3
A Political Opening: The NEC and Nigeria

Transport House, for much of the twentieth century, was located in Smith Square, a short walk from the Houses of Parliament. It was the home of the Transport and General Workers’ Union (TGWU), the most powerful trade union in England, and the Labour Party had its offices in rented space on the upper floors of the building. It was there, on 26 March 1969, that the party’s governing body, the National Executive Committee (NEC), met as usual. But what happened at that meeting, in the fourth-floor committee room, surprised even the Home Secretary’s staunchest critics. Callaghan used the opportunity of that gathering, on the eve of Harold Wilson’s departure on an overseas trip, to cast a vote that delivered a bold challenge to his own government’s plan to radically overhaul the trade unions. He did this even though the Cabinet had, after several extended sessions and much debate, approved the plan to legislate two months earlier.

The Labour government had left open some of the details of the reforms for further discussion, and it was known that Callaghan, when the plan was first presented to Cabinet on 3 January, disagreed with some points in the White Paper. But it had been assumed that he, being a senior minister, would support Barbara Castle, his colleague, at the NEC meeting, and maintain the position that had been collectively agreed upon by the Cabinet.1 Yet, the fact that he did not do that was extraordinary for two reasons: first, Callaghan undermined not only the pending legislation, but the principle of collective Cabinet responsibility. Under

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1 George Brown, the deputy leader of the Labour Party and a former trade unionist himself, chastised Callaghan’s position on constitutional grounds and voted with Castle.
that convention, once the Cabinet agreed on a policy – which in this case it had, since the intention to legislate was outlined in a White Paper approved in Cabinet on 14 January and later presented to Parliament with Callaghan’s name among the sponsors\(^2\) – Callaghan, as a minister of the Crown, was bound publicly to abide by the decision. Secondly, his vote to join the majority on the trade-union dominated NEC, and approve a resolution to block the proposal, came as the Prime Minister was preparing to depart on a peace mission to try to end the civil war in Nigeria.

The White Paper, which became known as *In Place of Strife*, was the Labour government’s reaction to the findings of the Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers’ Associations, chaired by Lord Donovan. The commission had been established three years earlier to address a sticky political problem, particularly for a Labour government, i.e. the public’s concern over the unbridled power of the trade unions. When the time came to put a plan into action, Castle, in her expanded role as Wilson’s new Secretary for Employment and Productivity, ventured beyond the rather conciliatory recommendations of Lord Donovan’s committee. Instead, she unveiled a set of no-nonsense measures to prevent wildcat strikes, including the taking of a ballot before workers could walk off the job, a government-imposed four-week cooling-off period to minimise disruptions in certain industries and, if all else failed, the threat of jail sentences to get strikers back to work.

When Wilson arrived in Lagos the day after the NEC meeting, hundreds of thousands of Nigerians gathered along the motorcade route from the airport to the capital to greet him.\(^3\) The outpouring reflected, at least in part, the hope that Britain might be able to do something to end the civil war. By then, the conflict had killed tens of thousands and caused widespread famine in Biafra, the newly named eastern region of the former British colony, which had seceded from the Nigerian federation two years earlier. But over the next few days Wilson’s peace mission was overshadowed and hampered by what turned out to be Callaghan’s shrewdest move in his bid to restore his political reputation. Callaghan, by exploiting the decision taken by the NEC while the Prime Minister was thousands of miles from London, cleverly repositioned himself in

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