



on Colonialism
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THE ADDRESS DELIVERED

By His Excellency The Governor of Kenya

Sir Philip Mitchell, G.C.M.G., M.C.,

to Members of

THE NAIROBI ROTARY CLUB

on 24th October, 1947

THE TEXT OF
SIR PHILIP MITCHELL'S ADDRESS

"I propose to address you to-day on the East African aspects of a somewhat general subject which has assumed considerable importance in the world which is emerging from the war, and that is the question of the justification—or, as some would call it, the moral basis, of the type of Colony which has been established here in East Africa. There are two main lines of criticism: one consists of a more or less general repudiation of the whole conception of Colonial occupation, usually accompanied by somewhat nebulous demands for "self-government"—but of what and by whom, is seldom clear; the other is directed to a more particular matter, which is usually described as racial domination or the subjection of coloured people to white. Both find frequent and usually immoderate expression in certain kinds of newspaper and in international gatherings, especially from the representatives of the most corrupt, oppressive and dictatorial forms of misgovernment to be found in the unhappy world of to-day.

It is not my purpose to engage myself or you in these dusty controversies, but I think it may be useful to put before you what appears to me to be the true substance of the matter. I have held high office in East Africa for over 20 years now, and I felt it to be necessary very soon after I found myself responsible for advising on policy to have for my own use an explanation of the reasons for our being here, the objectives which we are pursuing and the methods for attaining them, which appeared to me to make sense and to be morally justifiable, not before the world, but before my own conscience, for a man must believe that what he is doing is right before he can do it with confidence and zeal. It is this explanation which I offer you to-day.

In this matter, as in most others, it is necessary to define as exactly as possible the nature of the questions to which we are addressing ourselves. The first thing we have to do, therefore, is to distinguish between different kinds of Colonies, if we are to avoid muddled thinking, and to see our own affairs in a reasonably well defined framework. There are fortress Colonies such as Gibraltar, Aden or St. Helena, which have no bearing upon our problem at all; then there are—and more particularly, there were—commercial colonies, of which, in its beginnings two centuries ago, British India was for a time the most impressive example, and, of recent years, Malaya or Hong Kong; with these also we are not concerned; and thirdly, there are settlement colonies such as those out of which the States of the New World and the Dominions of the British Commonwealth have developed, and it is among these, albeit with certain special circumstances and qualifications that the Central and East African Colonies have a place. Before I discuss it, however, may I interject that on the West Coast of Africa there have been developed in our lifetime out of what were originally commercial colonies a somewhat special type which might perhaps be described as commercial and development colonies; that is to say, colonies in which, in addition to commerce with the aboriginal inhabitants, there is a substantial technical—especially mining—and agricultural development, together with the impact of powerful cultural forces from the metropolitan country.

In these colonies, for climatic or other reasons, no question of the introduction of a large permanently settled immigrant population arises. They are in the same continent as ourselves, but so distant, and separated from us by such vast tracts of primeval forest, that that fact is of no significance. Incidentally, the distance from Nairobi to Lagos is about the same as that of London to the Caspian Sea—in itself an illuminating fact.

The classification I have suggested may not cover every variety, but it is sufficient for my purpose.

Settlement colonies, of which the most striking in the world is of course the United States of America, have come into being because: first, of the existence in Europe of an impetus to migrate; and secondly, of the existence of large areas of the earth's surface containing potentially vast opportunities for development, which were either uninhabited or so lightly inhabited as to afford scope for settlement and development or latent wealth, which the aboriginal inhabitants have been unable to develop but which the world needs, and their establishment involves the permanent introduction of settler population, in our case not from Britain only but from India and Pakistan also, a fact in itself involving an additional complication.

So much by way of introduction.

Here in East Africa we are in fact the northern extremity of a settlement colonization which began at the Cape three centuries ago, apparently contemporaneously, quite accidentally contemporaneously, with a mass migration or at any rate general movement of native Africans within the Continent. The aboriginal inhabitants were almost certainly bushmen or pygmies, and they were overrun some time within the last three centuries by migrations of other African tribes, mainly Bantu and Hamitic, and practically exterminated, unless, of course—and this is possible—they were never more than a very small sprinkling of semi-wild people. The causes, the sources and the origins of those migrations or movements are unknown to us in the historical sense in which the great eruptions of Goths and Vandals into Western Europe are known, for in this Continent there is an almost total lack of history north of the Cape and south of Abyssinia prior to about 1890. We cannot therefore know any of the details, and as the people concerned were at a cultural level where they built no permanent buildings or installations of any kind, had no alphabet or means of writing, no external commerce, no transport other than their heads or backs, no mechanical appliances more advanced than a hoe and an axe, nor weapons than a bow and arrow,

they have left nothing for the archaeologist to discover with his spade, in the manner in which, for instance, the ancient civilization of Egypt has been rediscovered in modern times. If you dig here you find only prehistoric remains—between then and our day there is an almost complete blank. Moreover, these people were an assortment of tribes who had neither a common language nor any form of common government more extensive than the patriarch, or at most, the relatively unimportant chief of a tribe, such as Lobengula, Khama or Mutesa, and many of them were nomads. Since there was no area larger than one of the smaller English counties under the control of anyone capable of enforcing law and order (and even that was the rare exception), fighting, raiding and thieving were the order of the day to such an extent that there could be no social, economic, technical or political development as understood in more stable countries. It is for this reason that at the end of the last century, Europe found itself confronted with a vast expanse of territory between the Zambesi and Abyssinia, the Great Lakes and the Indian Ocean—and let me remind you that that is about the same in extent as Europe from Edinburgh to Naples, from Brest to Vienna—a vast expanse of territory which was a political, cultural, technical and commercial vacuum, inhabited by a scattered population about equal in numbers to that of London to-day, in a social, economic and technical condition far more primitive than that of the Ancient Britons when Rome invaded our island. Just reflect for a moment that no plough had ever entered East African soil until after 1890, no wheel ever turned on road or track. Nobody knows the reason for this, and nobody need waste time trying to ascribe it as a fault to anyone, African or other; it is simply a historical fact.

Although, then, these African tribes had had several centuries during which they were free to establish, if they were able, a stable form of society and a government or series of governments, in which agricultural, technical, commercial and economic development could be carried on, and the latent riches of the

Continent be made available for a world which needs them with ever-increasing urgency, they proved unable to do anything of the kind; indeed, the available evidence suggests that they were losing ground in the face of the great natural difficulties of their environment, intensified by the slave trade, when we first occupied these lands. I do not think it could be said that there is any evidence that the slave trade destroyed anything that was here, except, of course, human life; the evidence rather is that because there was nothing here but primitive, helpless tribal groups very widely separated in most cases one from another and living in the conditions to which I have alluded, incredibly weak parties of raiders were able to raid slaves as they wished. For you must remember the most extraordinary fact of the whole business—that these vast journeyings by the Arab slavers from the Coast to the Congo, from the Zambesi to Abyssinia, the terrible miseries they inflicted upon East and Central Africa so graphically described by Livingstone and other early travellers—that these things were the work of handfuls of slavers accompanied at most by a few hundred almost untrained irregular soldiers recruited from the tribes themselves and armed with tower muskets. Up to about 1890 a resolute man with a couple of hundred riflemen could have conquered the whole of East Africa without serious opposition anywhere.

Although South and East African colonization began at the Cape three centuries ago, for a long time it did not extend much to the north, not because it encountered any opposition, but because it was enclosed by the Karroo, an area which opposed a serious obstacle to people dependent on animal transport, and also because its original object was strategic and commercial, in support of the Far East trade. The dynamic which set colonization by settlement on its northward march after the Great Trek from the Cape was the discovery first of diamonds and then of gold about 75 years ago, and the hopes of vast wealth and exciting adventure which those discoveries held out to vigorous and enterprising men.

The resulting colonization, however, has found itself established in its march northwards among circumstances some of which are peculiar to it, and others so different in degree, albeit not in principle, from what was encountered in earlier days as profoundly to affect subsequent developments. We have therefore special problems, special and perplexing problems, of our own which other colonists did not encounter.

But be all this as it may, it seems to me important to recognize that the crux of this matter lies in the fact that although there was in the past, at any rate theoretically, a time during which it would have been possible for an exclusively negro African society and state or states to be established, that time has vanished for ever.

In so far, then, as some expressions of political views by native Africans take the form of an exclusively negro African nationalism, they appear to me to have no support either in history, common sense or contemporary conditions, to be no more than unreflecting repetition or echo of a political disease from which a large part of the world is suffering to-day; to be detached from reality and to amount, if indeed they amount to anything, to advocating a blind reversion to tribalism, to be achieved, if achievement were possible, which of course it is not—to be achieved by resignation (like Hitler) from western civilization and the sacrifice of all hope of a better, fuller life for the native African people. This is perfectly apparent to level-headed African leaders and has been expressed for example, by Mr. Mathu in the Legislative Council, anyhow in broad general principle; and it is certainly very well understood by thousands of Africans who have begun the processes which lead to a better life. But there is a corollary to all that, and it is that the establishment of an exclusively British, or an exclusively Indian, state or society is equally impossible. Whether we like it or not, we are committed to a joint enterprise.

The fact is that by our settlement in the vacuum to which I have referred, we have begun the creation of an entirely new society and polity, and entirely new technical, industrial, agricultural and commercial development, which have indeed already achieved an astonishing measure of progress and which stretch in the broadest sense from Cape Town to the borders of Abyssinia, albeit they are not now—and maybe never will be—closely integrated politically. This new society and polity have already outgrown both the unbending nationalism which once set Boer and Briton at each other's throats and the narrow, exclusive racialism by which they used to be disfigured.

I do not mean by that that differences of race, schisms and disagreements on that account have ceased to exist; still less do I mean that race, colour or caste can be disregarded as elements in our contemporary society or causes of difference and controversy between men; tragic events in India afford proof enough, if any were needed, that human differences and divergences are tough, enduring things; but I do mean that we have reached a stage where we can see that these things, difficult and deep-seated as they are, are contemporary social phenomena capable of adjustment and modification from time to time as circumstances may make possible and not rigid unchangeable things that must endure for ever—or rather until they are resolved by fratricidal strife and bloodshed. I do not suggest that because we can perceive these things we have established, or can at once establish a society and a polity devoid of contemporary imperfections, discontent or injustices, any more than any other human society at any other time in history; still less do I say that all races in East Africa have reached an equality of quality, knowledge, skill and political experience and capacity. But I do say that what we have already achieved here is a living, growing, dynamic society pursuing as its objective the creation of a polity in which all the human groups of which it is composed have a share and a vital interest according to their several needs and capacities, a society

which places no insurmountable obstacle in front of anybody of any race but demands only that if he wants to join others on the hilltops he should be capable of the climb involved, instead of deluding himself and others that the road is flat and he has only to stroll easily along it without effort. It is a society and a polity in which that part of it which is at this stage politically most mature and which is the projection here of the great spiritual and moral force and the long social and political experience of the people of Great Britain has, and will long have, a predominantly powerful and influential part to play, the more so as this is a colonial and not a self-governing territory and the final authority lies with the Government and Parliament of the United Kingdom; but it is very far from being based on any such rigid conceptions as the caste system in India, or the extreme forms of racialism prevalent in some parts of South Africa. We have had in our history in the United Kingdom, and we still have, social divisions and gradations which have been and are exclusive and in some measure intolerant. We have had political power and authority narrowly restricted, first in the hands of the monarch, later in the nobility, later still in the hands of those who have held most of the land and the wealth, and over a long period of years that authority has been continually broadening and extending, until it has reached a stage to-day when the highest office in the State under the Crown can be achieved by anyone who has the quality to achieve it. We have passed through a time when the basis of authority was the divine right of kings, by a long process of adaptation to another stage which we describe as democratic but which we have not yet worked out fully, so that there is considerable confusion in our contemporary affairs. We see quite clearly that the interpretation of democracy which says that two fat heads have a right to prevail over one long one leads directly and unflinchingly to totalitarian dictatorship and the destruction of liberty, just as over-emphasis of the converse led in the past to accumulation of power in the hands of the few. In our day we have not yet found the answer, and are still

working it out. All these processes are carried on, however, within the framework of the constitution and the law, and subject to the proviso that we would rally like one man to the side of authority if attempts were to be made, from within or from without, to subvert our State by violence or by the organization of ignorant men into obedient masses at the beck and call of irresponsible demagogues. We reject absolutely, because it has repeatedly been proved to lead nowhere, to be at best useless and at worst the cause of untold suffering and misery, the conception that political forms and devices can transcend or transform human values and human quality, and we stick obstinately to the British view that political forms must follow and derive from human personality and human qualities. We do not shut our eyes to the complications and difficulties which derive from race and colour, but we, or at any rate I, and I believe most others who think about the matter, cannot admit that these complications and difficulties are either insoluble or, like the caste system, rigid or for ever intractable; and it is a fact that they have been, and are continuously being modified and adjusted. Consider only the actual and impending changes in our legislature, and in the organs of Local Government, or such things as the United Kenya Club, the Scouts and Girl Guides, and you will see the process at work. It could not be otherwise, unless we are to resign from the Christian faith.

It seems to me that in this lies the key to the position we take at this time in this country. We do not claim that we are all just men or better or wiser than other men, nor that we have a divine right to exercise all power for ever; we do not say that in working out our problems or exercising the authority which is entrusted to us we never give cause for reasonable complaint by others; we do not even say that we may not be over-cautious, over-conservatively inclined to refuse to recognize that others have reached a stage beyond that which our contemporary institutions admit. It is in the nature of things that the processes of discontent from below should continuously widen the exercise of

authority above. We British should be the last to expect that people will not be discontented with their lot, since we have colonized a great part of the globe with our own people whose principal motive to migrate was discontent with their lot, and we have developed the most enduring and dynamic political forms in the world because our people have never been content to remain in a static condition, subject only to occasional outbreaks of violence, and have always insisted that their forms of government should be flexible, alive, and capable of adaptation to circumstances. What we do assert is something quite different: that what we have set our hands to here is the establishment of a civilized state in which the values and standards are to be the values and the standards of Britain, in which everyone, whatever his origins, has an interest and a part; the wildest naked man in Turkana has an investment in it, although, apart from the security he now enjoys, it may be a remotely maturing one; the planter, the farmer, the lawyer, the little Indian shopkeeper in the countryside and the wealthy Indian merchant in Mombasa have a stake in it, just as I have and all of you have; many thousands of Africans have a very real and actual stake in it to-day, and for thousands of others the opportunities increase year by year. If you consider, for example, the men and women who in the last generation have come to live in the manner in which the people are living in Kaloleni and other new housing estates, many of whom drive trains and buses and motor cars or run telegraph offices or engage in a hundred and one different salaried occupations, or in trade on their own account, living at a standard unknown to the wealthiest African 60 years ago, you can see the sort of stake that I mean, the sort of investment in civilization which they have all made; you can see that for them and their children the choice has been taken, and the choice is participation with the other races in those protracted processes which must lead, at a distant date which none of us need speculate about to-day, to the substitution here for the fragmentary tribal society, the rule of the spear and the sorcerer and a hazardous subsistence economy which

we found at the beginning, the substitution of a civilized society under the rule of law; an organic living society and state which presents, it is true, a great many dour and daunting difficulties, but which contains within itself, by its very nature and the material of which it is compounded, the means of growth and adaptation to the changing circumstances of the day; a society which, were it to be destroyed, would involve in its ruin all hope for the African people of a civilized future. For the truth is that the only way in which the multitude of East African tribes can hope to enjoy the benefits of civilized government, both central and local, now and for generations to come, before they have become themselves civilized, and thereby to have the opportunity to become civilized, is under the forms of colonial government—the flexible and continuously developing forms of colonial government—administered by a strong and enlightened colonial power and directed, as British colonial policy has been for centuries, to the achievement not of any particular political system but of a state of society in which the men and women of which it is composed—or at least a large part of them—have reached a stage of spiritual, moral, social, cultural and economic development capable of supporting and operating such democratic forms of government as may then appear desirable to them. There are people in our country and abroad who call all this “British Imperialism” and mean it as a term of abuse; I can only say that for myself and, I make no doubt, for the thousands of my countrymen who have engaged themselves for life in the business, it is an expression of faith and purpose, but it is a long range purpose and the processes by which it can be accomplished are inevitably neither rapid nor spectacular, indeed they are often barely perceptible to the contemporary observer and irksome to the impatient; while to the demagogue they offer endless opportunity for misrepresentation and calumny. That is no doubt regrettable, but it is inherent in the business.

That, then is the explanation that I have to offer of what I have been doing this 35 years past—doing imperfectly, perceiving indeed imperfectly at first, but more clearly as the years pass and responsibilities grow; I shall not see the millenium; I do not delude myself that there will not be setbacks and failures, nor that envy, hatred and malice will be miraculously uprooted in a few years from the minds and hearts of men; but I do say that the task is tremendously worth while, that it is possible and practicable, and that I believe the young people now growing up will gladly and resolutely carry it forward; and I say, lastly, that when doubts and difficulties perplex and the way seems hard to perceive, there is always at hand a textbook for the business—the New Testament.”

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THE ADDRESS DELIVERED

By His Excellency The Governor of Kenya

Philip Mitchell, C.M.G., M.C.

at Mombasa on

the 27th October 1962

in 1962

Collection Number: AD1715

SOUTH AFRICAN INSTITUTE OF RACE RELATIONS (SAIRR), 1892-1974

PUBLISHER:

Collection Funder:- Atlantic Philanthropies Foundation

Publisher:- Historical Papers Research Archive

Location:- Johannesburg

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