

Letter from Johannes Strijdom to Anthony Eden on the independence of the Gold Coast and its admission to the Commonwealth (London, 5 July 1956)


Caption: On 5 July 1956, the Prime Minister of South Africa, Johannes Gerhardus Strijdom, sends a letter to British Prime Minister Anthony Eden in which he criticises the United Kingdom’s position regarding the Gold Coast. Johannes Strijdom expresses his scepticism at the country’s future independence and admission to the Commonwealth.

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E. R.

Union of South Africa

South Africa House,
Trafalgar Square,

London, W.C.2.

5th July, 1956.

Dear Prime Minister,

under (48)

In your letter of the 3rd July, 1956, you state:

"If the present Prime Minister of the Gold Coast, Dr. Nkrumah, is returned, we know that he will introduce a motion calling for full self-government within the Commonwealth. The United Kingdom Government are committed to give effect to such a motion if it is passed by a reasonable majority".

In view of the above undertaking of your Government, it would appear that we are confronted with a fait accompli, and that refusal to agree at this stage would place the United Kingdom Government in a very embarrassing position.

If it were merely a matter of granting self-government or full independence to a colony or dependency of the United Kingdom, that would of course be a matter for the decision only of the United Kingdom, but where as in the case of the Gold Coast the granting of independence is coupled with an undertaking to admit such new State into the Commonwealth, then in my opinion it is a matter in regard to which prior consultation with Member States should take place before your Government commit themselves. In this case your High Commissioner in South Africa informed us that the Gold Coast would probably ask to be admitted to membership of the Commonwealth but the Union Government was not asked to express their views, with the resultant predicament in which we now find ourselves.

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I would therefore very strongly urge that in future, and in the case of a similar request from any other dependency of the United Kingdom, prior agreement be arrived at between your Government and other Member States before your Government commit themselves.

Our fear, well-founded I think, is that the population of the Gold Coast, except for a small minority, is as yet so undeveloped and politically immature that the granting of full independence and concurrent admission to the Commonwealth would create a dangerous position for all concerned. In any case it creates an undesirable precedent. We are of the opinion that in the case of a political immature and largely undeveloped country like the Gold Coast, which has been granted independence with full power to manage its own affairs, there should first be a testing period, before the following step is taken of admitting it to membership of the Commonwealth.

In view of the fact, however, that your Government are committed not only to grant full self-government, but also concurrent admission to the Commonwealth, and that refusal by us at this stage would place your Government in a very awkward position, the Union Government are prepared to give their consent, although we are convinced that the proposed action is for the reasons stated above, both premature and ill-advised.

In view of the importance of this matter I shall be glad if you would kindly bring the view of the Government of the Union of South Africa to the notice of the Prime Ministers of Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the Central African Federation respectively.

Sincerely Yours.

J.G. STRIJDOM.