

Rigging of Nigeria's Independence Elections by the British Government

by

[Harold Smith](#)

I was put on trial by the Governor General of Nigeria in 1960. Later in retirement he wrote his memoirs but he does not mention me. Although the book was published in 1974, I did not even hear of it until 1991. I had read every major work on Nigeria over several decades and nowhere was Sir James Robertson's book mentioned.

Clearly, in commenting on this book 'Transition in Africa' I am prejudiced. After all I was found guilty of a major crime and severely punished. Naturally, having served my sentence, I am curious to know more about James Robertson. What is indisputable is that Robertson was a highly successful colonial administrator.

Strictly speaking, the Sudan was not a British Colony, and for most of his life Robertson worked for the Foreign Office, but the differences are not really significant. The Sudan was run like a Colony and Robertson's work was no different than it would have been had he worked in Nigeria, which lay to the West on the Atlantic seaboard.

The British Colonies were run in a highly efficient and economical manner. It is true that much that is now accepted as essential services, even in poor African countries today, was not on offer when men like Robertson ruled vast numbers of colonial peoples. However, it is still extraordinary just how much was achieved by what was by any standards an absolutely minimally staffed service. The pay was not good, the health prospects were poor and it was by no means certain that every successful administrator would reach the top of the tree and collect gongs and a knighthood.

The quality of the staff recruited was high and Robertson was not untypical. He was a very capable Balliol graduate with a second in Greats and a Rugby Blue. He learned Arabic and worked very hard under the most primitive conditions for many years before promotion and honours came his way. These were richly deserved. Britain got a bargain in men of Robertson's calibre. The caricature of colonial blimps by liberals is unfair, if understandable. Robertson was not narrow. He had had an excellent education and his work in the Sudan called for considerable intelligence, enterprise and stamina. He wielded enormous power and routinely shouldered responsibilities beyond any that his contemporaries at Oxford would have realised in the Home Civil Service or in industry.

He was, I imagine, excellent company, with an enquiring mind, an amiable, friendly, good-humoured manner, loyal to his friends and, in his own way, to his country. In different circumstances the sort of person most of us rank and file in the service in Lagos would have been pleased to work under. As it was, my job at the Department of Labour, a notorious place to work, was made much worse by Robertson's intervention which was openly criminal.

My friend Michael Crowder, who was to become a distinguished, but flawed historian of African affairs, was surprised at how big a man Sir James was. He was to write of him as a great bear of a man, someone with a large presence and quite a big physique. I was down to seven or eight stone myself, largely due to Robertson, and in those days he seemed big to me too. Now I am fourteen stone myself, Robertson seems average. Michael got the plum job of Editor of Nigeria Magazine because he had cultivated Margery Perham at Oxford and she had recommended Michael to her good friend, the Governor General. When Michael was summoned to a tête-à-tête lunch at Government House he was already indebted to Sir James, and the Governor General reminded him of that fact. He also in a matter-of-fact way told Michael that he knew that he was a queer and that he was friendly with someone who was a thorn in his, His Excellency's, flesh.

"You are living very dangerously, Mr Crowder," said Robertson, topping up Michael's wine glass.

To say that Michael was frightened was an inadequate description of the terror he felt. He could go to gaol! At that point his bowel control became uncertain.

"Tell your friend Smith to stop dabbling in politics, or it might look bad for you. Do you understand what I am saying?"

Michael fled Government House and came straight to me after an enforced rush to the bathroom. Michael was pale and shaken.

"He knows about you, Sean," he stammered. "It was because of you I got the invitation!"

We had both wondered why Michael had been honoured in this way. The notion that I dabbled in politics amused me but did not cheer Michael. Henceforth he would steer well clear of me.

It was His Excellency the Governor General who was completely immersed in politics at a level which astounded everyone who was privy to the secret. When Robertson arrived in Lagos in 1955 he was no routine replacement. His predecessor, Sir John MacPherson, had become Permanent Secretary at the Colonial Office and Robertson headed a team of Sudanese administrators charged to carry out one of the most extraordinary missions in British colonial history. His team was made up of Sir Gawain Bell, who became Governor of the North, and his close friend Geoffrey Hawkesworth, who would take up the equally vital position of Chairman of the Federal Public Service Commission. Why was this team of experienced Sudanese administrators chosen to arrange the handover of power to Nigerian politicians? Quite simply, because what was required to be done was extraordinary. It is doubtful if Nigeria's top administrators would have carried out Whitehall's orders. His Excellency might have said jocularly, 'They've all gone native.' This was a tough assignment for men who would do whatever was necessary.

"Why?" I pleaded, when I saw Sir James at Government House in 1960. "Why did you rig the elections?"

"Because it was necessary," he replied coolly.

And also possible. In the Sudan, international observers were present to monitor the British administration of the elections. Robertson's elections prove how essential it is not to trust British protestations of fair play in running elections.

I was a lawmaker, busy preparing new laws befitting the giant African nation about to be born. My Factories Act had been hailed as the greatest piece of legislation to be placed on the Nigerian statute book. The Attorney General of Nigeria had praised my work highly, and the Chief Secretary, Sir Ralph, later Lord, Grey, wrote a letter for my personal file stating that I 'had been of some service to the state...' The Labour Advisor to the Secretary of State said I had made an extraordinary start to my career - I was, after all, straight out of Magdalen College, Oxford - and he promised that I was assured of a brilliant career.

The first stage of the Independence Elections took place in 1956 and were to decide the government of the three Regions, or States, which constituted the Federation. The British had always favoured the pro-British but very backward North, paradoxically because it did not seek independence at all, but was quite happy with the great powers bestowed on its hereditary leaders by indirect rule from the indifferent British. The chosen people were totally unprepared for independence and would inevitably suffer at the hands of the well educated and politically sophisticated Southerners who made jokes about British officials and ridiculed and even patronised them. The North lacked a University, even the basic elements of an elementary school system. Its civil servants at clerical level were Southerners and its administrators were almost totally British. Something had to be done.

I was astonished to receive orders from His Excellency in 1956 telling me to help fix the 1956 State elections. I was to head a covert operation and, under cover of a study of migration, to take all Labour headquarters staff and transport to help elect politicians backed by the British. I replied with a minute that said, 'No.' These were criminal acts, expressly forbidden by the election laws of Nigeria and I could not carry them out. The Governor General and the British Government had it in for the Action Group, the government party in the Western Region. Robertson's remarks about the Action Group in his memoirs illustrate his deep animosity and hatred towards them.

If that refusal to break the laws of Nigeria and Britain and the essence of democratic parliamentary system was dabbling in politics, I plead guilty. In truth it was His Excellency and Whitehall who were subverting the British Constitution and committing treason against the rule of HM The Queen.

Michael Crowder had received a menacing home visit from a senior police officer who made threatening gestures. My wife and I gave Michael all possible moral support in this grotesque and squalid blackmail by agents of the British Government.

Sir James told me that he had personally issued the orders to which I had objected; that not one of the many other senior officers involved had objected; that I knew far too much and if I would not shut up means would be found to silence me. I did not know all the facts. The operation was necessary. If I would not shut up I would never work again in a responsible position. The press would never be allowed to publish my story. Who would believe me? I would have to agree to work abroad. I was not to be allowed to be employed in the UK. A brilliant career lay ahead if I would give my word. The Colonial Service was like the Army: if you disobeyed orders, you paid the penalty.

Clearly Sir James Robertson was chosen for this treachery because it was known that he was a very hard man with an underdeveloped moral sense. Proof of this is to be found in his autobiography when he was severely reprimanded for executing three Africans who were allegedly acting as agents of the Italians.

I might have said, had I been allowed, that I was a civil servant. Even if I had been in the Army, I would have had the right to a lawful trial. As it was, my rights as a civil servant to appeal to the Public Service Commission were blocked by the Governor General's friend, Geoffrey Hawkesworth.

Amazingly, the Governor General's prediction was correct. The Colonial Office told its Minister, Julian Amery, in 1960 that I did not exist and when he persevered he was then told that all my papers had been destroyed. The Queen's friend, Lord Perth, was closely involved and can verify the truth of my story. His Excellency's Star Chamber trial verdict ran beyond his death in 1974. In thirty years the British Press has played its prostitute role and has been shamed by the bravery of a small County paper, the Wiltshire Times, which published my story in 1988.

Lord Grey has been available to inform successive British Governments of the truth of my account, but they do everything possible to pretend they have not been informed. Deniability is the aim. Having now had acknowledgements from Lynda Chalker, Chris Patten and the Prime Minister, that particular tactic is no longer sustainable. Blocking publication is proof of concerted Government action and an acknowledgement of guilt, if it were needed.

There is little point in listing the sleight-of-hand deceptions and stratagems Robertson used to avoid the truth in his account. When he is assuredly guilty of treason against our most hallowed constitutional principles, he is a man without honour, as are those politicians and Whitehall employees who gave him leave to behave criminally. His actions in the Sudan and Nigeria led directly to the tragedies which befell those countries. In Nigeria a million people died in the Biafran Civil War because of his machinations.

The degree of complicity of Mr. Major's Government in the conspiracy of silence still surrounding these events has yet to be established. As before, I am sending copies of this statement to various notables, none of whom however has yet interceded, and all of whom must share some degree of responsibility for preventing the full and proper disclosure to the public of these disgraceful events.

28 November 1991

Special thanks for Mr. Harold Smith for allowing the use of this article. He worked in Nigeria before Independence. Visit his site for more expose on Nigeria www.libertas.demon.co.uk

Election riggings in Nigeria have dealt a huge blow to the development of democracy in Nigeria. Nigeria's elections so far have not live up to expectations due to various forms of electoral manipulations which have denied the country credible free and fair elections in her body politic. Election rigging has not only marred democratic consolidation in Nigeria but has also violated the fundamental human right (right to life) of so many Nigerians. Election riggings since independence reviewed in this paper will be our bench mark. The study found that election riggings in Nigeria have resulted. The history of Nigeria is actually quite interesting, especially when it comes to the question about constitutional development in Nigeria before Independence. Let's look through some facts you have never heard before! What does Constitution mean? According to the history of Nigeria, in 1861, after the capture of Lagos by the British, a Legislative and Executive Council were set. In 1862, Lagos and other British regions in the Gold Coast were placed under the authority of a Governor General which was based in Sierra Leone on 19 February 1866. Actually, all of them had their own Legislative Councils. What is interesting is that in 1874 Lagos and the Gold Coast were launched into an individual colony. Nigeria was then made a British protectorate on 1 January 1901 thus becoming a section of the British Empire. Towards the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th centuries, the sovereign kingdoms that would later become Nigeria fought against Britain's attempts to enlarge its territory. Benin was conquered by the British in 1897 who also overpowered other opponents in the Anglo-Aro War that took place from 1901-1902. After World War II there were demands for independence by the locals and consecutive constitutions established by Britain helped move Nigeria towards a self-government. Towards mid-20th century a big wave for sovereignty was sweeping across the African continent and Nigeria attained its independence on 1 October 1960.