

The 'Wind of Change': On Whose Terms?

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This paper will interrogate British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan's 'wind of change' speech in the light of the conference theme – 'African engagements: on whose terms?' Ever since Macmillan gave the speech in South Africa in 1960, the phrase 'wind of change' has become something of a cliché, understood to signify support for African decolonization from the European powers. But as this paper reveals, through a focus on Britain's engagement in the crisis of the Congo in 1960-61 and her response to the role in the Congo of the United Nations, Macmillan's metaphor was complex and ambivalent.

For as newly-released British government documents reveal, Macmillan wanted Britain actively to shape the direction in which the wind of decolonization was blowing. On the one hand, he heralded the Congo's independence from Belgium in 1960 and publicly expressed regret at the secession of Katanga. But at the same time, he offered secret support to British commercial interests operating in Katanga and to Moise Tshombe, its self-styled leader.

The United Nations, under the direction of Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld, sought to protect the democratically-elected government of the Congo against Western interference – to enable the newly-independent nation to blow the 'wind of change' on her own terms. But the UN mission in the Congo was obstructed by Britain, despite her ostensible support for the Security Council Resolution of February 1961, authorizing the UN to take all measures to restore order in the Congo and to effect the immediate withdrawal of foreign advisors and mercenaries. When the UN initiated an operation in 1961 to remove Tshombe's white mercenaries, Macmillan was appalled and warned of 'a great financial and moral blow to the West and especially European civilization.'

This paper will also look at the significance of Macmillan's metaphor for Africans who were fighting against colonisation. From his gaol in Angola in 1960, Agostinho Neto, the leader of the Angolan nationalist movement, wrote a poem which transformed the metaphor into a declaration of hope for freedom from Portuguese rule:

I patiently wait for the clouds to gather
blown by the wind of History, no one can stop the rain.