9 Uhuru na Harambee

‘One of our main objects was to avoid forcing a split between the moderates and the extremists in the Government which might have strengthened Odinga’s hand.’ (Commonwealth Relations Office guidance on last Kenya constitutional conference, 14 November 1963)

In his inaugural speech as Prime Minister Jomo Kenyatta launched a new slogan: Harambee – ‘All Pull Together’ – to link up with Uhuru – ‘Freedom’ – which had long been the popular cry. Since his days as a journalist on Muigwithania in the late 1920s and the 1930s the need for hard work and unity had been his theme. He had admired the British when he had lived among them and now that he was in power he hastened to reassure the white farmers about their future. His speech to them at Nakuru had a remarkable impact in turning round their opinions of him and in winning their confidence. Men who would have regarded him a year or even a few months back as Satan Incarnate were saying, ‘It’ll be all right so long as the Old Man is still around.’

The trouble was that most people in late 1963 did not expect Kenyatta to be around for very long. His actual age was unknown but he was almost certainly nearer 70 than 60 (many thought well over 70) and he had been forced to live in a physically hard climate. The gossip in Nairobi was already about who was to succeed Kenyatta – would it have to be another Kikuyu or would a Luo be acceptable, and, if a Luo, which one? Seldom indeed was heard the notion that a representative of that third element in Kenya politics, the miscellaneous collection of tribes that made up ‘the Rest’, would be considered. Still less was it plausible, after the 1963 election, that the heir would come, as he eventually did, from the ranks of the KADU leadership.

Just as remarkable as Kenyatta’s new stature among the European settlers was the way in which, all past hesitations dropped, he moved to take command of his administration and to make it clear that, as Malcolm MacDonald wrote, ‘he is . . . the supreme maker and pronouncer of policy’. Almost overnight Kenyatta-watchers dropped the habit of contrasting his prestige as a ‘Freedom Fighter’
in the world outside with his supposed ineffectiveness as a domest­
tic politician. MacDonald was to tell how, before he took up the Governorship, he was briefed by the Colonial Office that Kenyatta was elderly, drinking himself to death and failing rapidly in mental and physical powers. In office he created a very different impres­sion – and after 1 June the ability of these two men to work smoothly together played a very major role in easing the transition. MacDonald told Sandys in November that ‘In all this the personality of Kenyatta towers above every other individual element. Without him ... we should be in a mess.’

On 7 June MacDonald wrote to Sandys, ‘It is true that when you were in Nairobi I thought it might be possible to carry on with internal self-government until well into next year and possibly until the middle of it.’ But he had changed his mind. Julius Nyerere had been staying with him in Government House and he and Tom Mboya had just dined with him. They had persuaded him that now was the hour for the East African Federation if they were willing to seize it. It was admitted that the initial public support had waned but, with KANU’s triumph, it was growing again. It was true also that Uganda had been making some difficulties but now she was once more on track. There would be a crucial conference of the East African Governments about the federation in the third week of August; consequently, Mboya said, the Kenya independence conference must be planned for September. MacDonald excitedly cabled, ‘A sound East African Federation is, of course, a dream answer to many of Kenya’s problems.’ Mboya had said that independence and federation should be established on the same day or within a few days of each other.

Sandys soon realized that for this prize he would have to pay a price. He was expected to get his Cabinet and his party to agree not only that Kenya should be independent before the end of 1963 but that, once more, a brand new constitution should be signifi­cantly changed. He had not forgotten the reproaches levelled at his predecessors that the ink was never left to dry on a Kenya Constitution before Britain was giving way to the demand that it be scrapped. His junior Ministers found him curiously unsure of his ability to cope with opposition from his own camp in the Com­mons. He had already had forewarning in May of what might be in store. While Kenya was actually voting, Frederic Bennett had put down a parliamentary question for written reply on 22 May, asking Sandys ‘whether he remains satisfied that the present con-