

# British hypocrisy at Commonwealth conference in Nigeria

By Ann Talbot  
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At a state banquet opening the Commonwealth conference, Australian Prime Minister John Howard commended President Olusegun Obasanjo for returning Nigeria to democratic rule. Howard was handing over the chairmanship of the 54-member Commonwealth, which is mainly made up of former British colonies. Howard's praise for Obasanjo was an eloquent expression of the double-dealing that characterises the organisation.

The very building that Howard stood in was evidence of the lack of democracy in Nigeria. It cost an estimated N5 billion. A total of N21 billion (\$150 million) was spent on the entire conference. The bill included renovating the International Conference Centre in Abuja, and the guesthouse where Queen Elizabeth stayed, as well as buying 400 bulletproof cars. This obscene expenditure took place in country where many citizens earn less than a dollar a day. To speak of democracy when there is such a vast disparity of wealth exists is grotesque.

Further evidence of the political situation in Nigeria came with the publication of a report by Human Rights Watch. The report itemised evidence of "persistent violence, corruption and poverty." The impression that there had been an improvement in freedom of expression was misleading, the report's authors said: "In extreme cases, the government's reaction to dissent or protest has resulted in extrajudicial killings."

Elections earlier this year were characterised by politically motivated violence in which several hundred people were killed, the report said. Despite this, the report points out, Britain's Foreign Secretary Jack Straw hailed Obasanjo's victory as, "a landmark in the advancement of Nigeria's democracy."

Since then opposition rallies and other public events have been suppressed and their organisers arrested. A 10-day general strike against the 50 percent rise in fuel prices was brutally suppressed in July. Up to 20 people were killed when the police opened fire on peaceful fuel protestors. In some documented cases the dead were passers-by. There is evidence, according to Human Rights Watch, that the orders to shoot came from the highest level. No police officers have been arrested or charged in connection with the killings. This is despite a Nigerian Senate report accusing the police of "a bloody reaction" to protests and "inhuman" behaviour. Lawrence Alobi, Commissioner of Police for Operations, has denied that anyone was killed.

When President George Bush toured Africa in July the Concerned Youth Alliance of Nigeria delivered a letter of protest

to the US embassy. Thirty of them were arrested and detained for two weeks. They have told Human Rights Watch that they were tortured.

While there is officially freedom of the press, Human Rights Watch reports an unofficial form of censorship. Those journalists who refuse to toe the line are subject to harassment. Their own union is often responsible for suppressing journalists' freedom of expression. Several journalists have been expelled from the union for writing articles critical of government corruption.

The evidence against Nigeria is all the more striking because of the campaign that Britain, Australia and Canada waged to maintain Zimbabwe's exclusion from the Commonwealth. Zimbabwe has been suspended since the UK challenged the result of the 2002 elections.

Despite opposition from some African countries, the Commonwealth upheld the ban. Africa expert Richard Dowden told reporters, "A lot of African countries have said in private they think this human rights stuff is just a cover for British interests there and they want to resist it."

In the light of Nigeria's human rights record it is difficult to disagree that forwarding British interests rather than human rights is the main consideration for Prime Minister Tony Blair. He said, "The whole point about the situation in Zimbabwe is that it is not getting better. The key thing is to maintain the suspension of Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth because I think that sends the right signal of disapproval."

Almost as he spoke the Nigerian military were reported to have opened fire from a helicopter on a village in the Niger Delta region. Official figures claim that four people were killed. But Daniel Ekpebide, a member of the Federated Niger Delta Ijaw Communities, claims that at least 50 people were killed.

The dispute over Zimbabwe led to tension at the Commonwealth conference. Unusually, the post of secretary general was put to a vote when a rival candidate challenged former New Zealand Deputy Prime Minister Don McKinnon. Normally the post is agreed privately without the necessity of a vote.

President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa backed Lakshman Kadirgama, a former foreign minister of Sri Lanka, for the post of secretary general. Mbeki opposes the continued exclusion of Zimbabwe and clearly hoped to unseat McKinnon, who is a vociferous proponent of the ban.

Despite this break with the usual consensus politics of the Commonwealth, McKinnon succeeded in winning a second

four-year term. He had the support of Britain, Australia and Canada. Only 11 countries backed Mbeki's candidate. How much political pressure Britain brought to bear to get this result is not known.

As a face-saving gesture a six-member task force was set up to consider the question of readmitting Zimbabwe. It consisted of South Africa and Mozambique, who are supporters of readmission, Canada and Australia, who are opposed to it and India and Jamaica, who are thought of as neutral. Setting up a committee avoids complete humiliation for the African governments who want Zimbabwe back in the Commonwealth. It gives the appearance that the organisation is in some way democratic and listens to the opinions of all its members. The reality is that Britain continues to dominate an organisation that perpetuates a colonial relationship.

The current African governments are desperate for aid and trade. They will not seriously oppose the British government. At the same time they want to appear as anti-imperialists to their own populations at home.

Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe's own strident anti-imperialist rhetoric has put them all in a difficult position. This is especially true of South Africa. Mugabe's seizure of white-owned farms has raised the question of the distribution of land in South Africa too.

Mbeki cannot afford to distance himself from Mugabe. If he is seen to side with Britain he will lose all political credibility as a supposed leader of the national liberation struggle. His failure to mobilise any significant level of support at the conference points to the impotence of Mbeki's nationalist politics.

In the past it was possible for African leaders to wring certain concessions out of the West because of the existence of the Soviet Union. Since the end of the Cold War this has become impossible. Africa's former colonial masters are in the process of clawing back every concession they ever granted.

In the face of the assault on his people's living conditions, Mugabe demonstrated the same impotence as Mbeki. He launched a bitter verbal attack on the British government. "There are other clubs we can join," he blustered.

His petulant gesture in quitting the Commonwealth late Sunday night was deprived of any principled significance by the long delay and his strenuous efforts to stay in it. For all his denunciations of British interference in Zimbabwe he is reluctant to burn all his bridges. Membership of the Commonwealth has no tangible benefits in itself. But it offers certain advantages to members. Mozambique, which was never a British colony, recently joined the organisation.

Principally the Commonwealth offers a place on the world stage for the leaders of semi-colonial countries. Nigeria's expenditure on the conference is an indication of how seriously they take it. Their desire for political kudos makes them easy for Britain to manipulate.

As an old colonial power, the United Kingdom excels in this kind of politics. Blair himself may be a political lightweight in comparison to many of the African leaders with whom he has to deal, but he has the weight of generations of experience behind him.

Zimbabwe finds itself denied aid and expelled from the International Monetary Fund as a result of its clash with Britain. Regimes with no better democratic record but which have taken care to keep on the right side of their old colonial master are viewed more favourably. They still have lines of credit and aid.

The price they pay, or rather their people pay, is that they have to follow all the prescriptions of the IMF. Living conditions, health care, education and jobs have been systematically wiped out over the last two decades as a result. Commonwealth leaders spoke about the need to combat AIDS and poverty, but their policies have created the conditions in which poverty and diseases have spread unchecked across Africa.

Zimbabwe is suffering the same fate in worse degree. Many of its people are starving. Half of them rely on food aid to survive. Mugabe opposed the free market measures that the Commonwealth and the IMF tried to impose on him, but his autarkic economic model is not a viable alternative. It has plunged his country into economic regression.

If the UK and the international financial institutions bear the primary responsibility for the condition of Zimbabwe, Mugabe has played a secondary role. For two decades he has remained a member of an organisation that perpetuates the colonial relationship. This most militant of nationalists, who endured prison and led an armed struggle against a better-armed military force, loved to strut on the Commonwealth stage. Even now he would go back to it if he could. At no point did he ever envisage breaking with the imperialist framework of international relations. His own nationalist outlook locked him into the Commonwealth and all that it stands for.

Blair's role in the conference was characterised by his usual sanctimonious moralising. And also as usual this failed to conceal his rank hypocrisy. He demanded that Zimbabwe was excluded, while pressing for the readmission of Pakistan which remains a military dictatorship.

Pakistan was excluded from the Commonwealth in 1999 when General Musharraf came to power. McKinnon praised Pakistan for "moving in the right direction." Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chrétien pointed out that Pakistan was "making a good contribution to the war on terrorism."

If human rights were indeed criteria for Commonwealth membership, then both Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and her prime minister would have found themselves excluded. The UK government is systematically violating human rights in its "war against terrorism." It is detaining people without access to lawyers. Over the last week more than a dozen people have been arrested in this manner. It is sharing US intelligence that has been extracted under torture. In its most flagrant breach of human rights, and one that far outstrips anything that Mugabe can claim, it has launched an unprovoked war against another country.

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