

Letter from Percivale Liesching to Gilbert Laithwaite on the future relations of the Gold Coast with the Commonwealth (Pretoria, 15 December 1955)

Caption: On 29 December 1955, the Commonwealth Relations Office publishes a letter from Sir Percivale Liesching, United Kingdom High Commissioner in South Africa, to Sir John Gilbert Laithwaite, Permanent Under-Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations, on the future relations of the Gold Coast with the Commonwealth. He informs him of a conversation he had with the Prime Minister of South Africa, Johannes Gerhardus Strijdom, on the possible admission of the Gold Coast to the Commonwealth.

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**THE GOLD COAST AND COMMONWEALTH MEMBERSHIP—
CONVERSATION BETWEEN THE UNITED KINGDOM HIGH
COMMISSIONER AND THE PRIME MINISTER OF THE
UNION OF SOUTH AFRICA**

*United Kingdom High Commissioner in South Africa to the Permanent
Under-Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations*

Pretoria, 15th December, 1955

Received 19th December, 1955

Dear Laithwaite,

With reference to my telegram No. 472 of the 13th December,* I enclose a note recording the conversation which I had on that day with Mr. Strijdom and Mr. Louw on the subject of the Gold Coast.

In my opinion the results were as good as, if not rather better than, we could have hoped for. Both Ministers listened with very close and serious attention to the observations which I offered, and in their own questions and comments they were much less reticent than I should have expected.

It struck me at the time as particularly significant that their first question—that about the position of the Federation—should have been based on the assumption that the Gold Coast had been admitted. One can be mistaken, of course, but, not only then, but throughout the discussion I got the impression that, while they were facing a very unpalatable dish, they were at present of the mind that they would have to gulp it down. I was surprised that they did not show more signs of distaste at the prospect, for distasteful it certainly is to them.

I was confirmed in my impression by the Prime Minister's remark recorded in paragraph 7 of the note. I consider he interjected this because there had been so little counter-argument from them against the case for admission and because he thought I was finding it all a bit too easy.

I think that the record speaks largely for itself. We must not yet take anything for granted on a question which is extremely tricky for any South African Government and not least for this one. We must also, if we are to carry them with us, pay particular attention to the two points on which they concentrated so heavily:—

- (a) The position of the Federation if the Gold Coast is admitted. This could become a real stumbling block if the point is not met. It is from her own point of view, not for love of the Federation, that South Africa would not be content to see a "white country" (I do not speak of numbers) walking behind an African "non-white country."
- (b) The procedures to be adopted when the question comes up for discussion. Much may turn on this.

As you will see, the argument likely to count most heavily with the South Africans is the danger that a rejected Gold Coast will fall into the hands of the Communists or of the Bandung Group.

But an argument which may count heavily also is the strategic one. I used it (*vide* the last sentence of paragraph 6 of the note). I had not at the time seen C.O.S. (55) 275, which shows the important defence facilities we should wish to retain in the Gold Coast. More should be made of this point on a future occasion.

Yours sincerely,
P. LIESCHING.

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ADMISSION OF NEW MEMBERS TO THE COMMONWEALTH

THE GOLD COAST

The Prime Minister received me at 10.30 a.m. on the 13th December. I had thought it wise to tell Mr. Louw that I was due to see Mr. Strijdom on this subject, which fell within his field of responsibility and interest, and, as I expected, he joined the Prime Minister for the interview.

2. I started by explaining to the Prime Minister the various stages of constitutional advance which had already taken place in the Gold Coast. I went on to describe the difficulties which had made their appearance recently, and were causing uncertainty about the time at which, with the abolition of the reserve powers of the Governor and the assumption of responsibility for external affairs and defence, the Gold Coast would attain its full independent constitutional status. But, I said, it was possible that this stage might be reached at the end of 1956 or during 1957; and, though it was at present impossible to say whether the subject would be ripe for discussion between Commonwealth Prime Ministers when they were in London next June, the Secretary of State had thought it right that I should have a purely provisional and preliminary talk with Mr. Strijdom on the subject.

3. I took care to emphasise that, although they were conscious of the problems which would then arise and of the various arguments for and against enlarging the circle of the full Members of the Commonwealth, United Kingdom Ministers were taking no view of their own on the subject yet, since it was one for collective decision; and that they would not be attempting to reach any conclusions until they had had an opportunity of hearing the views of others and contributing their own.

4. Mr. Strijdom intervened at this point, and was supported by Mr. Louw, in asking what would be the position of the Rhodesia and Nyasaland Federation if and when the Gold Coast was admitted. Mr. Strijdom said that he could hardly contemplate a situation in which the Federation with a comparatively large established European community should be called upon to take a place behind a purely native African state. I told the Prime Minister that this matter was very much in our minds. I was bound to admit that certain reservations in the constitution of the Federation represented a formal derogation from the status of the other full Members, and indeed from the status which, in the circumstances contemplated, the Gold Coast would enjoy. But I reminded him of the constant attendance by invitation enjoyed first by Southern Rhodesia and subsequently by the Federation over the past years, and went as far as I could to assure him that this particular problem would be properly looked after. I went so far as to express the personal view that public opinion in the Federation and, indeed, I thought, in the United Kingdom would not readily accept a situation in which the Federation was obliged to take a place behind the Gold Coast. Mr. Strijdom and Mr. Louw were both emphatic in their view that they themselves would find it difficult if not impossible to accept a situation in which the Gold Coast enjoyed precedence.

5. I then developed some of the considerations which would, I suggested, have to be weighed when the matter came up for decision. I acknowledged the hesitations which might be felt at the prospect of a dilution of the intimate relationships which existed in varying degrees between the existing Members of the Commonwealth. I touched on the idea of the "Second Tier" and discounted hopes that it could provide a satisfactory answer or one which would be accepted by a country which had achieved full constitutional independence. I mentioned the discreet discrimination which was practised in the exchange of top secret information on difficult international matters, and said that a newly-established African state, while receiving suitable information on all matters concerning it, could not expect to be introduced to all the complex and delicate matters with which older Members were deeply concerned. Mr. Louw interjected some remarks based upon the unofficial use of the words "old Members of the Commonwealth," which were helpful to me in dealing with this point.

6. I referred to the important industrial and agricultural potential of the Gold Coast in the event of war, and went on to the argument which, I judged, was most likely to count with South African Ministers. I spoke of the difficulties of an adolescent nation launched upon a turbulent world. Such a nation must find friends and help and would be inclined to look for the hand of friendship from

those with whom she had been associated in the past. If those hands were withheld, where would friendships be formed? If independent and outside the Commonwealth such a nation might fall into strange company in its international relations, not least if she were admitted, as might well be, to the United Nations Organisation. There was Russia looking for opportunities of making mischief in Africa, and there was also the danger that an African people, frustrated in its aspirations, might turn wholeheartedly to the Bandung group. It was a question largely of where our interest and our best hopes lay in dealing with an independent country which was exposed to these dangers and lay across the important lines of communication to South Africa.

7. The Prime Minister then made various comments which showed that he no longer questioned the inevitability of the Gold Coast reaching an independent status. He said that he would have preferred a policy of *festina lente*, but agreed with me when I said that frustrated nationalism was one of the best seed-beds for Communism. He went on to say that whereas before 1945 it might have mattered little, to South Africa at any rate, whether a country such as the Gold Coast became independent and went out of the Commonwealth, all things had changed since the rise of Russia as a great world Power, and these matters could no longer be regarded with indifference. There was, he agreed, much force in what I had said about the possibility of undesirable affiliations being formed.

8. Mr. Strijdom then referred to the speech which he had made about cultivating relations of friendly co-existence with non-European states to the north in Africa. He said that when he made this speech he was not thinking of such places as the Gold Coast but rather of such countries as Egypt and Ethiopia. I did not challenge this, except to say that I thought the Egyptians would probably not have read his speech as applying to themselves. Nor did I think it wise to refer to the significant leading article which appeared on the 3rd December in his own newspaper, the *Transvaler*, about which I wrote to Sir Gilbert Laithwaite on the 5th December.

9. The Prime Minister then turned with some signs of anxiety to the question how, if the subject was to be discussed among Commonwealth Prime Ministers, the discussions would be handled. He very much hoped that they would be canvassed first among the "old" Commonwealth countries and not be made the subject of a full and prolonged debate in Plenary Session. I said that speaking personally and in the light of my experience at a good many meetings of Prime Ministers, I thought that subjects of this kind would almost certainly first be the subject of quiet conversations—separately or jointly—between himself, United Kingdom Ministers, and such other Prime Ministers as Mr. St. Laurent and Mr. Menzies, and that it might well be that as a result of a series of discussions of this sort, in which the Asians were sometimes joined and sometimes not, the subject would not be brought to a Plenary Session until it was known that agreement had been reached. Prime Ministers might then simply be able to make speeches formally expressing such views as they wished to place on record. Mr. Strijdom and Mr. Louw in what they said on this point showed that they were anxious to avoid the kind of collision of views which can be foreseen if they became involved in discussions of this question with Mr. Nehru. They clearly wish to avoid any form of Plenary debate in which acrimony or dissension might find a place.

10. This conversation lasted for about forty minutes, and at its conclusion I left with the Union Minister's copies of the Colonial Office Memorandum on the Gold Coast dated the 25th October, 1955, copies of which were sent to my Deputy under cover of Commonwealth Relations Office letter Con 141/13 of the 3rd November.

P. L.

13th December, 1955.