were not in favour of immediate majority rule.<sup>82</sup>

As for the Portuguese colonies, Hughes asked in his opening speech if there was ‘some further positive step’ the diplomats would recommend.<sup>83</sup> Heddy, based in Mozambique, painted a benign picture of Portuguese colonialism: ‘there was law and order there, Communism was rejected, and the Portuguese were actively educating the African population and building bridges and roads. The Portuguese attitude to racialism was much the same as our own.’ He seems to have bought in to Portuguese claims about their policies (and colonialism in general) being beneficial for Africans. Perhaps this was a case of an Ambassador becoming too close to the government of the country in which he was working, although his posting had not been especially long. It likely also reflected the view from his department, the FO, which prioritised relations with Portugal over those with Africa. Those within the CRO, however, were critical of Portuguese colonialism – and, by implication, critical of Heddy. Johnston replied to Heddy at once that ‘the advantages of the Portuguese racial policy were cancelled out by the absence of any rule of law.’<sup>84</sup>

Several heads of missions suggested that a new public statement on Portugal would be useful. Fowler argued that the British government should ‘disassociate ourselves conspicuously from Portuguese policies in Africa . . . we should allow ourselves to reap the full benefit of our

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<sup>81</sup> Meeting, item 1, TNA DO 191/236/15.

<sup>82</sup> Murphy, (ed.), *BDEEP, Central Africa, Crisis and Dissolution*, 523-5.

<sup>83</sup> Opening Statement by Cledwyn Hughes, 17 May 1965, TNA DO 191/236/15.

<sup>84</sup> Meeting, item 1, TNA DO 191/236/15.

own enlightened policies.’ He believed that relations with African governments were being jeopardised by support for Portugal. Throughout, Fowler was positive about the prospects for Britain’s post-colonial influence and thought Britain should pursue it more vigorously. Summing up, Roger Allen from the FO argued that ‘[w]e should try to educate the independent African states on the realities of the situation in both Southern Africa and Rhodesia.’<sup>85</sup> African support for Britain’s policies was sorely lacking, and Allen hoped that it could be gained by explaining the situation as British officials viewed it: that they had limited power in Rhodesia and even less in South Africa and Portugal. His paternalism was clear in viewing Africans as needing a British ‘education’ in ‘realities.’

The Cold War had its own session at the meeting. It was a concern for British policymakers in all their foreign relations and the menace of communist subversion was strongly felt in Whitehall. The Cold War also shaped African foreign policies, with many states favouring non-alignment. Some African governments actively sought support from both sides, while others signalled their Cold War allegiance through their aid and military partnerships with external states.<sup>86</sup> Diplomats therefore highlighted the need for vigilance and robust aid and information policies to influence African opinion in favour of the West and counter communist subversion. Bennett, who was quiet for much of the meeting, made a plea for more British attention to Burundi, where, he argued, ‘the choice lay between ruin and Communism.’<sup>87</sup> Such attention, however, was not forthcoming, largely because Burundi was not a former colony. The distinction made by British

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> See Marco Wyss, ‘The Challenge of Western Neutralism during the Cold War: Britain and the Buildup of a Nigerian Air Force,’ *Journal of Cold War Studies* 20, no. 2 (2018), 99–128; Olajide Aluko, ‘The Determinants of the Foreign Policies of African States’, in Olajide Aluko (ed.), *The Foreign Policies of African States*. (London, 1977), 14-15; Frank Gerits, ‘“When the Bull Elephants Fight”: Kwame Nkrumah, Non-Alignment, and Pan-Africanism as an Interventionist Ideology in the Global Cold War (1957–66),’ *The International History Review*, 37, no. 5 (2015), 951-969.

<sup>87</sup> Meeting, item 3, TNA DO 191/236/15.

policymakers between Commonwealth and 'foreign' African states was clear, with substantially more resources directed towards former colonies. MacDonald argued, in more measured terms, that 'generally speaking there was no imminent danger of Communists gaining control anywhere in East and Central Africa. But the Communists . . . must be expected to hit back hard and soon, and at Britain rather than the U.S.A.'<sup>88</sup> Cole argued similarly that '[t]here was no immediate threat of subversion in Malawi, but it presented a tempting target in the long run.'<sup>89</sup> The diplomats did have genuine concerns about the prospect of communist advances in Africa, reviewing the amount of arms and finance given to particular countries and worried by Soviet and Chinese tactics including bribery and propaganda. Nonetheless, the High Commissioners were also relatively optimistic about the limited chances of successful communist subversion in Commonwealth Africa, at least in the short term.

There was, however, one country whose communist connections were especially worrying to the group: Tanzania, which Fowler described as 'a copy-book example of Sino-Soviet penetration', especially Zanzibar.<sup>90</sup> There had been a Communist-inspired coup in Zanzibar in January 1964, stoking the fears of British policymakers, who had even referred to it as a potential 'African Cuba'.<sup>91</sup> Tanzania's President Julius Nyerere took seriously his commitment to non-alignment and had relationships with the Soviet Union, East Germany and China as well as the West. And yet, Fowler argued, the Tanzanians saw the benefits of British aid and so, '[w]e should avoid pressing the Tanzanians to drop their relations with the Sino-Soviet bloc and should ourselves be ready with help. A number of Communist efforts had failed recently and this had

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<sup>88</sup> Meeting, item 1, TNA DO 191/236/15.

<sup>89</sup> Meeting, item 3, TNA DO 191/236/15.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ian Speller, 'An African Cuba? Britain and the Zanzibar Revolution, 1964,' *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 35 (2007), 284.

reflected well on us. We should leave the Chinese to overplay their hand.’ His idea was that by offering assistance on favourable terms, this would eventually bring success as the offers of the Soviets and Chinese were found wanting.

The extent of arms supplies to Tanzania was also a concern. As Fowler reported, Tanzania received extensive arms from communist countries, some of which were channelled to liberation movements based there.<sup>92</sup> Responding to Fowler’s comment that there were ‘far more arms in Tanzania than the armed forces required,’ Allen (FO) asked ‘Did Nyerere have control of these [arms]? Could we not stimulate him to ask for advice?’ Allen’s phrasing here is interesting: he clearly recognised that offering unsolicited advice was likely to be counter-productive. Allen therefore proposed a paper considering whether the arms might ‘for example, be used by the Communists to get control of the country? . . . [in order to] warn Nyerere.’<sup>93</sup> Fowler thought this might prove useful. Crucially, arms supplies were an area where African states were able to exert significant agency.<sup>94</sup> British officials, much as they might hope to, could not compel Nyerere to change his patrons, and instead hoped to exert influence through a low-key approach that would foreground their support and aid for his government rather than blatant anti-communism.

Attempting to prevent communist influence also led British policymakers to try to classify Africans into those ‘friendly’ or not to their own interests. Often this meant dividing Africans into ‘moderates’ and ‘extremists.’ This was based in part on factions in the Organisation of African Unity but also reflected British colonial attempts to classify Africans into comprehensible categories. However, like colonial officials, Martin Le Quesne (FO) found it ‘hard to distinguish

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<sup>92</sup> George Roberts, ‘The assassination of Eduardo Mondlane: FRELIMO, Tanzania, and the politics of exile in Dar es Salaam’, *Cold War History*, 17, no. 1 (2017), 5.

<sup>93</sup> Meeting, item 3, TNA DO 191/236/15.

<sup>94</sup> See Andy DeRoche, ‘Asserting African Agency: Kenneth Kaunda and the USA, 1964-1980’, *Diplomatic History*, 40, no 5 (2015), 975-1001; Wyss, *Postcolonial Security*; Poppy Cullen, ‘“Playing Cold War politics”: The Cold War in Anglo-Kenyan Relations in the 1960s’, *Cold War History*, 18, no. 1 (2017), 37-54.

who were the “moderates” we should encourage; our aim should rather be to support moderate policies.’<sup>95</sup> Despite their confidence that they understood Africans, British policymakers were less knowledgeable than they imagined, and the African political spectrum was more varied than this binary opposition allowed for. Nonetheless, British officials continued to believe that they understood Africans, while communists did not. Barker of the Counter-Subversion Committee thought that ‘the African was not a good subject for a conversion to Communism.’<sup>96</sup> MacDonald agreed that ‘neither the Russians nor the Chinese . . . knew how to handle the Africans.’<sup>97</sup> Implicit in his comment was a view that the British were better at ‘handling’ Africans.<sup>98</sup> The idea that there was a particularly ‘African’ personality, and that British officials knew and understood it, while communists did not, helped give confidence to diplomats’ actions. It speaks too to their ongoing tendency to consider ‘Africans’ as a single group.

In addition, ‘African’ actors were seen as immature. Hughes questioned whether ‘the worst features of Government activity in Uganda and Tanzania [were] due to immaturity rather than to a conscious desire to lean over towards the East?’<sup>99</sup> Monson further commented that Zambian ‘ideas were still rather vague and emotional.’<sup>100</sup> The idea of inexperienced Africans whose views were ‘emotional’ – presumably unlike ‘rational’ British thinking – shows the continuing colonial mindset of many British officials. Such ideas clearly influenced British policymakers’ understanding of the power dynamics between themselves and African leaders: considering

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<sup>95</sup> Meeting, item 2, TNA DO 191/236/15.

<sup>96</sup> The Counter-Subversion Committee was founded in January 1962 with members from Whitehall and the intelligence services: Rory Cormac, *Disrupt and Deny: Spies, Special Forces, and the Secret Pursuit of British Foreign Policy* (Oxford, 2018), 155.

<sup>97</sup> Meeting, item 3, TNA DO 191/236/15.

<sup>98</sup> See also Christopher Prior, ‘Reverberations of decolonisation: British approaches to governance in post-colonial Africa and the rise of the ‘strong men’’, in Berny Sèbe and Matthew G. Stanard (eds.), *Decolonising Europe? Popular Responses to the End of Empire*, (London, 2020), 62-64.

<sup>99</sup> Opening Statement by Cledwyn Hughes, 17 May 1965, TNA DO 191/236/15.

<sup>100</sup> Meeting, item 2, TNA DO 191/236/15.

themselves to be more mature, rational, and knowledgeable, and as the people who best comprehended African interests. Needless to say, from this perspective African interests necessarily corresponded with British interests.

### **Aid and the Commonwealth**

The other key issue at the meeting was the economic assistance Britain provided to East Africa. Aid was the main practical tool British policymakers had to exert influence, secure long-term relations, and limit African criticism. This was closely connected with the Cold War, as African choices of overseas partners for economic and military assistance could act as signals of Cold War allegiance, while for Britain, successful relationships in these areas were one way of limiting African connections with communist countries. As Johnston aptly put it, ‘We were fighting the cold war not with gunboats but with technical assistance and teachers of English.’<sup>101</sup> Aid was closely tied to the Commonwealth and over 80 per cent of British aid went to Commonwealth countries between 1958 and 1971.<sup>102</sup> Naturally, discussions on this subject revealed the difference in views between the CRO and FO, with the ODM generally in agreement with the former.

ODM officials at the meeting announced their intention for aid to be based on long-term need rather than short-term politics, echoing Castle’s view that aid should aim ‘not to secure political or trade advantages, but to “maximize development.”’<sup>103</sup> CRO and ODM officials had a clear sense of British responsibility towards former colonies which had to be met through the

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<sup>101</sup> Meeting, item 2, TNA DO 191/236/15.

<sup>102</sup> Jim Tomlinson, ‘The Commonwealth, the Balance of Payments and the Politics of International Poverty: British Aid Policy, 1958-1971,’ *Contemporary European History*, 12 (2003), 413.

<sup>103</sup> Barbara Castle, *The Castle Diaries 1964-70* (London: 1984), xvi. Notably, her trip to Tanzania and Zambia during the previous month was not mentioned at the meeting: 29.

provision of aid. Fowler, who was a strong advocate of post-colonial influence, argued that ‘all the ex-colonial powers had their special opportunities and responsibilities in the turbulent post-colonial phase.’<sup>104</sup> Such arguments clearly prioritised the Commonwealth. As was to be expected, Allen (FO) took a critical stance: ‘why, if the prime purpose of our aid was to achieve economic development, there should be any distinction in our treatment of Commonwealth and non-Commonwealth countries[?]’ Cohen (ODM) replied that ‘we had the major responsibility in Commonwealth countries and there was no indication – rather the contrary – that we should be able to transfer this responsibility to other donors . . . The Congo and Malawi could not be compared.’<sup>105</sup> Cohen was clear that Britain’s colonial past gave her a responsibility for former colonies. Other parts of Africa, like the Congo, had a lesser claim to British financial support.

This post-colonial responsibility was especially stressed in the case of Malawi. There had been an attempted coup in February, and a crackdown on opposition, with detentions and violence throughout the country.<sup>106</sup> Cole, reflecting on his own posting, commented that ‘Malawi provided an excellent example of the political importance of aid . . . a reduction could have brought down the [President Hastings] Banda regime.’ Nonetheless, he did have some criticism, noting that British aid was essentially helping to finance ‘the cost of detention camps’ and that ‘[i]t seemed wrong that a country so backward, unimportant, and politically disreputable, should receive such a large share.’ Cohen, however, believed that substantial aid to Malawi was necessary due to the colonial past and breakup of the Central African Federation. He argued that Malawi was ‘in a category of “sick men” who had become so for historical reasons for which we were largely responsible, and we had no real choice but to continue to prop them up.’ Although it was

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<sup>104</sup> Meeting, closing session, TNA DO 191/236/15.

<sup>105</sup> Meeting, item 5, TNA DO 191/236/15.

<sup>106</sup> John McCracken, *A History of Malawi: 1859-1966* (Rochester, 2012), 429-445.

‘unpalatable’ to give so much aid, and they ought to aim for a reduction, significant aid had to continue.<sup>107</sup> This was an interesting moment of recognition that British colonial rule had created problems instead of the more usual idea expressed during the meeting that decolonisation had been successfully accomplished. Cohen’s own sympathies for African nationalists throughout his career, alongside the ODM’s priorities, help to explain his unusual view.<sup>108</sup>

More generally, Commonwealth Africa was seen by CRO officials to offer most opportunity to exert influence, a key aim in Britain’s late-colonial and post-colonial relations.<sup>109</sup> John Chadwick (CRO) emphatically argued that the Commonwealth should be prioritised in British policy: ‘[i]t had given us advantages in African countries not enjoyed by others, a historical head start in our relationships, and unofficial links in many fields.’ He described British policy in Commonwealth Africa as ‘relaxed patience, backed by unobtrusive aid and influence’. While not exactly dynamic, this highlighted the long-term, low-key approach of the CRO which saw ongoing friendly relationships as more important than any immediate gain. The Commonwealth was useful because of the depth and breadth of connections it provided, offering key points of influence at all levels of society through what Johnston approvingly described as ‘the biggest international “old boy net” ever.’<sup>110</sup> By contrast, Russell (Ethiopia) criticised the prioritisation of the Commonwealth, arguing for a ‘reallocation of resources in the light of overall British objectives.’<sup>111</sup> Among those present, Russell was the most consistent critic of the Commonwealth and did not value Africa highly for British interests.<sup>112</sup> Russell also argued for greater prominence

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<sup>107</sup> Meeting, item 5, TNA DO 191/236/15.

<sup>108</sup> Robinson, ‘Cohen.’

<sup>109</sup> See L. J. Butler, *Britain and Empire: Adjusting to a Post-Imperial World* (London, 2002).

<sup>110</sup> Meeting, item 2, TNA DO 191/236/15.

<sup>111</sup> Meeting, item 4, TNA DO 191/236/15.

<sup>112</sup> For the view that the CRO had an outmoded view of the Commonwealth see S. R. Ashton and Wm Roger Louis, (eds.), *British Documents on the End of Empire Project*, Series A, Volume 5, *East of Suez and the Commonwealth 1964–1971*, Part I, *East of Suez* (London, 2004), 340.

to be given to his own post in Ethiopia, which he thought suffered ‘because of lack of staff and resources’ compared to Commonwealth Africa.<sup>113</sup> His view was, however, firmly in the minority at the meeting.

The extent to which African leaders themselves favoured the Commonwealth appeared more uncertain. Chadwick noted dryly that ‘[t]he African attitude to the Commonwealth was full of dichotomies.’ At the 1964 Commonwealth Prime Ministers’ Meeting, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, backed by others from Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean, suggested forming a Commonwealth Secretariat. The suggestion surprised and initially displeased the British government, although they quickly came to make plans, hoping to lead changes in line with their own interests.<sup>114</sup> Nonetheless, that a Secretariat had been proposed seemed to signify ongoing African support for the Commonwealth that those in the CRO thought should be encouraged. Although Monson noted that Zambian leaders felt ‘some disillusionment with the Commonwealth,’ MacDonald argued that for Kenya’s leaders, the 1964 meeting had ‘revived their faith.’<sup>115</sup> The ongoing debates about the future shape of the Commonwealth would be left to play out beyond the meeting.

The Commonwealth was also perceived to be beneficial because, as Chadwick suggested, it ‘would encourage Canada, India and Australia to provide support’ and thereby assist Britain’s aims in Africa.<sup>116</sup> This would occur primarily through Commonwealth members offering finance that the British government was unwilling to provide, or when African states looked for partners beyond Britain. Such attempts to instrumentalise these relations were not always successful. One significant example considered positively at the meeting was Canadian support for the Tanzanian

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<sup>113</sup> Meeting, item 3, TNA DO 191/236/15

<sup>114</sup> Smith with Sanger, 4-6; Ashton and Louis, eds., *BDEEP, East of Suez*, 325-332.

<sup>115</sup> Meeting, item 2, TNA DO 191/236/15.

<sup>116</sup> Meeting, item 2, TNA DO 191/236/15.

military.<sup>117</sup> Bennett recommended attempting to increase Canadian involvement in Burundi where ‘Canada was the Commonwealth country most active,’ and if more British support was not forthcoming, ‘Canada might be encouraged to take over Commonwealth responsibility . . . from Britain.’<sup>118</sup> Burundi was not a Commonwealth country, and not a priority for the British government, but communist involvement was a concern. By encouraging Canadian investment, the Commonwealth could thus benefit Britain’s Cold War agenda without significant financial cost.

Aid, influence, and the Commonwealth were closely interconnected. Aid had the potential to lead to disputes between British and African governments over projects and funding levels. MacDonald, however, argued that:

In practice this kind of conflict rarely occurred; Embassies and High Commissions kept in very close touch with African Ministers and officials responsible for development programmes; we were able in this way to exert considerable influence on the thinking of the African governments with the result that in most cases they asked for the kind of help that we wanted to give.<sup>119</sup>

MacDonald was optimistic about the prospects for British post-colonial influence. Monson agreed that British personnel could ‘exert considerable influence on the development thinking of the Zambians through the personal influence of Mr. Dudley Seers’, a prominent development economist. Seers’ role spoke to the continued prominence and influence of many British ‘experts’ in various roles in former colonies. With their assistance, the High Commissioners believed themselves able to substantively influence African development programmes and funding requests, shaping these to areas the British government favoured. This influence was not felt in the same way in non-Commonwealth countries. Russell was sceptical and ‘was not inclined to attempt

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<sup>117</sup> See Andrew B Godefroy, ‘The Canadian Armed Forces Advisory Training Team Tanzania 1965–1970,’ *Canadian Military History* 11, no. 3 (2002), 31-47.

<sup>118</sup> Meeting, item 2, TNA DO 191/236/15.

<sup>119</sup> Meeting, item 5, TNA DO 191/236/15.

to dictate the purposes for which the Ethiopians should use [British aid] . . . Our ability to do so was doubtful.’<sup>120</sup> The division in British policy between Commonwealth and non-Commonwealth Africa is clear: in addition to being the responsibility of different departments which had different priorities, the nature of relationships and the degree of influence diplomats believed they had with African elites also substantially differed. Nonetheless, throughout their discussions about aid, the diplomats betrayed an enduring confidence in Britain’s ability to shape world events, even as this was lessening in practice. A sense of superiority was especially present in relations with former African colonies, which had small elites and limited economic muscle by comparison. Briefing ahead of the meeting bluntly stated that independence:

Has tended to create weak governments, lacking self-assurance and mature conviction, and with shallow foundations. Unaccustomed to the exercise of power, they are ill-acquainted with the techniques and demands of sound administration, fearful of opposition and temperamentally sensitive to criticism, real or imagined.<sup>121</sup>

This critical, patronising stance was shared by many British officials as they negotiated the era of decolonisation. When the meeting’s participants explicitly discussed decolonisation, it was with a sense of self-satisfaction. Hughes confidently stated that: ‘With the exception of Rhodesia, our own disengagement from Africa has been carried through with almost miraculous success.’<sup>122</sup> This was accompanied by little self-reflection. The diplomats agreed for example on the lack of good African diplomats or sustained diplomatic contact between African states.<sup>123</sup> While they acknowledged the lack of flight connections around Africa, no one reflected on how British

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Draft brief, meeting of Heads of Mission in East and Central Africa: Information and Cultural Policy, TNA DO 191/236/4.

<sup>122</sup> Opening Statement by Cledwyn Hughes, 17 May 1965, TNA DO 191/236/15.

<sup>123</sup> On this issue see A. H. M. Kirk-Greene, ‘Diplomacy and Diplomats: The Formation of Foreign Service Cadres in Black Africa’, in K. Ingham (ed.), *Foreign Relations of African States: Proceedings of the Twenty-fifth Symposium of the Colston Research Society held in the University of Bristol April 4th to 7th, 1973* (London, 1974), 279-319.

colonial policies concerning race, education, and Africanisation had influenced the nature and number of African elites.

### **End of the Meeting and Aftermath**

The meeting closed with a speech by FO Minister George Thomson, who had been absent from the rest of the event. Reflecting wider FO opinion, Thomson did not consider Africa to be especially important to Britain. His speech contained little about Africa and instead covered ‘the general problems facing Britain in the modern world.’ As Thomson saw it, the Middle East should ‘logically take priority’ over Africa because of greater interests there, although he did accept that the Commonwealth offered some benefits. In his view, ‘the direct importance of Africa was limited to its gold, its copper and its votes at the United Nations.’<sup>124</sup> This was an extremely limited assessment of Africa’s significance. Thomson thus offered little reassurance to diplomats that politicians cared about Africa or were prepared to commit much effort or resources. This was a negative tone to end the meeting on, with the implication that politicians at the FO cared little for the detailed debate the diplomats had conducted over the past five days.

A report on the meeting was circulated two months later. It argued that ‘[i]t would be increasingly necessary from now on to re-assess our commitments in Africa against the claims of other parts of the world and the limitation of our own resources.’<sup>125</sup> This does not seem to have been the conclusion reached by the diplomats themselves, although it was certainly the message of Thomson’s speech. This suggests that this was the view independently formulated in Whitehall which had little to do with the discussions at the meeting. Reassessment of Africa’s importance

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<sup>124</sup> Meeting, closing session, TNA DO 191/236/15.

<sup>125</sup> CRO, ‘Report on Meeting of British Heads of Missions in East and Central Africa.’ 22 July 1965, TNA DO 191/236/18.

was increasingly called for, even as High Commissioners argued otherwise. Notably, the report was printed after the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting in June at which Britain was severely criticised by African leaders and which damaged many British policymakers' views of Africa and the Commonwealth.<sup>126</sup> As a further sign of the de-prioritisation of policy plans for Africa, the Cabinet Defence and Oversea Policy Sub-Committee on Africa then scrapped its intended report on policy towards Africa for the next ten years.<sup>127</sup> Long-term planning was abandoned in favour of ad hoc responses to events and a wait-and-see policy towards Rhodesia. Mid-1965 thus represented a lost opportunity to plan a coherent British policy for Africa, even if the complexities and competing interests across the continent would always have made such a policy difficult.

After the meeting, a list of 'suggestions to be followed up' was compiled by the CRO. These included encouraging contact between different parts of Africa, a statement on Portuguese colonialism, and a paper for Nyerere about 'Communist infiltration' in Tanzania's security forces.<sup>128</sup> By July, these suggestions had been considered and most of them dismissed. However, the idea of a further statement outlining the British position on Portugal's African colonies was followed up in the communique from the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting in June. It 'took note of the widely expressed regret at the failure of the Portuguese Government to give due recognition to the legitimate political aspirations of the peoples of the Portuguese territories in Africa.'<sup>129</sup> Despite this very mild tone, the attendees of the Heads of Missions meeting were

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<sup>126</sup> See Garner, 341; Watts, 'Moments of tension and drama.'

<sup>127</sup> Cabinet Defence and Oversea Policy (Official) Committee Sub-Committee on Africa, Draft report, Introduction, 30 March 1965, TNA CAB 148/46/13. A document was finally produced in October 1967. S. R. Ashton and Wm Roger Louis (eds.), *British Documents on the End of Empire Project*, Series A, Volume 5, *East of Suez and the Commonwealth 1964–1971*, Part III *Dependent Territories, Africa, Economics, Race* (London, 2004), 348.

<sup>128</sup> Meeting of Heads of Missions in East and Central Africa, Suggestions to be followed up, TNA DO 213/152/97.

<sup>129</sup> Cmnd. 2712, Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting 1965, Final Communique, July 1965.

informed by the CRO that this was ‘stronger language than had hitherto been used. We would have gone further if we had felt able to do so without running the risk of destroying all prospect of Portuguese co-operation.’<sup>130</sup> The meeting thus encouraged a policy statement to try and mitigate African criticism, but not a change of policy, which remained focused on trying to project a principled position while not antagonising the Portuguese.

Plans for future Heads of Missions meetings were derailed by Rhodesia’s UDI. The 1966 East and Central Africa Heads of Missions meeting in Nairobi, Kenya was postponed, as was the equivalent meeting for West Africa.<sup>131</sup> It was not until June 1969 that a further meeting of East and Central Africa Heads of Missions took place.<sup>132</sup> The next such meeting in July 1971 was the last.<sup>133</sup> From then on, meetings covered all of Sub-Saharan Africa without differentiating between East, West, and Southern Africa. The initiative of holding a separate meeting for each region did not last long. This was symptomatic of a growing pessimism about future African relations in the wake of Rhodesia’s UDI and increasing African and Commonwealth criticism.

## **Conclusion**

The 1965 Heads of Missions meeting documents internal debate at a key transitional moment in Britain’s relations with Africa: after most African countries’ independence, but before Rhodesia’s UDI. Britain’s future relations with Africa remained up for debate, and some civil servants and diplomats were optimistic about the prospects. The meeting offers an opportunity to compare the views of civil servants in Whitehall and in the different missions. It also shows the

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<sup>130</sup> Chadwick to Fowler, Hunt, MacDonald, Johnston, Monson, Cole, 30 July 1965, TNA DO 213/152/103.

<sup>131</sup> Greenhill to Pumphrey, 10 June 1966, TNA DO 195/370/13; Brown to Shaw, 14 September 1966, TNA DO 195/370/24.

<sup>132</sup> East and Central African Heads of Mission meeting, 23-27 June 1969, TNA FCO 31/286.

<sup>133</sup> East African and Zambian Heads of Mission meeting, 12-16 July 1971, TNA FCO 31/765.

way that officials' views could differ from those of politicians, who were largely absent from the meeting, and who, when they were there, told a different story: of changing priorities, decreasing resources, and Africa's limited value. Noticeably, the meeting paid little attention to how a shift to Europe would impact relations with Africa and the Commonwealth. The discussions before and at the meeting show the lack of clarity in British policy towards Africa, as declining British power and resources, coupled with the independence of former African colonies, prompted questioning of why and how much Africa mattered to Britain. But this ran alongside an optimism from many High Commissioners, who protested against de-prioritising Africa and had high hopes for the long-term prospects of the Commonwealth, for limiting communism, and for sustaining influence and positive relationships in Africa. While these hopes were not often fulfilled, the relative optimism of this moment should not be overlooked.

The meeting also offers a significant case study of how government policymaking structures affect policy choices. Key to this was the distinction made in British foreign policy in the mid-1960s between Commonwealth and 'foreign' states. The two departments, FO and CRO, prioritised different parts of the world, with most of the arguments about Africa's significance coming from High Commissioners who argued that Britain had a responsibility to countries that had recently been British colonies. The FO, on the other hand, did not consider Africa valuable enough to warrant much attention in increasingly financially strained times. Significantly, the CRO was less significant in Whitehall's hierarchy than the FO. Part of the explanation therefore for why Africa did not receive higher priority in British foreign policy is that although such arguments were being made, those making the arguments had less authority behind them. In 1966, the Colonial Office and CRO were merged into the Commonwealth Office, and in 1968 the Commonwealth Office merged with the FO to form the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. This

was often perceived as a take-over by the more powerful department.<sup>134</sup> In the end, the minimal power of the CRO, and its merger into the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, discouraged a continued British focus on Africa in the late-1960s and beyond.

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<sup>134</sup> Jane Barder interview with Leonard Allinson, 5 March 1996, BDOHP.

Table 1: High Commissioners and Ambassadors attending the 1965 meeting.<sup>135</sup>

Name	Position	Year appointed	Age when appointed	Previous position	Previous African experience	Previous posts as High Commissioner or Ambassador	Ambassadors or High Commissioners since independence
John Bennett	Ambassador Burundi	1964	54	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Second
David Cole	High Commissioner Malawi	1964	45	Deputy High Commissioner Ghana	Ghana	First	First
Robert Fowler	High Commissioner Tanzania	1964	51	Deputy High Commissioner Nigeria	Tanganyika, Nigeria	First	Second
Brian Heddy	Consul-General Mozambique	1963	49	Unknown	Unknown	n/a	n/a
David Hunt	High Commissioner Uganda	1962	52	Deputy High Commissioner Nigeria	South Africa, Nigeria	First	First

<sup>135</sup> Adapted and expanded from Kirk-Greene, pp. 79-128. Other information from <http://www.gulabin.com/> accessed 24 May 2021.

John Johnston	High Commissioner Rhodesia	1964	47	High Commissioner Rhodesia and Nyasaland	South Africa, Sierra Leone, Rhodesia and Nyasaland	High Commissioner Sierra Leone, High Commissioner Rhodesia and Nyasaland	n/a
Malcolm MacDonald	High Commissioner Kenya	1964	64	Governor-General Kenya	Kenya	High Commissioner Canada, Governor-General Malaya, Commissioner-General South-East Asia, High Commissioner India, Governor Kenya	Second
W.B. Leslie Monson	High Commissioner Zambia	1964	53	Colonial Office	West Africa Council	First	First
Michael Rose	Ambassador Congo	1963	52	Minister, Federal Republic of Germany	Algeria	First	Third
John Russell	Ambassador Ethiopia	1962	51	Foreign Office	None	First	n/a