

REITH LECTURES 1961: The Colonial Reckoning

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Lecture 3: The Politics of Emancipation

TRANSMISSION: 30 November 1961 - Home Service

In my last talk I showed, I hope, how a concentration of influences converged upon British Africa to force the growth of African nationalism. The new nationalists felt that colonialism was so oppressive that it could not be ended too quickly. When the Belgian Congo fell, almost from the day of liberation, into the welter of fragmentation and murderous bloodshed which still persists, Belgium was blamed for inadequate preparation. But was any colonial power prepared in time? Britain may almost unconsciously have laid some passable foundations for freedom, but let us admit that, caught by surprise; she finished off the top storeys with ramshackle speed.

All her long experience of empire was against her foreseeing the speed of African political evolution. Her dependencies have gained their freedom in periods exactly in opposite proportion to their qualifications. Consider the long subordination of our white colonies while they advanced step by step towards the final definition of their independence in the Statute of Westminster in 1931. Think of India with its ancient civilization and some 200 years of association with England, before her peoples attained their dual independence in 1947. Much the same could be said of Ceylon. To accuse Britain both of delaying independence and of failing to prepare for it in Africa is to assume that she should have begun this preparation from the very moment of annexation. But, as I pointed out last week, most of tropical Africa's colonial period covers no more than the span of a lifetime. Before 1914 Britain could not begin really effective administration. Her scanty agents were still making their first real contacts with the tribes, putting down slave raiding and tribal wars, building roads and railways with African labourers who in some parts had never seen an axe, a spade, or a wheel.

Then came the First World War with two theatres of conflict in Africa itself and shortages everywhere of staff and funds. Administration, just getting into action, was cut back to a care-and-maintenance basis. Hardly had Britain got again into her peacetime stride when the great slump hit the world—and Africa. Staff and the budding colonial social services were cut back remorselessly.

Not until the nineteen-thirties were well begun could Britain's administration go into really sustained action. Further, Britain had everything to learn about large-scale African administration. The Red Indians and the Maoris had presented marginal problems, both literally and metaphorically. Britain's first real attempts at administering Africans had been in South Africa in the early nineteenth century, the period of the strong humanitarian movement and later of confidence in the universal applicability of Victorian culture.

These influences, combined with L inexperience, led in South Africa to the policy sometimes known as 'identity', of regarding all men as much the same, of simply

extending the government and law of the existing white colony over the local Hottentots and Bantu. In West Africa this policy could be applied to the small areas first annexed on the coast. Here British citizenship could be given, English law established. A policy practicable for thousands! But what of the millions in the vast newly appropriated interiors? Here other methods had to be found, and found quickly. It was to meet this need that the system known as 'indirect rule' was developed. Many conquerors of peoples too numerous or too stubborn to be brought directly under an imperial government have tried to deal with them indirectly through their own authorities. Rome used client kings; the trials of Christ and St. Paul show native rulers and native courts operating under the Roman power. So, when the earlier British policy of identity broke down, either in face of numbers or because western civilization did not simply 'catch on' like some beneficent infection, Britain swung over to its opposite, this idea that Africans were different, and could be ruled by simply letting their own rulers carry on under the general authority of Britain. This was a policy of limited liability: but, in Africa at least, it just did not work. British authority was too detached: under it the small African society certainly survived, but without the virile challenge of independence, without active help in adjusting itself to new conditions, it grew weak or corrupt.

Indirect rule was a much more dynamic and rationalized version of this policy. It was applied by Lugard in the advanced Muslim city-states of Northern Nigeria. With his derisory resources of men and money he had no option but to incorporate these effective native governments almost as they stood. But he was the first to see that the incorporation must be made dynamic, must link the native systems closely with British power.

The experiment was at first spectacularly successful. His own school of administrators helped to diffuse his model. During the nineteen-thirties almost everywhere in British Africa I found 'indirect rule' was the gospel. Even today nearly all British Africa still bears the imprint of this system.

Certainly it had its merits. It broke the shock of Western annexation; it was economical; it kept the peace; it induced a sympathetic, inquiring attitude in colonial officials towards African society. But resounding success can in time crystallize administration: in lesser hands means can become ends—dead ends. There was also a tendency to warp and discredit chieftainship by making chiefs too much the agency of alien power. If the principle behind direct rule was that of identity, the principle behind indirect rule was the opposite—differentiation. Certainly the vast numbers of newly annexed Africans looked different enough from us. But they were not inherently, permanently different; they could change. It was here that the system tended to become static. In theory it was like a steel grid, carefully designed to accommodate native societies of all shapes and sizes. It could reform these: it could also stereotype them. Moreover, individuals were drawn out of their societies, to the new central government, to wage labour, to work in offices, to the ever-growing towns.

In the nineteen-thirties these socially and politically displaced persons showed their discontent with indirect rule. Whenever I talked to educated Africans their constant themes were that it led nowhere and had no place in it for them. Partly in answer to pressure, the British government gave way increasingly year by year just before,

during, and especially after, the Second World War. Legislative councils were given more nominated African members; then some elected members. These councils offered the people public debate of their affairs, a prototype of centralized parliamentary government. It was a period of all-round reform, expansion, advance, and increasing financial help from Britain. The Colonial Office itself was overhauled for its new and wider tasks. But none of these reforms could satisfy the West African elite. None of them offered an adequate answer to their own immediate personal ambitions or to their great new hopes about the political future of their territories.

It was in the Gold Coast that British Africa's first Negro dependency achieved independence. The full complement of almost ritual acts are there: the return from education overseas of the leader; the organization of the party; the appeal to the masses; the sloughing off of the moderates; the growing threat of force; the imprisonment of the leader; the commission of enquiry. Dr. Nkrumah had made an exact estimate of the strength of the fortress confronting him. It had become as light as a stage property. Two or three pushes of his strong irreverent hands and it was over. And on the other side was the Governor, Sir Charles Arden-Clarke, a tall, broad-shouldered man, writes Nkrumah, 'sun-tanned, with an expression of firmness and discipline but with a twinkle of kindness in his eyes', who 'came towards me with his hand outstretched'.

Shortly after this, I was able to stay with Sir Charles and observe the friendly co-operation between him and Dr. Nkrumah as they worked together to prepare the Gold Coast for complete independence. This was in the early nineteen-fifties. It could not have happened just like this in the nineteen-thirties. The war and all those resultant influences which I described in my last talk had subtly changed Britain's attitude, though perhaps the authorities hardly knew it until the moment of decision. And with little Ghana free, how could Nigeria's freedom be delayed?

Emancipation in West Africa presented fewer problems than those which still face Britain in East and Central Africa: in Tanganyika, with its great poverty of finance and trained staff, yet due for independence next month; in Uganda, top-heavy with its kingdom of Buganda; in the settled states of Kenya and Central Africa. But in the unprecedented conditions of Africa all African liberations must be hazardous hit-and-miss transactions.

Consider the Africans' side, their state of mind as they enter upon the transfer of power. The leaders are generally young, often inexperienced in politics, nearly always inexperienced in administration. Above all they are on fire with indignation at their individual and racial status. 'My country groans', said Dr. Azikiwe in 1948, not—as you might expect him to add—under this or that substantial oppression, but 'under a system which makes it impossible for us to develop our personalities to the full'.

I remember the tone of voice and flash of eye with which a young leader from French Africa exclaimed to me: 'You have never known what it is to live under colonialism. It's humiliating'. It is difficult to exaggerate the state almost of 'possession' felt by African leaders during their struggles. One young Uganda politician confessed to a European friend that he could hardly get near to a white man without wanting to stick a knife into him. Let me quote fragments from Africans from French territories, who

poured their passion into verse—French verse, to which translation does scant justice. The well-known African poet Monsieur Diop writes:

*The angry waves of liberty strike
against the maddened beast.
From the slave of yesterday a fighter
is born.*

Our recent guest in Britain, Monsieur Leopold Senghor, President of Senegal and a distinguished poet, writes:

*Through four centuries of enlightenment
Europe has scattered the slaver and bark
of her mastiffs over my land.*

Such intensity of emotion was not confined to Africans. That so moderate and all-comprehending writer, Nerad Chaudhuri, relates how, sitting in the gallery at the opera in Calcutta, looking peoples down at the well-dressed English audience below, he felt such a sudden gust of hate that he longed to drop a bomb and kill them all. He adds that there could be no redemption for India until it could escape from the ‘snake’s fangs of such hatred’; and indeed, thank God, it seems to have made this escape.

Forcing the Pace

Our African leaders had, of course, to be men of great powers of self-assertion. They had to construct their own platforms and jump upon them. They forced the pace of political development, cutting across the disciplines and loyalties of the colonial state. Their movements had often been born abroad, mainly, for British Africa, in London. Here students from different territories could stimulate each other and find sources of European support. They came up the hard way. Dr. Nkrumah tells us how in London he and his friends—probably in clothes of inadequate warmth—would work in a little office so cold that their breath fogged the one electric light. They would walk for miles at night picking up bits of coal fallen from carts and round coal-holes. Back in Africa the young leaders, with no regular funds, would hire a cheap room or two in the capital as party headquarters, with little equipment or trained staff, and with excited young Africans crowding it out. Yet the party would hardly be formed before it would be -demanding self-government-and at once! Their cry was like the Red Queen’s, ‘Faster! Faster!’, and in British eyes almost as unreasonable. Why such haste? Because of the head of psychological steam which had been raised behind the movement and had to be sustained. Because nearly every African leader was, and is, always in danger of being outbid and therefore outflanked by a rival leader.

I have been in six African states during their crises of transition, and my recollections turn from the excited African side to the apparent calm of Government House. The Governor’s first duty must be to maintain public order. All his staff, from his senior officials down to every hard-pressed officer precariously out in the bush; every African chief, or elder, every policeman, draws his authority from the Governor and looks to him to maintain the established order against those ‘angry waves’ of the poet which beat against it. Yet tomorrow this allegiance must be switched to the new, the

opposing leaders! Official policy is to make orderly and gradual concessions. But often that does not suit the African leaders; they need to strike the defiant posture of demanding, of taking, never-this is surely understandable-of appearing to receive their freedom. Working out a new constitution is an immense administrative and financial task which takes more than a matter of months.

Meanwhile the pressures rise. Is the Governor to stand aside, see the moderate, the loyal, or even the indifferent, intimidated; their houses burned, perhaps, the law flouted, the economy halted? He may remember Amritsar and will allow no shooting except as an utterly last resource. The leaders know this and on their side may court arrest. Had not Dr. Nkrumah, with precedents from India, shown that graduation through prison was an almost essential distinction for a leader?

A Power-house of Nationalism

Further, during this last decade of agitation and achievement the incitements, which had done so much to ignite the first fires of nationalism, have continued to blow the flames. Dr. Nkrumah's Ghana was no static symbol of enfranchisement: it was a power-house from which radiated currents to increase the power and heat of nationalism elsewhere. The 1955 Bandung Conference of twenty-nine Asian and African states was the dramatic prelude to a series of meetings, mainly in Africa, and especially in Accra and Cairo, at which Ghanaians, Egyptians, Tunisians, Moroccans, and perhaps Russian and Chinese, could give leaders still under colonial rule advice and, more, the sense that victory was within their grasp.

Perhaps the most serious problem of the transfer was due to Britain's tardiness in training Africans for higher posts in the Civil Service. And this remains as a grave weakness to the new states. The new African leaders needed a service in which loyalty and enthusiasm counted for more than efficiency. The Governor, in the crisis, needed the utmost steadiness and devotion from all his mainly British staff, and this at the very moment which faced them with the abrupt end of their careers. True, they might have the option of signing on for a period under new masters-those very men, perhaps, who seemed to have been condemning all they had done, all they stood for. Would these, they questioned, have the constancy or indeed the resources to honour their engagements, and especially to resist the thrust of young supporters eager for promotion? Would they honour the Civil Service principles of political impartiality? But impartiality was perhaps the last thing the new Ministers were asking-or needing! On its side the British government fumbled with the problem and only, almost at the eleventh hour of African emancipation, offered the financial underpinning which alone can ease the dangerous staffing crisis. All honour to the many officials who stayed and worked so well, and also to their African employers. This is part of a larger marvel, which the Congo contrast lights up, that what has been essentially a revolution has been carried through with so little bloodshed or even disorder.

What happens on the morrow of independence? The new states set out as parliamentary democracies with universal suffrage, with all the human rights and civil liberties written into their constitutions. Very soon most of them depart from it: the Sudan and Pakistan have passed under military rule; 'democracy in Burma and Ceylon has, to say the least, been shaken; Ghana has made a dramatic break with

parliamentary democracy and developed a one-party state under personal-very personal-rule.

A Vast Gap

Yet before we condemn such deviations we must surely try to enter into the difficulties of an African leader as he takes up the burden of power. He belongs to a very small educated élité; a vast gap yawns between this and the illiterate masses. These rallied round him for one single, unifying purpose, driven by the impulse, more of the blood than the mind, to free themselves from subjection to foreign rulers. This achieved, they would tend to fall back, either into their tribal groups, or else right out of them into a bewildered mass demanding a new integration under strong, even dramatic, leadership. He must therefore retain the *élan* and unity of the independence movement. How? One of the oldest devices for deflecting potential discontents and disunities away from a government is to project them upon some convenient enemy, to arouse that aggressive instinct which can be the strongest bond of a group. For the African leader this is to beat the familiar defiant note on the national drum-the old anti-colonial note. But the leader also needs positive support, an emotion which can transcend other emotions, especially the old loyalty of chief and tribe. To these socially orphaned people he must exploit his personality until he becomes-the psychologists might say-the super-self or the father figure. We are driven to use the fashionable adjective 'charismatic', the charisma on the leader's brow, a synthetic form of the unction that once belonged to kings.

But there are other demands upon the new leaders almost beyond human capacity to meet: the unaccustomed discipline of long hours of arduous office work; a world of a hundred nations, the greater part of which seems determined to visit, or to be visited; a score of conferences at home and abroad, including the great and all-important conferences at the United Nations; the bank balance handed over by the colonial trustees may be running down. Emancipation can land a new state in a lot of expense: a costly birthday party, a huge stadium, perhaps a national airline, an army and fleet, television, a steel mill, perhaps a hydro-electric scheme, impressive state buildings, and ministerial houses. Delegations of business men and contractors come flooding in. There are all the temptations for corruption. A little corruption may oil the joints of a stiff new machine, but too much of it clogs the works.

The party opposing this busy new government may be based not upon any political principle but upon sectional, even separatist, ambitions. Is this opposition, the leaders may ask, to be given a chartered liberty to disrupt, to entrench disunity, even to threaten to replace their new hard-working governments, and the party which has won independence? In all these circumstances, government by debate may seem too difficult and government by *Diktat* too easy.

Why, then, did Africans combine independence with this difficult parliamentary democracy? In past history, we may reflect, peoples won freedom under great leaders, not shadow cabinets. But to Africans our system was, at least until recent years, the most admired and enviable. It was also the warrant of independence. Universal suffrage provided the perfect means of voting Britain out on Britain's own principles. But why did we agree to equate colonial independence with the Westminster model? The American presidential system with its separation of powers and its fixed terms of

office might have given more stability, although the experience of Latin America might raise a doubt here. But we could give only what we had, the best we knew. And if we had invented something quite new, perhaps more autocratic, labelled 'Made for Africans', it would certainly have been rejected as insulting. Was it not best to begin with the principles of freedom written into the constitution, to endure at least as an ideal? African departures from democracy will lie not so much in African incapacity, as in African conditions: indeed, in conditions far beyond Africa.

Take a map of the world and colour the states which are genuine democracies and you will get a pretty blank design! The Westminster model is the end-result of at least 2,000 years of development in a highly favourable island site: first, a coagulation of our separate tribes and kingdoms; then centuries of development of a central government by kings who hammered dissidents into shape. The control of this government passed from the king to the nobility, to the gentry, to the new middle classes bred by the Industrial Revolution. Finally, with the diffusion of a high standard of living, and of universal education, we at last achieved full democracy. Africans have taken over this long-evolved system before any of these conditions have been achieved. They are attempting almost the exact reverse of our own experience.

Africans know this argument well. They will expect it to end with the conclusion that they should have remained under tutelage for another 2,000 or at least 200 years. This is *not* my conclusion. I state with all emphasis my belief that once Africans had been fully stirred into racial self-consciousness and political awareness there was little more that foreign rulers could do for them. We may try to equate Ghana with the Tudors or the Congo with the Wars of the Roses; but our immensely gradualist history cannot be exactly fitted to theirs. They need and can now borrow quicker if more dangerous mechanisms of change that may in part, only in part, make up for their lack of wider unity and political experience.

But we should not finish this review of the transfer of power without looking at one of the more encouraging prospects in newly independent Africa. Among these is certainly Nigeria. Admittedly, the Federation has only just passed its first birthday. Admittedly, too, it is a delicately balanced trinity of north, west, and east. Yet if the numerically predominant north can remain in association with the sophisticated and wealthy Yoruba in the southwest, and the intensely individualistic and vital Ibo in the south-east, Nigeria could evolve into a richly endowed nation. The federal constitution supplies a needed rigidity. While each region offers full scope to the particularism of each major group, they are all held together by sharing an intense pride in being members of Africa's largest state, with vast opportunities for influence in Africa and the world, if they can keep united. Nigerians had also the advantage, which they now admit, of some ten years of arduous and co-operative discussion with Britain before they finally hammered out their constitution. And perhaps indirect rule, whatever its faults, did give long and practical experience in administration to thousands of chiefs and councillors. The very size of Nigeria meant that it had first claim on Britain's best administrative talent from governors, an impressive sequence, downwards. We must also recognize the great ability of the three regional premiers. As for the Prime Minister, to see him at close quarters is to recognize the true gravitas of the statesman. This enables him to put up some resistance to the pressures of the sectionalists and the impatient young. Such leaders win our admiration for their initial

achievement. We may hope that Nigeria is now so strong that her leaders will not find our appreciation the kiss of death, or even of detriment.

But the less stable peoples, the politically errant states, demand something more difficult to give, patience, restraint, the understanding of problems which lie deep in their too brief apprenticeship to freedom. Times may come when, as with South Africa, we cannot continue as a nation to maintain the public bond without being false to the basic principles of state and commonwealth. But we should remember that African states are strained as on a rack between their political ends and the lack of nearly all the means to achieve them. Unostentatious help and friendship might just turn the trembling scale in these states in favour of reason and justice, if not of democracy as we define it. For Britain was their political nurse and tutor, and we bear some responsibility not only for their public virtues but perhaps even more for their political defects. We should therefore show understanding and restraint to the eleventh hour.