

## OBITUARY

### CHIEF OBAFEMI AWOLOWO, 1909-1987

(Submitted by Richard L. Sklar)

In his autobiography, Obafemi Awolowo tells about his tenacious pursuit of a barely adequate formal education. He was already thirty-four years old and a jack of many humble trades by the time he could finally afford to study law in London. Three years later, in 1947, the newly qualified lawyer and aspirant politician published a stunning book, *Path to Nigerian Freedom*, now a classic of African political thought. In it, he upheld the right of every cultural-linguistic group to establish modern political institutions within a unifying federal framework. His approach inspired a powerful political movement in Western Nigeria. He, himself, became an architect of Nigeria's federal constitution and the leading critic of its imperfections.

As Premier of the Western Region from 1954 to 1959, Awolowo acquired an awesome reputation for administrative competence and efficiency. In foreign affairs, he espoused Nigerian alignment with the Western democracies and decried Gamal Abdel Nasser's pretension to leadership in black Africa. No African leader has ever been flattered and praised with more conviction by conservative and liberal members of the Anglo-American Establishment than Awolowo in the latter 1950s. Yet his inner-directed personality was impervious to flattery and rarely if ever deflected from its self-directed course. He believed in democratic socialism and became its foremost Nigerian proponent as Leader of the Opposition in the Independence Parliament of 1960-62.

Awolowo's intellectual legacy lies mainly with his Afrocentric synthesis of democratic socialism and federalism. Posterity may also remember him as the exemplar of Fabian socialist thought in postcolonial Africa. His pluralist philosophy was anchored to the political principle of party competition. By way of comparison, both Julius Nyerere and Kenneth Kaunda are properly classified as participatory socialists in the democratic-corporatist tradition of G.D.H. Cole. Awolowo upheld the more orthodox party-parliamentary tradition of Sidney Webb and Harold Laski.

We shall never know whether an Awolowist federal government would have reflected his personal image of disciplined efficiency. His fervent belief in strong party leadership, as it is practiced in Britain, was incompatible with the construction of a winning coalition in the multicultural, federal state that is Nigeria. His conception of party leadership had built-in limitations that he refused to rectify for the sake of electoral success. They may have been the limitations of Fabian socialism in a plural and preindustrial society.

Chief Awolowo's voluminous published works include six substantial books. During his visit to California in 1982, the late Professor James Coleman asked him how his writing program had been, and would be, affected by the demands of public office. Without hesitation, he replied that it was easier for him to write while he was in office because everyone seemed to agree that a senior office-holder's time was precious and should be protected by subordinate officials. Out of office, he lamented, there was never enough time for his writing. Only the first volume of his projected trilogy, entitled "Adventures in Power," had been published at the time of his death.