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The Central African Federation

Andrew Cohen

Summary

The late 1940s and early 1950s saw British government policy align, albeit briefly, with European settler desire in Southern and Northern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe and Zambia) for a closer association of their territories. Widespread African opposition was overlooked, and on 1 September 1953 the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland (more commonly known as the Central African Federation) came into existence. Nyasaland was included at the insistence of the British government. The Federation was a bold experiment in political power during the late stage of British colonialism and constituted one of the most intricate episodes in its retreat from empire.

Explanations for the creation of the Federation centre on attempts to stymie the regional influence of apartheid South Africa and the perceived economic advantages of a closer association of Britain's Central African colonies. African opposition to the formation of the Federation was widespread. Although this protest dissipated in the early years of Federation the early promises in racial 'partnership' soon proved to be insincere, this reinvigorated African protest as the 1960 Federal constitutional review drew close. The end of the Central African Federation is best explained by several intertwined pressures. As a result African nationalist protest, economic weakness and hardening settler intransigence left it obsolete. By the end of 1962 there was large-scale African opposition to Federation in both Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland and the Rhodesian Front had come to power on a platform of independence free from the Federation. The final death knell for the Federation rang with the British government's decision that no territory should be kept in the Federation against its will.

Keywords:

Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi, Rhodesia, settler colonialism, decolonization, African nationalism, Central African Federation

Essay***The Origins of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland***

The territory that would become the present-day countries of Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi first came under British control in the late nineteenth century. Southern and Northern Rhodesia were initially administered by Cecil Rhodes' British South Africa Company (Chartered Company) which received its Letters Patent from Queen Victoria on 29 October 1889. Rhodes also wished to bring the territory that would become Nyasaland under Chartered administration however objections from the African Lakes Company, who operated in the area, and local missionaries prevented Nyasaland falling under Chartered Company Control. As a result Nyasaland became a separate British protectorate in 1891. The initial impetus for a closer association of Britain's territories of Southern and Northern Rhodesia began in the 1920s, yet it only became a serious consideration following the end of the Second World War. Southern Rhodesia had been administered by the British South Africa Company (Chartered Company) until a referendum in 1922 saw the territory's settler community vote in favour of limited responsible government under the British Crown, rather than incorporation as the sixth province of the Union of South Africa. Northern Rhodesia also left Chartered Company administration and subsequently became a Crown Colony during April 1924.¹

The ambiguous nature of the Letters Patent that granted Southern Rhodesia responsible government on 1 October 1923 would prove crucial to explain the latter history of the Central African Federation (CAF). The clearly stated that both executive and

legislative power in the territory was subordinate to the British government. London also retained the right to appoint Southern Rhodesia's governor. As legal appeals could be submitted to the Privy Council there were limitations placed on Southern Rhodesia's new Legislative Assembly's ability to pass legislation. The crucial clause, however, made clear that the Assembly had no right to legislate in respect to the Native Department or the African reserves. Southern Rhodesia's new franchise was based on property or income together with a literacy test. There was no explicit racial discrimination however these limitations resulted in a resoundingly white electorate with a few Indian shopkeepers and prosperous African farmers also qualifying.²

In practice, however, any restrictions proved to be purely theoretical. From the onset, London treated the Southern Rhodesian Assembly as if it enjoyed responsible government. London never attempt to legislate for areas not ostensibly under the control of the Legislative Assembly, and although Southern Rhodesia did, by convention, submit all laws to London before raising them in its Assembly however at no point were any countermanded by Westminster. Consequently the *de-facto* government of Southern Rhodesia was far closer to that of a Dominion than the Crown Colony status of its northern neighbour.³

By the early 1920s, the much fabled mineral wealth that had originally drawn Europeans north of the Zambezi River was beginning to live up to expectation. This period saw the beginnings of the large-scale development of the Northern Rhodesian Copperbelt as technological advances finally made the areas low-grade copper ore profitable. Sole prospecting privileges were granted to the Rhodesian Selection Trust, whose majority shareholder was the American Metal Company and the South African Anglo American Company.⁴ The Southern Rhodesian settlers, by 1933 led by their Prime Minister Godfrey Huggins, increasingly saw amalgamation with Northern Rhodesia as a way to benefit from the ever-increasing wealth of the Northern Rhodesian Copperbelt. The smaller Northern

Rhodesian settler community, led by Roy Welensky following his election to the Legislative Council in 1938, had initially been wary of having their interests subsumed by those of their southern neighbours also increasingly began to favour this option for their futures.⁵

Although the Northern Rhodesian settlers remained wary of their southern neighbours growing power their major concern centred on Britain's wider African policy. These fears had first been stoked by the 1923 British government White Paper on Kenya – the so-called Devonshire Declaration – that clearly proclaimed that 'the interests of the African natives must be paramount, and that if and when, those interests and the interests of the immigrant races should conflict, the former should prevail'.⁶ Although primarily aimed at East Africa, the Devonshire Declaration's influence spread south into Britain's central African territories. Leo Amery, the Conservative Party Colonial Secretary from 1924 to 1929, ensured that during his tenure 'African paramountcy' did not take precedence south of the Zambezi River by failing to rescind any Southern Rhodesian policy that was detrimental to African interests.⁷ Amery's subsequent Labour Party successor as Colonial Secretary, Lord Passfield, formalised the difference in British colonial policy towards the Rhodesias by explicitly reiterating that African interests were paramount in Northern Rhodesia.⁸

Philip Murphy has astutely stressed that the most important consequence of the Passfield Memorandum was that it convinced Northern Rhodesian settlers that they had to remove the influence of the Colonial Office if they were to control their own affairs. Consequently, ideas surrounding amalgamation with Southern Rhodesia began to grow in popularity. Initial demands to the British government for amalgamation from elected members of the Northern Rhodesian Legislative Council were responded to in a parliamentary statement on 2 July 1931. Although closer union was not explicitly ruled out, they declared that the territories were not yet ready for amalgamation and that any future arrangement must offer safeguards for the African population. This statement failed to stymie

settler demands. Consequently, elected members of the Northern Rhodesian Legislative Council and representatives of the three political parties in the Southern Rhodesian Legislative Assembly met at Victoria Falls and subsequently passed a resolution strongly in favour of amalgamation. This was later used as the basis for a motion that passed the Southern Rhodesian Assembly in May 1936.⁹

In response to settler pressure, the British government appointed a royal commission, chaired by Lord Bledisloe, to consider the issue. The Bledisloe Commission also included Nyasaland in its deliberations as it was not perceived that the territory could function outside of British government control if it was not intrinsically connected to the Rhodesias. A further reason to include Nyasaland was that any federation between solely the Rhodesias would be amalgamation under another name. The Commission reported back in March 1939, with its majority report clearly recognising the benefits of closer cooperation between the Central African territories and suggested that the British government accept in principle the ultimate aim of 'political unity'. It did, however, note the strength of African opposition to amalgamation and suggested that the divergence in the territories 'native policy' were too great at that time to move forward. In addition, it recommended the immediate amalgamation of Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland to remove the current duplication of administrative processes.¹⁰

Towards Federation

The British government remained resistant to supporting amalgamation although there was a growing appreciation that encouraging signals should be given towards some form of closer association. The outbreak of the Second World provided a distraction in London but it failed to lessen settler demands for amalgamation. In June 1943 a Colonial Office Memorandum prepared for Oliver Stanley, who had become Secretary of State for the Colonies seven

months earlier drew attention that any failure to act by the British would 'cause intense disappointment and dissatisfaction' amongst the Central African settlers and could lead to a growing South African influence in the region.¹¹ The response from Whitehall was the creation of the Central African Council in 1944, which brought Nyasaland into the equation. The Council would be responsible for all development and welfare plans and the allocation of development and welfare grants to Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland. African policy was to remain under the control of the individual territories. Welensky believed that if the Council was a success it could 'be the beginning, or foundation, of amalgamation between the territories'.¹²

Welensky's optimism did not last long. During his visit to London to discuss the Northern Rhodesian constitution in July 1948 he was told in no uncertain terms by Arthur Creech-Jones, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, that 'no government, irrespective of its political hue would carry out that action today [placing responsibility for Africans in Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland in the hands of Southern Rhodesian settlers]. The world would not put up with it'.¹³ It was from this point that both Huggins and Welensky came around to supporting the idea of a federation for Britain's central African territories.

Nyasaland was the principle site of African resistance towards federation in this period. The Nyasaland African Congress (NAC) was founded in 1944 by James Sangala who stressed the need for African unity and self-improvement as a means to overcome racial discrimination. NAC branches spread throughout the territory, with one even established in Johannesburg, which raised the question as to whether opposition to federation could be more effectively marshalled through one organisation representing African interests in all three territories. This Pan-Africanist visiting was supported by Dr Hastings Banda who was resident in London in this period. In the event, however, territorial nationalism won out over

Pan-Africanism at an organisational level with the individual territories adopting separate African nationalist organisations.¹⁴

A key strategy pursued by the settlers was the idea that a federation could help stymie the influence of the Union of South Africa. The National Party, led by D F Malan, came to power in South Africa following the general election of May 1948 and began to entrench racial discrimination through a series of laws which became known as the system of *apartheid*. The idea that a federation could strengthen the forces of liberalism and racial partnership and counterbalance South African practices increasingly gained sympathy in British circles.¹⁵ Consequently, in November 1950 James Griffiths, Secretary of State for the Colonies, announced that a conference would take place in March 1951 to discuss the possibility of closer union between the territories.

The conference was chaired by Herbert Baxter, the head of the British delegation. He later noted that the Southern Rhodesian delegation had arrived at the conference expecting to find 'a spirit of stonewalling and procrastination' from their British counterparts. Contrary to their expectations, the conference 'proceeded in an excellent atmosphere of cooperation and harmony'.¹⁶ Indeed, the conclusions of this conference laid the foundations for the eventual federal scheme. Key issues such as territorial responsibility for the administration of the day-to-day lives of Africans and the creation of an African Affairs board to evaluate federal legislation came out of these discussions. Following this conference it was clear that both Griffiths and Gordon Walker, as Secretaries of State for the Colonies and Commonwealth relations respectively, were in favour of Federation. Consequently Baxter and Sir Andrew Cohen, an Assistant Undersecretary for African Affairs in the Colonial Office, drafted a memorandum that Griffiths and Gordon Walker jointly presented Cabinet. The fear of encroaching South African influence was duly noted, however there was little attention given

to settler pressure for closer union. The Rhodesian settlers were now being painted as the 'upholders of British values, under threat from an illiberal alien culture'.¹⁷

As series of further talks now took place. Gordon Walker returned to central Africa in September 1951 for further talks at Victoria Falls. The discussions were undermined, however, by the British Labour Prime Minister Clement Attlee's decision to call a general election on the second day of the conference. Given the Labour Party's slim majority the settlers were in no mood to give any meaningful concessions given the probability that they would soon be negotiating with a more sympathetic Conservative administration. This view was proved prescient when Winston Churchill's Conservatives were returned to power.¹⁸ Oliver Lyttelton, the new Colonial Secretary, wasted little time in expressing the view that there was an urgent need for federation in Central Africa.¹⁹

As Mlambo has noted, many Africans in Southern Rhodesia were cautiously optimistic at the prospect of closer association with the Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland as it held the potential of potentially improving their own political situation.²⁰ As Nathan Shamuyarira was to observe:

The new policy of partnership, which was to be inscribed in the federal constitution, would bring a speedy end to segregation, humiliation and indignation we had suffered for 40 years ... the Northern territories would help to break down the racial barriers and the southern Rhodesian whites would even of their own accord, inspired by partnership, pass laws which would let us share political power and economic privileges and enjoy social justice.²¹

Africans in the two northern territories did not share this view. Their opposition coalesced around the fact that power would pass from the Colonial Office to the European communities in general, and the Southern Rhodesian settlers in particular.²² Dr Hastings Banda, who had represented the Nyasaland African Congress at the Fifth Pan-African Congress in Manchester in 1945, was adamant that Africans in Nyasaland did not want federation arguing that instead

they required political and economic reforms. *The Times* reported Banda announcing that 'We reject federation' he said 'for we are looking forward to a time when we have our own Government'.²³ Widespread migrant labour had given many Africans from the north first-hand experience of Southern Rhodesian settler power and the campaign against federation has been credited with being the 'decisive stimulus' for the formation of liberation movements in Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland.²⁴ Conversely, in Southern Rhodesia the Federation delayed the formation of a united African movement.²⁵ Ultimately African opposition to federation failed once settler pressure towards and British belief in a federation coalesced.²⁶

By January 1952 it was clear in Whitehall that African opposition in the northern territories would not be enough to prevent federation. The perceived economic and political benefits were too tempting for both Whitehall and Westminster and consequently African concerns were side-lined.²⁷ In an attempt to reach a definitive agreement the next scheduled conference was brought forward and consequently officials met at Lancaster House in London on 23 April. The crucial area for discussion were potential federal finances. It was recognised that any federation would require the ability to collect taxation above its immediate requirements to be distributed to its composite territories according to their needs. A fiscal Commission was subsequently appointed to investigate how this would work in practice. As Murphy notes, the dilemma facing the British was that a strong federation would potentially increase Southern Rhodesian influence and consequently endanger African interests. Yet a weak federation would run the risk of being unable to improve the financial fortunes of Nyasaland, which could also increase African unrest.²⁸ The conference also decided to remove the post of Minister for African Affairs and that the proposed African Affairs Board should be comprised of six rather than nine appointed members.²⁹ The proposals were later published as a white paper in June.³⁰

The publication of a proposed federal scheme in a white paper during the following month led to attacks from the Labour and Liberal parties, and left-leaning clergy and academics.³¹ Henry Hopkinson, Minister of State at the Colonial Office was sent to central Africa in August 1952 to gauge the opinion of Africans towards the proposals. He held 68 meetings with African leaders and canvassed opinion on the streets in Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland. He concluded that most Africans cared little about federation and would follow the lead of their chiefs. Meanwhile the leader of the Northern Rhodesian African National Congress (NRANC) Harry Nkumbula was vehemently against federation, remarking that Africans in Southern Rhodesia were ‘subjected to humiliation, social disabilities and political castration’.³² African opposition to federation was also intertwined with ongoing grievances amongst workers on the Copperbelt over issues surrounding the industrial colour bar. In Nyasaland, opposition stemmed more from ‘nascent nationalism’ which was inspired by events in West Africa and elsewhere in addition to the experiences of migrant labourers in both Southern Rhodesia and Nyasaland.³³ Opposition in Southern Rhodesia was slight and Hopkinson concluded that a multiracial federation would provide a favourable solution.³⁴

The Fiscal Commission appointed following the April 1952 conference reported six months later. It suggested that the collection of customs and excise duties and income tax across the three territories should be the responsibility of a federal government. It would retain 60 per cent of this revenue; the territorial governments of the two Rhodesias would each receive 17 per cent; leaving the Nyasaland government with 6 per cent of revenues.³⁵ Although it remained open to debate as to whether Nyasaland would benefit greatly from federation or whether the British government would make any significant savings it was clear to one Treasury official that ‘finance is not the rock on which this scheme [federation] may founder’.³⁶

As 1952 drew to a close any objections raised by the Federation's critics in central Africa and London were increasingly side-lined. A further conference opened on 1 January 1953 at Carlton House in London to hammer out the shape of a future federation. It allocated the division of powers between the proposed federal and territorial governments. It was also decided that both Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland would remain under the special protection of the Crown while Southern Rhodesia retained its responsible internal self-government, in accordance with its constitution. Again, the powers of the proposed African Affairs Board were weakened as it was brought under the aegis of the federal parliament rather than being created as an independent entity. Crucially for the Federation's eventual fate, it was decided at this meeting that there would be a constitutional review between seven and nine years after the implementation of the federal scheme. Welensky was later adamant that this review would not have the power to dissolve the Federation.³⁷

The conference drew to a close on the 31 January 1953 and its proposals were published as a white paper.³⁸ Given Southern Rhodesia's existing *de facto* self-government, it had been agreed that any federal scheme should receive the support of the territory's electorate. A referendum was held on 9 April with 25,570 votes in favour and 14,729 against. In Westminster the Federation Bill passed parliament with 247 MPs backing the scheme, against 221 in opposition. The subsequent Rhodesia and Nyasaland Federation Act received Royal Assent during July and the Federation was inaugurated on 3 September 1953.³⁹

Early Years of Federation

The creation of the Federation led to the reshaping of the political landscape in central Africa. Godfrey Huggins stood down as Southern Rhodesian Prime Minister on 7 September 1953, a post he had held for almost 20 years, to take up the position of interim Federal Prime Minister. Garfield Todd replaced Huggins as Southern Rhodesian Prime Minister. The early

federal period was marked by an increased clash between the interests of Northern and Southern Rhodesian settlers.

The early development of the Copperbelt had been powered by coal from Southern Rhodesia but by the early 1950s this was clearly not sufficient to meet the Copperbelt's needs.⁴⁰ Hydro-electric power seemed to offer a solution and of the two potential options: a dam on the Kafue River or on the Zambezi River at Kariba Gorge. Kafue was the early favourite. It would have placed the power station solely in Northern Rhodesia, have lower construction costs and was located closer to the Copperbelt. Yet despite these advantages, Kariba was announced as the scheme to go ahead in March 1955. Given the earlier decision in March 1954 to site the Federal capital in Salisbury, rather than Lusaka, Northern Rhodesian settler fears of a Southern Rhodesian bias in the Federal government appeared to be well founded.⁴¹

The failure of the anti-federal campaign had led to a relaxation of African protest on a national level, and in all individual territories.⁴² This was particularly true in Northern Rhodesia's rural areas. Africans there had anticipated that the scheme's success would lead to an influx of white settlers from Southern Rhodesia. When this failed to materialise the united front between rural and urban Africans in the fight to resist crumbled. This split was further exacerbated by the Federal government, which encouraged tradition leaders to ban political activities in their districts. Despite the growing ineffectiveness of African opposition in Northern Rhodesia, the Federal government failed to live up to their promise of racial 'partnership' in any meaningful way.⁴³

The importance of land alienation for the Federation's African inhabitants varied vastly between territories. It was felt most keenly in Southern Rhodesia, yet it was barely an issue in the northern territories, apart from the Southern Region of Nyasaland.⁴⁴ Contrary to

expectations, the copper boom during the first years of Federation did not spark the growth of secondary industry in rural areas in Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland. Development was primarily restricted to European areas adjacent to the railway lines and consequently the vast majority of Africans did not share in the Federation's initial prosperity.⁴⁵ African urban life during the 1950s was often characterised by 'extreme depravation' as any improvement in their income was often offset by higher living costs.⁴⁶ These conditions fostered urban discontent which mobilised into African opposition. In Salisbury this took the form of the City Youth League which campaigned for greater African self-reliance rather than multiracial cooperation between 1955 and 1957.⁴⁷

Huggins stood down as Federal Prime Minister and was replaced by Welensky in October 1956. He soon offered Britain the Federation's unwavering support in the wake of the Suez Crisis later that year. The Suez debacle saw Harold Macmillan replace Antony Eden as British Prime Minister in January 1957. Welensky's honeymoon period as Federal Prime Minister was not to last long. The slump in the price of copper had in March 1956 brutally exposed the weakness of the Federal economy's overdependence on a single commodity.⁴⁸ Despite this economic challenge, the Federal Government began to take steps towards greater independence from Britain through the introduction of the Constitutional Amendment Bill and the Federal Electoral Bill.⁴⁹ These Bills were designed to entrench settler control of political power, yet the Federal government underestimated the impact of these Bills on the Federation's African population. Their introduction, together with the mounting stress of unemployment, helped reinvigorate the moribund African opposition in all three territories by raising the spectre of Dominion status under white minority rule.⁵⁰

The Bill was formally adopted as the Constitutional Amendment Act by the Federal Assembly on 31 July 1957. The Act provided for the enlargement of the Federal Assembly from 35 to 59 seats. Under the new arrangement the number of seats for representatives of

Africans would increase; however, it was likely that the complex voting arrangements would ensure that, outside Nyasaland, an electorate that was predominantly European would nominate African representatives. Crucially, despite criticism from the African Affairs Board it was backed by the British government and became law in November 1957.⁵¹ The passage of the Bill demonstrated the ineffectual nature of the African Affairs Board. Its failure to stop a clearly discriminatory piece of legislation acted as a catalyst for better-organised African opposition to settler rule. It gave opposition to Federation a focus that eventually transformed opposing African movements into national political parties in all three territories.⁵²

In February 1958 Garfield Todd was replaced as Southern Rhodesia's Prime Minister by Edgar Whitehead after a protracted power struggle within the party. It was the return of Dr Hastings Banda, however, that led to events in the two northern territories of the Federation begin to overshadow Southern Rhodesian politics. Banda had originally left southern Africa in 1925 to study medicine in the United States of America. He graduated in 1937 and took a second medical degree in Edinburgh which was required if he was to practice medicine in the British Empire. He then practiced as a doctor in Newcastle-upon-Tyne between 1941-45 before moving to London after the Second World War. In 1951 he relocated to the Gold Coast and while there he was approached by Congress leaders to return to Nyasaland and lead their movement.⁵³ Banda arrived in Nyasaland to popular African acclaim in July 1958 and was subsequently elected leader of the Nyasaland African Congress (NAC) on 1 August 1958. Banda's mandate was to secure an African majority in the Legislative Council during the forthcoming Nyasaland constitutional review. Britain had agreed to open discussions over the constitution during 1959 and this, along with the forthcoming federal review, scheduled for 1960, helped create a sense of momentum and urgency within the African nationalist movement in Nyasaland.⁵⁴ This urgency was likely driven by the belief that they had a better chance of success negotiating with London rather than Salisbury. Similarly in Northern

Rhodesia the constitution was due for revision during 1959, and with a territorial election due the task of agreeing to a replacement was paramount. These reviews saw a series of discussions begin in both London and Salisbury which saw African, settler and British opinion clash. In the event a new Northern Rhodesian Constitution was adopted in time for Welensky's United Federal Party (UFP) to win 13 of the 22 elected seats in the March 1959 territorial election. This provided Welensky with a second successive victory in the polls following the UFP's victory in the November 1958 general election.

Pressure Builds

Of all the federal territories, Nyasaland contained the most effective African political opposition to the Federation by the late 1950s. In many respects this was not surprising. Nyasaland Africans had been at the forefront of the anti-federal campaign prior to 1953, and the territory's European settlers were far less numerous and powerful than those in either of the two Rhodesias. In Northern Rhodesia the centre of anti-federal protest was far more contested. The nationalist movement was split between the African National Congress (ANC) under the leadership of Harry Nkumbula and the Zambia African National Congress (ZANC) led by Kenneth Kaunda. Protest in Southern Rhodesia was more constrained as the Southern Rhodesia African National Congress (SRANC) had to contend with a far more powerful settler presence. Yet by December 1958 SRANC's growing confidence and influence on the territory's African population convinced Whitehead and his Cabinet that they should act. It is within this milieu of growing African confidence and assertiveness that the states of emergencies in Southern Rhodesia (25 February 1959) and Nyasaland (2-3 March 1959) should be placed. A state of emergency was not called in Northern Rhodesia, although ZANC was banned on 11 March 1959.⁵⁵

Tension began to rise in Nyasaland at the end of January 1959 when Governor Armitage's proposal for the new constitution fell far short of Banda's requirement for an African majority in the Legislative Council.⁵⁶ Reports began to reach the Nyasaland Government of a 'meeting in the bush' at which a plot to murder Europeans and Africans sympathetic to the Federation had been conceived. The Police Commissioner vouched for the validity of this intelligence and recommended that urgent action should be taken. The governors and prime ministers of the federal territories met in Salisbury on 20 February 1959 to discuss developments. Whitehead revealed he was planning to call an emergency in Southern Rhodesia in due course to arrest SRANC leaders and secure the territory before his security forces were required in Nyasaland. Armitage did not confirm he would call an emergency but did inform those present of the 'murder plot' rumours.⁵⁷ Whitehead called a state of emergency on 25 February and detained 430 leading SRANC members, although Joshua Nkomo, its leader, avoided detention as he was out of the country. Armitage followed suit in Nyasaland on 3 March 1959.

In an attempt to end public outcry in Britain surrounding the state of emergency in Nyasaland the British Government appointed a commission chaired by Lord Devlin. It was also decided to appoint a preparatory commission, chaired by Lord Monckton, in advance of the 1960 Federal review, in order to ensure the Devlin Commission did not exceed its remit and consider the wider remit of the Federation's future. Devlin arrived in Nyasaland on 11 April 1959 to collect evidence from a wide variety of African and European witnesses. The Commission's final report was published on 13 July and it was highly critical of the government's actions on three main counts. First, it found that the hostility of politically conscious Africans towards the Federation had been a major factor behind the unrest. Secondly, it cast considerable doubt that there had been a murder plot at all. Finally, it concluded that the security forces had used illegal force in the detention of suspects.⁵⁸ The

most damning line of the report was the oft-quoted sentence that ‘Nyasaland is – no doubt temporarily – a police state’. With memories of Nazi Germany still fresh, any mention of a ‘police state’ in a description of a British colony could not help but attract severe criticism. This resulting censure was further exacerbated by events in Kenya. The debate on the Devlin Report took place the day after the government had faced fierce criticism in the Commons over the deaths of 11 Mau Mau detainees at the Hola detention camp in Kenya. The convergence of these two incidents has been credited with persuading many in the British Government that it was far too costly to prop up settler governments in east and central Africa.⁵⁹

On 5 January 1960 Harold Macmillan embarked on his famous ‘wind of change’ tour of Ghana, the Central African Federation and South Africa. When he met with Welensky in Salisbury he assured the Federal Prime Minister that the forthcoming Monckton Commission had not been appointed to destroy the Federation.⁶⁰ The Commission arrived in the Federation on 15 February and spent three months collecting evidence from each territory. After much debate, it was decided that Banda should be released from detention to deliver his evidence to Monckton as a free man. In the event, the final report was passed to Macmillan on 7 September 1960 but not published until 11 October.⁶¹ Like the Devlin Report before it, the Monckton Report noted widespread opposition to the Federation amongst Africans, particularly in the northern territories. It recognised the economic benefits the Federation had brought to the region, and stated that it was desirable that these links remain. It also suggested that Northern Rhodesia should concede political power to an African majority even though this would likely lead the territory to request the right to secede from the Federation. It also called for a wider franchise in Southern Rhodesia to secure greater African representation. Finally, despite the assurances given to Welensky, the Report argued that the Federation could not survive if its people felt they were there against their will, and consequently it

suggested that 'under certain conditions there should be an opportunity to withdraw from the association'.⁶²

The Federal Experiment Fails

A new constitution had been agreed for Nyasaland in August, prior to the Monckton Report's publication. During the previous April, Whitehead had secured agreement that talks about amending the Southern Rhodesian constitution once Monckton's report had been published. African protest in the territory had worsened and Whitehead attempted to offer concessions in the form of reform of the Land Apportionment Act. This brought him into direct opposition with most of the settler community. The Dominion Party (DP) went as far as to promise to repeal any changes Whitehead introduced if they won the next election.⁶³

The Federal Review Conference opened in on 5 December 1960 however it was suspended on 16 December so talks could begin on the Southern Rhodesian constitution. This conference swiftly reached an impasse, however, after Whitehead banned the National Democratic Party (NDP) members from attending. The NDP had replaced SRANC after it was banned in the state of emergency. Eventually all parties agreed to another conference on 30 January 1961 in Salisbury which appeared to conclude successfully when all parties except the DP agreed to the conference's final conclusions. After criticism from members of his party, Joshua Nkomo formally withdrew their support from the constitutional proposals at a press conference on 17 February 1961.⁶⁴ A referendum on the proposals was subsequently held in Southern Rhodesia in which Whitehead won approval for the constitution by 41,949 votes to 21,846.⁶⁵ The NDP, who boycotted the referendum, held an African vote on the proposals which found 467,949 votes against with only 584 in favour.⁶⁶

At the beginning of 1962 the Federal government faced an almost impossible task in keeping the Federation together. No date had been set for the Federal Review Conference to

resume, the Northern Rhodesian agreement looked far from secure, and Hastings Banda continued to demand the immediate secession of Nyasaland from the Federation. The fragility of the situation was underlined when Reginald Maudling, Iain Macleod's replacement as Colonial Secretary, announced his decision to revisit the Northern Rhodesian Constitution. By the end of February 1962 it was clear that Maudling was prepared to override the objections of the Federal government to amend the constitutional proposals. As a result UNIP announced that they were willing to contest the Northern Rhodesian territorial election later that year.⁶⁷ Welensky responded by calling a Federal general election in an attempt to buttress his political position through a public vote of confidence. This had the unintended consequence of uniting the main white opposition parties, the DP, the Southern Rhodesian Association and the Rhodesian Reform Party into the Rhodesian Front (RF) under the leadership of Winston Field. The RF refused to contest the federal election, preferring to focus all their attention on the forthcoming Southern Rhodesian territorial election, which they viewed as being more important. The UFP won 54 of the 59 available seats but the lack of any serious opposition denied the legitimacy Welensky required.⁶⁸

The creation of the Central Africa Office in March 1962 saw Macmillan centralise responsibility for the Federation under a single Minister of State. R A Butler was given this responsibility. Butler's first visit to the Federation took place two months later and Welensky was heartened by his first impressions. This, however, was not to last. In June 1962 the British Cabinet agreed Butler could offer Banda a constitutional conference in the autumn. It became increasingly clear to Butler that Nyasaland would have to be offered the right to secede from the Federation if the conference was to have any chance of success. In the event Butler announced that Nyasaland had the right to secede from the Federation on 19 December 1962. It was September 1963 before Britain finalised the date for Nyasaland's independence.

The Northern Rhodesian elections took place in October 1962 and dealt another blow to the Federation's future. The UFP secured 16 seats, UNIP 14 seats and the ANC 7 seats. This allowed the formation of an African coalition government and meant that if the UFP were going to have any territorial government representation they would need to win the Southern Rhodesian election on 14 December. This they failed to do, when the RF won by five seats. There were now African majorities in both Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland and the RF had come to power on a platform of independence free from the Federation. The last rites were read for the Federation in March 1963 with the British government's decision that no territory should be kept in the Federation against its will. This cleared the way for Northern Rhodesia to follow Nyasaland's example and left the organisation obsolete.⁶⁹

The Victoria Falls conference on the dissolution of the Federation took place during July and finished in August 1963. All outstanding issues were settled and it was agreed that the Federation would be formally dissolved at midnight on 1 January 1964. In wake of the Federation, Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia achieved independence from Britain as Malawi and Zambia on 6 July and 24 October 1964 respectively. Southern Rhodesia, on the other hand, did not manage to secure its independence from Britain. Over the following year the accusations of duplicity which flew from Salisbury to London, and the numerous failed attempts to broker an agreement set the ground for the RF's new leader, Ian Smith, to make a unilateral declaration of independence on 11 November 1965.

Discussion of the Literature

The existing literature regarding the Central African Federation has been written using varying methodologies and source materials, reflecting evolving viewpoints and archival availability. There is a great deal of work by contemporary critics and apologists for Federation.⁷⁰ Whilst these works attempted to discuss the development of the Federation,

their arguments engaged with the ongoing debate over its future. As a result, they have become historical sources in their own right, offering insights into the contemporary discourse regarding the Federation. Accounts in support of the Federation placed more emphasis on the perceived economic benefits of association, while more critical appraisals focussed on the failure of 'partnership' to address racial discrimination. There are also of memoirs by the British, Federal and African politicians who were involved in deciding the Federation's fate.⁷¹ These are often partisan in nature; however, as such they clearly illustrate the rapid divergence of opinion in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

A more historically rigorous analysis of events took place during the late 1960s and early 1970s, in which the Federation was assessed primarily as a precursor to the Rhodesian Front's unilateral declaration of independence during 1965.⁷² Juxtaposed with this school of thought, a further branch of scholarship moved away from a Eurocentric assessment of African history and attempted to reinterpret the period in the context of constructing national histories for the newly independent countries of Zambia and Malawi.⁷³ Much of this work, while commendable in highlighting African experiences sidestepped the international nature of colonialism and focussed inwardly on the new nation states, rather than locating their arguments within the wider colonial system.

This imbalance began to be addressed during the 1980s and 1990s with the development of a further strand of scholarship that primarily examined the Federation in the wider context of British and European decolonisation.⁷⁴ However, much of this work suffers from a lack of official primary sources, principally due to the thirty-year release rule. Both British and Federal government records only became available to scholars during the 1990s. With the exception of Richard Wood's authorised account, *The Welensky Papers*, most work from before the mid-nineties is based only on sources in the public domain.⁷⁵

In the early twenty-first century two sizable and valuable additions to the historiography of the Federation have renewed interest in this field. In one, Philip Murphy edited the Central Africa editions of the *British Documents on the End of Empire*.⁷⁶ Murphy's selection of documents comprises two volumes and offers an important introduction to relevant documents held in the National Archives, Kew. The other, *So far and no Further!*, represents the fruits of Richard Wood's privileged access to the papers of Ian Smith.⁷⁷ This account, whilst broadly sympathetic to the settlers' plight, offers a valuable insight into the workings of the Southern Rhodesian territorial government in the final years of Federation. In more recent years, Julia Tischler's *Light and Power for a Multiracial Nation: The Kariba Dam Scheme in the Central African Federation* explores the construction of the Kariba Dam while Kate Law's *Gendering the Settler State* explores the ambiguous role(s) of white women in Southern Rhodesia during the federal period, clearly demonstrating their inconsistent and ambiguous views on ideas of liberalism, gender race and colonialism.⁷⁸ Zoe Groves' *Malawian Migration to Zimbabwe, 1900–1965* also offers, in part, an account of Malawian migration Southern Rhodesia during the federal period.⁷⁹ Andrew Cohen's *The Politics and Economics of Decolonization: The Failed Experiment of the Central African Federation* is the most recent book-length account of the Federation's history and situates the Federation in its wider international context, while stressing the importance of the Federation's economic position in sealing its fate.⁸⁰

Primary Sources

There are several main archival deposits, which are of use to historians of the Central African Federation. British government records held in the National Archives, Kew are voluminous and easy to access. The papers of several key individuals are also available in the United Kingdom, for instance the personal papers of Harold Macmillan are held in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, and Patrick Wall, a Conservative Member of Parliament with an interest in

Central African affairs are held at the University of Hull. The papers of the Federal government are available in the personal papers of Sir Roy Welensky and offer a key resource for anyone interested in undertaking research in this area. They are also available in the Bodleian Library in Oxford along with Sir Patrick Devlin's notes from his commission of inquiry into the Nyasaland emergency.

In Africa, the papers of Ian Smith, have now been returned to the National Archives in Harare but copies are also held in the Cory Library at Rhodes University, Grahamstown. These provide an interesting window into opposition settler opinion in the federal period. The South African Foreign Affairs Archives in Pretoria also contain useful material for teasing out regional concerns. The archives of the United National Independence Party and the African National Congress are available in Lusaka and have now also been digitised with copies held in the British Library, London. In the United States the papers of Sir Ronald Prain, chairman of the Rhodesian Selection Trust, are housed in the American Heritage Centre, University of Wyoming. These offer a window into the concerns of one of the major mining companies on the Copperbelt. The records of the State Department in the United States National Archives, College Park, Maryland also contain much relevant material in terms of the international importance of the Federation.

Links to Digital Materials

[Philip Murphy Central Africa Part I](#)

[Philip Murphy Central Africa Part II](#)

Further reading

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Cohen Andrew, *The Politics and Economics of Decolonization in Africa: The Failed Experiment of the Central African Federation* (London and New York, 2017).

Ronald Hyam, 'The geopolitical origins of the Central African Federation: Britain, Rhodesia and South Africa, 1948-1953', *The Historical Journal* 30, 1 (1987), 145-72.

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⁴ See S. S. Bernfeld in collaboration with H. H. Hochschild 'A Short History of American Metal Climax Inc. World Atlas (Chicago, 1962) 1-16 and Theodore Gregory, *Ernest Oppenheimer and the Economic Development of Southern Africa* (Oxford, 1962), 44.

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¹⁵ Ronald Hyam, 'The geopolitical origins of the Central African Federation: Britain, Rhodesia and South Africa, 1948-1953', *The Historical Journal* 30, 1 (1987) 172.

¹⁶ DO 35/3594 Note by G. H. Baxter, 4 April 1951. See Murphy, *Central Africa Part I*, 154.

¹⁷ Murphy, *Central Africa Part I*, xlvi.

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- ¹⁹ Cmnd 8411 (1951) *Closer Association in Central Africa: Statement by HM Government*.
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- ²² Robert Rotberg, *The Rise of Nationalism in Central Africa* (Cambridge, MA, 1966) 220.
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- ³⁶ T 220/253, 'Central African Federation Conference: Proposed White Papers', 17 October 1952. See Murphy, *Central Africa Part I*, 232.
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