

THE BRITISH EMPIRE AND UNIFICATION : 31 MAY 1910

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The "Union baby" that was born on 31 May 1910, was born and raised in sin for three reasons: it was a *racist* construction, because almost all of the blacks were excluded from political participation based on the colour of their skin, while the whites got almost all of the political power; it was an *imperialist* construction, because the British entered into an "unholy" compromise with the whites in order to try and prevent the fall of their declining Empire; and it was a race-based *capitalist* construction, because the Black Land Act (1913) created a capitalist system in South Africa which consumed *forced*, cheap black labour.

The Union of South Africa came into being based on the South Africa Act that was passed by the British parliament on 20 September 1909. In this Act the recommendations of the National Convention were accepted, which had met in South Africa from October 1908 until February 1909 regarding unification.

British imperial interests – and in particular the interests of the goldmine companies – played a decisive role when the British granted us unification.

Following the Napoleonic wars, Britain became the leading nation of the world. Its fleet and pioneering role in the Industrial Revolution (1770-1860) enabled it to build a large empire after 1820, mostly tuned in to India and Africa.

Until about 1880 Britain's so-called free-trade empire brought it great riches. Cotton garments produced by machines were very profitably exported to India and the rest of Asia. From 1850 onwards Britain also very profitably supplied large quantities of railroad material to Germany, France, Italy, the USA and later on to Brazil and India.

The railways enabled Germany and the USA to integrate their geographically extensive countries to cohesive "national economies". From 1870 on Germany and the USA became the pioneers of a second Industrial Revolution. Their Industrial Revolution was based on new technology and on large-scale steel and chemical industries that were energetically stimulated and protected by their relevant authorities.

Amidst the surging passions of nationalism in countries such as Germany, Italy and France, these nations from 1880 onwards started to challenge Britain's imperial monopoly. In the 40 years preceding World War 1 (WW1) an imperialistic competition developed between the nationalist and protectionism-driven empires and the British free-trade empire. This competition led to WW1.

Germany and the USA's relative share in the world's manufactured goods increased sharply from 1870 until 1914, while Britain's share declined. This created chronic payment problems for Britain, which led to an outflow of gold to Germany and the USA. Moreover, Britain experienced an extended Depression from 1873 to 1896.

In 1910 Britain's negative balance of payments (BP) with North America and Europe was £120 million. Its positive BP with the Middle East, Australia and Japan was £40 million. The only way Britain was able to keep head above water from 1880 until 1910 was by the favourable BP it maintained throughout with India. In 1910 this BP amounted to £60 million. The only way for India to survive such a negative BP with Britain was, for the sake of mother Britain, to smuggle large quantities of opium to China, causing a great loss in silver and gold to China.

Britain regarded the discovery of gold in the *Zuid-Afrikaanse Republiek* (ZAR) as a gift from God which would lead to the solution to its manifold economic problems. Over the past 120 years the mainly British goldmine companies have left many shiny – but also some filthy – footprints on South Africa's economic, political, social and ecological territory.

It was not easy to mine gold in the ZAR. The gold ore was not rich, it lay deep underground and the rock was hard. Semi-skilled miners were imported from Britain, but a large amount of unskilled labour was also required. In 1886 the African population was about 3 million. However, the Africans were not willing to work in the mines. It was against their culture and against their traditional way of life. Some Africans were profitable share croppers, while the majority were still making a satisfactory living from traditional farming in the part of South Africa that was still populated by them.

Subsequent to the discovery of gold, Cecil John Rhodes moved his capitalist interests from Kimberley to Johannesburg and in 1890 he also became Prime Minister of the Cape Colony. Rhodes was an arch imperialist and also a proponent of the rough form of racism. Rhodes wrote that when he went to bed at night and looked up at the starry sky, it made him very depressed. He claimed that, had he been able to, he would have colonised all the heavenly bodies for the British Empire.

In 1894 Rhodes placed the Glen Grey Act on the Cape Statute Book in order to force the Xhosas to the mines with a system of taxation. When this Act was debated in the Cape parliament, Rhodes said that, looking at the labour problems in the USA and Europe, he was very glad to be in Africa. He added the following: "*If the whites maintain their position as the supreme race [in Africa], the day will come when we shall all be thankful that we have the natives with us in their proper place.*"

In the first 10 years gold mines experienced big problems in recruiting enough unskilled black labour. Paul Kruger was not prepared to place the Africans in the ZAR under the kind of compulsion that Rhodes had placed on the Xhosas in the Cape Colony. The ZAR government also did not provide support services – such as water, electricity, dynamite and a transport system – as desired to the mines. These factors all contributed to the Anglo-Boer War (A-BW). The goldmine companies wanted the Transvaal to come under British rule so that circumstances could be created that were conducive to the increased production of even more gold, even more profitably.

The A-BW was a big war. It cost Britain more than £200 million. Britain sent 365 000 British soldiers to South Africa, and recruited an additional 150 000 soldiers in its colonies. On the side of the two Republics there were at most 90 000 burgers (civilians) and 25 000 outriders. The burgers were well armed because good weapons

were purchased, in particular in Germany, with the money that the government of the ZAR made from the goldmines!

In this war more than 70 000 people perished, among whom 26 000 Afrikaner women and children who died in the concentration camps. (Had the A-BW taken place in 1960, Britain would not have won. If TV images of conditions in the camps had been broadcast, even the stiff upper lip British would have revolted.) Forty thousand Afrikaner homes were burnt down and 65% of the property of the burgers (civilians) was destroyed.

The extremes to which the British went to win the A-BW are an indication of how important the gold mine industry was for the flagging British Empire. Ironically, the A-BW did not save the British Empire, but accelerated its downfall.

After the A-BW the goldmines still struggled to recruit sufficient unskilled labourers. Recruitment was extended to Kenya and Tanganyika. In 1903 Alfred Milner imported 64 000 Chinese indentured labourers for the mines and established the Lagden Commission (or SA Native Affairs Commission - SANAC) to investigate why the Africans did not want to work on the mines.

The members of SANAC were all Oxford graduates and members of Milner's *Kindergarten*. SANAC's report was published in 1905. It came to the conclusion that the Africans were lazy and that they should be forced to work in the white economy by dispossessing them of a large part of the land on which they were making their traditional livelihood. SANAC was of the opinion that if the Africans became hungry enough, they would be prepared to work on the mines.

Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman's Liberal Party won the 1905 general elections in Britain. Milner was recalled and in 1906 Lord Selbourne became High Commissioner in South Africa. He had been ordered to pursue a reconciliatory policy towards the burgers (civilians) of the former Boer republics. Before Selbourne arrived, General Jan Smuts paid a visit to London and warned Campbell-Bannerman that if the British did not start treating the burgers of the former republics with more sympathy, Britain would be stuck with a second Ireland.

Lord Selbourne played an important role in unification. The problems awaiting him in South Africa were difficult. During the A-BW the British had requested the blacks not to participate in the war and promised them that after the war *equal laws and equal liberties* would be granted to all population groups.

When peace negotiations were held in April/May 1902, the British were totally weary from the war. During the negotiations that led to the Peace of Vereeniging (31 May 1902) the British broke the promise they had made to the blacks. In section 8 of the Peace Accord they made the concession to the burgers of the two republics that the question regarding voting rights for Africans would be postponed *until* a form of self-rule was ceded to the two republics. This promise the British did keep.

In 1906 the two British colonies in the Transvaal and the Free State attained representative self-rule with a constitution in which blacks did not gain the right to

vote. General Louis Botha's party *Het Volk* won the March 1907 elections and General Smuts became Minister of Mining.

In May 1907 the white mineworkers, mostly British, went on strike for higher wages. The mine bosses were furious. On 23 May 1907 General Smuts declared a state of emergency and ordered the imperial troops that were still stationed in the barracks in Pretoria to occupy the British mines and to render safe passage to Afrikaner miners. The comments made by Lionel Phillips, a mining magnate, were significant:

"The whole position is getting topsy-turvy; a Boer Government calling out British troops to keep English miners in order; while Dutchmen are replacing them in the mines."

The actions by Smuts during the mining strike of 1907 played a decisive role in the process that led to unification. He convinced the British government and the mining companies that he understood the economic and financial interests of large capitalist companies and that he was prepared to protect their imperialistic interests. From that day on General Smuts became the favourite son of the British. He was promoted to Field Marshall for all his services to the Empire.

The negotiations that would eventually lead to general consensus at the national Convention were not without problems. A serious argument developed between Smuts and John X Merriman regarding the question of the right to vote. Smuts wrote directly to Merriman:

"I don't believe in politics for [the native races of South Africa] ...I feel inclined to shift the intolerable burden of solving the sphinx [franchise] problem to the ampler shoulders and stronger brains of the future."

Merriman's position was that the Africans were the workers and that history had taught us that the workers represent the future. He put this challenging question to Smuts:

"Is it not rather building on a volcano [to exclude the natives], the repressed force of which must some day burst forth in a destroying flood, as history warns us it has always done?"

According to the South Africa Act of 1909, those Africans and brown people who possessed a qualified right to vote in the Cape Colony would keep it. This qualified right to vote was not extended to black people in the three northern provinces (in keeping with Section 8 of the Peace Accord of 1902). In 1910 about 14 000 brown people and 6 000 Africans in the Cape Province qualified for the right to vote. South Africa's population was then 6 million: 4 million Africans, 1,3 million whites, half a million brown people and 200 000 Asians. In 1910 a system of white political domination – with minor exceptions – was established in South Africa by the British.

Prior to the British parliament's approval of the South Africa Act in 1909, a serious debate regarding the South African voting rights issue was raging in Britain. Many Liberal Party and the Labour Party supporters were opposed to it. The pressure groups

that represented British capitalist, imperialist and gold interests strongly supported the racially based Act.

With the South Africa Act of 1909 Britain was extending its notorious colonial policy of "divide and rule" and of "elite collaboration to stabilise the Empire". The British were prepared to co-opt (or collaborate) the Boer elite from the Transvaal, because, after their painful experience in the guerrilla phase of the A-BW, they realised it would be impossible to stabilise the Highveld and control the African population without the military co-operation of the Afrikaners. For the sake of the goldmine industry the British were therefore prepared to co-opt the whites with political and economical rights and privileges and to exclude virtually all of the blacks from such rights and privileges.

In 1913 the two "co-opted" Boer generals (Botha and Smuts) did what the mining companies and the British imperialists were expecting from them. They implemented the recommendations of the SANAC in the Black Land Act of 1913. The section of South Africa's territory that was inhabited by blacks was reduced to 7,5%, share-cropping on white farms was phased out and Africans were also dispossessed of the right to own property in "white" South Africa. (In 1910 the African share-croppers were probably producing more maize than white farmers)

The Act of 1913 lent a racial dimension to British laissez-faire capitalism in South Africa. From 1913 until 1974 this race-based capitalist system allowed the economy and the mines to prosper through the employment of forced, cheap black labour. From 1974 until 1994, in the midst of the struggle, economic stagflation was experienced and black unemployment rose sharply.

Apart from the oppressive and exploitative labour laws, the white SA Parliament also placed multiple discriminatory laws (to protect whites – in particular Afrikaners – from black competition) on the Statute Book. In this way the status of Africans in particular was degraded even further. The only thing Africans were regarded as suitable for, was unskilled labour at a wage that was even lower than a subsistence allowance. Their freedom of movement was also severely curtailed with pass laws, which gradually became stricter and later became known as the "dompas".

In the colonial world the policy of co-option (or the collaboration of an elite) was applied in all of Britain's colonies. The manner in which co-option (or collaboration) of the whites in South Africa took place led to serious divisions in Afrikaner ranks and to the *politicisation* of the Africans.

In 1912 General Herzog held his "South Africa first" speech at De Wilt and the National Party was established in 1914. The resistance of the Afrikaners to the British, to the local English establishment and to the so-called "Bloedsappe" (or co-opted Afrikaners) caused the rise of Afrikaner nationalism. This led to the Pakt government (1924-1933) and to National Party (NP) rule (1948-1994). The NP regime reshaped the segregation policy of the SAP government (1910-1924) and the UP government (1934-1948) into the policy of apartheid, which was more rigidly racist than the policy of segregation.

The fact that Africans had been excluded by the South Africa Act of 1909 led to the establishment of the ANC in 1912. For a long time the ANC was a peaceful pressure group, but gradually it became more militant and from 1961 on it began an armed struggle against the apartheid dispensation. This struggle reached its peak from 1974 until 1994. (The Africans and coloureds in the Cape Province had been stripped of their voting rights in 1936 and 1956)

In 1994 the system of white political dominance was ended. In 1994 the system of race-based laissez-faire capitalism was replaced with neoliberal capitalism. Race-based capitalism forced a large number of Africans into the white economy, while the migrant labour system of the mines (as well as the influx control) destroyed traditional "peasant" farming in the native reserves, which remained too small even after being increased to 13% of the country's surface area. Capital-intensive and globally oriented neoliberal capitalism is currently in a different, forced way excluding large numbers of Africans from participation in the economy.

From 1910 until 1970 laissez-faire capitalism in South Africa had an almost insatiable demand for unskilled and cheap black labour. From 1994 onwards neoliberal global capitalism has put the South African economy under pressure to employ skilled and productive labour only, thereby excluding unskilled and unproductive labour (mainly Africans, and almost 40% of our potential labour force) and leaving them to their (cruel) fate. While the upper 20% of the population is getting richer and richer, the lower 50% is getting poorer and poorer.

The threefold ideological atmosphere in which unification took place was highly suspect: At the time the blatant racial ideology of segregation received great support from both white population groups; Britain's ideology of imperialism made the British Empire stumble on like a wounded buffalo; and the ideology of race-based laissez-faire capitalism held up economic growth as a tool towards earthly wholesomeness, even if starvation wages were being paid to the African labourers.

I would have liked unification to have taken place under different circumstances and in a different ideological climate. I would like to believe that, with a different evolutionary history, South Africa today would have been a more humane and more civilised place for all of its 50 million inhabitants.