

Letter from Ian Watt to Herbert Bowden on the celebrations to mark the independence of Lesotho (Maseru, 14 October 1966)

Caption: In a letter dated 14 October 1966, the British High Commissioner in Maseru, Ian Watt, informs the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations, Herbert William Bowden, about the festivities held to mark the independence of Lesotho on 4 October 1966.

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BRITISH HIGH COMMISSION,

MASKRU.

14 October, 1966.

No. 1
(101/3)

Sir,

I have the honour to report on the achievement of Independence by the Kingdom of Lesotho, and the celebrations which marked the occasion.

2. Her Majesty the Queen was represented by Her Royal Highness The Princess Marina, Duchess of Kent. The charm, grace and friendliness of Her Royal Highness not only won for her an immense, and, I would expect, an enduring popularity here, but also ensured that the celebrations had a measure of style which local efforts alone might not quite have achieved.

3. Her Majesty's Government was represented by a delegation led by Mr. John Stonehouse, M.P., Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies, who was accompanied by Mrs. Stonehouse, Mr. A. Campbell, C.M.G., of the Commonwealth Office, Mr. G. Whitefield (Private Secretary) and myself. The United Kingdom Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association was represented by Mr. R. G. Paget, M.P., and Sir John Rogers, M.P. At Annex 'A' is a list of official delegates from other Governments. In addition, a number of eminent persons, most of whom had some connexion with Lesotho, were invited to attend the celebrations. They included Her Majesty's Ambassador at Capetown and Lady Stephenson, His Grace Archbishop McGeough as Apostolic Delegate, His Grace the Anglican Archbishop of Capetown, the Bishop of Basutoland, Lord Fraser of Lonsdale, Sir Julian Crossley representing Barclays Bank D.C.O, and Mr. A. Gilpin, representing the Secretary-General of the United Nations.

----- 4. At Annex 'B' I enclose the official programme of events.

The Right Honourable Herbert Bowden, P.C., M.P.,
etc. etc. etc.,
Secretary of State for Commonwealth Affairs.



/Two points



Two points in particular gave these celebrations an unusual interest and expectancy. First, almost all the Government delegations came here after attending the Botswana Independence celebrations and were very ready to compare public reactions in the two countries. Second, there was much concern about how the Paramount Chief would behave. You will recall, Sir, that only ten days before the celebrations began, the Paramount Chief had told a large rally that he intended to make a public complaint to Princess Marina about the Constitution; in particular as regards the powers and responsibilities which the Independence Constitution would permit him as Head of State.

5. The generality of delegates felt that the people of Lesotho entered into the Independence celebrations with much more zest, and that the main celebrations in the capital attracted many more people from outlying districts, than in Botswana. I believe that the demonstrative enthusiasm shown by the people of Lesotho, went some way to reduce the scepticism^s held by some African delegates at any rate about the popularity of Chief Leabua Jonathan's Government. Moreover, nearly all the Government delegates had to come here to realise just how completely this country is encircled by the Republic of South Africa; and perhaps in some cases this experience may have made them somewhat more ready to understand the motives which compel Chief Leabua Jonathan to follow policies of co-existence and co-operation.

6. In the following paragraphs I describe what took place, or, in one important instance, did not take place at four of the main events.

7. On the morning of 3rd October the Paramount Chief unveiled a statue of his great-great-great-grandfather, Moshoeshoe the First. The setting was unique; and the ceremony itself

/remarkable.



remarkable. The statue was placed on the top of a semi-circle of low hills; the delegates were seated on the flat below. The hillsides were crowded with thousands of Basuto in their very best: for the men conical hats and blankets of infinite variety, for the women bright blue draperies and headresses. It was as though the delegates were on the stage of a Greek amphitheatre, and the Basuto spectators in the auditorium with the statue on the topmost tier. Most of the men had come on horseback. As the delegates began to arrive and excitement grew, many of us heard for the first time an extraordinary sound which was to become, I think, the most penetrating feature of the celebrations. It is best described as an ululation. I do not know how the sound is produced, but it is like the whinnying of horses, and so I am told, has traditionally been employed by Basuto women to stimulate their warriors in battle. These ululations rose in a crescendo as the Paramount Chief cantered into the arena, attended by a great troop of horsemen clad like himself in blanket and conical hat; in scarlet, yellow and black, this bodyguard was a splendid sight. Following the Lesotho and British National Anthems the Paramount Chief ascended to the statue, which after making the speech, of which I enclose a copy at Annex 'C', he unveiled. The statue is the work of Mr. Eugene-Leon Bouffa a Belgian sculptor, and shows Moshoeshe the First gazing watchfully towards the plains of the Orange Free State. (It was this watchfulness which largely induced him to seek British protection.) In his speech the Paramount Chief spoke appreciatively of his ancestor's action and example in placing his country under British protection, and pleaded for national unity and self help.

8. The tone of this excellent speech gave the first grounds

/for hope



for hope that the celebrations might not be marred by open bickering between the Paramount Chief and his Government. Another encouraging sign, although it was a first detected only by connoisseurs of Lesotho politics, was that when the Paramount Chief descended and prepared to remount his horse, the Prime Minister stepped forward to hold the reins. I am assured that the symbolic effect of this one action was considerable.

9. In the evening of 3rd October, the Paramount Chief and his wife held a private dinner party to which they invited the representatives of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Mr. and Mrs. Stonehouse and myself. It was a most agreeable party and was clear the Paramount Chief was concerned to mark the Commonwealth connexion; ~~in this way~~ he proposed Her Majesty's health with sincerity and dignity.

10. There followed the programme of events leading up to the ceremony of lowering the Union Jack and raising the flag of Lesotho at midnight. Lesotho has been suffering from an alarming drought in recent months, and although the stadium had been planted with winter wheat in an attempt to provide a green surface and keep down the dust, most of us saw the events through an increasingly thick cloud of dust which became almost impenetrable when, after midnight, the fireworks were let off. The parades and the like, with the marked exception of the band of the Royal Irish Fusiliers, perhaps lacked the polish of similar events in larger countries, but everybody cheered everything, comparative punctuality was maintained, and the whole effect was a rather pleasing blend of pomp and simplicity. And there was no doubting the excitement and satisfaction of the crowd, estimated at some 40,000, (or four times the normal population /of Maseru),

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of Maseru), as the British Government Representative, Sir Alexander Giles, K.B.E., C.M.G., held out his hand to the Paramount Chief, now His Majesty Moshoeshoe the Second, standing in a circle of light beside the flagpoles.

11. On the morning of 4th October we assembled again at the stadium for taking of the Oath by the King, and the presentation by Her Royal Highness of the Constitutional Instruments. There was some tension as we awaited the King's speech in reply. If he intended to carry out his declared intention to make a public complaint to Princess Marina now was the time to do it. However, his speech (which I understand was the result of much hard drafting by his Ministers and himself), was not only free from blemish in this respect, but genuinely deserved the praise given it by a number of delegates as statesmanlike and sensible. Copies of the speeches by Her Royal Highness, in which she read a Message from Her Majesty The Queen, and of the King's reply, are at Annexes 'D' and 'E'.

12. This improvement in relations between the King and his Prime Minister, at any rate in public, was further demonstrated when the King attended a reception at the Prime Minister's house later in the day, and by the Prime Minister's broadcast to the nation, the text of which I enclose at Annex 'F'. In this address the Prime Minister expressed his loyalty to the Royal House of ^{Lesotho} Molapo, and his adherence to traditional ways. He took care, however, to emphasise the progressive outlook of the great Moshoeshoe and the readiness of the Lesotho people to change with the times. At a Press Conference, and also I understand, ~~there~~ at a private gathering of his Party supporters the Prime Minister emphasised that the King was now bound by Oath to uphold the Constitution.

/13. The day

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13. The day ended with a State Ball, attended by Her Royal Highness. This was perhaps somewhat more robust than comparable occasions elsewhere.

14. The 5th October was devoted wholly to a Pitso, the Sesotho word for a gathering which can include some of the characteristics of a happening, a moot, a political meeting, and a Highland Games. The Pitso was held in the mountains some seventy miles from Maseru, thus requiring a long drive on bumpy and dusty roads by Her Royal Highness, the King, and those determined delegates, who decided to go. It was a long day, a very hot day, and perhaps few would wish to repeat the experience, colourful although it undoubtedly was.

15. On 6th October Her Royal Highness visited the University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland to attend a luncheon given by Sir Hugh Stephenson, the Chancellor. Most unfortunately, a South African member of the teaching staff had been found dead early that morning; and in the circumstances this function was curtailed. Meanwhile in Maseru the Parliament of Lesotho held a formal meeting to receive gifts or promises of gifts from representatives of governments and legislatures. Mr. R. T. Paget, M.P., in his speech expressed the hope and confidence that Lesotho and South Africa would indeed find it possible to co-exist to their mutual advantage. This caused no comment but he was followed by Mr. J. J. Visse, Deputy Chairman of Committees of the House of Assembly of the Republic of South Africa, who rose to present a Speaker's Chair. Mr. Mokhehle, leader of the Basuto National Congress and official leader of the Opposition, immediately intervened to insist that no South African gift should be accepted. Amid increasing noise from his supporters,

/Mr. Mokhehle

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Mr. Mokhehle described the Speaker's Chair as a Trojan horse marking the first step in the decline of Lesotho into a Bantusan. Mr. Visse tried to carry on with his speech, but the Opposition members maintained the uproar, and effectively prevented him from speaking. The Speaker could not bring Parliament to order; he asked Mr. Visse to withdraw and ordered that his prepared speech should be written into the record of Parliament. This speech is at Annex 'G'. Mr. Visse withdrew with good humour and dignity and Parliament resumed its proceedings quietly. Mr. Mokhehle was later at pains to make public a letter which he had sent to Mr. Visse, explaining that he intended no personal discourtesy. The Prime Minister issued a statement condemning the Opposition's behaviour as discourteous, disgraceful and irresponsible. This was the sole disorderly episode throughout the Independence celebrations, which the Basutoland National Congress otherwise boycotted. Assuming that they had to let off steam somewhere, a parliamentary row was perhaps the least harmful way to do so. The visiting press, who were present in force, had been rather disappointed by the lack of troublous incidents during the celebrations; and they gave this episode perhaps more publicity than it deserved.

16. In the afternoon of 6th October Her Royal Highness attended a garden party given by the King, at which she was presented to a number of Lesotho and British notables. In the evening Her Royal Highness and the King attended part of a musical concert of inordinate length. It was a pity that the determination of enthusiastic choir masters and organisers to leave out nobody who was prepared to perform in public spoiled the pleasure of

/hearing the

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hearing the properly trained Lesotho choirs which sing, unaccompanied, delightfully.

17. On the morning of 7th October Her Royal Highness left by air for Johannesburg. There were many Basuto on the route to the airport; ululating cheerfully as Her Royal Highness's car passed; and large numbers of the public at the airport itself, where Her Royal Highness took formal leave of the Prime Minister and the King. With Her Royal Highness's departure, the official celebrations came to an end.

18. I am sending copies of this despatch to Her Majesty's Ambassador at Capetown, the British High Commissioner at Gaborones, and Her Majesty's Commission in Swaziland.

I have the honour to be,

Sir,

Your obedient Servant

Ian Watt

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