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THE POSITION OF SOUTH AFRICA
IN THE COMMONWEALTH

By

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The main factor in the political relations and attitudes of South Africa towards the Commonwealth as a whole has been the continuance in office of the National Party Government which is representative almost exclusively of Afrikaans-speaking South Africans and in which no English-speaking South African has yet served. The accession to political power of the National Party in 1948 (when it defeated General Smuts' United Party, a party which had included in its Cabinet representatives of both English- and Afrikaans-speaking South Africans), the re-election of the National Party with an increased majority in 1953 and again with a further increased majority in 1958 have undoubtedly weakened the Commonwealth ties of South Africa.

South Africa has in fact witnessed during the past decade the rise to power of a "nation within a nation" and that "nation" which has now assumed a completely dominant and apparently unassailable position in the parliament of the country, speaks a language which is "foreign" to the other members of the Commonwealth (although it is not suggested that it is unique in this respect) and has a culture of its own which is derived more from non-Commonwealth countries such as Holland than from Britain.

This "nation within a nation" concept was recently described in these words by the Administrator of the Province of the Orange Free State, Mr. J.J. Fouché.

"If by the barrier of Afrikaner unity we have to forfeit temporarily a measure of love of our fellow-country-men, we are sorry but the fact that we have to forfeit part of their love will not make us less active fellow-builders of our communal fatherland..... If, as a result of our fence of Afrikaner unity, we cannot enter the future hand in hand with all our fellow South Africans, we can only say to them - let us at least approach our communal future as closely as possible. And let us span the wider fence of national unity around the inner camps of self-protecting group barriers.

The Afrikaner volk is not an appendage of any other nation. We have one loyalty and one fatherland. We are a nation with our own language - the foundation stone of our nation's personality.

To sum up. We have our own culture, our own background and history - a history in which we have known bitter disappointments, but a history which has been written word for word with letters of our blood and screeds of national service. But this has happened and at this stage we bear no malice towards anyone, no matter who they be, who caused our history to be written in this manner."

It is often remarked that the Commonwealth, being an informal association of member states, is held together by ties of sentiment and expediency. It must be noted in the case of South Africa that for the present Government such ties of sentiment do not exist. If there are feelings about the Commonwealth, they are mixed with memories of historical differences including actual hostilities with Britain. There are, of course, still sentimental ties between English-speaking South Africans and the Commonwealth, but these are not reflected in a positive way in Government attitudes. Here it may be pertinent to mention that two very small parties, the Liberal Party and to a lesser extent the Federal Party, reflect contemporary attitudes in the Commonwealth as a whole to a much greater degree than do the Government Party or the main Opposition Party.

That there are ties of expediency there can be no doubt. There are important commercial relations with Commonwealth countries which are of benefit to South Africa and other Commonwealth countries. There are many other advantages in the Commonwealth link, such as the information on international affairs passed to the South African Government through the High Commissioner in London, technical co-operation and information on technical and scientific matters received from Commonwealth bodies, defence co-operation in naval, military and air matters, and the advantages of specialised training afforded to many South African defence personnel. Such personal contacts make for a better appreciation of what the Commonwealth has become and the advantages of the present may even overcome to a large extent the memories of the past.

Expediency favours at the present time the retention of the Commonwealth link. But it has been reiterated by the last two Prime Ministers (Dr. Malan and the late Mr. Strijdom) that South Africa will remain in the Commonwealth only so long as it is in her own best interests to do so. Doubtless such a statement may have a strange ring to Australian, New Zealand and even Canadian ears, but it seems to have been impossible for South African Government spokesmen to mention the Commonwealth connection without qualifying it in this way.

With the absence of sentimental ties to the Commonwealth the National Party Government has steadily worked at the removal of the traces of South Africa's dependence as evidenced by British symbols. Uniforms and titles have been altered, the British national anthem and the Union Jack have been officially dropped. There were until recently two anthems and two flags. Above all, the country is nearing the time when it is going to be asked to become a republic. It is argued by Government supporters that the removal of these "foreign" symbols and the adoption of a republican form of government would allow more friendly relations to develop between the Afrikaans and the British people. This may be so, although this assumption is debatable and it is certainly contested by the Opposition Party. It is not necessary here to examine the arguments. It is simply necessary to note that the South African Government is removing the evidences of sentimental association with Britain and the Commonwealth. The question of whether the proposed republic would be within or without the Commonwealth is, it is stated, to be decided separately from the question of the republican form of government, i.e. presumably it is to be decided on the grounds of expediency, at a later stage.

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The internal factors which make for a less intimate association of South Africa with the Commonwealth are strengthened by one of the main trends in world affairs, namely, the rise of independent states in Asia and Africa, and lessened by another - the struggle of the Western world against Communism.

The emergence of independent states in Asia and the more recent and continuing emergence of independent states on the African continent, coupled with the withdrawal of Western European political power and influence from these areas, has placed white South Africa in a difficult and embarrassing position. In the post-war period of rapid decolonisation, South Africa is being left behind in Africa as a kind of remnant of European colonial power. The determination of the whites in South Africa to remain in Africa means in present circumstances the maintenance of the political control of African peoples at a time when Western European nations are forsaking such political control. South African policies, in these circumstances, seek not merely to maintain a position but to reinforce it and the

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country is thus adopting policies which are quite contrary to the general trend in Africa, policies which consequently result in the embarrassment or even estrangement of other Commonwealth countries.

Thus the debates on South Africa's racial policies in the United Nations find the Commonwealth members quite divided. One of the Commonwealth members, India, has been the instigator of these debates and has succeeded in winning the support of the other Asian members, the new African member, Ghana, and also of Canada and more recently of New Zealand too. The United Kingdom has taken the view that such debates constitute an interference in the domestic affairs of a member state, under Article 2 (7) of the Charter of the United Nations, and in this the Australian Government concurs. Although the United Kingdom Government takes its stand on the purely legal aspect of the question and offers neither praise nor criticism of South African racial policies as such, it has recently found itself under strong criticism in Britain for appearing not to wish to condemn "discriminatory" policies. These policies were discussed at the last Commonwealth Relations Conference which was concerned with the multi-racial aspect of the Commonwealth. The present conference is concerned with the structure and function of the Commonwealth and it is only necessary here to note that the difficult position in which the South African whites find themselves today is having a disruptive effect among other Commonwealth members. The forum of the United Nations would seem to be stronger in promoting unfriendly relations and misunderstanding among Commonwealth countries in this and other matters than any forum which the Commonwealth itself provides for promoting friendly relations and understanding among its members.

In South Africa itself the bitterness of the attacks made in the United Nations acts as a unifying force on the Government and Opposition supporters, and English-speaking and Afrikaans-speaking are brought together by what seems to them a general ignorance displayed in the United Nations of conditions in the country and a callous disregard of the fate of a minority which, while holding political power, feels acutely that the retention of such political power is, certainly in present circumstances, its only hope of existence on the African continent. This is brought home perhaps even more forcibly to English-speaking South Africans who have seen that the democratic system has resulted in the political triumph of the numerically larger Afrikaner section and the complete exclusion of the English-

speaking from the Government of the country, and who feel, in consequence, that an extension of the democratic system to the numerically preponderant coloured peoples would result at best in the political dominance of the Africans and the complete exclusion of the whites from the government of the country.

Whereas the difficulties associated with the multi-racial nature of South Africa have tended to weaken South African ties with the Commonwealth, the struggle of the West against World Communism has brought the South African Government into closer contact with the Western countries of the Commonwealth. Although many peoples in the West regard South Africa as an embarrassing ally and feel that the South African Government is more concerned to preserve its domination over African peoples than to assist in the world-wide struggle, they do overlook the fact that the South African Government voluntarily sent forces to Korea. This was, of course, more of a gesture to the Western world than to the Commonwealth.

The main international event affecting the Commonwealth - the Anglo-French landings at Suez - did not produce in South Africa the sharp reactions of other Commonwealth countries, from the denunciations of Canada and India to the staunch support of the Australian Prime Minister. The South African Government issued the following statement on November 5th, 1956 :

"The Cabinet today fully discussed the serious situation in the Middle East in the light of everything that has happened since the nationalisation of the Suez Canal Company by the Egyptian Government, until the landing today of the Anglo-French military forces.

"According to a statement of the United Kingdom Government, the Anglo-French military action is intended to protect the Suez Canal as a result of the invasion of the Sinai Peninsula by Israeli troops.

"When the Suez Canal Company was nationalised, the Union Government clearly stated its position, namely, that no South African ships make use of the canal, and that the Union is thus not a 'user country' in the sense in which that term has been employed in connection with the Suez issue. Furthermore, only a small percentage of the Union's export trade passes through the Suez Canal.

"The fact that South Africa does not have a direct interest in the nationalisation of the Suez Canal Company has since been fairly generally admitted, and is also understood. The absence of direct interest was also confirmed when South Africa and, amongst others Canada, was for that reason not invited to attend the '18-country' conference.

"In the circumstances mentioned the Union Government feels that it is not involved in the hostilities which are now taking place in the Suez area.

"The Government is, however, deeply concerned about the maintenance of peace in the Middle East, and wishes once more to express the earnest hope that a solution will be found - or that, in any case, the hostilities will remain limited and localised.

"The South African Railways and Harbours Administration will continue to provide all possible assistance and facilities to ships which are now obliged to make use of the route round the Cape of Good Hope."

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The parliamentary scene in South Africa has been dominated over the last few years by a constitutional struggle which is now ended. It will be remembered that, soon after its accession to power in 1948, the National Party Government announced its intention, in pursuance of its apartheid policy, of removing the Coloured voters from the common electoral roll and placing them on a separate roll. The right of the Coloureds to vote had been granted in the old Cape Colony, re-affirmed on the formation of the Union of South Africa and entrenched by a special clause in the Constitution, which required any alteration in this right to be sanctioned by a two-thirds majority of both Houses sitting together.

It may be of interest here to summarize the main events of the constitutional struggle which arose from the National Party Government's determination to remove the Coloured voters from the existing electoral roll.

7/.. 1951 (June)

- 1951 (June) The Separate Representation of Voters Act passed through its reading in both Houses separately and the royal assent was signified by the Governor-General.
- (August) Four Coloured voters filed an application with the Cape Supreme Court, seeking to have the Act declared invalid.
- (October) The Cape Supreme Court dismissed the application of the Coloured voters.
- 1952
- (March) The Appeal Court invalidated the Separate Representation of Voters Act.
- (June) The High Court of Parliament Act, which constituted Parliament as the supreme arbiter in constitutional matters, was passed and received assent. Dr. Malan, the then Prime Minister, declared : "It is imperative that the legislative sovereignty of Parliament should be placed beyond any doubt, in order to ensure order and certainty."
- (August) The High Court of Parliament met but, on application from the Coloured voters, the High Court of Parliament Act was declared invalid by the Cape Supreme Court.
- (November) The Appeal Court upheld the invalidation of the High Court of Parliament Act.
- 1953
- (April) At the general election the National Party was returned with an increased majority.
- (July-September) Joint sittings of both Houses were held but the Government failed to secure a two-thirds majority for the validation of the Separate Representation of Voters Act.
- (September) The Government introduced a Bill to amend the composition of the Appeal Court, by which the Appeal Court would be divided into a Court of Civil Appeal and a Court of Constitutional Appeal. The Court of Constitutional Appeal would consist of a President and four judges to be appointed by and if necessary added to by the Governor-General. This was not proceeded with.

1954

(November) Mr. Strijdom succeeded Dr. Malan as Prime Minister and announced his determination "to continue the struggle until finality has been reached."

1955

(April) The Government introduced a Bill to increase the quorum of the Appeal Court to eleven in any case where the validity of an Act of Parliament was concerned. This Bill was passed.

(May) The Senate Act was passed, dissolving the existing Senate and providing that the number of senators be increased from 48 to 89, that nominated senators be increased from 8 to 16, and that the senators be chosen in each province by a simple majority system instead of by proportional representation.

A new Senate was thereafter constituted in accordance with this Act, which gave the Government a two-thirds majority of both Houses sitting together.

1956

(February) The South Africa Act Amendment Act was passed by a two-thirds majority of both Houses sitting together. This Act gave the force of law to the Separate Representation of Voters Act of 1951.

(May) Cape Supreme Court upheld the validity of the Senate Act and the South Africa Act Amendment Act.

(November) Appeal Court upheld the validity of the Senate Act and the South Africa Act Amendment Act by a majority of ten to one.

Thus the struggle over the rights of Coloured voters ended in a victory for the Government after over five years of bitter debates in the House and in the country. It has resulted in the clear establishment of the supremacy of the legislature in all constitutional matters. Further, although the struggle was concerned with the rights of Coloured voters, it has had the effect of altering considerably the representation of the white voters. Although an approximately equal number of votes was cast in the 1958

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election for the National Party and the United Party, the number of representatives of the National Party in both Houses is now more than double that of the United Party. This very large majority, coupled with an apparently assured future, has the inherent danger that it may lead, as it has done in other countries, to the Government disregarding the Opposition and its role in the life of the country.

A further point worthy of note is that, approximately fifty years after Union, the voting in parliamentary elections is showing an unmistakable trend to racialism - white racialism. If the present trend continues, it would appear likely that future electors will vote for "an Afrikaner" or "an Englishman", and the larger number of the former will ensure that the country is ruled, as it has been since 1948, entirely by Afrikaners.

It is probable that, within the next few years, a republican constitution will be adopted by South Africa. Although no indication has as yet been given of the form of the proposed republic, it is possible that the present system, modelled closely on the British parliamentary system, might give way to one resembling the American system, with the President of the republic being much more than the nominal head of the state.

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South Africa's economy continues to be sound although its development is hampered by a shortage of capital and skilled labour. While fluctuations in world prices have affected some South African exports, notably wool, the gold-mining industry remains the country's staple asset and its contribution to the national economy has been further enhanced in recent years by the export of uranium which it extracts as a by-product. The tremendous increase in secondary industry in the immediate post-war years continues at a somewhat slower pace, and its contribution to the national economy is now very great. Yet much of South Africa's secondary industry is in turn dependent on the gold-mining industry which also provides a stabilising force in difficult economic times. An increase in the dollar price of gold, for which successive South African Governments have been pressing and for which there

is now considerable Commonwealth support, would of course provide a great fillip to the country's economy, even though it would undoubtedly increase inflationary tendencies.

Foreign exchange reserves fell sharply in the early part of 1958 but have been steadily rising in the latter half of this year and by November they had passed the £100 million mark which is traditionally regarded as safe.

In external trade, economic ties with the Commonwealth remain firm. These ties relate to a large investment of British capital in the country which has been responsible for much of its industrial growth, to the considerable trade exchanges with other parts of the Commonwealth, notably the United Kingdom, and to South Africa's participation in the sterling area.

While the bulk of capital for development has in the past come from the United Kingdom, there has been during recent years a notable "drying-up" of capital investment from this source. Capital inflow from any source has indeed been poor but, over the last year or so, there have been two notable contributions from other than Commonwealth sources. Thus the control of one of the large gold-mining groups has passed into American hands, and another large gold and diamond group has recently borrowed a considerable sum of money from West German banks to develop the former Williamson diamond mine in Tanganyika.

External trade is still dominated by relations between South Africa and the Commonwealth, as the figures in the accompanying table show. The share of the United Kingdom, as a percentage of the total, continues to drop gradually, while trade with the U.S.A. and European countries is increasing. Exports to Southern Rhodesia, although they dropped sharply this year, are now of great importance to South Africa, and trade with other parts of the African continent is developing and is constantly being explored.

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To sum up, South Africa is at present undergoing a period of further adjustment in its relations with the Commonwealth. While continuing to enjoy a sound and flourishing economy, the country is experiencing political

difficulties both internally and externally. Internally, the next few years will probably see the establishment of a republic on grounds of sentiment. Such a republic would probably elect to remain within the Commonwealth on grounds of expediency.

At the same time relations with the Commonwealth will be further tested by the mounting criticism, particularly from the Asian and African members, of South African policies. The rapid advances towards self-government in British and French Africa will before long leave only Southern Africa under European political control and the external and internal pressures on South Africa to conform to the general trend are likely to increase accordingly.

Political relations with the Commonwealth could also deteriorate through other possibilities. A return to power in the United Kingdom of a Labour administration could well precipitate a crisis which would not appear to be unwelcome to either side. The question of the transfer to South Africa of the High Commission Territories of Basutoland, Bechuanaland and Swaziland might do the same, should demands continue to be made from the South African side for their incorporation without any new proposal being advanced, or should precipitate action be taken by a United Kingdom Government to promote the self-government of these territories,

Whether the advantages of mutual co-operation and friendly discussion which the Commonwealth can provide for its equal partners will outweigh the emotional and political bitterness which the partners sometimes show each other, remains in doubt.

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SOUTH AFRICAN IMPORTS

Value in £ million

	1925	1937	1948	1950	1954	1957
Total Imports	63.1	97.3	331.2	286.6	413.0	550.6
U.K.	31.1	40.9	103.6	113.9	133.5	179.8
U.S.A.	9.4	20.0	118.3	43.7	83.0	107.6
Germany	3.3	5.3	1.1	6.7	19.5	44.3
Canada	2.2	3.4	18.4	12.7	15.3	16.9
Belgium	0.8	2.6	9.1	2.9	7.1	12.2
Holland	0.9	1.3	2.5	2.7	8.7	11.1
Italy	0.6	1.2	3.4	6.2	8.7	10.7
France	1.1	0.8	1.0	4.7	5.8	10.0

SOUTH AFRICAN EXPORTS

(excluding gold bullion and specie)

Value in £ million

	1925	1937	1948	1950	1954	1957
Total Exports	77.4	123.9	119.0	226.8	277.9	398.3
U.K.	44.0	98.0	33.2	60.0	80.4	110.1
Rhodesias & Nyasaland	0.7	1.2	14.1	23.1	43.8	58.1
U.S.A.	2.1	1.3	8.7	19.9	20.8	25.5
Germany	3.8	5.0	4.6	9.6	15.4	20.3
Belgium	1.7	2.3	4.2	8.9	9.7	18.7
France	3.8	2.5	10.0	27.2	13.6	15.1
Italy	1.0	0.8	5.0	9.9	14.8	17.2
Holland	2.3	1.3	3.3	9.2	7.5	11.4