

**July 31, 1978**  
**Meeting, Thornhill Air Base between Smith, Fourie,  
Gaylard and Snell**

**Citation:**

"Meeting, Thornhill Air Base between Smith, Fourie, Gaylard and Snell", July 31, 1978, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Jack Gaylard Meetings, Rhodes University, Cory Library, Smith Papers. Included in "Southern Africa in the Cold War, Post-1974," edited by Sue Onslow and Anna-Mart Van Wyk. <https://digitalarchive.umd.edu/document/118540>

**Summary:**

Discussion of British involvement in Rhodesian conflict resolution, whether domestic British politics is a driving force of Foreign Secretary Owen's recent overtures.

**Credits:**

This document was made possible with support from Leon Levy Foundation

**Original Language:**

English

**Contents:**

Transcript - English

Meeting, Thornhill Air base, Monday 31 July 1978  
Smith, Fourie, Gaylard, Snell

Fourie began. He and Pik had recently been in New York where he had met Owen and Vance. The reason for wanting to meet Smith was to convey to him certain suggestions which Dr Owen had made. Mr. Fourie stressed he was merely acting as a messenger and did not wish to give the impression that SA Gov was committed in any way. Botha would have come himself to see PM but for the fact that Special Cabinet Meeting was being held today to consider consequences of certain decisions recently taken by the security Council of UN.

Basically, the British Government wanted the Prime Minister to meet Nkomo. Both Owen and Vance were of the opinion that, without Nkomo being part and parcel of any settlement exercise, the war would continue. Mr. Fourie said they had mentioned to Owen that there had been a certain de-escalation of the war, but the feeling of the British was that, under the present situation with Nkomo being outside any agreement, the only consequence would be an escalation of the war. The British had in mind a scheme which would be based on the present Executive Council. They were not insisting on going back to the original Anglo-American proposals. Dr Owen hoped to have a meeting with the PM as soon as possible, and this could well be tied in with a meeting between the PM and Nkomo. Owen wanted to fly out to Rhodesia this w/e and would leave the choice of venue and timing to the PM. If necessary, Nkomo could be kept in the aircraft and not be allowed out until such time as a meeting could be organised between himself and PM.

Fourie: Nkomo might not be prepared to come to such a meeting by himself and might insist on the presence of a General Garba of Nigeria. If this happened, the latter could be excluded from the talks. Fourie said that neither Owen nor Nkomo would undertake such a visit to Rhodesia unless they were convinced it would lead to something successful rather than be a complete failure. What they had in mind was to enlarge the present Executive Council by the inclusion of PF members. They envisioned a Council of eight members, the present four plus an additional four—two from the Nkomo faction and two from the Mugabe faction. Once such a Council had been established it would be difficult to operate on the basis of a consensus. The British had raised the question of a Chairman and they felt that the Chairman should be elected from amongst the eight members. If this was unacceptable the British would want to appoint a Resident Commissioner, who could be made the Chairman of the Executive Council with a casting vote. Once this enlarged Executive Council had been established the British would grant independence on the basis of a transitional constitution.

Another problem which the British raised was the question of who would have control of the Police and the Army. Fourie said he and Botha had gained the impression the British wanted the Resident Commissioner to hold this office. The Executive Council would be given executive and legislative authority. Fourie and Botha queried what the British intended to do about the present Rhodesian parliament. Owen was very vague about this issue.

Once agreement had been reached the new transitional constitution the British would lift sanctions. Fourie added that he and Botha considered that there were three main problems regarding composition of suggested Ex Co—

(i)

unlikely internal black members would agree to Nkomo/Mugabe faction having four members;

(ii) Chairman;

(iii) Control of police and army.

Owen had advised Botha that he was not necessarily wedded to Lord Carver because he realized that he was unpopular in Rhodesia. He also indicated he would be seeing Muzorewa and Sithole in London this week.

It was most important for Owen to get an early reply to his suggestions because the GB and U.S. were firmly of the opinion that August was the last month for a peaceful settlement in Rhodesia. After that the war would escalate and a reasonable solution would be impossible.

Owen had also said that he would be prepared to look at various adaptations of a constitution and would not be dogmatic about anything which had already been suggested. Fourie stressed he and Botha gained the very firm impression that as far as the British were concerned, there were only now two key figures in the Rhodesia settlement exercise, namely, PM and Nkomo.

PM told Fourie that he felt the reason for Owen's urgency was the forthcoming general election in Britain. Owen was playing party politics and if he could gain some kudos for Labour regarding the Rhodesia issue this would help the Labour party in their election battle. PM stressed, however, he did not want to appear destructive but if such a meeting were to prove beneficial to the nation then obviously it would have to be seriously considered.

Fourie agreed decision whether or not to meet Owen and Nkomo would have to be based on whether would be fruitful for Rhodesia. He said if was decided no meeting, he would convey this decision to GB.

Gaylard: inquired any other possible composition of Ex Council mentioned.

Fourie—no; GB wanted parity in Ex Council. He had gained the impression that the British hoped that Nkomo would be the chairman.

Gaylard: what power, if any, the British envisaged for the Resident Commissioner;

Fourie, if RC not Chairman of Ex Co, would have little power. If was Chairman, he would naturally have considerable power because of his casting vote.

Fourie—he and Botha found 'difficult to understand' that HMG keen to arrange meetings between PM, Owen and Nkomo but appeared to be paying no attention to other members of Ex Co.

PM: he had to be very careful not to do anything behind the backs the other three members of the Ex Co. He was now part of a team of four. It would be interesting to learn what Muzorewa and Sithole had to say when they returned from London—whether they had in fact been given same story by Owen as the one conveyed to him today.

PM: if he decided the British suggestion was a starter, he would have to put it to other three members. Was possibility the British trying to work with him behind backs of other 3...

PM asked whether Owen had said anything about driving a wedge between Nkomo and Mugabe.

Fourie: the British had said Mugabe was probably of little consequence. They indicated there could be a split between the Muzorewa faction, but he had definitely gained the impression that the British felt that if Nkomo came back Mugabe would be of little importance.

PM: asked whether Owen had given a clue as to the latest British thinking on Zambia and Mozambique.

Fourie: they had mentioned they wanted the PM to meet Machel and a leader of one of the other African states, though he did not remember which one. The British now felt that the Front line states were now toeing the line.

PM: asked Fourie for a true assessment of the position in Mozambique (over the stability of Machel, whether any Russians there, although in the estimation of the RSA, there was little evidence of this; Neto was now tending to move away from Russian influence. Their assessment was Machel could well do the same. Also what was Nyerere attitude?)

Fourie—his attitude was now fairly reasonable in that he had told SWAPO to accept the plan for SWA or he would have nothing further to do with them.

PM: was Seretse Khama of any real consequence?

Fourie: he is a sleeping partner, though it was obviously in the RSA's interest to have him there as president, rather than someone else.

PM: would discuss Owen's ideas with Muzorewa and Sithole when returned. In meantime he would 'turn over suggestions in his mind'; he had the feeling though Owen might be trying to use RSA to try and put pressure on him.

Fourie—he and Botha had made it quite clear that they would not apply any pressure—they would merely convey a message and take back a reply.