There has been growing interest in recent years in the economic dimension of British decolonization, focusing on the strategies adopted by big business in response to political change in a colonial setting. Earlier interpretations, which emphasised the scope for ‘neo-colonialism’, have been challenged by a number of case studies highlighting the failure of big business to defend its interests during the years of colonial retreat.\(^1\) This paper is a contribution to the debates triggered by such recent re-evaluations. It examines the case of copper mining in Zambia (previously Northern Rhodesia), unusual in that it presented a situation in which business was confronted by two competing nationalisms – white settler and Black African. Its focus, copper mining, was a dynamic, volatile and rapidly expanding sector during this period, of overwhelming economic importance to the territory, and vital, on strategic and economic grounds, to Britain and to its long-term plans for Central Africa.

From its inception in the late 1920s/early 1930s, copper mining in Northern Rhodesia attracted political controversy, especially concerning the distribution of the wealth generated by mining. White settlers in both Northern Rhodesia, under direct British rule, and in Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), which enjoyed a unique ‘semi-colonial’ status after 1923, dreamed of creating a territorial bloc under their control, fuelled largely by the wealth of the Copperbelt. Moreover, first settlers, and subsequently African nationalists, raised the possibility of nationalising the mining industry. Similarly, successive colonial governments, the settler lobby and African nationalists periodically showed interest in imposing special taxes on mining, to fund economic and social development, or to ease Northern Rhodesia’s regular budgetary problems. Labour
relations in the mining industry formed an equally sensitive political issue, focussing on the exclusion of African workers from most categories of skilled work, and the growing, and mutually reinforcing, militancy of both European and African employees. After 1945, both mining groups on the Copperbelt, the American-controlled Rhodesian Selection Trust and the South African controlled Anglo American Corporation, enjoyed buoyant demand, fuelled by rearmament and the Korean War, and boom conditions produced a period of growing profitability, confidence and expansion. Yet the Copperbelt also faced increased competition, thanks to the global expansion of the copper industry, and rising costs as operations became more technically demanding, and labour more expensive. The mining groups’ response was to attempt to cut wage costs, and, imitating the mining industry in the neighbouring Belgian Congo, to employ an increasing proportion of relatively cheap African labour, a policy known as African ‘progression’ or ‘advancement’. This brought them into conflict with the powerful white mineworkers’ union, which had exploited wartime conditions to secure a ‘colour bar’ on the Copperbelt, reserving the most skilled categories of work for white miners. The Mine Workers Union (MWU) insisted on the principle of ‘equal pay for equal work’ which, if implemented, would have robbed African advancement of its value to the mining industry. Simultaneously, the mining groups were coming to accept the reality of an increasingly ‘stabilised’, or settled, African workforce. Given the swollen costs of providing for the needs of these workers and their families, extracting the maximum value from African labour, and so replacing more expensive white workers, inevitably had its attractions. Yet the mining industry was reluctant to confront the MWU on this issue unless it could be sure of securing government support. Consistently denied this, the mining groups instead concluded an agreement with the MWU in 1946, prolonging the colour bar for another decade.

**The mining industry and the Central African Federation**

In 1953, Britain created the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, one of the most ambitious initiatives in post-war British colonial policy. A device imposed by Britain despite clear African opposition, the Federation brought together Northern Rhodesia, Southern Rhodesia and Nyasaland, in what was intended to be a barrier to the northwards spread of South African racial thinking, aided by the recent influx of
Afrikaner migrants to the Copperbelt. The British government envisaged the Federation as being a ‘middle way’ between the extremes of Black nationalism to the north and settler nationalism to the south. For the British government, political considerations outweighed the economic justification for closer territorial association in Central Africa. Central to Britain’s public case for Federation, and to its continuing justification after 1953, was that it promised to construct a multiracial ‘partnership’ upon which future constitutional development could be built. Based on a restricted franchise, the Federation would, in theory, allow for increased African political participation, while preserving effective white hegemony for the foreseeable future. The Zambian mining industry had traditionally been suspicious of amalgamation, on the grounds that it would lead to the introduction of discriminatory labour practices from Southern Rhodesia, and so increase production costs. In the post-war period, with the industrial colour bar already a reality, such objections were irrelevant. Although they would have preferred full territorial amalgamation between the Rhodesias, reasoning that this would create a political unit capable of attracting large numbers of settlers, and lend itself to effective economic co-ordination, the mining groups supported the campaign for Federation, through financial help for key lobby groups such as the United Central Africa Association and the Capricorn Africa Society. The mining groups recognised a need to integrate the Central African territories more closely, especially to overcome the region’s chronic energy and transport problems after 1945. Heavily reliant on the near-exhausted Rhodesia Railways system, and on unpredictable supplies of coal from the Hwange colliery in Southern Rhodesia, the mining companies had strong practical reasons to promote closer infrastructural co-ordination between the neighbouring territories. It was even rumoured that Southern Rhodesia, the prime mover in the campaign for territorial amalgamation, was exploiting the coal shortage to pressurise the copper companies into support for closer union. The groups may also have had political motives, too: some form of association between the two Rhodesias was seen as offering the best means of creating a counter-balance to the growing power of Northern Rhodesian settler politicians, who were often sponsored by, or linked to, the Mine Workers Union. Since 1948, it had been customary for the colonial government to defer to the views of settler representatives entrenched in Northern Rhodesia’s legislature. Settler assertiveness had been seen, for example, in mounting pressure on
the copper companies to move their headquarters from London to Northern Rhodesia (where, it was argued, they would be more accountable), and to the companies’ growing conclusion that the colonial state was impotent in the face of the settler political demands, and incapable of delivering rapid economic development. The Northern Rhodesian settlers were led by Roy Welensky, a longstanding advocate of heightened state regulation of the mining industry: ironically, Welensky would soon be criticising African politicians who called for the nationalisation of the copper industry, because of the impact this might have on investor confidence. Symbolising the settlers’ growing political strength had been their success in 1949, after many years of dispute, in imposing new arrangements for the collection of mineral royalties payable on copper. While the mineral rights were left, anomalously, in the hands of the British South Africa Company, they were now scheduled to expire in 1986, with the Northern Rhodesian government meanwhile receiving a considerably larger share than hitherto. The new agreement did not affect the mining companies directly, but it was, perhaps, a timely reminder of the economic interventionism characteristic of many white settler regimes in central-southern Africa.

Regarding the British authorities as having repeatedly ‘sold out’ to the demands of local white politicians, the Northern Rhodesian mining companies hoped that association with Southern Rhodesia would create a more ‘balanced’ political climate. In addition to giving discrete financial support to the campaign during 1952 to launch the Federation, both mining groups subsequently helped fund the Federation’s major settler political party, the United Federal Party. At the time, this was justified on the grounds that political life within the Federation was in its infancy, and that the UFP effectively was the political system. In order to ensure that the Federation functioned efficiently, it was therefore necessary to ensure that the governing party was efficiently organised and adequately financed. However, this entire issue was politically delicate, fuelling resentment among settlers towards the high profile the mining industry enjoyed in the Federation, particularly the influence it was believed to have within the political establishment, typified by claims that the UFP was the ‘stooge’ of the mining industry. In these circumstances, leading figures in the mining industry attempted to keep out of the political limelight. Nevertheless, their close links with the Federation’s governing
party may explain why the mining groups did not apparently seek separate representation for business in the Zambian legislature, unlike mining companies in other colonial territories, for example Ghana. Both mining groups felt that African opposition to the proposed Federation should not be permitted to obstruct the project, seeing the British Colonial Office’s attempts to ‘consult’ African opinion as inept. Significantly, both groups also supported the idea of encouraging mass European immigration into Central Africa, an idea much discussed in the early 1950s, and associated particularly with bodies such as the Capricorn Africa Society, which endorsed the ‘Two Pyramid Plan’, developed by the Southern Rhodesian prime minister and staunch advocate of amalgamation, Sir Godfrey Huggins. The alternative, as some leading business figures predicted as early as 1951, might be an African-governed Northern Rhodesia resembling the Gold Coast model, which might adopt unpalatably radical policies. Always sensitive to public relations, the mining groups would also subsequently respond to Federal government pleas by investigating the scope for establishing a distinctively pro-Federation newspaper. The plan came to nothing, because foreign newspaper publishers did not see the venture as commercially attractive.

In 1953, breaking ranks with Anglo American, and seizing the opportunity created by the termination of bulk-purchasing of copper by the British government, RST took a tough public stand on the ‘advancement’ of African mineworkers, a cost-cutting measure the group had been contemplating for some time. Having sought to avoid confrontation with the MWU since the war, in the interests of uninterrupted production, the group now issued an ultimatum to the white workforce. The evidence suggests that the timing of this initiative was chosen partly to impress potential opponents in Britain of the plans for Federation, the implication being that Federation need not be contrary to African interests. Significantly, the British government privately recorded the view that RST’s behaviour at this sensitive time had been ‘helpful’ to the Federal cause, in contrast to the cautious public position of Anglo American on advancement, demonstrating a sympathetic understanding of what was in Rhodesia’s long-term interests. A further factor in RST’s desire to promote advancement was the dramatic post-war growth of African labour militancy, witnessed in a major strike in 1952,
possibly in imitation of the militant strategies of white mineworkers, but also a feature perhaps unwittingly fostered by the British authorities’ encouragement of African trade unions, organised along ‘acceptable’ lines, that is, orientated towards an identification with Western values and practices.\textsuperscript{26} The encouragement of a moderate and co-operative African trade union movement seemed unavoidably to require progress on African advancement, an issue which had been stalled because of the wartime and post-war conditions of economic emergency, and the British government’s unwillingness to do anything which might antagonise white miners and so jeopardise precious dollar-saving copper production.\textsuperscript{27} For RST, then, African advancement held out the promise of reduced costs and, ultimately, industrial peace among the African workforce. Perhaps of critical importance in explaining RST’s behaviour was the ever-spiralling wage bill. A generous pay award, agreed after arbitration in January 1953, was estimated to cost the mining groups around £870,000. Increased labour costs in turn enhanced the appeal of further mechanization in the mines, and created a greater incentive to employ African labour more efficiently and extensively, hence the groups’ renewed interest in ‘advancement’.\textsuperscript{28} Yet despite a succession of pious government endorsements of this principle, the colonial authorities were adamant that this was a problem for the two sides of industry to resolve for themselves. Progress remained slow until, without government help, RST induced the MWU in 1955 at agree to a theoretical elimination of racial restrictions.\textsuperscript{29}

Perhaps the most important help the mining industry could give to the Federation was to try to promote prosperity by maintaining high copper prices, although given the world copper industry’s poor record at concerted action, this was not entirely in the mining groups’ hands.\textsuperscript{30} Some figures in the mining industry warned periodically that the Federation had become too dependent on high copper prices, which experience showed were unlikely to last.\textsuperscript{31} When the boom in copper prices eventually collapsed late in 1956, the shock within the Federation was considerable. Soon afterwards, the Federation faced serious, ultimately fatal, political problems, following the attempt by the federal government to adjust the constitution in favour of the settler minority, triggering alarm, and political mobilization, among the African majority, reflected in the dramatic growth of the African nationalist movement, which in turn was able to draw
upon the effective post-war organisation of African labour, especially on the Copperbelt. Ironically, Britain’s own actions in creating the Federation, and in promoting trade unionism, had helped trigger the development of mass African nationalism. Suspicions were already widespread among the African population that the Federation’s structures were designed not only to maintain white hegemony, but also to siphon off Northern Rhodesia’s copper wealth, to the disproportionate advantage of Southern Rhodesia’s white population. But it was fear of becoming trapped, permanently, in a white-ruled, self-governing Federation, whose constitution was due to be reviewed in 1960, which fuelled mounting African protests. Escalating violence led to the imposition of states of emergency in the Federation early in 1959, leading to protracted attempts by Britain first to salvage something from the seemingly doomed Federal experiment, and then by efforts to steer each of the Federation’s component territories towards separate self-government, under arrangements acceptable to African majorities in each of them. The Federation itself disintegrated at the end of 1963, with Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland gaining independence in 1964 under Black majority rule, leaving the problem of Southern Rhodesia unresolved for another seventeen years. The response of the Federal government during the Federation’s terminal years was highly revealing: while relatively unconcerned about the prospect of impoverished Nyasaland going its own way, the government was determined to retain control of copper-rich Northern Rhodesia, or, at least, to its mining region, the Copperbelt.

The mining industry and African nationalism

Intimations that the mining industry quickly began to distance itself from what it perceived to be a failing political structure can be detected even before the Federation entered its final phase. Early in 1959, shortly before the declaration of the state of emergency, Sir Ronald Prain, chairman of the RST group of companies, had warned the Federal prime minister, Sir Roy Welensky, about his misgivings over the political direction the Federation was taking. Having previously backed the Federation publicly, for example in Britain, and before prestigious groups such as the Council of Foreign Relations in the United States, Prain now demanded to know what steps were being taken to make ‘partnership’ between the races a reality. It is striking that Prain
anticipated by a year much of Harold Macmillan’s celebrated ‘Wind of Change’ speech, pointing to the growth of African nationalism and the need to respond to this constructively. Prain identified a practical motive – the fact that fresh investment would require confidence in the Federation’s political stability. He pointed to a circular problem, in that political stability depended on continuing economic development; however, without stability, investment would dry up, preventing further economic development, leading in turn to greater political instability, and so on. Equally striking is the fact that even before the Belgian Congo’s disastrously precipitate independence in 1960, Prain was warning that African populations had to be prepared adequately for self-government, for example through involvement in the administration, business, the military and other sectors. Stressing that the core African demand was for greater political, economic and social participation, Prain saw the creation of employment opportunities for Africans as an important example of this, and argued that it was necessary to make concessions to African aspirations before it was too late. 34

Once the Emergency had been declared, Prain reassessed RST’s position in relation to the Federation. In May 1959, RST withdrew its support for the UFP, and ostensibly pulled out of Federal politics, on the grounds that the Federation had failed to achieve its objectives. 35 Not only had the Federal government done virtually nothing to help the mining industry over the issue of African advancement, partly, no doubt, because Federal ministers relied on the votes of white miners 36, but it had also been perfectly willing to employ ‘strong-arm methods’ to extract financial contributions from the mining industry for projects such as the prestige Kariba Dam project (or suffer the imposition of an export tax on copper). 37 Admittedly, under the Federal system, labour questions remained territorial responsibilities, but Federal ministers showed little interest in pressing the cause of advancement. 38 Moreover, by the end of 1952, RST had lost confidence in the Northern Rhodesian government’s ability to deal effectively with the advancement question. 39 Late in 1953, Welensky had declared that advancement was not a Federal concern 40, prompting Prain to seize the initiative by declaring publicly that the Federation’s success hinged on its ability to resolve the problem of the industrial colour bar. Endorsing Africans’ right to insist on change, Prain had encouraged them to demand it. 41 Shortly afterwards, he announced that RST was giving
the MWU notice of RST’s intention to terminate its recognition agreement, leading Welensky to respond that there might, after all, be something in the union’s claim that RST’s true aim was to secure plentiful cheap labour.⁴²

By the summer of 1959, Prain had already discussed the entire question of the Federation with the British prime minister, Harold Macmillan. While it is unclear who influenced whom in these exchanges, it seems possible that it was Macmillan who drew on Prain’s impressions. A degree of pragmatism is clearly visible in Prain’s position, in that he argued that business must always align itself with the strongest prevailing political force. In the African context, it was clear to him that power would inevitably shift to the African majority, and he had already begun to identify the next generation of potential African leaders.⁴³ Hitherto, Prain had aired his political views privately, but in October 1959 he used the occasion of his annual statement to shareholders to publicise his views more widely. He stressed that economic development alone was not the key to the Federation’s future, and stressed instead the importance of African political and social advance.⁴⁴ Significantly, only weeks earlier, Welensky had publicly stressed the diametrically opposed view – that political and social advance must be based on economic development. Welensky was, in effect, still wedded to the gradualist ethos of African development, originating in the Second World War and enshrined in a new British commitment to eventual self-government for the colonies, following a process of material and social preparation. Prain, on the other hand, was clearly attuned to the radically revised timetables for political development currently being discussed in London as part of the ‘Wind of Change revolution’.⁴⁵ Late in 1959 and early in 1960, through the good offices of the American Friends’ Service Committee, Prain actively sought contact with Zambian nationalist leaders, especially with Kenneth Kaunda, who would lead the country to independence in 1964.⁴⁶ The British authorities in Lusaka were sometimes uneasy about these contacts with Kaunda, who was, at the beginning of 1960, still in detention. Whitehall, however, was more positive in its response, regarding Prain as having a clearer idea of Zambia’s prospects than most members of the European community.⁴⁷ Arguably, Prain became an important intermediary between British policy-makers and Zambian nationalists. His position at the head of a progressive example of modern business made Prain especially valuable at a time when
the record of business in colonial contexts was vulnerable to nationalist criticism, while his access to key British politicians offered Zambian nationalists a useful channel of communication to London. Although it is not clear precisely when the two men first met, Prain was certainly successful in developing close and friendly links with Kaunda. Kaunda subsequently paid tribute to Prain as the man who had taken him seriously at a time when the authorities still ignored him. Above all, Prain urged the British government to make concessions to Kaunda, seeing him as much more ‘moderate’ than some of his nationalist colleagues. Prain had been consistently advocating the cultivation of African nationalists at least since 1956. Then, he had advised the Colonial Office that the growing power of the African National Congress (currently the leading nationalist force) should be recognised and responded to constructively, allowing its energies to be channelled along ‘useful’ lines: otherwise, it would be driven underground and become dangerous. An important point here is that after 1959, Prain’s views were both sought and respected by key figures in the British government, including not only Macmillan, but also Iain Macleod, the minister most closely associated with the acceleration of British decolonization after 1959. Moreover, Prain’s contributions to British government thinking were especially valuable because the flow of information from Zambia to London was not always reliable, in part reflecting the resentment of settler politicians at continuing control from London. Developing one of the classic themes of British decolonization, Prain warned Macleod in June 1960 that Kaunda’s moderation had to be cultivated and rewarded, otherwise ‘extremists’ might displace him. Northern Rhodesia’s Special Branch would soon underline the problems Kaunda was facing in restraining his more extreme colleagues. Although Prain continued, publicly, to endorse the idea of Federation (making this point in the evidence he gave to the Monckton Commission, which reported on the Federation’s future in 1960), he stressed the urgent need for political reform, describing self-determination as one of the strongest political forces of the twentieth century.

Under Prain’s guidance, therefore, RST adjusted pragmatically to the advent of mass African nationalism, but the group was not complacent about its position within an independent Zambia. While seeking to establish good relations with Zambian nationalists, RST also sought to invest some of its African profits in Chilean copper
mining, so reducing its dependence on the Copperbelt, and was only prevented from
doing this by the Federation’s imposition of exchange control, itself a response to
foreign investors’ dwindling confidence in the country’s future.\textsuperscript{53} Explanations of
RST’s ‘progressive’ attitude tend to focus on the influence of American opinion,
expressed through RST’s major shareholder, the American Metal Company. The latter
had a long record of identifying with liberal causes. As early as 1950, AMC was urging
the Copperbelt mining companies to lobby the Northern Rhodesian government to
abolish the industrial colour bar, seeing this as necessary to allow the companies to
retain the initiative in shaping the industry’s future development.\textsuperscript{54} Specifically, AMC
felt that the companies should not risk losing prestige by being seen to be merely
responding to external pressure concerning the sensitive labour question. Particularly
significant is the fact that AMC privately stressed the ethical aspect of the problem, not
only its financial implications (as a route to cost-cutting through the advancement of
cheaper African labour).\textsuperscript{55} However, as African political and industrial mobilisation
intensified, AMC became concerned that advancement should be seen to be achieved
thanks to the mining groups’ initiative, and not as a result of an African strike, which
might strengthen the hands of ‘extremists’.\textsuperscript{56} AMC was renowned for its early
identification with the cause of African independence from colonial rule. In 1951,
AMC’s chairman, Harold Hochschild had predicted the rapid growth of African
nationalism in Central Africa, foreseeing a dominant African political role in
Rhodesia.\textsuperscript{57} In 1953 – the year the Federation was created – Hochschild reputedly told a
future Federal minister that political power always passed eventually to indigenous
populations, and that AMC therefore planned to accommodate itself to this, and to
adjust its policies accordingly.\textsuperscript{58} When it grasped the nettle of confrontation over
African advancement, late in 1953, RST enjoyed the full support of AMC.\textsuperscript{59} Similarly,
in May 1961, when Northern Rhodesia’s political future was still unclear, following an
abortive British attempt to introduce a new constitution for the territory in February, an
AMC representative told a committee of the US Congress that RST was already
preparing to operate under Black majority rule. Against the background of deepening
international pessimism caused by the civil war in the Congo, AMC declared publicly
that Northern Rhodesia offered a hopeful example of development in Africa.\textsuperscript{60}
An advantage RST may, arguably have enjoyed in dealing with political shifts within the Federation was that it could draw on the earlier experiences of big business facing the challenge of decolonization elsewhere in Africa. For example, by the time political uncertainty began to affect the Federation, expatriate mining companies in Ghana already had a decade’s experience in adjusting to African nationalism. One of the firms most affected by developments in Ghana was the Consolidated African Selection Trust (CAST), a member of the Selection Trust group of companies, registered in London, the group which had originally created RST in 1928.\(^{61}\) Although Selection Trust no longer had a direct interest in RST, it did have an indirect interest in RST’s affairs through its holdings in AMC.\(^{62}\) Selection Trust was also represented on the board of RST and AMC, and performed a variety of services for RST in London. Numerous conduits therefore existed for the transmission of one mining group’s African experiences to the other.

What makes RST’s stance on African development in the political and employment spheres particularly interesting is the apparently contrasting attitude of the other mining group on the Copperbelt, Anglo American. Much slower than RST to accept the implications of the ‘Wind of Change’, Anglo American’s response to political developments was cautious and conservative.\(^{63}\) Of critical importance is the fact that, in business terms, Anglo’s ‘centre of gravity’ remained in South Africa. The group was therefore obliged to consider the effect developments in Central Africa might have on its wider, regional interests, particularly the impact changes in labour policy might have on industrial relations in South Africa, whose powerful white mineworkers’ trade union enjoyed close links to its Zambian counterpart, and which Anglo was especially reluctant to provoke.\(^{64}\) This is perhaps why Anglo American was happy to let RST take the lead in pursuing African advancement from the early 1950s onwards.\(^{65}\) Yet there may be a danger of exaggerating the differences between the two mining groups. Like RST, Anglo American signalled its dissatisfaction with the Federation by withdrawing financial support to the UFP in 1959, a move which was more than merely symbolic. It is also clear from Prain’s private correspondence that RST scrupulously observed the convention of consulting Anglo American before making pronouncements on the advancement of African labour. Furthermore, a major theme which may have helped to
draw the groups (and the British government) closer together was the claim, increasingly heard in the early 1960s, that political ‘decolonization’ was an illusion which concealed the reality that economic power in former colonies remained in the hands of big business in a situation of ‘neo-colonialism’. In the context of an increasingly globalized Cold War, such allegations were naturally of great concern to both business and the Western Powers, offering to the Soviet Union and China a useful propaganda weapon with which to attack ‘Western imperialism’, and to appeal to newly-independent members of the United Nations. The British government, in particular, feared that these attacks would deter investors and so jeopardise the future development of African states. In 1963, RST and Anglo American collaborated with the Foreign Office to produce detailed briefings for the British delegation at the UN, designed to demonstrate how the activities of the mining companies had benefited both Northern Rhodesia and the Federation. Whitehall itself took a very positive view of the mining industry’s record, seeing the sector as having exercised a ‘moderating and liberal influence’ in Central Africa, as well as making a very significant contribution to government revenues through taxation, and providing a wide range of social services and amenities for its workers and their families. British officials privately drew a sharp contrast between the mining companies and the other major example of big business in the region, the British South Africa Company, whose almost parasitical role was seen increasingly as an embarrassment.

Whitehall’s efforts to anticipate attacks on the mining groups at the UN were apparently successful: not only did Kaunda make it very clear that he would not support such criticism, but he also seems to have persuaded the Tanganyikan nationalist leader, Julius Nyerere, to adopt the same position. This was particularly important, because Nyerere was a leading figure in the emerging Afro-Asian bloc of nations. Mounting criticism of Western business at the UN also encouraged a closing of ranks between the mining groups, leading to the unusual suggestion by RST that Anglo American had actually been more progressive, for example over labour issues, than its public statements might have suggested. Similarly, although Anglo American’s public position remained very cautious, the group’s chairman, Sir Harry Oppenheimer (already a leading figure within the dwindling white liberal community in South Africa), apparently approved of RST’s
attempts to develop good links with Kaunda and other nationalists. Nevertheless, a striking example of Anglo’s slower adaptation to political change is the fact that Oppenheimer did not meet Kaunda in person until late 1962, almost three years after Prain had first made contact, and not until after the elections which guaranteed the formation of an African-led coalition government in Northern Rhodesia, suggesting that Anglo may have been ‘hedging its bets’ politically, awaiting developments before committing itself too firmly to any particular nationalist grouping.

At his meeting with Kaunda, Oppenheimer had hinted broadly about his plans to invest more in Northern Rhodesia, and to contribute more to the territory’s development, but he stressed that this would depend on assurances of future political stability. These comments touched on an issue of ever-growing importance to Northern Rhodesia which, despite its enormous copper wealth, was perennially short of the funds needed to promote territory-wide African development, in turn emphasising the sharp contrast between material conditions on the relatively well-provided Copperbelt and those in the rural expanses of the country. This problem had been aggravated by the fact that Northern Rhodesia’s revenues were siphoned off during the Federal period to help subsidise Nyasaland and, especially, Southern Rhodesia. This situation created valuable opportunities for the mining companies to reinforce their public image, and so enhance their post-independence prospects, by offering to provide much-needed development aid. In 1956, for instance, RST made substantial donations to the Northern Rhodesian government, insisting that the money should be spent on projects to benefit Africans. Politically, this was a sensible move, since the money was spent largely in the areas from which the group recruited most of its African labour. Similarly, in 1960, RST gave the Northern Rhodesian government over £1 million to help develop African education services, a source of deep concern at least since the 1930s, and an instance of inequitable public expenditure which belied the Federation’s commitment to ‘partnership’. Such assistance from the mining industry was especially important at a time when Britain’s capacity to provide development aid was being questioned in Whitehall, and when uncertainty about the political future had shaken the confidence of external investors. The mining companies were naturally anxious to derive the maximum propaganda benefit from their actions, and the Northern Rhodesian
government appreciated this and was happy to assist. In the case of RST, a high-profile commitment to development aid was also a shrewd reaction to complaints in the early 1960s that an excessive proportion of the group’s profits was being repatriated to Britain and the United States.

It might be argued that the broad position adopted by the mining groups on the eve of decolonization reflected their fears of being nationalised by an independent African regime. It has been suggested, for example, that RST’s position on African advancement, and the support it received from AMC, reflected a concern to minimise the danger of possible expropriation by a future African government. State ownership of the mining industry had become a popular platform among African nationalists, as it had long been among white settlers. According to one influential view, the companies’ position was in reality very secure, since any post-independence government, lacking the necessary expertise and capital, would depend on them to run the mining industry and to continue generating wealth. By the same logic, the larger mining operations became, the more secure the companies’ would become. Certainly, before and immediately after independence, Kaunda went to great lengths to reassure the mining industry (and foreign investors) that they would be safe under African rule – this is one reason why both Britain and the United States regarded him as the favoured candidate for power. Nevertheless, real fears persisted that Kaunda’s United National Independence Party (UNIP) contained radical elements, in contact with Moscow and Beijing. Because so much depended on Kaunda’s ability to retain control of the Northern Rhodesian government, it was therefore necessary to reinforce his position as leader at every opportunity.

The argument advanced here is that the mining companies actually had very few grounds for complacency about their future position. The climate of the early 1960s suggested a clear and growing preference in the developing world for state economic controls, an outlook certainly not confined to governments on the left, as shown by the interest shown by Chile’s right-wing government in the early 1960s in bringing the country’s copper mines under greater state control. This context accounts, for example, for the British government’s nervousness when the Ghanaian government
proposed, in 1961, to nationalise several British-owned gold mines. Of particular concern to the British government were the UN’s discussions which culminated in Resolution 1803, the ‘Declaration on the Permanent Sovereignty of Natural Resources’, passed in 1962, establishing the right of nations to use their natural resources in the interests of their own development, for example through nationalisation. London feared that this move would become a tool in the wider Soviet-orchestrated campaign against neo-colonialism. Examples such as these suggest that, for a variety of reasons, the atmosphere in the early 1960s, as Northern Rhodesia drew close to independence, was unsettling for business and Western governments alike. In Northern Rhodesia’s case, this was encapsulated in the debate during 1964 on the future of the country’s mineral rights. Periodically discussed since the 1930s, the position was anomalous in that the territory’s very lucrative mineral rights were in the hands of the BSAC. First white settlers, and later African nationalists, made the recovery of these rights a major political objective. Immediately before independence, Kaunda’s government threatened to expropriate the BSAC, unless the British government helped buy out the BSAC and transfer the mineral rights to the Zambian government. After much last-minute wrangling, this was arranged, but, tellingly, not only was this problem handled in London at prime ministerial level, but the Cabinet Secretary, Sir Burke Trend, stressed the need for compliance by the British government, on the grounds that Kaunda might otherwise turn his attention to the mining companies and nationalise them, damaging the interests of British investors, and compromising Britain’s future relations with independent Zambia. To the British government, then, the danger of nationalisation seemed real enough. From another point of view, the transfer of the mineral rights held out the possibility of negotiating a new royalty formula, long sought by RST. This would encourage the development of lower grade deposits and not penalise smaller mines. These considerations were, arguably, of greater significance to RST than to Anglo American, which, as a major shareholder in the BSAC, indirectly benefited from the pre-1964 royalty system. It could be argued, then, that RST’s deliberate cultivation of good relations with the leading Zambian nationalist movement was inspired not only by the possibility of expropriation, but, more positively, by the anticipation of outcomes in the field of economic policy from which the group hoped to gain substantially.
Conclusions
In the two decades preceding Zambia’s attainment of independence in 1964, the country’s largest single industry, copper mining, was exposed to an extraordinary spectrum of pressures, taxing both its political acuity and the flexibility of its business strategies. External pressures, over which the industry had little control, included fluctuating patterns of consumption of its product, alarming price volatility, coupled to both of which was the ever-present danger that consumers might turn to cheaper substitute materials. Compounding these anxieties was the reality of rising costs in a climate of industrial relations on the Copperbelt in which the temporary success of the white workforce in preserving its privileges served only to galvanise African labour into comparably efficient organisation and counter-veiling militancy. Within Northern Rhodesia, arguably, the greatest challenges for copper mining revolved around the development of polarised nationalist visions of Central Africa’s future, the one centred on enduring white ‘tutelage’, the other aspiring to replace colonial rule with African independence. The former, apparently so confident at the beginning of the 1950s, the high-point of the copper industry’s post-war fortunes, imploded in less than a decade, the hollowness of its pretensions exposed by the escalation of majority African grievances and the effectiveness of African nationalist mobilisation. Having apparently endorsed the Federal experiment with enthusiasm at its outset, the mining industry was obliged to adapt itself to the likelihood of Black majority within a time-scale few would have thought feasible in the early 1950s. It is, of course, possible to account for the industry’s political reorientation as a pragmatic response to realities. The Federation, despite its early promise, had failed the Copperbelt in most respects. Crucially, to an industrial sector notoriously suspicious of government interference, it had failed to provide leadership in the one area in which such interference would have been welcomed: the removal of racial barriers to employment. Overcoming the colour bar had brought the mining industry into closer contact with the African labour movement, precursor of African nationalism. While it would be an exaggeration to say that this process had removed company anxieties about the scope for extremism within African organisations, it arguably made subsequent dialogue with African nationalist leaders less fraught, and helped prepare the way for good relations between the two.
While it had traditionally attempted to speak publicly with one voice, the copper industry revealed important cleavages in its responses to African nationalism. Here, the more enlightened attitude of RST, when compared to that of Anglo American, remains striking. Anglo’s business horizons were framed clearly within central-southern Africa, and the possible repercussions of developments on the Copperbelt for the group’s more important interests in South Africa could never be ignored. In this respect, RST appeared to enjoy greater latitude, and proved willing to explore fresh opportunities not only within Africa but far beyond, in Latin America, Australia and elsewhere. Yet each group faced broadly similar practical problems associated with rising costs, an uncertain market and rising competition among global producers of copper. Of inescapable significance is the apparent contribution made to RST’s outlook by its key American shareholders, the AMC. At least a decade before an independent Zambia was being contemplated by the British government, and longer still before many settlers would accept the inevitability of majority rule, AMC appeared to be preparing itself, and by extension RST, for this outcome. Crude pragmatism seems an inadequate explanation of this remarkable shift in corporate thinking, although the security of AMC’s considerable investments in the Copperbelt was certainly an important consideration. These concerns are clearly expressed in the voluminous (private) correspondence between AMC and RST head offices in Africa, but so, too are underlying misgivings, couched largely in ethical terms, about the morality of the settler project in post-war Central Africa. An equally consistent strand of thought is the danger of propelling political ‘moderates’ into the arms of ‘extremists’. Whereas British approaches to decolonization commonly stressed the need to detach moderates from extremists, and so identify future collaborators, American business, in this case, seemed keen to prevent moderates developing into extremists. This, perhaps, accounts for the enthusiasm AMC exhibited towards programmes of development, education and African ‘advancement’ generally, though all of these could be expected, eventually, to meet the needs of the mining industry as well as promoting political stability in Northern Rhodesia. It is possible that, in the Copperbelt, and in the mining industry’s response to political change, we see a microcosm of a larger development closely related to the unfolding of British decolonization against the background of a widening, and threatening, Cold War – the growing interest of the United States in the progress of Third World countries towards
independence, and the increasing co-operation between London and Washington in the management of this process. Just as RST, arguably, served as a go-between in the developing relationship between British policy-makers and African nationalists, so the group’s activities could tentatively be said to reflect a convergence in British and US political priorities for Central Africa, one which emphasised liberal solutions for the region’s problems as an alternative to more radical prescriptions, which would challenge not only Western business interests, but a much more fundamental strategic stake, too.

Notes


5 Sir Ronald L. Prain, *Selected Papers 1953-1957* (London, 1958), 57. In 1950, Prain privately lamented that the Northern Rhodesian government seemed willing to interfere in a wide range of issues, except the one which really mattered, that is, the colour bar: American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming: Prain Papers, Box, Folder 2, Prain to Harold K. Hochschild, 26 April 1950.


7 NA CAB 129/45 CP(51)122, Joint Cabinet Memorandum by Colonial Secretary and Commonwealth Relations Secretary, ‘Closer association in Central Africa’, and annex, confidential minute by G.H. Baxter and A.B. Cohen, 3 May 1951.

8 NA: CAB 129/47 CP(51)265, Joint memorandum by Colonial Secretary and Commonwealth Relations Secretary, 12 Oct. 1951.


12 NA: SUPP 14/29, K.D. Rogers (Ministry of Materials) to J.S. Gandee (Commonwealth Relations Office), 13 August 1951, citing opinion of A.W. Durrant, former secretary of the Rhokana and N’Changa companies.

13 AHC: Prain Papers, Box 1, Folder 2, Ronald Prain to Harold K. Hochschild, 21 April 1950.


15 *Northern Rhodesia Debates*, col. 148f., 3 July 1952.

16 P. Slinn, ‘Commercial concessions and politics during the colonial period: the role of the British South Africa Company in Northern Rhodesia, 1890-1964’, *African Affairs* 70 (1971).

17 American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming: Prain Papers, Box 1, Folder 2, Ronald Prain to Harold K. Hochschild, 21 April 1950.

18 See, e.g., AHC: Prain Papers Box 2, Prain to Welensky, 10 March 1952. Sir Ernest Oppenheimer, on behalf of Anglo American, was reported to have adopted a similarly supportive position: ibid., Welensky to Prain, 22 March 1952.


22 See letter from David Stirling, President of the Capricorn Africa Society, to *The Times*, 30 May 1951. Briefly, the plan envisaged the development of distinct European and ‘native’ sphere in Southern Rhodesia, ostensibly allowing Africans to progress economically and politically, while creating opportunities for large-scale white immigration.

23 AHC: Prain Papers Box 2, Prain to Welensky, 7 July 1954 and 23 August 1954.


26 Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society. The Labour Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge, 1996), 263.


Sir Ronald Prain, *Reflections on an Era. Fifty Years of Mining in Changing Africa* (London, 1981), 103. By the mid-1950s, Prain had become convinced that what the Federation needed was long-term stability in copper prices, to reinforce its credit-worthiness and allow it to budget ‘sensibly’: AHC Prain Papers Box 2, Prain to Welensky, 7 Feb. 1955.


Ibid.


Murphy, *Party Politics and Decolonization*, 74.

Between them, RST and Anglo American contributed £20 million, plus a further £10 million surcharge on the power they would buy from Kariba: Prain, *Reflections on an Era*, 132-3.


AHC: Prain Papers Box 1, Amco/AMAX folder, Prain to Walter Hochschild, 26 July 1954.


Murphy, *Party Politics and Decolonization*, 74.

NA: DO 35/7620, M.R. Metcalf (Office of the High Commissioner for the UK, Southern Rhodesia) to Lord Home (Commonwealth Relations Secretary), 29 August 1959.

LSE Library: Selection Trust Papers, ST G1/15/3, Statement by the Chairman, 15 Oct. 1959.

NA: CO 1015/1747, Presidential address by the Federal Prime Minister, Sir Roy Welensky, to the UFP Congress, 17 Sept. 1959. It is conceivable that Prain’s statement was a form of ‘trial run’ for Macmillan’s celebrated speech, delivered to the South African parliament in 1960.

of a meeting with Kaunda as early as September 1959: see AHC: Prain Papers Box 1, Folder 5, Prain to Harold K. Hochschild, 29 Sept. 1959.


49 AHC: Prain Papers, Box 2, ‘Zambia’ Folder, Prain to A. Lennox-Boyd, 23 July 1956.

50 NA: DO 183/477, G.W. Jamieson (CRO) to J.A. Molyneux (Adviser on Commonwealth and External Affairs, Deputy Governor’s Office, Lusaka), 31 July 1964.


54 AHC: Prain Papers, Box 1, Folder 2, Prain to Harold K. Hochschild, 8 May 1950.

55 Ibid.

56 AHC: Prain Papers Box 1, Folder 3, Harold K. Hochschild to Prain, 20 Sept. 1954.

57 AHC Prain Papers, Box 1, Folder 2, H.K. Hochschild to Prain, 18 June 1951.

58 Rhodes House Library, Oxford: Welensky Papers WP 231/11, ff.1-8, 8 March 1963. This strand of political realism within the American mining industry can be detected much earlier. Even before the First World War, the mining engineer and future President, Herbert Hoover, had warned publicly that among the priorities of the indigenous governments of newly-emerging nations would be to secure control over the exploitation of natural resources: see A.J. Wilson, The Life and Times of Sir Alfred Chester Beatty (London, 1985), 277.


63 M. Kahler, Decolonization in Britain and France: The Domestic Consequences of International Relations (Princeton, 1984), 285-6.

64 Berger, Labour, Race and Colonial Rule, 128.

NA: DO 183/221, H.G.M. Bass (Central Africa Office) to Hone, 12 July 1963.


NA: DO 183/217, R.E. Luyt (Acting Governor, Northern Rhodesia) to Lord Alport (British High Commissioner, Salisbury), 29 Dec. 1962.

Ibid.

Roberts, *A History of Zambia*, 218. AMC had already voiced its concern that the disparity in educational provision for European and African children would become a cause of ‘spreading criticism’. The rationale for expenditure by the RST Group was that it would foster improved race relations, and equip Africans to undertake the kind of work which the policy of advancement would make available. See AHC: Prain Papers Box 1, Folder 4, Harold K. Hochschild to Prain, 11 May 1955, and Box 1, Folder 5, Harold K. Hochschild to Prain, 25 Nov. 1959.

AHC: Prain Papers Box 2, Governors Folder, Sir Evelyn Hone to Prain, 4 Nov. 1959.

See, e.g., Roberts, ‘Notes towards a financial history’, 358.

In 1951, for example, Prain considered it more likely that a white-controlled Zambian government would nationalise the copper industry than that a British Labour government would take this course.


See, e.g., speeches reported in *Sunday Mail* 22 April 1962, and *Rhodesia Herald*, 25 June 1962.

NA: DO 183/475, minute by G.W. Jamieson (Central Africa Office), 30 April 1964. For Prain’s continuing misgivings, disclosed to the British Cabinet Secretary, shortly before Zambia’s independence, see NA: PREM 11/5026, note by Sir Burke Trend, 13 August 1964.


NA: FO 371/166966/UNS22615/9, draft brief on PSNR by N.P. Bayne (Foreign Office), 12 Sept. 1962.


