

# Is the Vast British Empire Breaking Up?

By WILLIAM C. UTLEY

**K**ING GEORGE V's silver jubilee, now at its height in England, has formed an innocent, if world-wide, institution for propagandizing the unity and extent of the British Empire. No one, certainly, questions its extent. But there are those among the political economists of the day who at least suggest that the far-flung realm shows signs of breaking apart, and when the real test comes, if it ever does, they may be right.

"Recent developments in South Africa have again made people ask whether the British Empire is breaking up," writes Fred Clarke, English educator and former representative of the Union of South Africa at Geneva, in Current History Magazine. "Without attempting to answer that question, one can have no doubt as to the importance of the status of the Union act, which received royal assent on June 22, 1934. This new law has a bearing on the whole future of British imperial unity."

The status act contains the first definite official reference of the crown to the union as "a sovereign independent state." Its accompanying seal act gives the exclusive right of use of the Great Seal and Little Seal, heretofore held by the king, to the South African ministers.

For more than a quarter of a century South Africa, politically, has been torn bitterly between two political factions as directly opposed as our New Dealers and rugged individualists. They were led by General Smuts, right-hand man of General Botha in the Union government which arose a few years after the South African war, and General Hertzog, a minister in the Botha cabinet who was removed in 1912, two years after the cabinet was formed.

General Smuts and his faction openly considered the Union a definite part of the Empire, with British civilization and culture dominant. Hertzog sympathizers held out against the complete social, cultural and political domination of the Boer population by the British, and have always striven to make the Union a separate and independent nation.

The present status of the Union has been effected as a sort of political compromise between the two generals and their respective parties. The Union is undeniably independent now, with merely "allegiance to the crown," the string politically tying it to Great Britain. And the two parties have fused into one.

### They Get Together.

It is interesting to note that the coalition of the parties came about because their differences became so bitter after England went off the gold standard in 1931 that party leaders decided that unity and compromise would be the only means of averting hopeless internal political strife. Imagine Mr. Roosevelt and, say, Mr. Hoover, getting together before a political campaign and straightening out their differences!

General Hertzog's nationalist party, which was in power in 1931, preferred to keep South Africa on the gold standard, believing that England had stepped off only temporarily, and that maintaining the standard would help to stabilize a leading industry of South Africa, gold mining. Other interests suffered badly, and General Smuts' South African party accused the incumbents of pampering the political interests always prone to take the opposite line from the empire, jeopardizing the interests of the Union in general thereby.

It was conceded that if General Smuts could force an election at that time, he would have more than an even chance of winning, but that he could not do so without stirring up



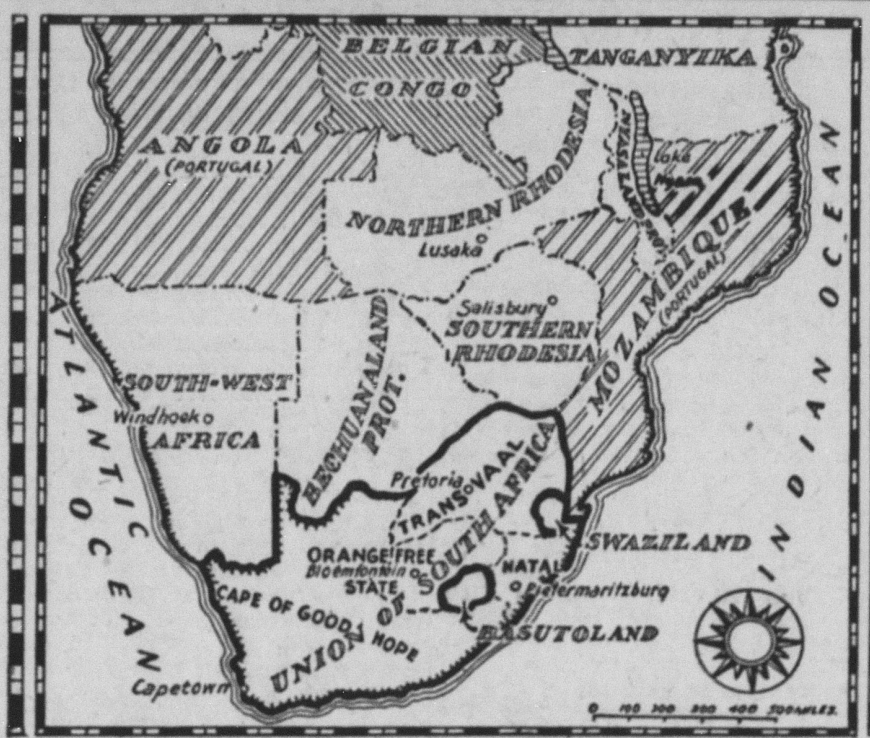
General Smuts.

the smoldering embers of racial conflict between Boers (or, rather, the present-day Afrikaanders) and Britons, an animosity that had been admirably subdued in the preceding decades by wise government.

To youth of South Africa really goes the credit for coalition. Young men of both parties know the sentimental and romantic racial dissensions merely as historical traditions, not as real loyalties and convictions. It was they whose insistence that these differences be wiped out once and for all impressed the nation with the necessity for taking up the real business at hand—that of administering good government. As a result of the coalition, the status act, satisfactory in the main to both parties, was effected.

### Boers in Opposition.

The Boer in South Africa has long opposed the out-and-out political domination of the Union by London, as proposed by the Briton, for fear of losing his identity. South Africa is a



region of two separate and powerful cultures, and its people speak two languages. There is, of course, the English with which we are more or less familiar. And there is the Dutch offspring, Afrikaans.

The New Deal for South Africa pacifies both factions by fostering both cultures. Education is administered in both. Newspapers and magazines are published in both languages.

That the status act, with its admission of South Africa's virtually absolute independence, applies as well to all of the British Dominions, is implied in the fact that it includes in its preamble the Balfour declaration obtained by General Hertzog when he headed the nationalist government of 1924. This calls the Dominions "autonomous communities within the British Empire, equal in status, in no way subordinate one to another in any respect of their domestic or external affairs, though united by a common allegiance to the crown, and freely associated as members of the British Commonwealth of Nations."

Further removing British political dominance from the Dominions was the Statute of Westminster, which was passed by the British parliament in 1931. It closely allied the constitutional development of the other Dominions of the empire with that of the Union of South Africa. The Balfour declaration and the Statute of Westminster are masterpieces of phraseology which carried soothing balm to both South African factions. The status act is the application of them to the South African constitution.

Two important concessions are made to the Dominions in the Statute of Westminster. It gives the Dominion government power to amend, repeal or modify any British act which has been incorporated in the law of the Dominion. It further states that no British law may be applied to any Dominion unless that Dominion has requested the application and consented to it.

### Really Independent.

The status act itself declares that no British legislation shall be considered in effect in the Union of South Africa until it is re-enacted by the South African parliament. The "chief executive" is defined as the king, who shall act upon the advice of his South African ministers.

In South Africa the king's representative is the governor-general. Neither he nor the king have any powers of veto or reservation of a bill. The governor-general may, however, simply return a bill with his opinion for further consideration if he thinks it wise. The king does not retain the power to name the prime minister and to dissolve parliament.

The case of war would be the real test. For, with the clearly worded status act, the Union of South Africa can now decide for itself whether or not to remain neutral if the empire enters a war. Says Clarke: "It might even secede altogether, though not apparently, by legal process. Some commentators in England as well as in South Africa feel disturbed by these possibilities. But 'equal status' necessarily implies them, and legal barriers would be flimsy defenses against the strong political pressures when the time of crisis comes."

It will be remembered that when England entered the World war there was widespread dissension in South Africa, and even serious uprisings in some cases. Clarke goes on:

"Neutrality and secession are political issues, to be determined in the light of all the facts when the question arises. They are not to be determined in advance, as some of the die-hard lawyers seemed to demand, by any constitutional legislation, especially legislation under such documents as the Balfour declaration and the Statute of Westminster."

### The Ties That Bind.

The abolition of the prerogative power of the king aroused the anguish of the pro-British faction in South Africa. This faction claimed that in the time of crisis the king was the executive head of the entire British Empire, and that he could act as he saw fit in case of a crisis, in order to keep the realm from falling apart. General Smuts was able to convince his followers that for centuries no such prerogative, if there was one, had been exercised, and that the question was not one of law, but of politics.

Of course, what the economists who cite the status act as evidence that the British Empire is disintegrating fail to

show is that political power or legal power are not the real bands which hold the Empire together. Experience has taught us that in time of war nations do not act on the literal interpretation of the law. The ties that bind are more substantial. In the case of the British Imperial Dominions they are the advantages of free trade within the Empire and the protection of the British fleet. The Union of South Africa would be an easy mark indeed for an invading force were it not for the protection of the greatest fleet in the world. It is extremely doubtful that the Union would ever want to forsake such a protection.

With its constitutional status now more clearly defined than ever before, the Union of South Africa is ready itself to begin expanding. It would like to annex the adjacent protectorates of Bechuanaland, Swaziland and Basutoland, which are now governed under the Dominions office in London. When the Union was formed in 1909, the constitution provided for the eventual inclusion of these territories.

Their population, however, is 99 per cent black, and they were left out of the original Union and kept under direct London protection because of the treatment they had received at the hands of the Boers who made up a large share of the Union population.

When, last year, Prime Minister Hertzog announced to Great Britain that the Union of South Africa was ready to act immediately to include the protectorates, his act drew an instant appeal from Chief Tshakedi



General Hertzog.

Khama of Bechuanaland. British administration to the protectorates has not been all that it might be, but natives and native sympathizers believe that it is better than the discrimination which might harm them at the hands of the Boers.

### Native Chiefs Balk.

Unionists claim that there are no selfish reasons for annexation, for the Union has plenty of land and plenty of economic difficulty without taking on that of the native areas. Basutoland is tremendously overcrowded and conditions among the blacks are deplorable. The Union would move the surplus population over to the vast expanses of Bechuanaland, where the population is scarce, and would give the blacks land and irrigate it.

The natives and their chief are afraid of this. The reason is that the Tatit Company, Ltd., owns about 1,325,000 acres in Bechuanaland. They fear that the blacks might be exploited industrially here, that the grazing land which has been held out to them as a home land for the surplus Union blacks might be seized by the surplus whites of the Union.

Neither do they like the present native policy of the Union. The native under the protectorate of the Union, according to the Manchester Guardian, has found that "his freedom of movement is limited by restrictive 'pass' laws; his status as a worker is degraded by the color bar act to one of permanent economic inferiority. He sees his fellows through the Union compelled by the native service contract act to relinquish settlement and to wander in search of work. He sees them barred by the native land act from acquiring land even if, despite all obstacles, they acquire means to do so."

With the constitutional differences straightened out between black and white in the Union, and with the rising of a new generation which does not feel so bitterly the inequality of the whites and the blacks, it is held that the government under Smuts and Hertzog means well by the natives.

# OLD DAYS COME BACK TO RIVER

Modern Vessel on Missouri Stirs Memories.

What long-silent echoes the Franklin D. Roosevelt must have stirred to life among the blue hills crowding the Missouri river as its deep-throated blasts heralded its arrival at Kansas City recently.

Gone are the scores of vessels that contributed to the making of this city on the Missouri's elbow. Their wooden carcasses slowly are petrifying below the turbid tide of the stream or they slowly are rotting at wharfs far from the scenes of their original activity. They served their day. They made possible the opening of a great and fertile area to the later railroads, then bowed to that new form of transportation.

They left only memories tinged with romance. Still living in the hills along the Missouri are persons who, in the prosperous river days, could identify by the tone of its whistle, long before it could be seen, any of the regular steamboats plying past Kansas City.

There must have been something missing for them as they listened to the Roosevelt. The sound of its whistle does not duplicate that of the old steamboat. It is not a steamboat and no effort has been made to play to the traditions of the steamboat. It represents a new era in river transportation from its whistle to its propellers.

It has no bulging and picturesque sidewheels. It is not a stern-wheeler. It does not have steam boilers nor sweating stokers. Its twin screws, propellers in miniature of those which drive ocean liners, are driven by powerful Diesel motors. They are supplied from oil tanks, not coal bunkers. Yet the Roosevelt develops many times the power of the primitive river boats, is more tractable and requires even less channel depth than most of them did.

Yet it is a river boat, inaugurating a new river transportation, and its voice, recalling the more romantic voices of the past, must find a response in the hills themselves as well as among those whose lives have spanned the gap in river navigation.—Kansas City Times.

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