



University of London

INSTITUTE OF COMMONWEALTH STUDIES

COHP David McDowell: APPENDIX TWO

Content:

Additional material provided by Mr David McDowell on 1 July 2014. The selection reproduces a note McDowell had originally authored for a New Zealand newspaper following Idi Amin's death in 2003.

'Idi Amin is Dead' by David McDowell

Conversation over lunch with Idi Amin was not easy. When the desultory exchanges between the President and Commonwealth Secretary General Arnold Smith stalled I tried a new gambit: why, I asked, were soldiers with chain saws cutting down the century-old tropical elms which distinguished the main street of Kampala?

The big round head swung around to me and the eyes glittered – I had already encountered his unspoken but palpable ire by breaking the rule that no-one stood taller than the President. Now he had me at his mercy. With that manic logic which was difficult to counter he answered: in a few weeks' time we are going to mark the first anniversary of my coup and I want my soldiers to be able to march fourteen abreast down that street and they can't do it with those trees in the way. He dared me to comment. I kept my peace (coward!). We were there for other reasons and antagonizing the President would not be a contribution to the more important discussions to come.

For Amin had declared war on his South Asian citizens and Arnold Smith had to talk him into letting them leave peacefully and with their possessions. Arnold was at his persuasive best in such a tight situation. He emphasized what damage further punitive moves against the Asian people would do to the image of Uganda and the regime in the Commonwealth and around the world and how this would affect recognition and support from friends and neighbours.

The stand-off lasted several days. It was a surreal time. We were put up in State House, the President's residence. A huge bedroom each, equipped with numerous household staff. Every evening we dined with the President and his Foreign Minister at a large table set on the lawn. Silver shimmered and crystal sparkled in the candlelight. The food was excellent. It was a week of full moon so an unearthly light illumined the orderly gardens and the stars were close

enough to touch in the soft African night. An Army band played softly from a corner of the lawn. A tall be-turbanned South Asian stood woodenly behind each of the four diners. This did not seem to inhibit Amin though he grew increasingly monosyllabic with Arnold Smith as the long multi-course meals progressed.

By contrast, I had a series of scintillating conversations with the elegant Elizabeth of Toro, the then Foreign Minister. Well-educated, like most of the chiefly class and the public servants in a country which had had a university college for at least as long as had New Zealand, she was loyal in her utterances so long as she sensed the President might be listening but guardedly irreverent at other times. She would have graced a dinner table anywhere in the world. With each night that passed in this way Arnold would grumble over his goodnight Glenfiddich that it was time his Special Assistant earned his keep by sitting next to Amin while he (Arnold) got to talk to the beautiful Elizabeth. It never happened. Several months later she managed – though not without difficulty – to give her minders the slip and get out of Uganda safely.

These were the early days of Amin's reign of terror. While one biographical account suggested that even at this point he was holding the severed head of one of his wives in a refrigerator at State House he managed to give the outward appearance of being a reasonably sane leader at this juncture. He was still susceptible to the sort of arguments against moving to dispossess the Asians the Secretary-General was advancing and indeed seemed on occasion to be flattered that Arnold Smith was his guest. He possessed a certain gruff charm and a rough brand of humour and performed well in front of the world media who – like the British Government – habitually and dangerously underestimated him.

In the end he agreed, with reservations – no compensation was to be paid for land or other such immoveable property owned by the South Asians, for example – that he would not stop these citizens fleeing Uganda. This did not prevent further outrages but a relatively orderly exodus followed and Uganda lost many of its most skilled people.

Amin in the end wanted us out of his hair and sent us off to visit two of Uganda's magnificent national parks. We were not sorry to fly out of Entebbe a few days later.

As the years passed Amin's actions became more and more extreme. In the end some at least of his neighbours had had enough and he was driven from office by Tanzanian soldiers ordered into Uganda by the near-pacifist President Julius Nyerere.

The news of Amin's passing occasioned little grief in Uganda or elsewhere in Africa. One of the tragedies is that a country which had so many able trained people at independence lost so many of its gifted citizens through bloody oppression and flight during the Amin years.