

What Butler did: Britain and Rhodesia, 1963-4

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The negotiations between London and Salisbury over independence for Southern Rhodesia during the last years of Conservative Government rule have long been shrouded in controversy. Memoirs by the main protagonists differ in most respects. While Ian Smith, Rhodesian prime minister before and after UDI, maintains to this day that the settler colony was promised independence by Britain's then Secretary of State for Central Africa, there is no written evidence in support of this claim. Certainly RAB Butler always denied that any such undertaking was given. Current historiography, based largely on British Government records, agrees that Butler deliberately played it 'long'. Scrutiny of Rhodesian Cabinet documents, however, suggests that Whitehall's bat was not always as straight as subsequently portrayed. Both Butler and Sir Alec Douglas Home, who had succeeded Harold Macmillan as British prime minister in October 1963, initially left their Rhodesian counterparts with the distinct impression that the Conservative Government not only sympathised with their case for independence but also that 'unilateral action' might need to be taken. Although both sides were looking over their shoulders at the looming prospect of a Labour Government and the likely implications of this for Rhodesian independence, the real change seems to have occurred in April 1964 when Winston Field was replaced by Smith as the Rhodesians' leader. From this point, the attitudes of all parties hardened markedly.