


10. Smuts: Afraid of Greatness

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Richard Steyn's recently acclaimed biography (2015), albeit critical and acknowledging Smuts's numerous ambiguities and flaws, presents him as a 'great man' who, respectively, fought for freedom against British Imperialism; established South Africa as a new state; sought to build a united white nation; and played a distinguished role internationally as a military leader and global statesman. Given a current tendency for Smuts to be uncritically dismissed as having laid the foundations for apartheid, Steyn's reassertion of Keith Hancock's presentation of Smuts as both a highly complex figure and one of the most outstanding men of the twentieth century (1962 and 1968) is most welcome. However, this contribution will argue that his characterisation of Smuts as 'Unafraid of Greatness', the subtitle of his book (borrowed from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*),¹ is fundamentally wrong, and that as Prime Minister during the years following World War II, he failed the greatest test that history had put to him.

The argument to be made here does not seek to dispute the significance of Smuts's role in history. Nor will it seek to engage in the debate about whether it is constructive and proper to attribute historical 'greatness' to notable individuals who can be acknowledged as having shaped our past. The position adopted here is that while structural forces have usually been far more significant in shaping historical outcomes than individuals, particular individuals have played a highly influential (at times, even determining) role in particular situations. Furthermore, it is recognised that while we assess the role played by individuals according to our

1 A reminder, if it is needed: '...be not afraid of greatness. Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon 'em'.

judgement of how their actions were guided by (or deviated from) the values and beliefs that pervaded the society of their day, the values which we hold today inevitably influence our understanding of the past. This does not mean that we have a completely free hand in how we judge the actions of our subjects of study, as we must continue to be guided by the rules and standards of historical scholarship. However, it does indicate that in making our judgements, we need to make the perspectives and values from which we are approaching our writing of history evident and clear.

Any biographer worthy of the name is going to be aware of the complications these considerations bring to the task of making judgements about the lives of their subjects. They need to counter-balance their awareness that their subjects were 'men or women of their time' with retrospective judgements of the consequences of their actions, and the extent to which they bore responsibility for them (for good or ill). And this of course, brings us back to Smuts, and why - in the view of this writer - the reputation attributed to him for 'greatness' by some biographers (even if they have eschewed that device of language) has in our time become so tarnished.

In brief, it is argued here that the reason why Smuts is so widely criticised, even reviled, today is that, despite his professed liberalism, he was on the wrong side of history regarding the issue of the black vote, despite his long-held realisation that what (in its time) was termed 'the native question' was the most important existential issue confronting South African society. The argument of this chapter is that he consciously and consistently ducked the issue.

There is clearly much retrospection in this judgement. So how do we untangle the argument while recognising the problems posed by relativity of historical judgement referred to above? A short answer is 'with difficulty' because of the contradictions which lay at the heart of his liberalism.

The Liberal and Democrat

In 1943, Alexander Campbell, a left-leaning British journalist then based in South Africa described Smuts as 'One of the greatest democratic leaders in the world today' (Campbell, 1943:45). Writing at the height of World War II, at a time the opposition National Party (NP)² was flirting openly with fascism and urging Hitler to victory, this assertion would have been regarded as commonplace amongst many of his readers. It was Smuts who had ensured that South Africa would enter war on the side of Britain in 1939; he was a close confidant of Churchill; and he had long become a great man of the Empire. It was Smuts, if anyone, who would be able to persuade his countrymen to move forward to democracy after the war.

Of course, it was well known internationally that there was a highly developed system of racial segregation in South Africa, more thoroughgoing and more rigorous than anywhere else in the British Empire. Nonetheless, for all that Smuts had been at the heart of governments which had enacted a mass of legislation which buttressed white racial dominance, it would not have been regarded as unduly contrary by his readers when Campbell described Smuts as the man most likely to move South Africa forwards to a more liberal system (Campbell, 1943:66).

Smuts had long enjoyed a reputation internationally as a liberal. Having embraced the British Empire as a protective canopy for South Africa's progress and freedom following the Boer defeat in the Second Anglo Boer War, he had come to subscribe to its liberal ethos. He had played a prominent role in drafting the constitution which had created the Union of South Africa as a Westminster-style (albeit white) democracy in

2 Following the formation of the United Party in 1934, Dr F. Malan and his followers had broken with the Prime Minister, J.B. Hertzog and formed the *Gesuiwerde Nasionale* (Purified National) Party, which in turn became the *Herenigde Nasionale* (Re-united National) Party after they were joined by some of Hertzog's followers who rejected South Africa's entry into World War II. For ease of reference in this chapter, I refer simply to the NP.

1910. Furthermore, he had served in Lloyd-George's Liberal-led coalition government during World War I before further burnishing his liberal credentials at its end by his pleas at Versailles for a more generous treatment of Germany than the Allies had proved willing to give (Lentin, 2010). In any case, there was always a marked tendency in Britain to heap the burden for South Africa's brutal racism on the Afrikaners (e.g. Barnes, 1930),³ or more particularly, upon the successive iterations of the NP which had emerged at key moments in the Union's short history, first to the right of the Botha / Smuts's South African Party in 1914 and subsequently of the Hertzog / Smuts's United Party in 1934. In sum, although Smuts was never wholly free of criticism internationally (usually from missionary quarters), he was 'a political figure peculiarly immune to public criticism' (Schwarz, 2013:324) - despite his combining his professed commitment to liberal democracy with the necessity of white supremacy.

The Supremacist Democrat

In an essay he had written for a prize when he was a twenty-year old undergraduate at Stellenbosch, Smuts had proclaimed that 'the race struggle is destined to assume a magnitude on the African continent such as the world has never seen'. White unity was the 'necessary condition' for avoiding white annihilation (Hancock, 1962:30). In his youthful naivety, he was making explicit what was more often left unsaid amongst all but the most radical of those who proclaimed themselves 'Cape liberals'. While out of a mix of tradition, paternalism and electoral dependence on the small stratum of propertied and male Africans and coloured people who had become enfranchised under the Cape Colony's 'colour blind' franchise laws, they remained determined that the white vote would never be 'swamped'. Nor did they ever question the necessity for the white man to rule.

3 Even though, as Barnes noted in his preface, his Afrikaner was 'simply a personification of the general will of white South Africans as a class'.

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Smuts's first stab at the franchise question was made in a speech he delivered in defence of Rhodes in Kimberley in 1895. The tenor of his argument was that democratic principle should be tempered by reality. In South Africa, the white people were confronted by a mass of natives, the overwhelming majority of whom were barbarous and uncivilised. While the law should recognise that an appreciable number of the latter had moved beyond an early stage of development, it did not seem unreasonable that natives should be treated differentially, safe in the knowledge that if the white people abused their power, they would arouse feelings of resentment dangerous to themselves (Hancock, 1962:56-57). Yet it was only after the Boer defeat in the Second Anglo Boer War that what Hancock refers to as Smuts's pragmatic approach to democracy was spelt out in extensive correspondence with John X. Merriman, the renowned Cape liberal. This began prior to the grant of self-government to the Transvaal and came to a climax in the build-up to Union.

In 1906, in preparation for his meeting with the new Liberal government in London, Smuts had prepared a memorandum in which he disputed proposals for an electoral system which had detailed an economic qualification for voters⁴ by making the case for what he termed the 'true democratic principle' of adult male suffrage for white people, making no reference to the question of votes for people of colour. On his return, he had sent his memorandum to Merriman, who responded that while he was agreed with its overall content, he could not accept its franchise proposals. These were open to the same objection as the American Declaration of Independence in that they ignored three-quarters of the population that was coloured. He hastened to assure Smuts that he did not like the natives at all and wished there was no black man in South Africa, yet the reality was that they were there, and the only course was how to 'maintain the supremacy of our race and at the same time to do our duty'.

4 Made in the so-called Lyttleton Constitution (which was never implemented) of 1905.

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There were two options: the Cape policy of votes for all persons of any colour who achieved the prescribed standards, or the policy pursued by the two Republics and Natal of denying them the franchise. His recommendation was to pursue the former: 'Give every man who qualifies a vote but set the qualifications reasonably high.' Such a procedure would disqualify many 'poor whites', yet by enfranchising a few 'rich blacks', it would provide a safety valve. This would offer 'the most reasonable guarantee against an explosion', while simultaneously denying a pretext for interference into South African affairs by 'busy bodies on both sides of the water' (Hancock, 1962:219-20).

Smuts's reply was revealing of the position which he was to maintain throughout the coming years:

In principle I am entirely at one with you on the native question. I sympathize profoundly with the native races of South Africa whose land it was long before we came here to force a policy of dispossession of them. And it ought to be the policy of all parties to do justice to the natives and to take all wise and prudent measures for their civilization and improvement. But I don't believe in politics for them. so far as the natives are concerned politics will to my mind only have an unsettling influence. I would therefore not give them the franchise, which in any case would not affect more than a negligible number of them at present. When I consider the political future of the natives in South Africa I must say that I look into shadows and darkness; and then I feel inclined to shift the intolerable burden of solving that sphinx problem to the ampler shoulders and stronger brains of the future.

Merriman's reply was telling. While conceding (in response to a barb by Smuts that he was an 'old Tory') his devout hope that South Africa would remain founded on 'an aristocratic basis', he observed that Smuts was pretending it would become a democracy - yet Smuts was no more a democrat than he! 'How could you without blushing talk of manhood suffrage' while

excluding two-thirds of the population from the vote and terming it 'democracy'? (Hancock, 1962:227)

In the event, Merriman's long-held enthusiasm for Union overcame his insistence for the qualified franchise throughout the entirety of South Africa and subsequently he accepted the compromise around the vote reached at the National Convention, whereby qualified Africans and coloured people retained the vote in the Cape but were denied it in the other three provinces. Nonetheless, as Hancock avers, although the debate on Native policy between Smuts and Merriman may have illuminated the main issues, it 'had settled none of them,' and Smuts never addressed Merriman's reasoning about the wisdom of a safety valve.

What is more germane here is that within a few years of the end of the Second Anglo Boer War, Smuts became widely lauded as a democrat, despite his openly stated belief in the virtues of white supremacy. This was not so contradictory as it appears to modern eyes. The joining of the British colonies and Boer states had long been an Imperial ideal, and Smuts had proved the main instrument in bringing it about under a constitution modelled along British parliamentary lines. After all, despite unease in Westminster about leaving the 'native' franchise to the Union's white politicians, the British themselves had to justify their beliefs in representative government at home with a system of Imperial rule abroad which was itself premised on the conviction that 'natives' were not ready to rule themselves.

So, when in February 1942, Smuts delivered a speech to the Institute of Race Relations in which he declared that the African urbanisation which segregation had sought to stem was inevitable, it seemed to signal a significant shift in his thinking.

Realist and Reformer

Smuts had always appeared to stand for unqualified white control of the state and hitherto had presented the Union government as presiding over a benevolent paternalism

under whose umbrella the African population would live in a world of benign chiefly governance and customary law. He had elaborated this justification for segregation in his Rhodes Memorial lectures at Oxford in 1929 when he had addressed the native question in detail. The thrust of his argument then had been that without a large European population 'as a continuous support and as an ever-present example and stimulus for the natives', Africa was destined to stagnate. At the same time, the nature of African society was such that Africans needed protection from the ravages of industrialisation. The territorial and cultural segregation of Africans was for their own good.

There was much in African society that needed to be preserved. The African retained some wonderful characteristics. No other race was so easily satisfied, so good-tempered and so carefree, qualities it had needed in abundance to endure the intolerable evils which had been inflicted on it over the ages. However, this happy-go-lucky temperament had its inevitable drawbacks. It was a bar to progress and had evolved no religion, no art, and no literature since 'the magnificent promise of the caveman'.

Such a race required a policy very unlike that which was suited to Europeans:

If Africa has to be redeemed, if Africa has to make her own contribution to the world, if Africa is to take her rightful place among the continents, we shall have to proceed on different lines and evolve a policy which will not force her institutions into an alien European world, but which will preserve her unity with her own past, conserve that which is precious in her past, and build her future progress and civilization on specifically African foundations.

Smuts had argued in these lectures that the African way of life was disintegrating under the impact of the continent's incorporation into a white and more advanced world. Unless this disintegration was halted, native cohesion would be broken down, and governments would sit with vast hordes

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of detribalised natives on their hands. The result would be 'chaos'. Consequently, the establishment of reserves for Africans, enabling their communities to live apart from white people would protect them from the dangers inherent in urbanisation and proletarianisation.

From the native point of view, nay, even more from the native point of view, the policy of African settlement is absolute necessity.

And yet there remained a problem. Africa's industrial development required African labour. This resulted in the African's migration from black territories to white. Worse, the labourer's family was prone to migrate away from the tribal home to join him, yet as soon as this was permitted, the entire system of territorial segregation was likely to break down. The only way to resolve this difficulty was through the system of labour migrancy, where the native retained his family home, 'not with the white man but in his own area'.

Smuts had both outlined the problem and come up with its solution, yet simultaneously his logic had faltered, for he had gone on to admit that in South Africa, migration and urbanisation had progressed too far. The situation had been rendered even more difficult by the 'justifiable fervour' with which urbanised natives living amongst white people clung to their rights. It was they who constituted the real crux of the problem, as they claimed to be civilised and Europeanised, and did not wish to be pushed back into the seclusion of their former tribal associations. Were it not for the urbanised and detribalised natives, he declared, the colour problem would be shorn of most of its difficulties. Alas, 'few acquainted with the facts and difficulties (could) profess to see clear daylight in the tangle of this problem' (Smuts, 1930).

Yet by 1942, apparently, he was beginning to see daylight, for in his speech to the SAIRR he admitted that existing policy was failing. He emphasised South Africa's rapid economic expansion, industry's insatiable demand for African labour, and the corresponding growth of the urban population. Urbanisation was eroding ethnic and racial distinctions,

resulting in the intermixture of the various 'Native tribes' and the wider population. These were observable facts. They refuted the theory that white and black people could live in totally separate territories. 'The policy of keeping Europeans and Africans completely apart for the self-preservation' had failed. The high hopes placed in it had been disappointed. How could it be otherwise? Throughout the length and breadth of Africa, a similar transformation was taking place, and the momentum was towards closer contacts between the races. 'Isolation had gone, and segregation has fallen on evil days.' A revolutionary change was taking place amongst the Native peoples of Africa. 'You may as well try to sweep the ocean back with a broom' (Hancock & van der Poel, 1973a:335-36).

Jonathan Hyslop has argued that Smuts's SAIRR speech was expressive of a significant shift in South African policies that took place during the years of Smuts's second premiership. These represented:

the direct opposition of the attempt to drive the black working class out of the urban areas. Rather, they moved toward a strategy based on acceptance of black urbanization. The demands of South Africa participating in a global war unleashed a radical, and in some respects quite effective, reorganization of the South African state, economy and racial arrangements (Hyslop, 2017:439).

It was a moment when Smuts allowed white liberal and social democratic officials to launch welfarist and reformist initiatives directed at addressing the social conditions of black people (Dubow & Jeeves, 2005). By 1942, the Department of Native Affairs had acknowledged the importance of pass law grievances, and convictions under these laws declined massively during the war years. Industrial conditions for black workers improved and their real wages rose substantially, with cost-of-living allowances made obligatory. In the same year, a commission was established to make recommendations for a national health service 'for all sections of the population' and new thinking encouraged a flourishing of public health initiatives, with South African exponents of 'social medicine'

becoming global leaders in their field (Reynolds, 2010). In 1944, a social security committee proposed comprehensive benefits for all South Africans, and a scheme for non-contributory old age and invalidity pensions for Africans were implemented, albeit at racially differentiated rates. In 1945, African education, hitherto largely paid for by a poll tax, was made wholly chargeable to the central exchequer, and actual expenditure upon this item increased more than five-fold during the period of Smuts's government.⁵ The key point about these and other changes in social policy is that they recognised the breakdown of the African reserve system and the need to address the social conditions of a permanent black proletariat. This was only possible because South Africa's participation in the war had broken Smuts's alliance with the Hertzogite segregationists and opened the space for a new planning-oriented approach to social policy (Hyslop, 2017:453).

For Bill Freund (2018) this meant that South Africa emerged from the war as a quasi-developmental state. As in every other belligerent nation, the Smuts government had been compelled to suspend free-market policies in favour of extensive government intervention, adding that, as a Keynesian, Smuts was a proponent of state-directed industrial development that resulted in a significant reshaping of the economy. War-related production and the need for import-substitution had made manufacturing rather than mining the dominant growth sector of the economy, while the expansion of international trade after 1945 carried both mining and manufacturing even further along the road of industrial diversification. Even after the war, Smuts's regime was strikingly different from that of the apartheid government that followed, as it continued to give space to initiatives which accepted black urbanisation and attempted to create adequate urban social conditions for the new urbanised working class.

The shift in official policy was confirmed by the Report of the Native Laws Commission. Presented by its chairman,

5 From £909,340 in 1939 to £4,843,000 in 1947 (Hancock, 1968:481).

Justice H.A. Fagan in March 1948, this has been cited as the most liberal document produced under the auspices of a South African government hitherto (Evans, 1997). Appointed in 1946, its mandate was to examine the laws relating to Africans in urban areas, report on the operation of the pass laws, and consider future policy regarding migrant labour. Its major premise was that total territorial segregation had become impractical and outdated. Although the differentiation of the urban African population into settled and migrant labour communities should continue, it rejected the traditional doctrine that Africans had no right to remain in urban areas unless they were there to minister to the needs of white people. While it accepted that the migrant labour system should continue (the mining industry was excluded from its recommendations), it insisted that migratory labour should no longer be regarded as the only acceptable form of African labour in urban areas. The growth of the urban African population (including women and children) was inevitable, and the urban African labour force should be 'stabilised' by the extension of housing, pension and other welfare benefits. While it did not deny the need for controls over the movement of Africans into the towns, it proposed a rationalisation of the pass laws via the establishment of a system of labour bureaux to guide Africans into the right jobs (Suzman, 1948).

Smuts accepted the principles and proposals of the Fagan Report on behalf of the United Party, and despite some disquiet from within its ranks, it provided the basis for the party's programme with which it fought the 1948 election. However, the party remained unclear about how it would manage its political implications, repudiating attacks from its opponents that Fagan-style acceptance of African urbanisation would lead inevitably to racial and political equality. Smuts himself remained loftily vague. While insisting upon the recognition of the 'hard facts' laid out by the Fagan Commission, his view remained that while fully 'Europeanized' Natives would claim their right to citizenship, they would remain segregated politically and subordinated to white rule. Nonetheless, on 17 April 1946, Smuts declared to parliament that the idea of

trusteeship which he had thought sufficient four years earlier when he had addressed the Institute of Race Relations might not provide all the answers:

but the idea and practice of guardianship also mean that as those portions of the population who are under our guardianship develop, one must to a certain extent grant them political rights (Hancock, 1948:490).

Hancock suggests that this was a cautious intimation of his readiness to consider limited improvements to Native parliamentary representation as established in 1936 (when the right of qualified Africans to vote in parliamentary elections had been abolished) – but not before the forthcoming elections (Hancock, 1948:490).

So Far, and No More

Hancock (1962:263), the prima donna of Smuts's biographers, refers to him as the 'actor, manager and producer' of the foundation of the new state of South Africa in 1910. According to Bill Schwarz (2013:288), Smuts himself never forgot that he was a founding father of South Africa. No less an authority than his son (Smuts, 1952:120) was to recall in his own hagiography that his father remembered his efforts to make the Union as 'his greatest single work'. That the forging of the Union, as a compromise of conflicting interests of the four colonies involved and between clashing constitutional principles, provided the political basis for South Africa's subsequent economic momentum has generally not been disputed. Equally, however, historians have looked back upon its entrenchment of white supremacy as its defining and ultimately fatal characteristic.

'I would rather not give them the franchise,' Smuts had written to Merriman in 1906 in response to the latter's plea for the 'Cape franchise' whereby the right to vote was determined by property and educational qualifications (Hancock, 1962:221). Ultimately, after extensive debate by the delegates at the National Convention, the deal was made that the existing

franchise laws in each of the four colonies would continue in place when they became provinces in the new union, with the qualified vote in the Cape being protected by the South Africa Act prescribing that any Bill to disenfranchise African and coloured voters would need to be passed by the two houses of parliament sitting together by a two-thirds majority of their total membership. In addition, although every member of the lower house was to be of European descent, four of the eight nominated members of the Senate would be chosen by virtue of their 'thorough acquaintance' with 'the reasonable wants and wishes of the Coloured races in South Africa' (Thompson, 1960:126-34).

Despite his pride in the part he had played in the founding of the Union, Smuts was to go along with Hertzog's abolition of the right of qualified Africans in the Cape to vote in elections in 1936. Following his party's loss of the election of 1924 to the National Party -Labour Party 'Pact', he had not only opposed Prime Minister Hertzog's 'civilized labour' enactments, arguing that they were not necessary for the protection of 'white civilization', but also his Natives Parliamentary Representation Bill, which proposed to abolish the Cape franchise in exchange for granting Natives throughout the Union seven white representatives in the House of Assembly, albeit with limited powers of voting. It was not that he opposed the idea of communal representation as such (Hancock, 1968:210), but rather that he believed that common roll voting in the Cape had provided for three generations of political stability and he doubted whether Hertzog's attempt to resolve the 'Native question' at a single stroke⁶ was viable. In any case, he worried that Hertzog's proposed Native Representatives might hold the balance of power in parliament!

Hertzog had sought Smuts's cooperation in passing his bills, as he wanted both major political parties to back them

6 The Representation of Natives in Parliament Bill was accompanied by a Union Native Council Bill, a Natives Land Act (Amendment) Bill, and the Coloured Persons Rights Bill.

as expressive of white unity. Indeed, the two men met four times to discuss the bills, and by all accounts, these meetings were friendly, yet they proved unable to agree, and in February 1929, Hertzog re-introduced two of the bills in a revised form, which were even more racially restrictive than their earlier versions in 1926. Smuts's South African Party (SAP) fought the bills clause by clause, Smuts arguing instead for the convening of a National Convention or Commission to explore the way to find a comprehensive settlement of the 'native question'. Yet Hertzog had outmanoeuvred him, for by now, he was committed to holding a general election, and in the notorious 'Black Peril' campaign that followed, he had pilloried Smuts as dangerously soft on the natives. He had gained a resounding victory, the NP increasing its parliamentary majority, enabling it to abandon the alliance with the Labour Party (Blackman & Dall, 2022 for a lively account). Thereafter, he had pressed forward with his drive to remove black voters from the common roll, calling a joint session of the two houses of parliament after the election to appoint a joint committee to consider and report upon the issue.

Subsequent discussions culminated in the Natives' Parliamentary Representation Act of 1936, which (i) removed Cape voters from the common roll, but made provision for them to vote on a separate roll for three white representatives in the House of Assembly; (ii) made provision for the election of four white people to the Senate by a system of bloc voting by chiefs, local councils, urban advisory boards and election committees in all provinces; and (iii) created a Native Representative Council (NRC) of six white officials, and four nominated and twelve elected Africans. This was to be accompanied by a Native Trust and Land Bill which, while preventing the purchase of land by Africans outside the Native Reserves, provided for the expansion of the latter from the 7.3% of South Africa's land area laid down by the Natives Land Act of 1913 to a maximum of 13.7%.

The debates in parliament had widened divisions within the SAP over native policy. Smuts had responded by reformulating his outright opposition to Hertzog's attempt to

resolve the native question at one swoop into a doctrine that, if Africans were to lose their franchise on the Cape's common roll, they should be offered proportionate compensation. Come 1936, he had managed to convince himself that what was being offered by the two Native bills as a package constituted the *quid pro quo* for which he had been holding out, and he had proceeded to vote for their passage – despite his knowledge of the resolute opposition to the bills of the All-Africa Convention, chaired by Professor J.D. Jabavu, which had met in Bloemfontein the previous December.⁷

The sequel to these events has been extensively rehearsed in the literature. The expansion of the urban African population was accompanied by an increased militance of the African working class, this fuelled by war-generated growth in African industrial employment, continued restrictions on the rights of Africans to strike, and the diversion of industrial resources away from basic consumer products to satisfy war needs. This culminated in the African mineworkers' strike of 1946, which after a week was brought to an abrupt end by brutal police repression (which Smuts was to endorse). This gave further momentum to a post-war radicalisation of the African National Congress (ANC), the overthrow of its conservative leadership by its newly formed Youth League in 1948, and its subsequent turn to mass action. Yet of more immediate concern to Smuts was the widening breach between his government and the NRC, the body formally representative of African opinion created under the legislation of 1936. As Hancock (1968:482) points out, this was particularly worrying for Smuts, as he had accepted the NRC 'as an important element of the *quid pro quo*' he had been looking for to compensate Africans for the abolition of the Cape vote.

7 A deputation of the All-Africa Convention had met with Hertzog after the Bloemfontein meeting, and its representations had an apparent effect, as it had led to his scrapping of an earlier version of the Natives Representation Bill which would have deprived Africans of representation in the House of Assembly entirely. Hancock credits Smuts with having played a discreet role in having brought the meeting about (Hancock, 1968:265).

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The changes in socio-economic policy introduced by the government during the war were not enough to satisfy the aspirations of the NRC. Its indirectly elected membership was scarcely radical, yet even before the end of the war, it had come to the conclusion that it commanded no official respect, and that it was serving no useful constitutional function. As the years passed by, its demands increasingly began to fall in line with those of the ANC, to which a number of its own more influential members belonged. By 1943, it was demanding that its own membership be directly elected by adult male suffrage, that its own composition and functions be enlarged and that African representation in parliament be increased from 3 to 10 Native representatives in the House of Assembly. By 1944, it was calling for the abolition of the pass laws and scrapping of segregation. Then, in August 1946, it passed a motion condemning what it termed the 'wanton shooting' of African mineworkers by the police during the strike, linking this to a demand for the recognition of African trade unions. Further disputes with officialdom culminated in its suspending its operations following its passage of a resolution which decried the government's 'continuation of a policy of Fascism' in defiance of the spirit of the Atlantic Charter and the recently proclaimed charter of the United Nations (UN) (Hancock, 1968:485; Ballinger, 1969:141-215; Bell, 1978).

Jan Hofmeyr, Smuts's liberal deputy, who had recently stood in as chair of the NRC,⁸ wrote to Smuts (who was at the UN in New York) worrying about the radicalisation of its moderates, the latter replying that while there was need to liberalise social policy, it would be necessary to carry (white) 'public opinion' with it. However, when this was explained to the NRC when it resumed its interrupted session in November 1946, it was notably unimpressed, and rejected out of hand what Smuts had described in his reply to Hofmeyr as progress towards 'practical social policy away from politics' (Hancock, 1968:485-6).

8 Smit, the permanent chair, was a member of the South African delegation accompanying Smuts in New York.

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The NRC had been aware that Smuts had recently suffered a 'severe mauling' at the UN by Mrs Vijay Lashmi Pandit, Indian Prime Minister Nehru's sister, who had linked South Africa's discriminatory treatment of its Indian citizens to a demand that South West Africa, which South Africa had administered under a mandate of the League of Nations following World War I, become a Trust Territory of the newly established UN.

At the UN's foundation in San Francisco in 1945, Smuts had played an influential role in drafting key documents, notably its Charter, which committed it to 'equal rights and self-determination of peoples'. Elected President of the new body's General Assembly, Smuts had urged that the Charter should have universal appeal, including a declaration that 'We the United Nations Declare our faith in basic human rights', his proposal being accepted (except that the word 'fundamental' was substituted for 'basic'). Although he was still at that point highly respected as an elder statesman, he had gone to San Francisco uncomfortably aware that the liberal principles he espoused on the world stage were contradicted by South Africa's racial policies at home.

Smuts had expected a rough ride, and that was what he had to endure during the following eighteen months. He was repeatedly attacked by Indian diplomats who cited the contradiction between the aspirations of the charter, which he himself had authored, and South Africa's discriminatory treatment of its Indian citizens. This had been most recently embodied in an Asiatic Land Tenure and Indian Representation Bill, whereby the government had sought to compensate recently negotiated restrictions on Indians' rights to residence in white suburbia and land purchase in Durban in exchange for limited parliamentary representation (by white people) in parliament. Labelled by the Indian community the 'Ghetto Act', this prompted a campaign of passive resistance, and had found its way on to the agenda of the first session of the UN General Assembly, where Smuts was about to seek approval of the new body for South Africa to incorporate South West Africa.

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When proceedings came to a climax between 21 November and 8 December 1946, Smuts was compelled to listen 'patiently and courteously' to passionate speeches delivered by Mrs Pandit, seeking support for a motion that South African treatment of its Indian citizens was in conflict with the principles of the UN and they were entitled to the protection of its charter. Smuts argued in response that South Africa's treatment of its Indian citizens was a purely domestic matter, the Charter did not elevate political equality to a human right, and that in any case, there was not yet any agreed international formulation of fundamental human rights. Backed by Britain and other South African allies, Smuts sought to have the matter referred to the International Court of Justice, where he hoped that legal rather than political arguments would prevail. After the matter went back and forth in committee, it was at last returned to a final debate of the General Assembly where, the Indian delegation having agreed to a milder French-Mexican version of its own original proposal, secured the necessary two-thirds majority it was needed to pass, some of South Africa's traditional allies having chosen to abstain. India was triumphant! Smuts was undone! His high reputation had counted for nothing!

In practical terms, the vote had little purchase, as resolutions passed in the General Assembly were largely symbolic. Nonetheless, Smuts's humiliation had damaging political consequences at home, where he became the butt of extensive Nationalist criticism. He knew his championing of human rights and his defence of South Africa's racial policies was incompatible and opened him up to charges of hypocrisy.

The story, repeated in various biographies, tells how after the vote, Mrs Pandit, recalling an injunction by Gandhi to return home as a friend of Smuts, crossed the floor and begged his forgiveness if she had not met the high standard of behaviour set by the Mahatma. He is reputed to have replied, 'My child, you have won a hollow victory. The vote will put me

out of power at the next elections, and you will have gained nothing.⁹

Smuts's embarrassment in New York certainly did not help him at home. But was his pessimism about the outcome of the forthcoming election really justified?

The 1948 Election: An Unnecessary Defeat

Despite Smuts's disconsolate remark to Mrs Pandit, the United Party went into the election of 1948 confident that it would win. Smuts himself had become increasingly convinced of victory as the campaign had progressed (Hancock, 1968:496). This fed wider expectation. Tom Macdonald, a contemporary commentator, expressed a predominant view: 'The Old Master' continued to stand out as 'the great personality of his epoch' (Macdonald, 1948:261). It was 'impossible' to see how the country could repudiate Smuts, in what surely was now the 78-year-old's 'last election'. Yet repudiate him it did, much to the surprise of even the NP, which had expected gains, but had not expected to win.

The fundamental story of the 1948 election is that the NP won more seats (70) than the UP (65) but lost the popular vote by a substantial margin (37.6 per cent of the votes cast to the UP's 49.1 per cent). It only secured an effective majority of 8 in the 150-strong House of Assembly via an electoral agreement with Havenga's Afrikaner Party, which won 9, thereby outgunning the UP's alignment with the Labour Party (6).¹⁰ The imbalanced result was an outcome of three principal factors.

9 In fact, as Vineet Thakur (2017:86) has pointed out, Smuts had already left New York before the final vote was taken, and the exchange must have taken place earlier. He also relays that Smuts had confessed earlier to a member of the Indian delegation that while he was personally unhappy about the situation in South Africa, he could only take 'his people' to a certain point, and not beyond it, and warned him that India would come to reject his ousting.

10 Its majority fell to just five, if the likely backing of the three Native Representatives is also taken into account.

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The first was the practice of the Delimitation Commission (which decided constituency boundaries) of 'loading' urban seats (a loaded seat being one with more voters than the average number of voters per constituency for all seats). This meant that fewer votes were needed to win seats in rural areas (where Afrikaners predominated) than in urban areas, a factor which favoured the NP.

Second, the high rate of migration of white people from rural to urban areas during the 1930s and 1940s was largely a migration of Afrikaners, this swelling the NP-leaning vote in a significant number of urban constituencies (Heard, 1974:7-13), which also gained momentum from post-war economic discontents.

The third factor which was the most immediately influential was the 'race issue'. 'For Malan, in 1948, as for Hertzog in 1929', the alleged 'Black Peril' was a politically potent battle cry' (Stultz, 1974:151). While most voters understood that a future Smuts government would follow a path of ad hoc, pragmatic adjustments to accommodate race pressures, the NP's steadfast stress on racial exclusivism re-united Nationalist support which had been divided by South Africa's entry into the recent war (in which many Afrikaners fought with distinction). Once the war was out of the way, it undercut the electoral margin of support which had sheltered fusion from the mid-1930s. Consequently, after 1948, the prospect of a united white nation through the promises of compromise and conciliation was lost, and white unity, if it were to be achieved, would have to be 'founded on principles dictated by Afrikaners' (Stultz, 1974:157-59).¹¹

This brief summary of the received wisdom about the bare facts of the 1948 election invite further commentary to elaborate Smuts's own very major part in his own downfall. It is useful to deal with the three factors in reverse order.

11 I have borrowed the above summary from Southall (2022:29-30).

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First, the *race issue*. His biographers elaborate this last factor by arguing, as he had stated to Mrs Pandit, that he was constrained by limits on his ability to sell his programme of gradual and pragmatic reform, as outlined by the Fagan Report, to many of the UP's historic supporters. Hancock (1968:504) depicts his campaigning as trying to sell the middle road (between the extremes of racial equality as opposed to the NP's racial exclusivism) which he had outlined in his Rhodes Memorial Lectures in 1929, of South Africa as a unitary state, in which the weaker races as well as the stronger must have electoral representation, taking his stand on the system as established in 1936. There was a need for white people to face up to the hard facts outlined by Fagan, and to implement his proposals for dealing with them. Yet as his biographers continue, many of the UP's historic supporters found these 'hard facts' difficult to swallow, and it was not only the reactionaries from Natal who feared that socio-economic reform would lead, willy-nilly, to political reform, resulting in white people being 'swamped'. Nor was Smuts's advocacy of a middle road helped by Hofmeyr, his liberal deputy and chosen successor as leader of the UP, being forced to deny Nationalist attacks that he was an advocate of racial equality, and that his liberalism provided a short-cut to Communism.

Mrs Ballinger, one of the three Native representatives in the House of Assembly, is more condemnatory. By 1948, she argues, Smuts was more and more convinced of the need for a change in colour policy but had not made up his own mind about the real nature or extent of the change that needed to be made. Nor was Hofmeyr any clearer, failing to evince 'any general philosophy' which would 'blaze a new trail in South African thought' (Ballinger, 1969:134).¹² This was a

12 Ballinger (1969:134) follows up by arguing Hofmeyr's inability, either to establish viable personal relations with the Africans sitting on the NRC or 'to gather round him those who would have been happy to find in him a leader under whose banner they might help to guide South Africa into more modern ways'.

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situation which left Smuts's party extremely vulnerable to Nationalist attack:

His failure to appreciate this seems to have derived from a miscalculation of the time factor in the situation. Curiously certain of victory in this election as he had been anxiously doubtful about the result in 1943, and taking his stand on the wisdom of meeting the problems of society as they developed – the pragmatic approach – he clearly counted on time to see how things would shape – and time to enable him to carry his people with him along the path which all his thought and emotion seemed to indicate as his eventual choice.....But he thought the first step for us was to unite our European people (Ballinger, 1969:136).

The question that is posed is whether he was as hamstrung by his right-wing supporters as is widely suggested. True, as in 1929, the Nationalists were painting Smuts as soft on the natives and now touting apartheid as necessary for white survival amidst a rising tide of black agitation, making an appeal to faith, whereas, in effect, Smuts's Fabian-esque middle road was making an appeal to reason. True, also, that in 1948, the modern panoply of surveys and focus groups was unavailable, and that Smuts had to steer his campaign according to received understanding of the electorate, information fed to him by his party machinery, and political instinct. Nonetheless, it is also true that there were those who thought Smuts's campaigning was too cautious, and that the electorate was not so inflexible on the racial question as he feared. Of these, the most cited is Mrs Ballinger (Hancock, 1968:504), who argued that the political arena was not so polarised as the NP was deliberately making out. Credence to this is the subsequent rise of the Torch Commando, described as the first mass movement to confront apartheid, formed by white ex-servicemen in 1951 to oppose the Nationalists' intent to remove coloured voters from the common roll (Kane-Berman, 2018). Fail in its mission though it did (admittedly, partly because of internal divisions around whether to accept coloured members), it indicates, as opined by Brotz (1977:12),

that 'There is no reason to assume that South Africa was then as bereft of common-sense as it later appeared to become under the post-1948 Nationalist regime'.¹³

Many members of the Torch Commando were Afrikaners who had served in the forces during the war, yet equally, Malan had made it his mission to re-unite Afrikanerdom following the breach with Hertzogism at the outset of the war and had enjoyed considerable success. Although the UP had swept to a large majority in the election of 1943, Malan had by this time marginalised the influence of the *Ossewa Brandwag* (Ox-Wagon Sentinel) and other openly pro-fascist paramilitary forces within the NP. Come the 1948 election, apart from playing on post-war economic discontents and white fears, he had forged his electoral alliance with the Afrikaner Party, formed by Havenga in 1941, to unite behind him supporters of the Hertzog brand of Nationalism at that point not willing to join the NP. Ultimately, this was to prove crucial, as when the results of the election came in, the 9 seats they won provided the NP with an overall majority.

It is therefore particularly germane to recall that Smuts had blown his own chance to ally with the Afrikaner Party, and thereby to re-incorporate those former followers of Hertzog who had not already decamped to the NP, back into the United Party. According to Mrs Ballinger (1969:267-68), Havenga had been waiting for an invitation to re-join the UP following the election of 1943. However, following the pummelling the Afrikaner Party had received in that election,¹⁴ when broached on the issue, the UP leadership felt that Havenga had nothing to offer them. Indeed, Smuts is reported to have dismissed

13 I must admit in the spirit of honesty that I gave Brotz's analysis too short a shrift at the time of its publication, arguing that he completely over-estimated the potential for a 'moderate' white centre in politics (Southall, 1978). Although I do not disavow the main lines of my critique at that time, a re-reading of his work some forty (sic!) years later provides evidence of a more cogent argument than I allowed, and some fascinating insights into potentialities and limitations of liberalism in post-1945 South Africa.

14 It had won a mere 1.78% of the votes and no seats.

them 'as a lot of Fascists'. Yet this was a major miscalculation. Havenga retained political ambition, and his cold-shouldering by the UP left him nowhere to go but into the more welcoming arms of the NP. Brotz's judgement is harsh but surely correct:

The fact was that Smuts's United Party, after the departure of the Hertzog wing, was no longer the same. It had returned in a way to being the old coalition of *Bloedsappe* (literally, blood South African Party men) – that is, Afrikaners who had a hereditary loyalty to Botha and Smuts – and English which came together after Hertzog had split from the South African Party. While this coalition proved able to govern South Africa during both World Wars, it had a similar political liability at the end of each. This was the absence of a clear-cut link with any representative of moderate Afrikaner nationalism (Brotz, 1977:15).¹⁵

This leads on the second issue, the demographic factor, the drift of Afrikaners to the towns during the 1930s and 1940s, where they undermined the UP's electoral predominance. It was not that the UP was unaware of this. Indeed, it had been given a strong warning about it by a string of defeats in by-elections leading up to the 1948 election. Yet rather than seeking to counter this by re-invigorating its ability to campaign and state its case, Smuts had allowed the UP organisation to wither. Most of its best constituency officials had decamped in 1939, either following Hertzog into the Afrikaner Party or joining the HNP; its grassroots membership had shrunk; and it had neglected fund-raising

15 Space is too short to develop this line of argument in more detail, save to say that Dr E.G. Malherbe, a leading liberal-centrist and by now the Rector of Natal University, but who had served as Director of National Intelligence during the war (so may be counted as having known a thing or two about the lie of the political land), is cited by Brotz (1977:18-19) and Southall (1978:183-87) as having advised Smuts in the strongest terms that to forge an alliance with the Afrikaner Party, he would have to be prepared to break with Hofmeyr, and even agree to serve under Havenga as deputy prime minister, as he had done under Hertzog previously.

and was desperately short of money (White, 1989). Had Louis Esselen, who had served as party secretary for many years and who 'had never been afraid to tell Smuts unpleasant things about his party' (Hancock, 1968:496; see also Tothill, 1989) not died in 1945, perhaps the UP might have been less complacent in its expectations of victory. As it was, Smuts even ignored warnings from his own constituency officials in Standerton that his own seat was in peril, with the result that he himself went down to a humiliating defeat by a thoroughly forgettable candidate.

Finally, there is the third, and perhaps most telling factor, Smuts's refusal to tackle the imbalance in the electoral system which resulted in a significant undervaluation of the urban vote. This was one issue which UP officials had raised with him, but despite the fact that the large majority he had won in 1943 had given him considerable power to reform 'the rules and customs' of delimitation, he dismissed their pleas out of hand. Hancock (1968:506) records him saying that although he recognised that the existing arrangements were damaging to the UP (after all the SAP had won the popular vote in 1929), they had their roots 'in the pact of good faith which had created and must sustain the constitution'.

The generous interpretation of Smuts's stance is that to say that it was an honourable refusal to change the rules of the game in his own favour. Yet in retrospect we know now that once they were in power, his opponents had no such scruples, and once they had moved into power, they embarked on a series of constitutionally dubious moves to amplify their majority, starting by granting white people in South West Africa six seats which they knew they were sure to win before launching their campaign, achieved eventually (in 1955) only by constitutional chicanery, to remove coloured voters from the common roll. These were part and parcel of the whole panoply of policies and practices which narrowed the scope even for 'white' democracy, and which entrenched Nationalist hegemony under apartheid. While Smuts's defenders might argue that it is unfair to fault him for not predicting this future, the obvious response is that having knowledge of the

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pro-fascist leanings of significant elements within the NP, he should have been much more wary of the risks of allowing his opponents into power.

The irony in all this, of course, is that during the making of the constitution, at the National Convention in 1908–09, much debate had attended the issue of whether votes should be of equal value or, as had been a long-established tradition, especially in the Cape, the votes of those living in rural areas should be overrepresented. Yet because in the 1907 election in the Transvaal, the performance of their *Het Volk* party had proved that a moderate Afrikaner party could attract English-speaking votes, Botha and Smuts had swung behind an acceptance of ‘equal rights’ as a price worth paying if it would bring about ‘conciliation’ and bi-partisan support for the new Union. Furthermore, because Smuts had been persuaded by enthusiastic backers of proportional representation in England that such a system would ease tensions between the two ethnic blocs of the white population, they had pushed for the adoption of the Single Transferable Vote (STV) electoral system. Yet ultimately, the push for STV had come to nothing, and because it had suited the personal political interests of the majority of delegates (who came from rural areas), the Convention had adopted a Cape-style plurality system, which over-represented rural voters (Thompson, 1975a, 1975b). In short, the choice of electoral system had been far more a grubby deal than a matter of political principle, so given that as in 1929, its disproportionate outcomes deprived the majority of the electorate of their choice of government, Smuts's failure to correct the system when he had the chance was a major, and very conscious, act of omission.

Nor was this omission consistent with his professed stance that the deal struck in 1910 was sacrosanct. That deal had protected the Cape franchise for qualified Africans, yet Smuts himself had participated in its removal in 1936. His inconsistency smacks at best of hubris, his personal arrogance that he knew best, and that South Africa would not reject him. The far more serious charge is that it was a failure of courage.

Conclusion: Afraid of Greatness

There is no guarantee that even if Smuts had been returned to power in 1948 that South Africa would have gone far in a different direction. After his death in 1950, and that of Hofmeyr (in 1948), the leadership of the UP passed to two lacklustre leaders who were far more disposed to pander to white racial prejudices than to challenge them in South Africa's long-term interest. If the UP had won in 1948, it is more than a little possible that, buffeted by a rising tide of black political organisation and consciousness, the white electorate would have kicked it out in 1953 (although it is noteworthy that the NP failed to win a popular majority until the election of 1958). Nor should we discount the argument that, amidst the turmoil of post-war Africa, white settler regimes - of which South Africa was the most advanced industrially - were inherently programmed to become more repressive the more they were faced by threats by rising African middle and working classes from below (Good, 1975). Yet in contrast, there were liberal politicians who argued at the time, and liberal academics in abundance who have argued subsequently, that there was another way, that had South Africa's white politicians grasped the nettle in the 1950s, they might have negotiated their way forward to a political accommodation with a black majority which would have provided for a protection of minority interests, thereby avoiding the worst of the violent confrontations of the 1970s and 1980s.¹⁶

We shall never know whether the liberals were right. But what can be argued is that, although Smuts had been aware since his student days, the 'racial question' was the major issue confronting South Africa, he was never prepared to grapple with it politically. He perpetually kicked the can down the road. He was as much unwilling as he was unable to resolve the contradictions between his liberalism, as expressed by his promotion of human rights at the UN, and his defence of white

16 I refer to the liberals of the day such as E.G Malherbe and Margaret Ballinger, and academic liberals, such as Heribert Adam, who in later years were to promote the case for consociationalism in South Africa.

supremacy. Nor was he prepared to act on his realisation that black demands for political inclusion were destined to grow and could not be stuffed back into the box of increasingly impoverished rural reserves.

We are left with a feeling of frustration, that despite Smuts's immense political stature, when he was given the opportunity to move South Africa in a different direction, he lacked the courage to do so, that he was afraid of failure.

The irony is that his career ended in failure anyway.

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