The drift to Mugabe

Christopher Hitchens writes: A report on the state of affairs in Rhodesia has been sent to the Prime Minister and Dr Owen. It represents a month's work by Alex Lyon, MP and his assistant Clare Short, who spent their time mainly in Rhodesia but also in the 'front line' periphery. Mr Lyon has made himself unpopular with this government over racial matters in the past; it would be a pity if his findings were set aside for that reason, as they coincide with many other independent reports. What he discerned in Rhodesia itself was a steady drift of support from Bishop Muzorewa to Robert Mugabe, and a growing fear that Britain is too heavily committed to the installation of Joshua Nkomo as President of the new Zimbabwe – with or without elections.

The sheer nastiness of the present war in Rhodesia makes it every day more likely that there will be a subsequent civil war between ZANU and ZAPU if the unity of the Front Line Presidents and the twin Patriotic Front leaders is damaged. Mr Lyon believes that British partiality towards Joshua Nkomo and Kenneth Kaunda makes this outcome more probable, and thereby strengthens the short-term bargaining position of Smith.

Ominously, Mr Lyon and Ms Short found support for Nkomo and Mugabe tending to divide along tribal lines, with the former drawing heavily on Ndebele around Bulawayo. This has only intensified the distrust which exists between the two wings; a distrust magnified on Mugabe's side by the private meeting between Smith and Nkomo and by the opening of the border between Rhodesia and Zambia. 'Option B' in the Foreign Office position paper seems to the Tanzanians and Mozambicans a 'get-out clause' which would justify British support for Nkomo without elections.

Since Nyerere broke diplomatic relations with Britain on this issue once before – when we were dealing with Smith without electoral guarantees – it can be assumed that he does not hold his present position lightly, Foreign Office reaction to this most recent report will no doubt be affected by the allegation that it listens only to Zambian sources and to our High Commission in Lusaka, while all the time the internal settlement is collapsing and the mass movement is slipping away towards Mugabe and his troops.

Risks at Aldermaston

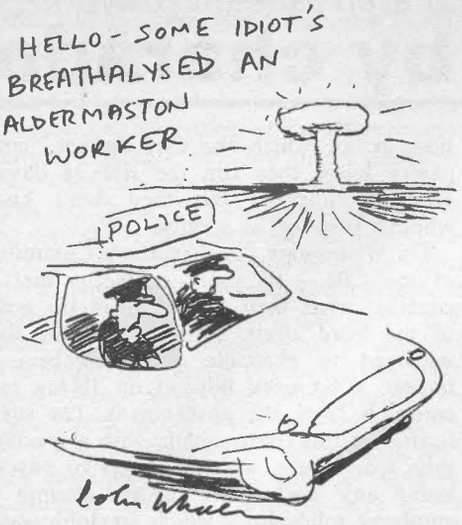
Duncan Campbell writes: The safety record of one of the Defence Ministry's most sensitive establishments – the Aldermaston atomic weapons centre – has now been thoroughly scrutinised under a public spotlight, and found thoroughly deficient. Many changes will take place as the centre returns to normal operation. The safety report by government medical adviser Sir Edward Pochin, which was published last week, notes a remarkable unconcern over the importance of health and safety factors in an establishment concerned with one of the riskiest production lines imaginable.

Underlying this are some examples – documented at length in the report – of systematic misunderstanding or ignorance of the factors neccessary for safety. Time, money, and perhaps more was wasted on equipment which didn't do the right job, or was installed in the wrong place, or even increased the risk. For example:

- Many rooms where radioactive material is handled have to have considerable ventilation to avoid risk of contamination. The entire volume of air in a room may be changed as often as once every 80 seconds, a factor which is actually irrelevant, as the vast air flow may not even disturb some surfaces where radioactive dust lingers. The 'basic concept' was 'erroneous'.
- Water sprays were used in an attempt to prevent dust rising; in fact this precaution would result in more fine dust being suspended in the atmosphere. This was 'detrimental' to health.
- Tests of plutonium exposure of Aldermaston workers were done only by taking urine samples, even though other nuclear experimental centres had known for years that this was irrelevant to the major hazard – the breathing of plutonium as dust. The discovery of plutonium concentrations in several workers' lungs was a major factor behind the recent inquiry.

Examples like these demonstrated the extent to which the real safety issue was fudged, even when genuine concern was being exercised. Even this was not always the case – the health physics establishment was well below strength, and management and training difficulties as well as lack of staff had intensified bad practices.

Of more concern still, perhaps, is the demonstration of systematic errors in understanding science and technology by a section of the nuclear industry, even when it was their lives on the line. It should be said that practices at British Nuclear Fuels' Windscale plant and elsewhere reportedly compare very favourably with Aldermaston. But one systematic misunderstanding is still perpetrated by all parties: the concept of a 'safe' level of radiation exposure, which underpins much of the analysis in the Pochin report, and of course any assessment of the risks of nuclear power. Just one radioactive particle may start a cancerous cell, and any increase will magnify



the hazard to health, even if little more than background level. The issue then shifts to containing radiation to 'permissible' or 'recommended' levels. And who judges the 'permissibility' of giving another cancer?

Freeloading in Namibia

Roger Murray writes: Journalists at the United Nations Headquarters in New York have found themselves in the thick of a major controversy following an invitation from the South African Government to spend 10 days in Namibia reporting next Monday's internal elections which it describes as 'country-wide elections based on universal adult suffrage'. While the South African Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Bernadus Fourie, has been busy assuring the UN Secretary-General Dr Kurt Waldheim that Pretoria is willing to cooperate in implementing the UN plan for elections next year, the text of the invitation makes interesting reading. A letter signed by David Steward, the South African Chargé d'Affaires in New York, and dated 30 October, conveyed an invitation on behalf of the Administrator-General of Namibia, Judge Marthinue Steyn: 'Because of the historical and political importance of the occasion, I have pleasure in inviting you to the Territory for the process of observing the electorial (sic) process. It is suggested that you arrive in the Territory between 27 November 1978 and 4 December 1978 for a visit of up to 10 days prior to, during or after the election period. I am looking forward to having the opportunity of meeting you personally in Windhoek. Signed: M. T. Steyn, Administrator-General.' The covering letter continued: 'The Administrator-General is prepared to bear the cost of your visit.'

The invitation was extended to 17 journalists in their capacity as UN-accredited correspondents. What particularly incensed officials of UNCA, the UN Correspondents Association, was less the offer of a free trip than the apparent attempt to set up a situation in which it could be claimed that the UN in some form had taken part in the proceedings, and the fact that the invitation was exclusively directed to Western correspondents, although UNCA has several, although too few, African and third world members. Inquiries by one veteran observer of UN affairs, journalist Alec Collett, failed to obtain a prior assurance from the South Africans as to whether or not the group of UNCA journalists invited would be able to travel freely and have full access to individuals, rather than being obliged to travel about in a group at all times. A majority of the news organisations invited – most of which in any case have long-standing house regulations precluding the acceptance of free trips – declined the invitation. Only two correspondents – from the BBC and Reuters – accepted the initial invitation.

The South African Embassy in Washington has confirmed that up to 100 persons from various countries had been invited by Judge Steyn. Americans invited included heads of major foundations, jurists and some strong critics of apartheid, such as Millard Arnold, a Washington attorney who directs the South African programme of the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, who had twice before been refused visas for South Africa. John Knowles, president of the Rockefeller Foundation, and McGeorge Bundy, head of Ford Foundation, publicly announced they had turned down their invitations.

Paying for students

Francis Wheen writes: The National Union of Students is holding an emergency conference in London this weekend to discuss the reforms of student union financing suggested by the Department of Education and Science. Students in receipt of mandatory awards currently have their annual union subscription – sometimes as much as £50 per capita – paid by their local education authority, which then has 90 per cent of the sum reimbursed by the DES. Following consultations with interested parties the DES issued a discussion paper in May this year, which proposed that unions should receive a maximum of about £15 from local authorities and, 'to cover the cost of all but the minimum level of student union activity', would have to negotiate a subvention from their host institutions to make up the sum.

This move was designed to stem criticism of student unions' alleged lack of accountability for the large sums of public money they consume – £13 million in 1976-77 – without impinging on their autonomy. Many unions feel, however, that having to negotiate a subvention direct from their college would reduce not only their independence – since the money could be awarded conditionally – but also their income, since they would be competing with academic departments for a slice of the same cake. Recognition of this unease came last week with the announcement by Mr Gordon Oakes, Minister of State at the DES, that, while the government still intends to go ahead with its original scheme in the absence of any acceptable alternative, it might now prove necessary to defer its introduction until the academic year 1980-81 to allow time for further consultations. Although the DES proposals are far from perfect, they do at least represent a heartening victory for the Department over the Treasury, which wanted to interfere with the NUS's independence as well.

Intelligence fantasies

Duncan Campbell writes: The lobbyists of the right have hit back at the allegations of Mr Sia Zand – the Iranian defector who claims that certain British journalists have been in the pay of the Shah of Iran – in a burst of fantasy which illuminates them rather than Zand. In the *New York Times* of 23 November 'British Intelligence Sources known for a generally hard line attitude' are quoted on the subject of Mr Zand, who, they say, 'has been taken over by "the Agee ring" ' – said to be a group of writers and activists who were friendly with CIA critic Philip Agee. The 'sources' ventured one name of this Agee circle – mine. Because of these taunts, Mr Zand was not to be trusted.

Mr Zand has not met me, or indeed anyone who might be part of an 'Agee ring' as described. The incident points to a clear and no doubt witting fantasy being perpetrated by some sections of British intelligence agencies and their lobbyists, namely that any critic of their activities is a servant of Moscow, orchestrated by *bêtes noires* like Agee.

Mr Zand's allegations still await substantiation, although it is notable that the Iranian embassy has admitted the practice of giving expensive gifts to journalists. Embassy spokesmen have helpfully refuted any suggestion that Mr Zand was 'a puppet of communists or Trotskyites'.

The fantasies of 'British intelligence sources' will also leave their mark elsewhere this week. Attorney-General Sam Silkin is to face a meeting; of the Parliamentary Labour Party this Thursday to explain why he allowed 'unsubstantiated' and 'oppressive' charges under Section One of the Official Secrets Act to be brought in the recent trial on the recommendation of security advisers.

The old, old Nixon

I like a drink as much as anyone: critics, indeed, may say this is an under-estimate. And if you edit a newspaper, even a small one like the NS, there's no shortage of occasions on which you can have one, or several, without paying.

But there are some invitations I find myself refusing. In October for instance, there was the card entitling the bearer to celebrate at the Soviet Embassy the anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. Now, I'm quite ready to do specific business with the controllers of the Soviet Union: asking, for instance, about human rights in their country, or about their latest methods of refining titanium. But I'm not ready to swig champagne with them on the anniversary of a socialist revolution the aspirations of which were butchered long ago.

Of course, this is an awkward matter for a reporter. In order to do one's job, one must be meek and gentle with all kinds of butchers. Certainly I would not give 10p for any reporter who claims to understand the condition of modern Britain, but who has not spent some time leaning on a bar while some National Frontsman expounds his unlovely theories. (One never knows how much of one's modest demeanour is professional detachment, and how much is pragmatic judgment about the number of bodies blocking one's passage to the door.)

There seems to be no test except the instinctive one of the irresistibly rising gorge. Others may differ; but my own gorge passed the Plimsoll mark on the arrival of an invitation from Lord Longford to lunch luxuriously with Richard Nixon and some large gathering of London wits and intellectuals. It was, I think, the wording of the card that did it: Guest of *Honour* the *Honourable* Richard Nixon. Coming from a self-appointed guardian of public morals, it seemed a little rich. Should we *honour* the man who tried to subvert American democracy? Nixon is, of course, entitled to free speech. Any time he has something to say, there's a soapbox at Hyde Park Corner. And why shouldn't Lord Longford, who likes to reform hard cases, buy him a warming lunch afterwards? But it would be wrong to imagine that the Longford shindig, or Nixon's visit to the Oxford Union, have anything to do with the free passage of information. Nixon, as usual, will say nothing he has not said before, and those who attend will learn no more that the visitors to a raree-show.

Nixon, however, is satisfied with such an exchange, for his business at the moment is to restore himself as a force in American politics by 'collecting' naïve and, where possible, distinguished audiences outside America. (It was always his pitch that 'the world' was more appreciative than his own ungrateful people.) He will not be a Presidential candidate again, but he is on the way to being a Republican kingmaker – and Lord Longford and the Oxford Union have received a small part in the script. Soon, we shall be reading about another 'new Nixon', and it may be wise to recall what one veteran American editor said last time a product was launched under that name, in 1968. 'Gentlemen,' he said, 'there is no "new Nixon". There is just the old Nixon, a little older.'

Bruce Page