

Smuts and South Africa

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THE free world mourned General Smuts (South Africans seldom called him Field-Marshal) with an affection and respect which it has given in equal measure only to President Roosevelt and King George V in our time. It is not the purpose of this article to add to the tributes already paid, but to try and explain why Smuts was to such a remarkable degree a prophet without honour in his own country. For the unanimity with which, after his death, his great qualities have been acknowledged even in his homeland does not contradict the fact that for many years now he had been cast out by the majority of his own Afrikaner people and that, even among his political supporters, he was often treated with reserve and not infrequently with suspicion. Indeed very many Afrikaners treated him with the bitterness that is accorded only to renegades. Although the memorial services for him were attended in the cities by men of all parties, it was otherwise in much of the platteland where the hard core of Nationalist Afrikanerdom is found. In the small country town, where this article was written, the ministers of the three Dutch Reformed Churches (of one of which Smuts was a member) refused to hold memorial services of their own or to take part in an undenominational one. The Anglican and Presbyterian ministers, whose churches here are small, were refused permission to hold their joint ser-

vice in the Town Hall on the ground that a memorial service for Smuts would be equivalent to a political meeting!

II

THERE was one period which formed an exception to the general rule of his political career—the identification of his will with that of the great majority of South Africans in the last war. When General Hertzog moved his neutrality resolution on 4th September, 1939, Smuts, then deputy leader of the coalition government, carried an amendment against it by 13 votes and, remembering how narrow was the margin in the Middle East in 1940-42, it is not fanciful to see in that close division one of the crucial decisions of the war. When Smuts went to the country in 1943, his party polled two-thirds of the total vote and secured a large majority in parliament. There is no doubt that this fairly represented the majority opinion of South Africa; it is equally certain that the implacable one-third never accepted the majority decision in a constitutional manner and for a variety of reasons (pro-German, anti-British and merely isolationist) continued to oppose the prosecution of the war, sometimes actively, more often passively. How Smuts drove a country, deeply divided on issues that were widely misunderstood

and misrepresented, and totally unprepared militarily to a war effort that will compare with any, is a story too long to tell here, though it must be mentioned. For the truth is that Smuts, like Churchill, was his country's man of crisis, a leader whose drive and vision were recognised and accepted unchallenged only when the country seemed in obvious mortal danger. In less dangerous times he suffered, like his great English contemporary, from a certain insensitivity in regard to the bread-and-butter issues of domestic politics. There is a general similarity between Churchill's attitude to the General Strike of 1926 and that of Smuts towards the Rand rioters of 1923, on whom he turned machine guns. But, this one weakness apart, Smuts was too great for the stage on which he played, and for that situation both his own character and that of his countrymen were to blame.

III

SMUTS was never an easy man to meet and even to the end, though more especially in the first half of his life, there was a touch of intellectual intolerance about him—an unwillingness to suffer fools gladly and an impatience with those whose minds had not his lightning quality—which offended many smaller men. As readers of Deneys Reitz's *Commando* will recall, Smuts as a Boer general kept his own counsel and made his decisions alone—an aloof, somewhat austere figure. In this respect he was outside the Afrikaner tradition. Paul Kruger, autocratic and undemocratic as he was in handling his council and assembly (wherein, too, he was a traditional Afrikaans type which we are seeing revived to-day), was approachable by all; any burgher was welcome to tea or coffee on the President's *stoep*. Smuts had neither the intellectual nor social temperament for such homeliness, and his aloofness and obvious mental superiority were resented among a people that do not greatly honour intellectuality. Later in life he mellowed but, as much as this, it was the kindly

simplicity of his wife which attracted to them both their share of the nation's affection. Both the other great figures in the Union's politics, Generals Botha and Hertzog, were more in the Kruger mould socially and it was the alliance between the widely loved and practical Botha and the vision and ability of Smuts which ensured the success of the early years of Union. Smuts alone could never have commanded the necessary affection; respect, often grudgingly given, was not enough, when men followed a leader rather than a policy. The same alone-ness was displayed in Smuts' wartime governments, which he so dominated that, except for Hofmeyr, no outstanding minister emerged and Smuts' passing has left his party without leaders—at least without any who have established their reputations. Intolerant of criticism and opposition within his own party or government, he was, perhaps, too tolerant of error or mediocrity in those who supported him whole-heartedly, so that there was an element of truth in the charge that his cabinets existed only to acquiesce—cabinets of his shadows.

IV

IT was no accident that the world knew more of his vision than his own country. He was an unusual combination of visionary and practical politician. His great friend and later deputy Prime Minister, the late J. H. Hofmeyr, was more of an idealist and man of principle. He resigned from the Smuts-Hertzog coalition ministry because Hertzog appointed to one of the senatorships representing native interests a man whose particular qualifications for this post were less conspicuous than his personal friendship with the Premier. Smuts did not consider that this piece of jobbery required him to endanger the coalition. In a country where racial prejudice so often distorts the moral issues, Hofmeyr was the conscience of South Africa—the phrase is Smuts'—as Smuts himself could never have been. However, it is certain that

Smuts, like Hofmeyr, recognised that the full development of the country would require the progressive association of the coloured races in all aspects of administration and the gradual extension to them of political responsibility and representation; but, unlike Hofmeyr, he seldom spoke of the distant future. He would have justified this by the need to avoid antagonising public opinion until the inevitable logic of events had become more apparent; for the majority of his own supporters were (and still are) tacitly, if not openly, in favour of perpetuating white supremacy, though not necessarily by the methods of the present Government. Smuts' political nickname of "Slim Jannie" derived as much from belief that he dissembled his real intentions and ultimate objectives in the case of immediate administrative success as from respect for his intelligence—for the Afrikaans word "slim" implies craftiness as well as cleverness. Even in his own party many feared that they might be pushed further than they wished to go and knew that they might not realise it in time.

V

BUT it was in Smuts' relations with his own race that the tragedy of modern South Africa may be seen. Soon after the end of the Boer War Smuts' mind, as a practical expression of his philosophy of holism (the organic integration of parts into greater wholes) was moving towards the unification, first, of his own country and, later, of mankind. But within four years of Union Hertzog had rejected the Botha-Smuts policy of conciliation and in 1914 he founded the Nationalist Party to provide a focus for Afrikaner separatism. Again, when after the 1931 economic crisis the parties of Smuts and Hertzog formed a coalition and then merged into the United Party (Hertzog having been convinced that Dominion status gave the substance of independence) only 19 MP's remained with Dr. Malan in opposition and it seemed that Smuts' hope of a united white South

African nation might be realised. But that small caucus of Afrikaner isolationism represented a real and permanent element in Afrikaans politics. It increased its strength to 27 in 1938 and became an effective parliamentary force again when Smuts' amendment on the issue of neutrality or war split General Hertzog's personal following. Botha and Hertzog represented the Afrikaner leader tradition, as Smuts never did, and with their deaths (Botha in 1919 and Hertzog during the last war) and the end of the war emergency South African politics became in 1948 less an affair of leaders and more truly a matter of policies (as among the white races) than ever before. It is the country's misfortune (and may yet prove to be all Africa's) that the division of opinion should be almost entirely on racial issues.

The following extract from one of General Smuts' speeches exemplifies the holistic range of his thought towards the greater synthesis—from Boer and British provinces to Union, from South Africa to the Commonwealth, the League of Nations and the United Nations, all three of which associations bear the imprint of his vision and purpose:

"I come from a small people. I think it is a matter of history that I have been prepared to lay down my life for that people, and I need hardly tell an Irishman like you, Dulanty, that I am still prepared to lay down my life for that small people. The point is that they are a small people, mere flotsam among the nations of the world, having no platform from which to speak to influence either their own destiny or the destiny of mankind. And now, with these few words of explanation, I will give you the quotation:—

"The poet said the city of Cecrops is very dear.

May I not also say the City of God is very dear?" "

This is a vision which the majority of Afrikaners do not wish to share. Nor is the reference to the Irish irrelevant, for Afrikaner nationalism, in its narrow sense, is as much concerned as Irish nationalism has been to emphasize real or imagined

humiliations at the hands of the British. Only recently the Minister of Justice and Education (as he then was) announced the present Government's intention of sponsoring a new history of the already well-documented Boer War in which the story of the concentration camps is to feature prominently.

These were camps where British interned Boer women and children from areas which had been feeding and succouring the Boer guerilla commandos. The high death rate in the camps was not, as is alleged by Afrikaner extremists, due to deliberate cruelty or neglect; but partly to epidemics which also decimated British troops in the vicinity, partly to non-cooperation by the internees with the camp medical authorities and partly (in some areas) to successful sabotage of the food supplies for both camps and troops by the Boer guerillas. Kitchener's policy of razing the farms and interning their inhabitants was widely condemned at the time by much British opinion and is not seriously defended to-day; but the analogy with Dachau and Buchenwald is justified neither in intention or performance.

Defeat in that war was the culmination of a long series of reverses (occasionally relieved by Pyrrhic victories) which broke the Afrikaner supremacy in Southern Africa. It has never been forgiven or forgotten by the majority of Afrikaners, who treasure every incident discreditable to their opponents; and this undying memory has been stimulated and inflamed by successive generations of Nationalist politicians, getting more bitter as the man who actually fought the war and remembered its humanity as well as its suffering died out, until wounded vanity has issued in an aggressive-defensive racialism, which seeks to return to past glories both against British and Bantu—the former including English-speaking South Africans.

VI

THE events of 1901-10 which led up to Union and Smuts' own career in particular have been commonly cited

as examples of how generous treatment of the vanquished can abate bitterness and lead to a constructive synthesis. A few days before Smuts died the complete victory of his political opponents in South-West Africa emphasized what the history of the last ten years had suggested—that that verdict was premature. Their victory there gave the Nationalists the parliamentary majority by which they can in fact (though not constitutionally) entrench themselves by abrogating the Entrenched Clauses of the constitution—the constitution which Smuts so largely framed and by which he sought to safeguard the old Cape Colony franchise for the Coloured (half-caste) and Native peoples. The Malan-Havenga pact* marks the first assault on Smuts' greatest legislative achievement. Yet for a few more years he will continue through that instrument actively to dominate the South African scene as appeals go up to High Court against unconstitutional legislation. Then they, too, will cease as the jurisdiction of the Courts is restricted or excluded by new legislation and the present judges, as they die or retire, are replaced by others more "nationally" minded. When Smuts died, he must have foreseen the twilight of democracy in South Africa and the broken dream of racial harmony. Himself one of the last great figures of the 19th century liberal tradition, he lived to hear the Ministers of the Government of his country describe liberalism as a species of communism for no better reason than that both were resolutely opposed to an illiberal racial policy.

NEVER was the contrast between two incompatible ideas of nationalism more vividly brought out than in the speeches at the opening of the Voortrekker Monument on 16th December, 1949. General Smuts dwelt on the contribution made by all races to the Great Trek and the need for the willing co-operation of all in building the new South Africa. Dr. Malan's speech, exclusively concerned with the Afrikaans people, ended with a passionate plea for the return of the Afri-

kaners to the religion, the ideals and the virtues of their ancestors. "Terug" (back), with which the Premier opened each of his final sentences, might be the motto of Afrikaner nationalism.

The gulf between Smuts' forward-looking vision of a united humanity, in which there is an honorable place for even the smallest peoples, and the Nationalists' parochialism with its ideals of racial domination and living for ever in a golden past is so great as to appear almost unbridgeable, unless the vicissitudes of power and responsibility drive home the lesson that other small peoples of the world have had painfully to learn in the last forty years. It is against this narrow sectarian background that we can understand the mentality of a Nationalist neighbour who, on the morrow of Smuts' defeat in 1948, rejoiced that Cambridge University would need to find a new Chancellor (though he did not actually propose Dr. Malan for the post). No

argument would convince him that Smuts' fame rested on a foundation much more secure than domestic politics could ever provide, and indeed the honour which the world paid Smuts in his lifetime was a source of offence and reproach to many of his countrymen. They found his greatness hard to bear and, judging him against their own much more limited and sectional ideals, they said that he subordinated the interests of his country to those of other nations and to the enhancement of his own renown. Time will show how wrong they were.

*This agreement between the Nationalist and Afrikaner parties, by which the latter abandoned General Hertzog's stand on the sanctity of the Entrenched Clauses, was consummated by an Act of June, 1951 removing Coloured voters from the common electoral roll in the Cape Province. An appeal against this unconstitutional measure is pending in the Appellate Court. Meanwhile the Afrikaner and Nationalist parties have agreed to merge into one National party since the former, by surrendering their constitutional conscience, no longer differ in principle from the latter; and both openly proclaim the doctrine of white supremacy against the black majority, irrespective of merit, morality or cultural development.

As You Like It

Consciously or unconsciously, we all strive to make the kind of world that we like . . . There is every reason for doing all that we can do to make the future such as we desire.

OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES, JR.