

Note from the Colonial Office on Nigerian independence and membership of the Commonwealth (16 February 1960)


Caption: On 16 February 1960, B. J. Greenhill from the Colonial Office comments on a memorandum from the British Colonial Secretary, Iain Macleod, on Nigerian independence and the country's membership of the Commonwealth.

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NIGERIAN INDEPENDENCE

(Memorandum by the Colonial Secretary)

The action proposed in this memorandum by the Colonial Secretary, if approved, will usher in the final phase of Nigeria's progress to independence next October.

2. The Colonial Secretary proposes to send a despatch to the Governor-General of Nigeria acknowledging and welcoming the resolution passed ^{unanimously} by the Federal House of Representatives on January 16th asking for independence on October 1st and for Her Majesty's Government's support with other Commonwealth Governments for Nigeria's desire to become a member of the Commonwealth. The Colonial Secretary proposes to say:-

- (i) Her Majesty's Government will be glad to introduce legislation at an early date to enable the Federation of Nigeria to become fully independent on the 1st October; and
 - (ii) the Nigerian desire for membership of the Commonwealth will be communicated informally to the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting in May and a formal application will be transmitted to Commonwealth Governments on Nigeria's behalf after the Royal Assent has been given to the Nigerian Independence Act.
3. Generally, Nigeria satisfies the usual criteria for independence, viz. she appears to have a stable, firmly based Government, independence is clearly the desire of the different parties and the majority of the inhabitants, and the territory seems economically viable.

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4. The Secretary of State can therefore clearly support the Colonial Secretary's proposals. But the following points will need to be borne in mind:-

- (a) The North and South Cameroons (paragraph 5 of Colonial Secretary's paper).

On independence the Trust areas of the North and South Cameroons will have to be administered directly by the United Kingdom (hitherto they have been administered as part of Nigeria). We understand that the form of the administrative system to be adopted is at present under discussion between the Colonial Office and the Governor-General. This administration will last until the United Nations decisions following the plebiscite^{to} in February, 1961/determine whether the Cameroons should join Nigeria or Cameroun are known. The administration, particularly in the Southern Cameroons, where public order has at times suffered from the repercussions of terrorist activities in Cameroun, must be effective and impartial. From the Commonwealth Relations Office point of view, that is, from the point of view of future United Kingdom relations with an independent Nigeria, it is important that our administration of these territories should be such that we do not run the risk of being accused either of persuading the Cameroonians to join Cameroun or, if the plebiscite goes the other way, of saddling Nigeria with financial responsibilities a newly emergent country could ill afford. It should therefore perhaps be little more than a holding operation. (At the moment it seems possible that the Northern Cameroons may opt to join Nigeria and the Southern Cameroons may opt to join Cameroun).

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- (b) Defence (paragraph 6 of Colonial Secretary's paper)

Alhaji Sir Abubakar has expressed his concern about his long and undefended frontiers. The problem of the defence and internal security of Nigeria is being examined separately by the Chiefs of Staff. While there may be some risk of disturbances spilling over from the newly independent State of Cameroun, the internal security problem does not appear generally to make Nigeria a bad bet for independence.

- (c) The Prime Ministers' Conference

The Prime Minister has suggested that if Alhaji Sir Abubakar is in London at the time of the Prime Ministers' Conference it might be politic, after the question of Nigeria's admission to full membership has been decided, to arrange for him to be brought in in some way to meet his future colleagues.

- (d) We understand that the final draft of the Nigerian Constitution is now in an early stage and that there is to be a further Conference with Nigerian Ministers on this question in May.

- (e) The question of which Minister is to represent the United Kingdom at the Independence Celebrations will arise. We understand that the Colonial Office will be taking this up with this Office shortly.

- (f) It is possible that the Prime Minister will revert to an idea he discussed with Sir Abubakar during his visit to Nigeria. This was that the Nigerian Government should make a formal request for membership of the Commonwealth after rather than before independence. The purpose of this was to avoid any danger of ill natured persons claiming that ^{the} Nigerian

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This could be done e.g. at an informal session of the Conference at which Sir A. could be informed of the decision about Nigerian membership & some of the other PMs could make appropriate speeches.

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Government was being forced to apply to stay within the Commonwealth because the request was made while still under British rule. There are strong arguments against such a procedure which are summarised in the telegram a copy of which is appended to this brief.

B.J.

(B.J. Greenhill)

16th February, 1960.

I agree with the brief so far as it goes. In fact, judging by the Prime Minister's discussions in Lagos, point (f) above is likely to be the one of importance. Mr. Macmillan put it to the Nigerian Prime Minister that it might be better for Nigeria to apply for Membership of the Commonwealth after Independence rather than before, in order to avoid any criticism that she had been kept within the Commonwealth as the result of decisions taken while she was still dependant.

The telegram below argued strongly against such action. (It is believed that the Prime Minister did not in fact see it at the time.)

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On all counts it seems desirable to stick to the Malayan precedent. Here it is interesting to read the record of the discussion at the 1957 Prime Ministers' Meeting. This is flagged^A in the attached volume. When the same point was raised over that issue, the Prime Minister, summing up, concluded "It would be unwise to risk offending Malayan opinion by too slavish observance of constitutional niceties; the communique should therefore be so worded as to imply that there was a reasonable expectation of Malaya achieving Membership of the Commonwealth in the near future."

Since the Nigerian Parliament has passed a unanimous Resolution in favour of Membership at the date of Independence, there seems to be every reason for adhering to precedent and thereby of meeting Nigerian wishes, rather than of appearing to administer the Federation a public snub by a grudging reference to their application in the communique following the forthcoming Meeting of Commonwealth Prime Ministers.

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I agree. The point behind Mr Macmillan's suggestion could perhaps be met by proceeding in the normal way as regards Membership, but for the Nigerian Parliament, at their first meeting after Independence, to pass a confirmatory resolution. 1/12 17/12