

There's a considerable row going on at the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference as to whether the Union of South Africa should continue to remain a member of the British Commonwealth of Nations.

At first glance it would seem that the issue is a fairly simple one of principle. In a Commonwealth that contains millions of coloured people, and a number of Negro nations, is it possible to include a country like the Union whose policy towards non-whites, the vast majority of its people, is repressive, unjust and, indeed, thoroughly disreputable?

But a moment's thought will show you that it's not, unfortunately, as simple as that. Mr. MacMillan as well as a great many other people, believe that merely to expel South Africa will solve nothing. The ties, both economic and psychological, which bind the Commonwealth may be rather vague and mostly unwritten, but they are nevertheless real.

So long as a country is a member of the Commonwealth, many subtle pressures can be brought to bear upon it. If South Africa remains in, there is a hope that Commonwealth and world opinion will combine to force her to behave better. Once she's out, it will be very much more difficult to bring these pressures to bear.

Besides, it must be remembered that shot-gun methods like expulsion, or boycotts, hurt our friends as much as they do our enemies. It is easy for Jamaica to make the noble gesture of boycotting South Africa when we have no trade with South Africa anyway. I often wonder if we'd have been so noble had South Africa been one of our major export markets. There is already a serious flight of capital from South Africa, and a diminished flow of new capital. If expulsion or boycotts were seriously to affect South African industry, the resulting unemployment and poverty would hit the negro and coloured people first and hardest. It would also hit the English South Africans who, by and large, together with the Anglican Church, have been fighting the Boers at the side of the coloured peoples.

What is needed, and Prime Minister MacMillan realises this, is some other weapon which will act selectively upon the Boers, without at the same time, like expulsion and boycotts, harming the very people we want to help.

It's a good thing that there is a first class row going on about South Africa's racial policies. One hopes that there will be plenty of plain speaking. But it must be remembered that if all the countries in Africa that act oppressively against Africans were to be expelled, we could not logically pick upon South Africa alone. Sir Roy Welensky of the Central African Federation is not much better. And if denial of civil liberties and parliamentary democracy is to invite immediate expulsion, then Ghana would have to be expelled too, for there's little to choose between the attitudes of Nkrumah and Verwoerd. They are both dictators. The only difference between them is their colour.

The fact of the matter is that nowhere in Africa today, with the exception of Nigeria and a few places still under Colonial Office rule, is there very much tenderness for the rights of the ordinary African to freedom and democracy as we know it. This is especially true of the territories which have gained, or already have, full self-government. I get very bored by those sentimental but simple souls who think that because an African leader is black he is automatically a champion of the freedom of Africans and that if he's white he's automatically a dictator, or vice versa. The best hope for Africa, and Prime Minister MacMillan realises it, is to keep them all within the Commonwealth, so that in time, we hope, all will come to realise, within their own territories, those ideals of freedom and decency to which the people of Africa rightly aspire.

In the meantime a good row at the Conference will do much to clear the air. But let us not deceive ourselves that a complex problem can be solved by an over-simplified solution.

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