

Prelude to Unilateralism: Foreclosed Independence Bids in Pre-Federation Southern Rhodesia, 1948 and 1950

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ABSTRACT

This article recovers two resolutions, in 1948 and 1950, respectively, by the all-white parliament in Southern Rhodesia (colonial Zimbabwe) that expressed support for the colony's independence within the British Commonwealth. The examination of these post-war pushes for sovereignty illuminate how Rhodesia's political leadership was sensitive to wider changes in the imperial status quo, well before the broader white electorate became similarly seized by colonial withdrawal. The motions highlight the gulf between the metropole and local settler leadership, even when the latter were ostensibly firmly backed by imperial policy and domestic black political opposition was comparatively muted. Additionally, the two parliamentary debates elucidate domestic interparty differences. The article is primarily informed by verbatim transcripts of the pertinent legislative proceedings. The deliberations have largely disappeared from the colony's historiography – a significant omission given the considerable scholarly interest surrounding Southern Rhodesia's unilateral declaration of independence from Britain in 1965. This article shows that nearly two decades before that fateful step, changing international factors motivated Rhodesia's political class to consider major steps that would ensure the maintenance of white dominance.

KEYWORDS

Godfrey Huggins; decolonisation; empire; sovereignty; white backlash; nationalism

On 11 November 1965, the minority white leadership of Southern Rhodesia (colonial Zimbabwe) issued a unilateral declaration of independence (UDI) from British colonial rule. This well-known historical incident was the culmination of a process that saw white Rhodesia increasingly reject the 'wind of change' sweeping across

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Africa and the associated imperial collapse.¹ While this discourse reached a critical threshold in Rhodesia's wider white community in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the seeds of this unease were apparent a decade previously. From the late 1940s the colony's political leadership generally accepted independence as a means to deflect emerging international post-War pressures, although the ruling United Party (UP) and its primary opposition, the Liberal Party, differed on the urgency of securing that status. This article explores the Southern Rhodesian Parliament's expression of support for independence (in principle) in 1948 and a reaffirmation of that stance two years later.

Although understudied, this drive for 'dominion status', or effective sovereignty within the British Commonwealth, was a notable feature of Rhodesian parliamentary political life between the end of World War II and UDI. Indeed, related sentiments were recurring elements throughout the colony's political existence. The British colony that became Southern Rhodesia owed its creation to the late nineteenth-century intervention of the British South Africa Company. After several decades of company rule, at a referendum in 1922, resident whites opted for 'Responsible Government', or effective local autonomy, over absorption by their larger, more prosperous neighbour, South Africa.² From 1923 Southern Rhodesia was wholly governed by an elite local white settler class and had its own civil service and legislature. However, the United Kingdom retained the constitutional authority to block this body's decisions.³ Perhaps the first formal expression of Rhodesian unease with this continued oversight came in a parliamentary debate in 1934 where an attempt to attain 'dominion status' was eventually discarded in favour of a call for 'full responsible government'.⁴

This paper focuses on the more immediate post-war period when the collapse of Britain's empire in Asia and emergent signs of constitutional reform in African territories began to influence renewed domestic political calls for Southern Rhodesia's full independence. The term 'dominion' went out of favour in the metropole after 1947 when the United Kingdom's Dominions Office gave way to the Commonwealth Relations Office.⁵ It continued to resonate regionally, however, with a new right-wing political party spanning Northern and Southern Rhodesia launching in 1956 as the Dominion Party.⁶ The promulgation of the

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1. A useful collection on this topic is: L. Butler and S. Stockwell, eds, *The Wind of Change: Harold Macmillan and British Decolonization* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
 2. This rejection of association with South Africa is covered in detail by Abraham Mlombo, *Southern Rhodesia – South Africa Relations, 1923–1953: Political, Economic, and Social Ties* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), ch. 2 passim.
 3. A.B. Mutiti, 'Rhodesia and Her Four Discriminatory Constitutions', *Présence Africaine*, 90 (1974), 261–262.
 4. *Debates of the Legislative Assembly* [Southern Rhodesia], 28 June 1948, cols. 1489–1492.
 5. W.D. McIntyre, 'The Strange Death of Dominion Status', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 27, 2 (1999), 200.
 6. 'Opposition Parties Unite at Lusaka', *The Sunday Mail*, 19 February 1956.

1948 and 1950 pro-independence motions elucidates the subsequent willingness to embrace UDI, aspects of the dynamics of intra-white political competition in the colony, and the gathering awareness among white political elites of rising black political expression and its threat to their dominance.

The Rhodesian Parliament's foreclosed post-war pursuit of dominion originated within the right-wing opposition, then operating under the banner of the Liberal Party. This was a misnomer as it was ideologically conservative and described at the time as favouring policies 'very similar' to Apartheid.⁷ When the right came to power in 1962 as the Rhodesian Front (RF), it controversially steered the colony onto the UDI course in a manner its predecessor had eschewed. However, the essence of the 1948 and 1950 parliamentary resolutions received overwhelming bi-partisan support. This general consensus demonstrates the deep-rooted allure of independence and helps explain why the white political class ultimately seized it after negotiations failed. This study thus demonstrates how wider international changes that unfolded in the aftermath of World War II sparked white backlash on the periphery of empire at the incipient stage of decolonisation. In the months preceding the 1948 motion, four former British territories in Asia shed colonial rule. Critical to the foiled outcome of Rhodesia's 1948 and 1950 independence debates, however, imperial resolve in Africa remained high (or seemed to).

Historiographical position and extant literature

The pro-independence resolutions of the Southern Rhodesian Parliament in 1948 and 1950, while foreshadowing the eventual UDI proclamation, scarcely feature in the colony's historiography. In a meticulous account of the era, J.R.T. Wood served up two concise factual paragraphs on the 1948 motion and a passing reference to the 1950 debate.⁸ In another extended account of Rhodesia's pursuit of independence, Kenneth Young offers a more robust narrative account of the 1950 independence motion, but curiously ignored its recent antecedent.⁹ Both works are outdated, lack context and analysis, and primarily look ahead to subsequent developments. Other Rhodesian-era comprehensive accounts of white Rhodesian politics with an eye towards independence yearnings gloss over these debates.¹⁰ Frank Clements, a Rhodesian freelance journalist and politician, opined that amalgamation with Northern Rhodesia was treated with more urgency by local whites than dominion.¹¹

7. 'Huggins Assured of Majority in S. Rhodesia', *Rand Daily Mail* [hereafter 'RDM'], 16 September 1948.

8. J.R.T. Wood, *The Welensky Papers: A History of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland* (Durban: Graham Publishing, 1983), 115–116, 168.

9. K. Young, *Rhodesia and Independence: A Study in British Colonial Policy* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1967), 32–37.

10. R. Blake, *A History of Rhodesia* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1978), 255–256.

11. F. Clements, *Rhodesia: The Course to Collision* (London: Clio Press, 1969), 46.

This was strictly correct, but obscures how the Liberal and United parties tussled over which course to follow as a matter of policy. Meanwhile, more recent historical overviews generally neglect the early independence motions altogether and typically frame moves to UDI as beginning with the December 1962 ascent of the RF, the party in power at the time of the declaration.¹²

UDI remains the subject of a vibrant historiography.¹³ However, ideological and structural factors underpin the contemporary scholarly neglect of the two early pro-independence motions. In terms of the former, Young and Wood both enjoyed ready access to leading Rhodesian officials. Both have been criticised by reviewers as being sympathetic to their subjects, white supremacists of varying degrees.¹⁴ Consequently, their work is awkwardly positioned alongside a more mainstream body of literature. Accounts that retrospectively consider UDI's antecedents generally begin no earlier than 1953. In that year, Garfield Todd, a New Zealand-born missionary, became the Southern Rhodesian Prime Minister. His subsequent liberalism, which only began to coalesce around 1960/61, has made him the subject of considerable scholarly interest.¹⁵

Todd's rise was facilitated by the creation of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, also in 1953. This new body, which incorporated Southern and Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland (today's Zimbabwe, Zambia and Nyasaland) was simultaneously a reflection of Southern Rhodesian desires for greater regional authority but also representative of late imperial Britain's appetite for regional economic associations – similar bodies emerged around this time in the Middle East, east Africa, the West Indies and Southeast Asia.¹⁶ It lasted only a decade but this late imperial 'experiment', which was accompanied by a superficial commitment to racial harmony and promulgated some modest integrationist reforms, is likewise the subject of an outsized body of scholarly work.¹⁷ Phil Murphy, one of the leading historians of this federation (primarily

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12. An example is: C.J.M. Zvobgo, *History of Zimbabwe, 1890–2000 and Postscript, 2001–2008* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 120–125.
 13. T. Nyamunda, "More a Cause than a Country": Historiography, UDI and the Crisis of Decolonisation in Rhodesia', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 42, 5 (2016), 1005–1019.
 14. I. Henderson, 'Nothing Learnt, Nothing Forgotten', *Journal of African History*, 27, 2 (1986), 402; J. Eekelaar, 'Review of *Rhodesia and Independence*', *African Affairs*, 66, 264 (1967), 270.
 15. Recent examples include: K. Wilson, 'Reappraising the 1950s in Zimbabwean History: The Problem of Todd and the Limits of Liberalism', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 47, 3 (2021), 489–504; R. Southall, 'If Only: Missed Opportunity or Inevitable Fate in Rhodesia?', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 53, 2 (2019), 367–378. For challenges to the extent of Todd's liberalism and his 1960/61 realignment see: M.O. West, 'Ndabaningi Sithole, Garfield Todd and the Dadaya School Strike of 1947', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 18, 2 (1992), 297–316; and B. Marmon, 'From Dreams of Dominion to Aspirations for a New Africa: Ahrn Palley's Re-invention in Southern Rhodesia, 1959–1961', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 45, 3 (2019), 497–500.
 16. On Southern Rhodesia see B. Marmon, "Bogey Bogey Stuff": Gold Coastism, Federation, and White Backlash in Southern Rhodesia, 1951–56', *The Round Table*, 111, 2 (2022), 214–226; for Britain see M. Collins, 'Decolonisation and the "Federal Moment"', *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 24, 1 (2013), 36.
 17. Recent examples include: A. Cohen, *The Politics and Economics of Decolonisation in Africa: The Failed Experiment of the Central African Federation* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017); P. Murphy, "Government by Blackmail": The Origins of the Central African Federation Reconsidered', in M. Lynn, ed., *The British Empire in the 1950s: Retreat or Revival?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 53–76; J. Tischler,

from the imperial perspective) has been one of the few scholars to (briefly) consider Rhodesian secessionist threats prior to the federation's dissolution.¹⁸ However, his focus on unconstitutional action renders the parliamentary debate considered here outside of the scope of his inquiry. Murphy's view that the federation's creation was a British concession to white Rhodesian nationalism is complicated by this more retrospective study which demonstrates that the more ardent Rhodesian nationalists pressed for dominion but lost out to their more restrained federalist counterparts.¹⁹

Murphy's incomplete assessment is indicative of the scholarly tendency to neglect the study of the high politics of Southern Rhodesia prior to 1953. There has been little effort to explore how the opposition right-wing Liberal Party nearly secured power after the first post-war election in 1946. Studies of this period tend to centre around socio-economic issues and the working class, both white and black.²⁰ There were several major strikes by black labourers over the second half of the 1940s that have merited significant attention in the literature.²¹ In the immediate post-war period this activity spurred the establishment of a range of black groups with political and economic grievances, such as the Voters League (ca. 1945), Reformed Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa (1946), and the African Workers Voice Association (1947). However, organised black political party activity only assumed a national character in the second half of the 1950s with the formation of the Southern Rhodesia African National Congress.²² As Michael West has observed, these groups of the late 1940s were not composed of anti-colonial nationalists. The activists pursued governance reforms rather than universal suffrage and self-determination.²³

While this labour activism was certainly influenced by new post-war dynamics, there remains a need to assess how Southern Rhodesia's political elite responded to the incipient rise in black political activity. This analysis of the two parliamentary motions in 1948 and 1950 demonstrates how closely white Rhodesia's political leadership was attuned to, and influenced by, signs

Light and Power for a Multiracial Nation: The Kariba Dam Scheme in the Central African Federation (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

18. P. Murphy, "'An Intricate and Distasteful Subject': British Planning for the Use of Force Against the European Settlers of Central Africa", *English Historical Review* 121, 492 (2006), 746–777.
19. Murphy, "Government by Blackmail", 71.
20. N. Ginsburgh, *Class, Work and Whiteness: Race and Settler Colonialism in Southern Rhodesia, 1919–79* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020); T. Ranger, *Bulawayo Burning: The Social History of a Southern African City, 1893–1960* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2010).
21. K. Vickery, 'The Rhodesia Railways Strike of 1945, Part I: A Narrative Account', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 24, 3 (1998), 545–560; I. Phimister and B. Raftopoulos, "'Kana Sora Ngaritswe': African Nationalists and Black Workers – The 1948 General Strike in Colonial Zimbabwe", *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 13, 3 (2000), 289–324.
22. A. Mlambo, *A History of Zimbabwe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 145.
23. M. West, *The Rise of an African Middle Class: Colonial Zimbabwe, 1898–1965* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 168–169.

of imperial collapse in the early post-war environment, even in the absence of widespread pan-African nationalist activity. Thus, when that ideology became a fixture of the continent's political scene from the late 1950s, white Rhodesians were poised to embrace unilateral action to protect their privileged position.

The pro-independence resolutions were promulgated as Southern Rhodesia experienced a post-war boom. Buoyed by Britain's struggles to rebuild in the aftermath of World War II and the rise to power of the Afrikaner-dominated National Party in neighbouring South Africa in 1948, the white population of Southern Rhodesia saw exponential growth in the late 1940s and early 1950s.²⁴ From 1946 to 1953, the British colony attracted 85,000 white immigrants, a number larger than the entire white population at the end of the Second World War.²⁵ This rapid growth created economic challenges. White residential areas in the capital, Salisbury, lacked sufficient housing. Just days after the 1950 motion, *The Rhodesia Herald*, the colony's paper of record, reported that some new immigrants occupied tents or overflowed houses with upwards of two dozen residents sharing one bathroom.²⁶ Around the time of the 1948 deliberation, authorities warned of the need to ration electricity due to increased consumption, and petrol rationing was introduced, in part for the same reason.²⁷

However, logistical challenges induced by rapid white demographic growth did not obstruct the colony's leaders from pursuing grander ambitions. The growth probably encouraged them. In a nod to the colony's development, on the same day that dominion status was discussed in 1948, Parliament passed a resolution backing the assembly's expansion from 30 to 40 members.²⁸ The following day it deliberated prospective sites for the University of Rhodesia, which would become the colony's first higher education institution.²⁹ The 1950 debate on independence occurred a week before South Africa's first high commissioner took up office in Salisbury, becoming the most senior Commonwealth diplomat in the colony.³⁰ Several political talk shops were established around this time. In the final quarter of 1946, the Rhodesia National Affairs Association began to sponsor lunch hour lectures, primarily focusing on political matters of local interest.³¹

24. On the efforts of Rhodesian authorities to promote immigration during this period see: A. Mlambo, *White Immigration into Rhodesia: From Occupation to Federation* (Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications, 2002), 29–31.

25. C. Sanger, *Central African Emergency* (London: Heinemann, 1960), 79.

26. 'Stark Facts of Housing Shortage in City and Suburbs', *The Rhodesia Herald* [hereafter 'TRH'], 11 May 1950.

27. 'Electricity May be Rationed in Bulawayo', *TRH*, 19 June 1948; 'Introduction of Petrol Rationing', *TRH*, 9 July 1948.

28. 'More MPs', *TRH*, 29 June 1948. The colony's parliament was ultimately only expanded in 1962.

29. 'University of Rhodesia', *TRH*, 30 June 1948.

30. 'Rhodesia in Diplomacy', *TRH*, 10 May 1950.

31. National Archives of Zimbabwe [hereafter 'NAZ'], RH 20/7/1, 'The Rhodesia National Affairs Association'.

The foremost issue of high politics that garnered widespread public interest at the time was not independence, but the question of amalgamation or federation with Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland. While there was an economic rationale for federation, Huggins and his backers asserted that it would also serve a defensive role by insulating Southern Rhodesia from the ‘wind of change’.³² This may have been, in part, an attempt to rebut the Liberal Party’s claim that dominion status was necessary for the same purpose. The Federal Union Capricorn Africa was established in Salisbury in 1947 with the aim of lobbying for the federation of the two Rhodesias.³³ It rebranded as the Capricorn Africa Society two years later and adopted a more expansive pan-African scope while continuing to advocate for federation. In 1948, the United Central Africa Association (UCAA) was launched with several ruling party Members of Parliament (MPs) constituting the executive of its Salisbury Branch. It aimed for a ‘great British Dominion in Central Africa’ and was especially interested in fostering a closer relationship between the two Rhodesias.³⁴ The UCAA and Capricorn merged in 1952 amidst the final push for federation.³⁵ In the initial years of federation, Capricorn was a major forum for debate on interracial cooperation. However, it could point to few tangible contributions that liberalised the colony’s political life. In the late 1950s, as whites became more concerned by African decolonisation and the potential of federation as a protective instrument to insulate whites from nationalism dissipated, the society faded away.³⁶

Only around that time did the right wing begin to reclaim the levels of parliamentary representation it had had following the 1946 election. It was no coincidence that as the federation teetered on the brink, right-wing forces experienced a revitalisation. Perspectives on dominion versus federation varied according to political allegiance. The Liberal Party MPs who advanced the two independence motions, Albert Rubidge Washington Stumbles (1948) and Ray Stockil (1950), both believed Southern Rhodesia should focus on the pursuit of dominion status, rather than federation.³⁷ Although each equivocated on the issue of closer regional association once it became clear that it was popular amongst most whites, both expressed inherent unease with federation. Stumbles later described himself as ‘bitterly opposed’ to the grouping.³⁸ Stumbles was a lawyer representing the Avondale district, a low-density suburb of the capital; Stockil was a rancher from the more rural

32. See Marmon, “Bogey Bogey Stuff”.

33. B. Phiri, ‘The Capricorn Africa Society Revisited: The Impact of Liberalism in Zambia’s Colonial History, 1949–1963’, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 24, 1 (1991), 67.

34. ‘Eventual Aim Is Central African Dominion’, *TRH*, 9 June 1948.

35. R. Rotberg, ‘The “Partnership” Hoax: How the British Government Deprived Central Africans of their Rights’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 45, 1 (2019), 102.

36. I. Hancock, ‘The Capricorn Africa Society in Southern Rhodesia’, *Rhodesian History*, 9 (1978), 58–59.

37. Stumbles: *Debates*, 23 June 1948, col. 1351–1352; Stockil: *Debates*, 3 May 1950, col. 592.

38. NAZ, ORAL/ST6, A.R.W. Stumbles, interviewed by D. Hartridge (various dates in 1973), 56.

Midlands region. Support for independence thus cut across any rural/urban divide.

The UP, led by Prime Minister Godfrey Huggins, desired dominion as well, but considered federation the first priority. During the June 1948 debate, the parties were almost evenly split, with Huggins' UP holding 14 parliamentary seats to 11 for Stumbles' Liberals.³⁹ The collapse of the Liberals after a general election that September ensured that Huggins' desire for federation would subsume the drive for dominion. With the right wing firmly on the defensive, Southern Rhodesia's independence quest temporarily receded. A failed push that year by white settlers in Northern Rhodesia for responsible government – or increased political autonomy similar to the prevailing situation in Southern Rhodesia – also served to reinforce interest in federation.⁴⁰ However, while the UP procured 24 of 30 seats at the 1948 election, the Liberals obtained over 30% of the total vote, demonstrating a baseline of support on which the right wing could build.⁴¹

The short-lived Liberal Party, like the two early bids for independence, features on the periphery of Rhodesia's historiography. This has obstructed the development of a more holistic account of the UDI trajectory. As Robert Blake observed, 'there is a direct line of political descent' from the Liberals to the RF.⁴² Most prominently, Ian Smith, the long-serving RF prime minister (1964–1979), first entered parliament as a Liberal following the 1948 election. George Rudland, an RF cabinet member and Smith confidant, contested 1940s elections on the Liberal ticket, as did Olive Robertson, a future RF senator.⁴³ Although Stumbles drifted to the political centre (as did Smith for a time) and successfully held his seat against a RF candidate in 1962, he retained the confidence of his former colleagues. He was parliamentary speaker (a non-voting position) at the time of UDI and was consulted by Smith in advance of the announcement.⁴⁴

The early years of RF governance have been derided as a 'cowboy' government dominated by politically inexperienced farmhands.⁴⁵ However, as the party trumpeted on the campaign trail in 1962, 17 of its candidates 'had considerable Parliamentary experience' and all but one member of its first cabinet had previously served in Parliament.⁴⁶ In contrast, at the 1946 election, just one Liberal candidate had prior parliamentary experience and only a grand

39. Blake, *History of Rhodesia*, 239.

40. L.H. Gann, *A History of Northern Rhodesia, Early Days to 1953* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1964), 395–396.

41. Clements, *Rhodesia: The Course to Collision*, 96.

42. Blake, *History of Rhodesia*, 237.

43. NAZ, ORAL/ST6, A.R.W. Stumbles, 63; NAZ, ORAL/RU3, G.W. Rudland, interviewed by D. Hartridge (5 September 1973), 14–16.

44. A.R.W. Stumbles, *Some Recollections of a Rhodesian Speaker* (Bulawayo: Books of Rhodesia, 1980), 121.

45. L. White, *Unpopular Sovereignty: Rhodesian Independence and African Decolonization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 13 and passim.

46. Advertisement in *Umtali Post*, 14 December 1962; C. Dupont, *The Reluctant President* (Bulawayo: Books of Rhodesia, 1978), 124.

total of two had previously contested a parliamentary election.⁴⁷ Accordingly, the late 1940s and early Federal era can be seen as a formative era for the right-wing political forces that assumed power in the early 1960s. Imperial collapse was more immediate and obvious by that time; thus, the right wing's more significant heritage of attempting to proactively navigate changing global dynamics contributed to its resurgence.

The critical backdrop to these early independence bids was the evolving international scene following World War II. The United Nations was founded in 1945. In Asia, signs of Britain's imperial retreat began to emerge. India and Pakistan became independent in 1947. Myanmar and Sri Lanka followed the next year. White colonists from the East settled in Southern Rhodesia. They became known somewhat derisively as 'Bengal Chancers'.⁴⁸ Within Africa, the day before Stumbles made his bid for effective Rhodesian independence, *The Rhodesia Herald* reported that Sudan was on the verge of self-government, which would put its constitutional status roughly on par with that of Southern Rhodesia.⁴⁹ As the following discussion of the two debates reveals, Rhodesian MPs were closely attuned to these imperial transformations and sought to ensure, even at this comparatively early stage, that they responded in a way that protected their racial privileges. UDI in 1965 was the culmination of these efforts, engendered by the wider white public's more belated recognition of the import of these global changes.

The independence bids

The material that follows draws on a relatively narrow source base. The 1948 and 1950 independence discourse does not seem to have elicited much reaction outside of the elite political class. *The Rhodesia Herald* published no letters to the editor on the debate. Thus, the more immediate insights of this analysis are firmly fixed on interparty competition. The following passages overwhelmingly rely on the verbatim transcripts of the legislative proceedings during which the two motions were discussed. The lack of scholarly interest in the Liberal Party complicates efforts to identify any extant private correspondence that might offer more behind-the-scenes insights on the calculations of the Liberal Party officials at the time. This is a notable limitation.

However, the political thought of Stumbles, the parliamentarian behind the 1948 motion, is comparatively well documented. In the 1970s he published his memoir and conducted a thorough oral history interview with the National Archives of Rhodesia, the transcript of which exceeded 100 pages.⁵⁰ Despite the

47. C. Leys, *European Politics in Southern Rhodesia* (London: Clarendon Press, 1959), 165.

48. D. Lowry, 'The Impact of Anti-Communism on White Rhodesian Political Culture, ca. 1920s–1980', *Cold War History*, 7, 2 (2007), 172–173.

49. 'Self-Government by End of Year', *TRH*, 22 June 1948.

50. Stumbles, *Some Recollections of a Rhodesian Speaker*; NAZ, ORAL/ST6, A.R.W. Stumbles.

mutated reaction of the broader public, few matters of parliamentary debate could have been considered more hallowed than the issue of sovereignty. Thus, the remarks of the politicians evaluated here can be considered to have been carefully chosen and representative of their views. Furthermore, the recurrence of the debates in comparatively close order, coupled with the importance of UDI in the historiography, justifies the study of these two motions in relatively granular detail.

1948 independence bid

On 23 June 1948, A.R.W. Stumbles, a South African-born lawyer who claimed to be a distant descendant of George Washington, the first American president, rose in Parliament to ask for Southern Rhodesia's independence from British colonial rule.⁵¹ The deputy leader of the Liberal Party called for 'a delegation chosen from all political parties represented in the House to be appointed to proceed to the United Kingdom with a view to obtaining Dominion Status for the Colony of Southern Rhodesia'.⁵² The motion touched off a day and a half of parliamentary debate. It culminated with the passage of an amendment (21–5) by a UP MP that called for a more deliberative approach, namely 'that a Select Committee be appointed to consider and report upon steps to be taken to achieve Dominion Status' prior to dispatching a delegation to London.⁵³ Stumbles remained disappointed about the government's failure to formally approach the UK with an independence request, claiming in his memoir, published more than three decades later, that dominion status was available 'for the asking' as an alternative to federation.⁵⁴

In a lengthy supporting speech, Stumbles outlined an array of reasons for his motion. He appealed to his colleagues to consider the motion 'as an all Party issue' and stated that he believed it was 'something to which no Party in this House is opposed'.⁵⁵ Indeed, the more restrained amendment that overwhelmingly passed illustrates the extent to which Southern Rhodesia's political class desired complete freedom from imperial control. One of the first spheres in which Stumbles advanced his case was the assertion that the ratio of white to black inhabitants in the colony had increased from 23:1 in 1920 to 18:1 at the time of his motion.⁵⁶ However, Stumbles' mathematical contortions attempted to mask a major obstacle in his statehood quest. As Josiah Brownell observed, Rhodesia's white rulers during the UDI era were 'one of the most demographically fragile ruling ethnic castes in any polity anywhere in the world'.⁵⁷

51. Stumbles, *Some Recollections of a Rhodesian Speaker*, 171.

52. *Debates*, 23 June 1948, col. 1345.

53. *Debates*, 28 June 1948, cols. 1499–1500.

54. Stumbles, *Some Recollections of a Rhodesian Speaker*, 55.

55. *Debates*, 23 June 1948, col. 1346.

56. *Debates*, 23 June 1948, col. 1349.

57. J. Brownell, *The Collapse of Rhodesia: Population Demographics and the Politics of Race* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 2.

Stumbles then turned his attention to Southern Rhodesia's readiness for independence, declaring, 'we have grown up'. A key point in this regard was the white population's record of service in the two World Wars, which 'ought to count in our favour when the question of our fitness comes to be decided'.⁵⁸ Another MP, Bulawayo's James Stuart McNeillie, representative of the Rhodesia Labour Party (RLP), the more conservative of two labour parties with minimal representation in parliament, reiterated the colony's 'very valuable [War] effort' during the course of the debate.⁵⁹ In his memoir, the UDI-era Rhodesian President Clifford Dupont enthused that 29 of the 35 RF MPs seated after the 1962 election had served in World War II.⁶⁰ There has been speculation that Southern Rhodesia's role in the war helped obviate the threat of armed British intervention against UDI.⁶¹ The invocation of Southern Rhodesia's war effort in this early independence bid offers one of the most direct early examples of how the war invigorated Southern Rhodesia's pursuit of dominion.

Emerging changes to the colonial order featured prominently during the deliberation. Stumbles posed to his colleagues, 'let us see what is happening in other parts of the world. What of India and what of Burma? Surely we can claim with equal justification to be given what they have been given [independence] ...'.⁶² McNeillie expressed concern that the British empire had recently 'been somewhat contracted'.⁶³ Nonetheless, in mid-1948, the independence of a handful of British colonies in Asia seemed comparatively remote. However, a decade later, pan-African currents began to surge throughout the colony in the aftermath of Ghana's independence. In 1961, the United Federal Party and Dominion Party (successors to the UP and Liberals, respectively) contentiously debated whether new constitutional proposals would keep Southern Rhodesia on par with newly independent African states.⁶⁴ As these major international changes became more apparent to whites less attuned to current affairs, the RF and associated right-wing forces were bolstered by their more significant heritage of seeking to pre-empt the changes wrought by decolonisation.

However, with Britain's empire in Africa intact, Southern Rhodesia's parliamentarians were not yet the full-on unilateralist and isolationist white ethnonationalists who embraced UDI. Harry Davies of the RLP was enthusiastic about a greater degree of self-government as it might allow Southern Rhodesia to dispatch a delegate to the United Nations.⁶⁵ Dominion status was explicitly framed as a device to bolster the British imperial presence in Africa. Stumbles

58. *Debates*, 23 June 1948, col. 1350.

59. *Ibid.*, col. 1365.

60. Dupont, *Reluctant President*, 123.

61. C. Watts, 'Killing Kith and Kin: The Viability of British Military Intervention in Rhodesia, 1964–5', *20th Century British History*, 16, 4 (2005), 402–403.

62. *Debates*, 23 June 1948, col. 1354.

63. *Ibid.*, col. 1365.

64. 'Welensky Shocked by this DP Advert', *Sunday Mail*, 23 July 1961.

65. *Debates*, 23 June 1948, col. 1371.

proclaimed in his opening address, ‘the fact that we in this House are asking for Dominion status today cannot under any circumstances be interpreted as isolationist. It is a start of something that might become something bigger’. According to Stumbles, that grand achievement would be the formation of a ‘Central African Dominion for strengthening and carrying out the defence of the Empire’.⁶⁶

However, the UP perceived such discourse as subterfuge. Huggins assailed the Liberal Party as being ‘isolationist’, a term also deployed by a leading South African newspaper to describe the party.⁶⁷ According to his private secretary, Huggins was critical of the support that the party drew from Afrikaans speakers from South Africa and sought to marginalise that constituency.⁶⁸ The Afrikaans-dominated National Party wrested power in South Africa in May 1948, a development which was perceived to have hurt the Liberals at the general election in Southern Rhodesia several months later.⁶⁹ Although unstated, Huggins may have interpreted the Liberal Party’s move for dominion and the associated weakening of British oversight as a scheme to appeal to its Afrikaner constituency, facilitating reforms such as the introduction of Afrikaans as an official language in the colony.⁷⁰ When Huggins began to vigorously campaign for federation a few years later, anti-South African discourse assumed prominence.⁷¹ However, the view of the Rhodesian right wing’s affinity for South Africa was grounded in reality. The South African High Commissioner in Salisbury found that relations rapidly improved after the RF came to power.⁷² This cooperation deepened after UDI.⁷³

The independence aspirations of the Liberals, while not rejected by the UP, were tempered by the ruling party. Whereas Stumbles believed that the pursuit of amalgamation would sidetrack the more pressing need for dominion status, Edward Noaks, a UP MP who had served in parliament since 1930, believed both could be pursued simultaneously. His amendment to Stumbles’ motion called for a Select Committee to investigate the implications of dominion as a first step.⁷⁴ His call was adopted and the United Kingdom was thus spared, momentarily, a direct approach from Southern Rhodesia for dominion

66. *Ibid.*, col. 1351.

67. M.N.C. St Quintin, *A History of Southern Rhodesia and the Federation of Rhodesia & Nyasaland: 1945–1965*, unpublished undated manuscript, Cory Library, Rhodes University, St. Quintin Papers, MS17/958, folder 4, 214; ‘Huggins Assured of Majority in S. Rhodesia’, *RDM*, 16 September 1948.

68. National Archives of South Africa [hereafter ‘NASA’], BSB, S.20 Vol. 1, Eustace to Forsyth, 16 August 1950.

69. ‘Union Election Result Helped Rhodesian U.P.’, *RDM*, 17 September 1948.

70. The Liberals repeatedly denied such intentions.

71. R. Hyam, ‘The Geopolitical Origins of the Central African Federation: Britain, Rhodesia and South Africa, 1948–1953’, *The Historical Journal*, 30, 1 (1987), 145–172.

72. NASA, BSB, S.20 Vol. 8, ‘Interview with Winston Field’, 9 February 1963.

73. F. de Meneses and R. McNamara, *The White Redoubt, the Great Powers and the Struggle for Southern Africa* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

74. *Debates*, 23 June 1948, col. 1371.

status. The committee was constituted, but apparently only met once before it became dormant.⁷⁵ An obfuscatory editorial on the debate in *The Rhodesia Herald* deployed impressive linguistic acrobatics to similarly avoid taking a decisive position. The newspaper opposed dominion status but supported ‘complete self-government’.⁷⁶

However, the most formidable obstacle to a formal request for dominion emanating from Southern Rhodesia in 1948 was the opposition of Prime Minister Huggins. He was the colony’s foremost international personality. He had been elected to the first parliament in 1924 and had led the colony since 1933.⁷⁷ Partially deaf, Huggins refrained from commenting on the motion during the first day of debate. However, when the deliberations were resumed five days later, Huggins injected a decidedly more confrontational and partisan tone. He lashed out at Stumbles for being ‘impertinent’ and added that he could not take his ‘appeal seriously’.⁷⁸ Although *The Rhodesia Herald* reported in advance on Stumbles’ intention to introduce the motion, Huggins faulted Stumbles for failing to provide the government forewarning.⁷⁹ Mindful of Stumbles’ case for Southern Rhodesia’s ‘fitness’ for independence, Huggins couched his opposition in terms of practicalities. He remarked on the significant increase in government expenditure that would result from dominion status, primarily emanating from increased diplomatic representation abroad.⁸⁰ He concluded his rebuttal, ‘I hope we shall soon be a Dominion, but there must be a limit to the price we are prepared to pay for this enhanced status of the country when we are obviously not ready for it’.⁸¹ With this evasive, stalling pronouncement from the head of government who was more interested in amalgamation with Northern Rhodesia, the 1948 drive for dominion fell by the wayside.

1950 independence bid

The UP scored a resounding general election victory in September 1948. Stumbles lost his seat and the Liberal Party retained only five representatives in parliament. The question of dominion status did not feature significantly during the campaign. The UP was eager to prevent the Liberals from wielding independence calls as a campaign issue. Thus, at least on paper, there was little difference in policy between the two parties. UP party principles adopted for the election supported ‘the attainment of dominion status’.⁸² However, the party did not

75. *Ibid.*, 3 May 1950, col. 599.

76. ‘Essential to Agree’, *TRH*, 25 June 1948. The editorial did not clarify the difference between the two.

77. L.H. Gann and M. Gelfand, *Huggins of Rhodesia* (London: Allen & Unwin), 1964.

78. *Debates*, 28 June 1948, col. 1481.

79. ‘Dominion Status’, *TRH*, 18 June, 1948; *Debates*, 28 June 1948, col. 1481.

80. *Debates*, 28 June 1948, col. 1485.

81. *Ibid.*, cols. 1487–1488.

82. ‘The Political Principles of the United Party’, *TRH*, 6 September 1948.

ascribe prominence to this call or consider it urgent – on the campaign trail Huggins reiterated his warnings about the fiscal cost of dominion and declared that the Liberals were pressing for dominion too hastily.⁸³

In a post-election interview, a confident Huggins announced, ‘we have most of the advantages of Dominion Status without the attendant disadvantages’.⁸⁴ The premier then turned his attention to pushing more strongly for amalgamation with Northern Rhodesia. Huggins and his allies wanted access to that colony’s copper deposits, but also saw federation as providing a buffer that insulated Southern Rhodesia from anti-colonial pressures. They believed that the federation, could, over time, secure dominion status under Southern Rhodesia’s dominance.⁸⁵ In February 1949, settler representatives from the two Rhodesias met in Victoria Falls to discuss prospects for a closer association of the two colonies.⁸⁶ This marked (for about a decade) the ascendancy of a commitment in Southern Rhodesia to a federation of the two Rhodesias and Nyasaland. Although in retreat, the weakened Liberals did not abandon their push for dominion/independence. Despite their disadvantaged position after the 1948 election, their continued attempt to secure independence underscores the depth of the right wing’s commitment to sovereignty, the extent to which that group was unsettled by post-war imperial changes, and the lack of clarity around Southern Rhodesia’s position within the subregion and the Commonwealth.

On 3 May 1950, Ray Stockil, the Liberal leader, rose in Parliament and requested ‘to amend the Constitution with a view to removing all restrictions and that thereafter a delegation chosen from all political parties represented in the House be appointed to proceed to the United Kingdom to secure this aim’.⁸⁷ Although the motion conspicuously avoided the word ‘dominion’, Stockil’s objective was basically identical to Stumbles’. As the former noted, ‘it is not important as to what we call this improved status’.⁸⁸ Like Stumbles, Stockil was born in South Africa and immigrated to Southern Rhodesia as a youth. Hailing from a missionary family, he earned a bachelor’s degree from Washington Missionary College (now Washington Adventist University) in Washington, DC, USA, prior to becoming a professional rancher in Southern Rhodesia.⁸⁹

83. ‘Prime Minister on Cost of Dominion Status’, *TRH*, 6 September 1948.

84. ‘Huggins Wants to Be Friendly with Union’, *RDM*, 17 September 1948. The poor performance of the Liberals at the 1948 election has not been explored in detail and, like their success in 1946, needs further study.

85. L. Butler, ‘Business and British Decolonisation: Sir Ronald Prain, the Mining Industry and the Central African Federation’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 35, 3 (2007), 462.

86. C. Dunn, *Central African Witness* (London: Gollancz, 1959), 92.

87. *Debates*, 3 May 1950, col. 588.

88. *Ibid.*, col. 589.

89. Molly Warth, interview with author, Harare, Zimbabwe, 14 November 2017.

Stockil was also unnerved by broader imperial changes. In a sign of the gathering momentum of decolonisation during the previous two years, Stockil located them primarily within Africa, rather than Asia:

There is no doubt that politics in Africa generally are in the melting pot. Events in one territory affect conditions in any other part of Africa. One has only to consider the general picture of Southern Africa at the present time. East Africa is rather concerned about proposed constitutional changes. We have to the south the question of the protectorates, Bechuanaland, Basutoland and Swaziland. There is an extreme native policy in the Union of South Africa, and in the territories in north we have the other extreme ... I feel for this reason alone it is necessary for Southern Rhodesia to improve her status so that she will be in a position to give leadership not only of thought but possibly of action.⁹⁰

Echoing Stumbles' brand of white saviour internationalism, Stockil proceeded to condemn independence and Republic status in 'other parts of what was the Empire' and asserted that his motion sought to 'strengthen the influence and the ties of the Commonwealth relationship'.⁹¹

Stockil's call was again blunted by UP MPs who expressed concern that sovereignty would thwart the gathering momentum for amalgamation/federation.⁹² Party members also suggested that contrary to Stockil's claim, independence would isolate Southern Rhodesia within the region. L.M.N. Hodson, a UP backbencher, warned, 'if we isolated ourselves too soon as an independent nation state, it might be more difficult for us to get together with territories which belong to other Powers in Europe'.⁹³ When another UP backbencher, John Richard Dendy Young, amended the motion to call for a committee to investigate the attainment of dominion status, but refrain from immediately approaching the UK government with any such request, Stockil and his handful of colleagues on the right were unable to prevent the revision from sailing through.⁹⁴ Thus, the 1950 debate played out the same as its 1948 precursor. Critically, Huggins remained opposed, announcing 'we are not ready yet'.⁹⁵ He believed dominion status was 'for the time when we have a European population of about 250,000 and not 130,000. But get ready for it by all means ...'.⁹⁶ Without the prime minister's support, Stockil's independence bid was as doomed as Stumbles'.

In his parliamentary response to Stockil, Huggins noted that racial epithets used by right wingers in Parliament had damaged Southern Rhodesia's relations with the UK government, led since 1945 by Clement Attlee and the more leftist Labour Party. Huggins perceived Attlee as being heavily under the influence of

90. *Debates*, 3 May 1950, col. 592.

91. *Ibid.*, col. 593.

92. *Ibid.*, col. 594.

93. *Ibid.*, cols. 594–595.

94. *Ibid.*, col. 601.

95. *Ibid.*, col. 605.

96. *Ibid.*

the socialist-oriented Fabian Society.⁹⁷ Attlee's Secretary of State for the Colonies, Arthur Creech Jones, had been Chair of the Society's Colonial Bureau, which supported colonial liberation.⁹⁸

The determination of Huggins and the UP to accommodate the UK was likely a product of their resolve to press for amalgamation or federation. Had a Conservative government controlled the UK at this time, Huggins might have been more willing to confront the UK and pursue independence more directly. Just a few years later, as prime minister of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland (1953–56), Huggins referred to the Conservative government under Prime Minister Anthony Eden as 'stupid'.⁹⁹

The 1950 'higher status' debate concluded relatively swiftly – a reflection of the reduced parliamentary presence of the opposition. It transpired within one day and its verbatim transcription occupied just 25 columns of the parliamentary Hansard – as opposed to 54 columns for the 1948 debate that spanned two days. It seems to have made only a modest impact on white Rhodesian society. The debate was front-page news in *The Rhodesia Herald* the following day. However, the article stressed Huggins' position that the legislature sought to 'prepare' the colony for dominion status once the white population had nearly doubled.¹⁰⁰ This factual reportage with a UP slant was accompanied by a vague editorial that also urged caution about the pursuit of dominion.¹⁰¹ As with the 1948 predecessor, it does not appear that the Select Committee established by the amended motion undertook any work of substance. Dominion discourse was soon discarded in favour of pro-federation rhetoric. When the federation enervated towards collapse in the early 1960s, the international position had changed sufficiently that Southern Rhodesia's right wing was positioned to more successfully leverage the quest for sovereignty in its appeal to the electorate. The changes in Africa that Stockil observed in 1950 were much more apparent a decade later when the Democratic Republic of the Congo (then the Republic of Congo) became the first majority-ruled independent nation on the federation's border.¹⁰²

Conclusion: UDI trajectories

The political trajectories of Huggins, Stumbles and Stockil all illuminate the fitful but rightward and isolationist drift of Rhodesian politics. In 1956, on the eve of his retirement, Huggins, then federal prime minister, privately initiated abortive discussions on Southern Rhodesia's independence with

97. *Ibid.*, col. 603.

98. J. Boswell, 'The Fabian Society and Africa', *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 5, 1 (1967), 131.

99. Sanger, *Central African Emergency*, 247.

100. 'Colony Should Prepare for Dominion Status', *TRH*, 4 May 1950.

101. 'The No or Yes of Status', *TRH*, 4 May 1950.

102. B. Marmon, 'Operation Refugee: The Congo Crisis and the End of Humanitarian Imperialism in Southern Rhodesia, 1960', *Cold War History*, 22, 2 (2022), 131–152.

Alec Douglas-Home, Eden's Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations.¹⁰³ In 1953, Stumbles abandoned the right and joined the United Rhodesia Party, a successor to the UP.¹⁰⁴ A year before UDI he quit party politics to become parliamentary speaker, a move that effectively re-aligned him with the right wing and the RF.¹⁰⁵ Stockil resigned as leader of the Dominion Party – successor to the Liberals – in early 1959, declaring that federation was a failure and that he could make a more effective contribution to national progress by focusing his energies on agricultural development.¹⁰⁶ He never contested another election. The Southern Rhodesian right wing never attained a significant parliamentary presence in the federation, but the association dissolved at the end of 1963, removing a logistical obstacle to UDI.

The pro-independence motions of 1948 and 1950 emanated from the right-wing opposition. In a sign of the popularity of their general sentiments, each was co-opted by the 'centrist' ruling party. As Dendy Young announced, 'that we should entertain the ambition of sovereignty in this country is only natural'.¹⁰⁷ These early independence bids were largely motivated by the changing international scene and challenges to the imperial order; Britain had recently lost a significant chunk of empire in Asia, and legal reforms in several African territories were beginning to point towards a changing situation on the continent as well. These concerns were likely reinforced by burgeoning signs of black political mobilisation within the colony although they were not expressly invoked. By 1950 these shifts were not so pronounced as to warrant unilateral action, or even merit a formal approach to Whitehall. The debates on international changes and local ramifications were primarily confined to Rhodesia's political elites and failed to gain significant traction in the wider white community. Furthermore, the ruling party embraced federation as a strategy to maintain white dominance, rather than dominion or a negotiated independence. The situation changed drastically over the following decade when the federation failed to fulfil that aim.

In early 1960, British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan spoke of a 'wind of change' while touring Cape Town. The speech publicly heralded Britain's embrace of Africa's decolonisation.¹⁰⁸ 1960 became popularly known as the 'Year of Africa' due to the large number of countries on the continent that attained independence. Domestically, it saw the formation in Southern Rhodesia of the National Democratic Party, a pan-African anti-colonial nationalist

103. Hoover Institution, Stanford University, collection number 74021, Rex Reynolds interview of Godfrey Huggins, 1968, 'Events Leading Up to Federation: II, 1952–55', 3.

104. Stumbles, *Some Recollections of a Rhodesian Speaker*, 56.

105. *Ibid.*, 119.

106. 'Ray Stockil to Retire', *RDM*, 4 February 1959.

107. *Debates*, 3 May 1950, col. 600.

108. S. Dubow, 'Macmillan, Verwoerd and the 1960 "Wind of Change" Speech', *The Historical Journal*, 54, 4 (2011), 1087.

movement with widespread support and international networks.¹⁰⁹ White political opinion in Southern Rhodesia re-aligned as the cautionary words of Stumbles and Stockil acquired new resonance.

The monumental UDI declaration five years later was fraught with symbolism. The syntax of the independence proclamation closely mirrored that of the United States' Declaration of Independence.¹¹⁰ The decision was announced by Rhodesian Prime Minister Ian Smith at 11 am on 11 November – the precise anniversary of the cessation of hostilities of World War I, a conflict in which white Rhodesians reportedly served at a higher proportion than settlers in any other British territory.¹¹¹ This pageantry underscores the underacknowledged extent to which the quest for independence dominated white Rhodesia's political class since the end of World War II. White Rhodesia was fundamentally primed for unilateralism once the drive for negotiated independence failed.

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109. John Day, *International Nationalism: The Extra-territorial Relations of Southern Rhodesian Nationalists* (New York: Humanities Press, 1967), passim.
 110. M. Evans, 'The Wretched of the Empire: Politics, Ideology and Counterinsurgency in Rhodesia, 1965–80', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 18, 2 (2007), 181.
 111. P. Keatley, *The Politics of Partnership* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1963), 205.