

The fork in the road? British reactions to the election of an apartheid government in South Africa, May 1948

*Nicholas L. Waddy**

This article is a natural follow-up to a previous contribution to *Historia* that was published in 2004, entitled “Certain Destiny: The Presentist Obsession with ‘Apartheid’ in South African History.”¹ In that article, I analysed the 1948 election, which brought the National Party (NP) apartheid government to power for the first time, in the light of the popular notion that this victory represented a “turning point” in South African history. I attempted to prove that on the contrary, the NP’s grip on power under D.F. Malan was fragile; the NP conception of “apartheid” was in flux; and the number of South African whites who opposed apartheid and the Nationalists was very great. Moreover, the United Party opposition had every intention of winning the next election. Meanwhile, as I indicated, the British, who were highly interested observers of South African politics, reacted passively to the 1948 election. They seemed to believe, as did Field Marshal Smuts and his many followers in South Africa, that the National Party victory was a temporary setback.²

The present article will examine the British reactions to the National Party victory in 1948 in greater detail.³ In so doing, it will help to debunk the idea that the “apartheid” election of 26 May 1948 represented a “turning point” in South Africa’s history⁴ – or, at least, that it is undeniably presentist to describe it as such, when virtually no one alive at the time saw it in those terms. In fact, it took at least another decade before the many South Africans who opposed the Nationalists – and most Britons – came to the conclusion that apartheid represented a fundamental and irreversible change.

First, a few details about the 1948 election.⁵ The incumbent government was dominated by the United Party (UP), led by South Africa’s prime minister from 1939 to 1948, Field Marshal Jan Christiaan Smuts. The United Party, which had led South Africa since 1934, was diverse in its make-up, but its main policies were, first, to

* Nicholas L. Waddy is associate professor of History at SUNY Alfred in Alfred, New York, USA.

1. N.L. Waddy, “Certain Destiny: The Presentist Obsession with ‘Apartheid’ in South African History”, *Historia*, 49, 2, November 2004, pp 59–77.
2. R. Owendale, “The South African Policy of the British Labour Government, 1947–51”, *International Affairs*, 59, 1, 1982/83, pp 41–58. The issue of whether the 1948 election was “critical” or not is also ably examined in N. Stultz, “South Africa’s ‘Apartheid’ Election of 1948 Reconsidered”, *Plural Societies*, 1972, pp 25–37. Stultz concludes that the election result was *not* determined by the NP’s invocation of “apartheid”, nor did it represent the seismic shift in South African politics that many analysts claim.
3. See also D. Geldenhuys, “The Politics of Race: A Study of the Impact of South Africa’s 1948 General Election on Anglo-South African Relations”, *Journal for Contemporary History*, 4, 1979, pp 1–21.
4. See Waddy, “Certain Destiny”, pp 63–65, for examples of this historiographical attitude.
5. N.L. Waddy, *The Dawning of Apartheid: Debating Racial Policy in the British and South African Parliaments, 1945–1948* (Verlag Müller, Saarbrücken, 2009) for a more detailed examination of the 1948 election. See also K. Heard, *General Elections in South Africa, 1943–1970* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1974).

maintain the close relationship with Great Britain (and to fight on Britain's side in World War II), and, second, to continue South Africa's old racial policy of so-called Stallardist segregation. This meant that blacks would be governed by whites, would be subject to pass regulations to keep them as much as possible in the "native reserves" and out of the cities, and would be strictly separated from whites in most social, educational, and occupational domains. The United Party did, however, realise that this segregationist system was under pressure, for example, by the need for more black workers in the cities in order to maintain South Africa's wartime economic boom. Thus, modifications in the system would from time to time be required, especially if and when blacks proved themselves worthy of greater trust, as the UP saw it. Prime Minister Smuts even went so far as to propose the formation of an elected "native parliament", with its own budget and jurisdiction over some questions of what was referred to as "native policy."

Opposing the United Party in 1948 was the "Reunited" National Party of Dr D.F. Malan. The NP depended almost entirely on the votes of Afrikaners, unlike the UP, which had wide-support among whites who were both English-speaking and Afrikaans-speaking. These nationalist Afrikaners were generally suspicious of the British, hopeful for a republican form of government in South Africa, outside of the Commonwealth. They were deeply troubled by the progress of racial liberalism in South Africa and in the world as a whole. The movement of blacks to the cities in South Africa, which seemed to the United Party to be an economic necessity, seemed to the Nationalists to be a social catastrophe, which portended a higher crime rate; greater interracial co-mingling; and perhaps even the extinction of the Afrikaner people. To combat these evils, the Nationalists advocated a new and rather poorly-defined policy called "apartheid", or "separateness", which envisioned a strengthening of the old policy of segregation. They even adopted the ambitious long-term goal of total territorial separation of blacks and whites. The Nationalists believed, naively but in many cases sincerely, that segregation was best for all races in South Africa, and would be warmly embraced by all, once its humane and Christian foundations were properly understood.

It was expected by almost all observers of the 1948 election, and in fact even by the NP itself, that the UP and Field Marshal Smuts would emerge victorious. The United Party majority in the House of Assembly was so large, and the self-satisfaction of the government after its successful participation in the Second World War was so great, that it was judged nearly impossible for the National Party to gain the more than 30 seats they required (out of a total of 150, not including three "native representatives") to form a government. Smuts himself assured Sir Evelyn Baring, the British high commissioner, that "we are sure to obtain a majority."⁶

This was the view not only in South Africa, but also in Britain, where the worst case scenario envisioned was a government in which the United Party would depend on a coalition to remain in power. An outright National Party victory was judged to be a "gigantic task".⁷ *The Economist*, for example, criticised the racial policies of both parties, including the vagaries of the UP government regarding

6. The National Archive, Kew, London (hereafter TNA), Colonial Office (hereafter CO) 936/2/4, Sir Evelyn Baring – Philip Noel-Baker, Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations, 12 June 1948, p 1.

7. *Round Table*, 38, 1947/48, pp 506–510, 719–722.

“Christian trusteeship” for the natives. Nevertheless, the magazine blandly predicted that the election would “enable General Smuts to continue his wise rule”, and that the Nationalists “will not come anywhere near to a majority”.⁸ Meanwhile, the *Manchester Guardian* was even more confident of a United Party victory. The *Guardian* cited as evidence the weakness of the NP’s apartheid proposals, which were described as “not so much a policy as a neurotic fantasy”.⁹ The Labourite *Tribune* echoed *The Economist* in criticising the racial policies of both major South African parties, but it praised the report of the Fagan Commission issued by the government, which had indicated the need to accept and provide for a permanent black population in the cities. The report was “by South African standards, a progressive document”, according to the *Tribune*, which further declared that although “it may seem that there is little to choose between [the UP and the NP] ... there is a world of difference between ... the two parties”. The *Tribune* concluded that Smuts would probably win, “though with a reduced majority” – and thereafter a continuing stream of British immigrants to South Africa would “re-enforce the United Party” in future elections.¹⁰

It is also instructive to take note of the attitude of the British government towards the South African election in the months leading up to the polls. A 12 January 1948 draft of a “top secret” government report on the gold loan which was granted by South Africa to Britain in 1947–48 illustrates the anxieties that British officials harboured about the prospects for the United Party in the South African general election. According to the report, “there is no certainty that they [the United Party] will win it”. Moreover, the gold loan could be seen in South Africa as an effort by the anglophile Smuts to underwrite the shaky British economy, to the detriment of South Africa. Since this impression might increase the chances for a National Party victory in the election, “it is clearly important that nothing should be done on the UK side which would embarrass Field Marshal Smuts’ Government”.¹¹ The report thus makes it fairly obvious that not only were the British friendly towards Smuts, but they were even prepared to give ground in bilateral negotiations in order to boost his chances for victory in the 1948 election.

Luckily, from the British perspective, a March 1948 bulletin on the “Political Situation in South Africa”, authored by Sir Evelyn Baring, the British high commissioner in Pretoria, and circulated to the cabinet, announced that the fortunes of the United Party were once again on the rise.¹² According to Sir Evelyn, in 1947 war-related economic dislocations and international criticism of South Africa’s racial policies had contributed to a swing towards the National Party. However, in the meantime, it had become apparent that the Nationalists had few “constructive suggestions” regarding native policy; in addition, because of the length of the campaign, the NP’s largely emotional appeals to colour prejudice were falling flat, while the Smuts government’s counterattacks were working. And, finally, a vibrant domestic economy and a tense international situation both made a Smuts victory more

8. *The Economist*, 22 May 1948, p 833.

9. *Manchester Guardian*, 26 May 1948, p 4.

10. *Tribune*, 21 May 1948, pp 4–5.

11. TNA, Dominions Office (hereafter DO) 35/3518, “Gold Loan from South Africa”, 12 January 1948, p 3. The report mentions that South African sensitivities about the export of “footwear” were especially noteworthy.

12. TNA, CO 936/2/4, “The Political Situation in South Africa: Prospects at the coming General Elections”, 22 March 1948.

likely.¹³ Characteristically – for an English observer of the South African scene – Sir Evelyn believed that the Nationalists’ opposition to South Africa’s successful participation in the Second World War, in itself, discredited them as aspirants to take charge of the country’s foreign policy. Sir Evelyn described Malan as someone who “in the dark days of 1940 was so conspicuously false a prophet”.¹⁴ Sir Evelyn went on to argue that in October 1947 “the results of the municipal elections were very favourable for the United Party”.¹⁵ The UP’s support base was also “galvanised” to an extraordinary degree. Even the Transvaal and Orange Free State farmers were “in a good humour”.¹⁶ Based on all these factors, “shrewd” analysts were predicting a majority of around 20 seats for the UP. A majority of about 10 seats would be the worst case scenario. Sir Evelyn had even been assured by a “respected” Nationalist MP that his party had “mismanaged” the campaign. Thus, while Sir Evelyn was willing to concede that the NP was a “most formidable force”, he also observed that they were “less sanguine” about the election than members of the UP, and for good reason.¹⁷

A similar dispatch in mid-May found the South African electorate “surprisingly apathetic”, according to Sir Evelyn.¹⁸ The United Party, flush with “increased prestige”, was focusing on the strong economy, the NP’s “black war record”, and the unrealistic nature of its “apartheid” proposals.¹⁹ Besides criticising the Nationalists’ views on race, however, the UP was “saying as little as possible on the colour problem”.²⁰ Smuts, meanwhile, was playing to his strength, emphasising international affairs. The Nationalists’ riposte, a savage attack on Smuts’ liberal-minded deputy, Jan Hofmeyr, was undermined by “quarrels” within the NP ranks.²¹ Sir Evelyn characterised many of the NP’s election tactics as “petty or irrelevant”,²² but this time he demurred in making a specific prediction about the election’s outcome.

The election results in May 1948, of course, came as shock in almost all quarters. As *The New Statesman and Nation* put it, “neither United Party pessimists nor Nationalist optimists anticipated so sweeping a change”.²³ The British were, if anything, even more stunned than the South Africans. The white electorate in South Africa, fed up with war-related economic dislocations, rising crime, and what were perceived as dangerous new experiments in racial liberalism, voted in record numbers for Malan and his Nationalists. The National Party, and its ally the Afrikaner Party, gained no less than 31 seats, becoming, just barely, the new government in South Africa, to the consternation of Field Marshal Smuts, who died two years later. And, as we now know, the NP did not lose their grip on power in South Africa until 1994. As

13. Baring, “Political Situation in South Africa”, pp 1-2.

14. Baring, “Political Situation in South Africa”, p 2.

15. Baring, “Political Situation in South Africa”, p 2.

16. Baring, “Political Situation in South Africa”, p 3. This, incidentally, was a spectacular misreading of the facts, because discontent in rural districts would play a huge role in the eventual NP victory.

17. Baring, “Political Situation in South Africa”, p 3.

18. TNA, CO 936/2/4, Sir E. Baring, “General Election in the Union of South Africa: Nominations and Election Campaign”, 10 May 1948, p 3.

19. Baring, “General Election in the Union of South Africa”, pp 2-3.

20. Baring, “General Election in the Union of South Africa”, p 3.

21. Baring, “General Election in the Union of South Africa”, pp 4-5.

22. Baring, “General Election in the Union of South Africa”, p 5.

23. *The New Statesman and Nation*, 19 June 1948.

most historians have noted ever since, therefore, the election of 1948 really does seem to mark a “turning point” in South African history – a movement from piecemeal segregation to uncompromising apartheid, and from South African friendship with the British and the international community to pariah status for a white government determined to hold the line against majority rule and even against elementary civil rights. And yet, lest we forget, as obvious as all this may seem in retrospect, none of it seems to have been obvious at the time.

Now we will consider in more detail the British reactions to this apparent sea-change in South African politics. Most of my own research has involved the analysis of parliamentary records, so I was naturally intrigued to see exactly what the reaction had been in the British House of Commons to the surprising election results in May 1948. I already knew, from my research of the parliamentary debates from 1945 to 1948, that there was a fairly consistent, although admittedly modest, level of interest in South African racial policy, especially, but not exclusively, from Labour backbenchers. Frequently, an MP would express concern about South African mistreatment of people of colour, and he would be silenced with a reminder from the government or from the parliamentary speaker that such matters were domestic concerns of the South Africans and were not, therefore, appropriate matters to discuss in the House of Commons (this line would change, of course, after about 1960). Imagine my shock, therefore, when I discovered that parliament, which *was* in session in May 1948, completely ignored the results of the South African election! Not a single MP considered the defeat of Smuts and the victory of the pro-apartheid Nationalists, worthy of a single, solitary comment or condemnation. I found this very odd.

Consider also the reaction of the British press to the news of the National Party victory. It was unanimously negative, but also surprisingly muted and even, at times, upbeat!²⁴ The *Manchester Guardian* expressed amazement, first of all, that South African voters would make the choice that they did. From the *Guardian's* perspective, choosing a reactionary bigot like Malan over a visionary war-hero like Smuts was simply incomprehensible.²⁵ The *Daily Telegraph* echoed many of the sentiments of the *Guardian*, as it announced its “deep regret at the defeat of General Smuts”.²⁶ The Labour press, meanwhile, was less fawning in regard to Smuts²⁷ (who was seen as an apologist for British imperialism), but still equally disgusted by the election outcome. “Fear and hatred”, pure and simple, had produced the NP victory, according to *The New Statesman and Nation*.²⁸ Many other publications echoed this point that raw emotionalism had benefited the Nationalists, at least in the short term. The overwhelming reaction from the British press, however, was not one of panic but of quiet reassurance – in other words, the victory of the NP was seen as a *setback* for

24. I must respectfully disagree with Deon Geldenhuys's assertion that the reaction of the British press to the election results was one of “gloom and doom”. Geldenhuys, “The Politics of Race”, p 7. The perspective of the British media seems to have been more nuanced than this, although Geldenhuys does assemble an impressive catalogue of laments.

25. *Manchester Guardian*, 29 May 1948, p 4.

26. *Daily Telegraph*, 29 May 1948, p 2.

27. The *Socialist Leader*, 5 June 1948, p 1, went as far as to say: “The Smuts régime – brutality tempered with hypocrisy – has given way to the Malan régime – brutality simple, naked, and unveiled by any hypocrisy whatsoever.”

28. *The New Statesman and Nation*, 19 June 1948. Repeated references to Nazism and fascism were made in the newspaper's analysis, indicating its disdain for Afrikaner nationalism.

racial liberalism and Anglo-South African friendship, but not as a final verdict by any means.

First of all, many commentators in Britain and elsewhere pointed to the narrowness of the NP victory, which had given Malan only a four-seat majority in the House of Assembly.²⁹ Thus, according to *The Economist*, “Dr Malan’s majority is far too small to enable him to do anything drastic”.³⁰ “All is so far quiet in South Africa”, suggested the Labourite *Tribune* on 11 June 1948, and “[both major parties] believe new elections must come soon ...”.³¹ The *Tribune* pointed again to the meagre margin of victory for the Nationalists, as did the *Socialist Leader*, *The New Statesman and Nation*, and many other publications. The “precarious” majority³² that the new government held indicated to most British observers that the Malan regime might be short-lived.³³

The main argument on which British optimism seemed to rest, however, was this: apartheid, the central theme of the NP campaign for office in 1948, just would not work. It was impractical and out of sync with the liberal changes that were taking place throughout “Afro-Asia”, as many called it at the time. According to the *Daily Telegraph*, therefore, apartheid could not possibly “prove practical”.³⁴ The *Tribune* asked pointedly: “Is the [NP] programme feasible at all?”³⁵ The *Manchester Guardian* went even further. According to the *Guardian*, apartheid, because of its obvious flaws, would end up as “the rope that hangs the Nationalists”. “The shadow of fear and jealousy and small-mindedness will pass”, it declared, and Field Marshal Smuts would be restored to power.³⁶ *The Times* seemed to agree. Under the headline, “Drastic Changes Unlikely”, it declared that there was “unquestionably something unreal about this election”, and perhaps things would “turn out for the best” now that the supporters of humane and liberal racial policies had been disabused of their complacency.³⁷ *The Economist* was somewhat less optimistic, but still observed that “the disease is not yet so far advanced as to be beyond cure”.³⁸

Interestingly, to the extent that the British press was worried by the election results, it tended to fixate on the relations between the two white language groups, rather than the danger of greater oppression of the black majority.³⁹ Along these lines,

29. *The Economist*, 5 June 1948, p 916. Stultz claims that 91 total votes in three constituencies could have given the election to Smuts. Stultz, “South Africa’s ‘Apartheid’ Election”, p 31.

30. *The Economist*, 5 June 1948, p 917.

31. *Tribune*, 11 June 1948.

32. *Tribune*, 4 June 1948, p 7.

33. See Geldenhuys, “The Politics of Race”, p 9.

34. *Daily Telegraph*, 29 May 1948, p 2.

35. *Tribune*, 4 June 1948, p 7. The *Tribune* seemed to answer its own rhetorical question in the negative, but observed that racial hatreds in South Africa were strong enough to move the electorate towards Malan anyway.

36. *Manchester Guardian*, 29 May 1948, p 4.

37. *Times* (London), 14 June 1948, p 5.

38. *The Economist*, 5 June 1948, p 917.

39. Newell Stultz believes that the results were more indicative of an ethnic realignment caused by Smuts’s decision to join the British war effort in 1939 than of a racist resurgence under the banner of “apartheid”. See Stultz, “South Africa’s ‘Apartheid’ Election”, pp 26, 32–34. Indeed, as indicated in by-election results, much of the swing to the NP after 1945 occurred even *before* the “apartheid” slogan was unveiled! Stultz further points out that a version of “apartheid”, though admittedly under different labels, was proposed during the election campaign of 1938, and the NP performed terribly at the polls. Stultz, “South Africa’s

the *Socialist Leader* described the NP victory as “revenge” for the Anglo-Boer War.⁴⁰ *The Economist* recommended the formation of a coalition government to maintain precious white unity, while it declared a “Bantu rising” far less likely than acrimony between “the two white races”.⁴¹

There was also little fear in the British press that Anglo-South African relations would be irretrievably damaged by the National Party victory, even though Malan was committed, in theory, to making South Africa a republic. The prevailing wisdom seemed to be that Malan would soften his anti-British stance once he took the reins of power,⁴² and to a large extent this was true. “There will probably be less change than might be thought”, observed *The New Statesman and Nation*.⁴³ The *Tribune* agreed, pointing out that South Africa’s post-war economic boom was fragile, and the South Africans were highly dependent on British capital.⁴⁴ Moreover, Malan “has shown himself to be a believer in constitutional rather than fascist methods”, according to *The Economist*.⁴⁵ Later in the year, moreover, the British press found Malan’s cabinet choices generally reassuring.⁴⁶ Indeed, throughout Malan’s premiership, Anglo-South African diplomatic, defence, and economic ties remained extremely close.

What is interesting, therefore, about the general reaction of the British press to the victory of apartheid and of the National Party in 1948 is that there was a remarkable sense of assurance that extraordinary – and very temporary – factors had produced the negative outcome.⁴⁷ The possibility of a decades-long entrenchment of National Party rule, let alone a complete sea-change in racial policy or international diplomacy, was widely discounted.⁴⁸ Many Britons, in fact, believed that racial liberalism would ultimately reassert itself as the only practical answer to South Africa’s domestic problems. The Anglo-South African bond, moreover, was thought to be strong enough to survive this regrettable setback.

Many of these attitudes were replicated in official British dispatches and reports.⁴⁹ In June 1948, Sir Evelyn Baring wrote that the election result had come as a complete “surprise” and even the “Nationalist leaders had made no arrangements for

‘Apartheid’ Election”, pp 27–28. He also highlights Smuts’s “gross tactical oversight” in refusing to form a political alliance with N.C. Havenga’s Afrikaner Party (AP). Instead, the NP formed an alliance with the AP, and won the election as a consequence. See Stultz, “South Africa’s ‘Apartheid’ Election”, p 30.

40. *Socialist Leader*, 5 June 1948, p 1. Currently this war is referred to as the South African War.

41. *The Economist*, 5 June 1948, pp 916–917.

42. See *Manchester Guardian*, 14 June 1948, p 6; *Daily Telegraph*, 29 May 1948, p 2; and *Times*, 29 May 1948, p 4. These sentiments were echoed by Smuts. See Ovendale, “The South African Policy”, p 42.

43. *The New Statesman and Nation*, 19 June 1948.

44. *Tribune*, 4 June 1948.

45. *The Economist*, 5 June 1948, p 917.

46. Geldenhuys, “The Politics of Race”, p 11.

47. *The Tribune*, 4 June 1948, p 7, pointed to economic factors as playing a particularly potent role.

48. *The New Statesman and Nation* was somewhat prescient, though, in warning of a consolidation and radicalisation of National Party rule.

49. Sir Stafford Cripps, chancellor of the exchequer, offered the only official public reaction of the British government to the South African election. He minimised the long-term significance of the NP victory and suggested that a patient attitude was called for. See Geldenhuys, “The Politics of Race”, p 9.

taking over office”.⁵⁰ Baring blamed the results largely on “slackness” in UP electioneering;⁵¹ an “irritation” vote among those tired of UP rule; “greed” among South African farmers, who wanted higher prices for their crops; Smuts’s imprudent and ill-timed recognition of the state of Israel, which offended anti-Semitic English-speakers; and most of all, constant NP attacks on the alleged racial liberalism of Smuts’s deputy prime minister, the former principal of Witwatersrand University and brilliant intellectual, Jan Hendrik Hofmeyr.⁵² Sir Evelyn stressed the emotional nature of the Nationalists’ appeals, citing in particular the example of a van with a loudspeaker that travelled through Cape Town’s suburbs blaring: “A vote for the United Party is a vote for Hofmeyr. A vote for Hofmeyr is a vote for your daughter marrying a Kaffir.”⁵³ Sir Evelyn also described the Nationalists’ racially-charged appeals to English-speaking whites as “ingenious”.⁵⁴ He cautioned, though, that in many constituencies the National Party edge was razor-thin.⁵⁵ “At present the Government [is] weak and dependent on English-speaking votes”, he concluded, but once the NP’s position was consolidated, its policies could grow much more aggressive and even authoritarian.⁵⁶ On the other hand, the UP might regroup and recover its popular support, especially if it was prepared to dispense with the services of the unpopular Jan Hofmeyr.⁵⁷

Later, in October 1948, Sir Evelyn expressed disdain for the “vague and woolly theory of ‘apartheid’”, given that thus far it seemed to portend “no revolutionary changes ... but [instead] a ... general increase in strictness”.⁵⁸ Indeed, Sir Evelyn felt that “apartheid” appeared in the short term to be mainly a ploy to shore up the Malan government’s parliamentary majority. It aimed to do so by eliminating the limited voting of rights of blacks and coloureds in the Cape Province.⁵⁹

By March 1949 Smuts was assuring Sir Evelyn that “apartheid ... is wearing a little thin”.⁶⁰ In June 1950, Sir Evelyn could point with tentative satisfaction to a series of National Party setbacks in provincial and municipal elections.⁶¹ The best estimate that he could find of the likely results of the next general election was one that would produce a renewal of UP rule with a modest but comfortable majority.⁶² In a separate report the acting high commissioner in Pretoria, H.A.F. Rumbold, indicated that with respect to the next South African election, “the present indications are that

50. Sir Evelyn Baring – Philip Noel-Baker.

51. This theme is explored in W.B. White, “The United Party and the 1948 General Election”, *Journal for Contemporary History*, 17, 1992, pp 73–97. In early 1948, the UP’s head office staff comprised a mere five people, two of whom were typists. White also sheds light on the extraordinary over-confidence of the UP.

52. Baring – Philip Noel-Baker, pp 2–3.

53. Baring – Philip Noel-Baker, p 4.

54. Baring – Philip Noel-Baker, p 5.

55. Baring – Philip Noel-Baker, p 7.

56. Baring – Philip Noel-Baker, p 9. Consider also that in TNA, FO 371/76351, “South Africa: First Parliamentary Session of Dr Malan’s Government”, 15 October 1948, p 1, Sir Evelyn suggested that the NP had already improved their standing in the eyes of the public vis-à-vis the UP.

57. Baring – Philip Noel-Baker, p 11.

58. “South Africa: First Parliamentary Session”, pp 3–4.

59. Baring, “South Africa: First Parliamentary Session”, p 4.

60. TNA, DO 121/75, “Memorandum by Sir Evelyn Baring”, 12 March 1949, p 5.

61. TNA, DO 35/3885, Sir E. Baring, “South Africa: Policy of a Nationalist Government”, 7 June 1950, p 2.

62. Baring, “South Africa: Policy of a Nationalist Government”, pp 2–3.

the Nationalist Party will have some difficulty in maintaining their position".⁶³ This was partly because the policy of apartheid was "getting a bit flyblown".⁶⁴

Based on the complacent attitude and tactics of the United Party from 1948 onwards, we can safely assume that leading UP politicians largely shared the optimistic assessment of the South African political situation espoused by their British friends. UP leaders saw the 1948 result as an anomaly that the voters would soon correct.⁶⁵ Jan Smuts and Jan Hofmeyr, the two leading lights of the United Party, even seem to have expected new elections in as little as a few months' time. The Nationalists, for their part, were quite concerned that they could experience a reversal of political fortunes. Clearly, one reason why they were so determined to disenfranchise black and coloured voters after 1948 was precisely because they feared defeat at the ballot box. In short, therefore, while South Africa's apartheid government in, say, 1949 or 1950 may seem "strong" to historians in retrospect, it seemed weak at the time,⁶⁶ and indeed it was!

To set the views of the British press and the British high commissioner in context, it is important to note that the National Party had won the parliamentary election of 1948 – that is, they gained more seats in the House of Assembly than did the United Party – despite *losing* the popular vote.⁶⁷ In fact, the United Party of Field Marshal Smuts gained a *majority* of the votes cast. To make this perfectly clear, the majority of whites voted *against* apartheid in 1948, and as a matter of fact this was true in 1953 and 1958 as well. This is one more reason why, in my opinion, the historiographical conceit that "[t]he choice for apartheid had been made"⁶⁸ in 1948 is at best a half-truth. It ignores what most of the voters themselves were choosing.

Not surprisingly, the attitude of the British government had evolved somewhat by 1950–51, after the death of Jan Smuts. In September 1950, in perhaps the most important memorandum on the South African situation issued during the Attlee years in Great Britain, Patrick Gordon Walker, the secretary of state for Commonwealth relations, laid out the strategic and economic arguments for a close relationship between the two countries.⁶⁹ His rationale revolved around South Africa's importance to Empire defence; its helpfulness in combating communism; its importance as a gold supplier; and its traditional association with the Commonwealth, an organisation that

63. TNA, DO 35/3885, H.A.F. Rumbold, "South Africa: Question of Becoming a Republic", 7 June 1950, p 2.

64. Rumbold, "South Africa: Question of Becoming a Republic", p 2.

65. Interestingly, Smuts seems to have believed that the small number of English-speaking voters who supported the NP in 1948 were quite decisive. He also believed that anti-Semitism may have played a role in their decision to vote NP because Smuts had decided to recognise the new state of Israel shortly before the election. See Ovendale, "The South African Policy", p 42. *The Economist* also believed that anti-Semitism affected the election results, as did Afrikaner fears about unchecked British immigration to South Africa. See *The Economist*, 5 June 1948, p 916.

66. It is also important to take note of the weakness of the ANC in this period. The "age of apartheid" is often seen as pitting two great adversaries against one another: NP versus the ANC. In fact, circa 1948, neither protagonist was in a position to play its mythical role in this titanic struggle.

67. Heard, *General Elections in South Africa*, pp 38, 46–49.

68. J. D. Omer-Cooper, *History of Southern Africa* (J. Currey, London, 1994), p 192.

69. TNA, DO 35/3839, "Relations with the Union of South Africa: Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations", 25 September 1950.

was based on the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of its member states.⁷⁰ Moreover, Gordon Walker asserted that a working relationship with the National Party government in South Africa had already been established, and that it was vital to continue such co-operation. This was especially true since, in the absence of Smuts's leadership, the UP was unlikely to experience a rapid resurgence.⁷¹

More interesting from the perspective of evolving British attitudes towards the new government in South Africa were Gordon Walker's reflections on a visit he made to the Union in early 1951. Surprisingly, he found the English-speaking whites no more likeable or enlightened than the Afrikaners.⁷² While he held out no great hope that the United Party would make a comeback, he still believed that the National Party was unlikely to push forward a vote on making South Africa a republic. Simply put, they were making too much hay on the issue of race (among both Afrikaans- and English-speakers) to risk a confrontation with whites who were still loyal to the Empire.⁷³

At this stage, despairing of a UP victory in the next general election, Gordon Walker expressed some fear that Afrikaner nationalists might try to spread their influence north, into the Rhodesias. He advised that Britain should follow a policy of "containing" South Africa and limiting Afrikaner immigration northwards, albeit without antagonising the Union unduly.⁷⁴ In this regard, Gordon Walker displayed an anti-Afrikaner prejudice that was fairly typical of British officialdom in the 1940s and 50s – rather more typical, one might argue, than pro-black sentiments.

Despite these points of potential disagreement between Britain and South Africa, Gordon Walker felt that powerful interests were binding the two countries together.⁷⁵ He foresaw no need for a definitive split of the sort that occurred in 1960 when the Nationalists finally achieved their goal of creating a Republic of South Africa.

So what does all this mean? Clearly, the 1948 election in South Africa was important. It marked a shift in political power that was symbolic, although not at all decisive, of the direction that South African history and politics would take for the remainder of the twentieth century. Winning the election in 1948 gave the Nationalists *an opportunity* to consolidate their hold on power, which they did by skilfully manipulating the fears of the white electorate. When historians look back on the election of 1948, however, they often see more than this – they see a proverbial "turning point", when one era ends and another begins. Consider the fact that dozens of historians have chosen to study and research the activities, personalities, and ideology of the National Party in South Africa in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and yet virtually no one has chosen to study the United Party in this period, even though it governed South Africa until 1948, and had every intention of doing so again

70. Ovendale, "The South African Policy", pp 53–54.

71. Gordon Walker, "Relations with the Union of South Africa", p 2. Meanwhile, Sir Evelyn sent yet another missive, this time complaining about the "emotional" and "ignorant" nature of the "typical Nationalist". See TNA, DO 35/3840, Sir Evelyn Baring – Sir Cecil Syers, 27 September 1950, p 6.

72. Ovendale, "The South African Policy", p 55.

73. Ovendale, "The South African Policy", p 55.

74. Ovendale, "The South African Policy", pp 56–57.

75. Ovendale, "The South African Policy", p 57.

thereafter.⁷⁶ This historiographical neglect of the United Party, despite the fact that it was supported by a *majority* of whites, and (in some fashion) by a majority of every other population group, is frankly absurd.

The main point I wish to make, therefore, is that to study the period around 1948 as the beginning of the “age of apartheid” is pure presentism – it ignores the fact that to virtually everyone living at the time, including the British (and even the Nationalists), the late 1940s in South Africa were something quite different. It was a time when, yes, the National Party had won an election by the skin of their teeth, but the United Party was still a vigorous and powerful voice in favour of a more moderate racial policy. This was also still a time when the relationship between Britain and South Africa, despite the views of the Nationalists, was extremely close.⁷⁷ It was a time, in short, when the activities and beliefs of white *opponents* of apartheid and of Afrikaner extremism were *important*, perhaps more important than ever; they were not irrelevant, as many historians seem now to believe.

Contrary to popular belief, therefore, the fate of South Africa was not sealed in 1948 – the proverbial year one of the “age of apartheid”. It would take some time for the Nationalists to grow comfortable in their seat of power,⁷⁸ and for apartheid to cause a more decisive break in Anglo-South African relations.⁷⁹

Abstract

This article examines in depth the reaction of the British government and the British press to the election of a National Party, apartheid government in South Africa in May 1948. The conventional view – that the 1948 election represented a “turning point” in South African history and Anglo-South African relations – is repudiated. On the contrary, it appears that the British, although they almost uniformly admired Field Marshal Smuts and distrusted Afrikaner Nationalists, felt that the results of the 1948 election were not indicative of a fundamental shift. The view was widespread in Britain and South Africa that Smuts and the United Party would soon be returned to power, and apartheid would prove to be impractical and politically embarrassing to

76. The post-1948 history of English-speaking whites in South Africa has been similarly neglected. I hope to help address this shortfall in future research projects.

77. On the links between Britain and South from 1948 to c.1960, see Waddy, “Certain Destiny”, pp 70–72; Waddy, *The Dawning of Apartheid*, pp 329–331; Ovendale, “The South African Policy”, pp 43–58; R. Hyam and P. Henshaw, *The Lion and the Springbok: Britain and South Africa since the Boer War* (Cambridge University Press, New York, 2003), pp 133–137, 287–291; J. Barber and J. Barratt, *South Africa's Foreign Policy: The Search for Status and Security, 1945–1988* (Cambridge University Press, New York, 1990), p 30; G.H.L. le May, *The Afrikaners: An Historical Interpretation* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1995), p 204; D. Geldenhuys, “The Head of Government and South Africa's Foreign Relations”, in R. Schrire (ed), *Malan to De Klerk: Leadership in the Apartheid State* (St Martin's, New York, 1994), p 245; G.R. Berridge, *Economic Power in Anglo-South African Diplomacy: Simonstown, Sharpeville and After* (Macmillan, London, 1981), p 164; G.R. Berridge, *South Africa, the Colonial Powers and 'African Defence': The Rise and Fall of the White Entente, 1948–1960* (St Martin's, London, 1992). On British efforts to “appease” the Malan regime during the Seretse Khama affair, see D. N. Pritt, *The Labour Government, 1945–51* (Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1963), pp 348–350. In 1948, Smuts felt that any weakening of “Commonwealth ties” would be “temporary.” See Baring–Noel–Baker, p 10.

78. White claims that the support for the UP among Afrikaners explains the NP struggle to remain in power from 1948–53. See White, “The United Party and the 1948 General Election”, p 97.

79. See Geldenhuys, “The Politics of Race”, pp 13–15.

the Nationalists. Only after Smuts's death in 1950, and after the further consolidation of National Party political control in South Africa, did the British begin to accept that the re-establishment of a mildly progressive, anglophile regime in South Africa was unlikely to occur.

Opsomming

Die vurk in die pad? Britse reaksies op die verkiesing van 'n apartheidsregering in Suid-Afrika, Mei 1948

Hierdie artikel is 'n indiepte ondersoek van die reaksie van die Britse regering en die Britse pers op die verkiesing van 'n Nasionale Party en apartheidsregering in Suid-Afrika in Mei 1948. Die konvensionele standpunt – dat die verkiesing van 1948 'n “keerpunt” in Suid-Afrikaanse geskiedenis en Anglo-Suid-Afrikaanse verhoudinge verteenwoordig – word verwerp. In teenstelling, dit blyk dat die Britte, alhoewel hul feitlik eenvormig vir veldmaarskalk Smuts bewonder het en Afrikaner-nasionaliste gewantou het, van mening was dat die uitslag van die 1948 verkiesing nie 'n fundamentele verskuiwing was nie. Daar was 'n wydverspreide siening in Brittanje en Suid-Afrika dat Smuts en die Verenigde Party spoedig weer in beheer sou wees and dat apartheid 'n onuitvoerbare politieke verleentheid vir die Nasionaliste sou wees. Eers na Smuts se dood in 1950 en na die verdere verstewiging van NP politieke beheer het die Britte begin aanvaar dat die herstel van 'n matige progressiewe en pro-Britse bewind in Suid-Afrika nie sou plaasvind nie.

Keywords

National Party; United Party; Great Britain; South Africa; parliament; Jan Smuts; D.F. Malan; apartheid; segregation; international relations; 1948 general election, Sir Evelyn Baring; Patrick Gordon Walker; republicanism; Commonwealth; House of Assembly; Afrikaner Party; Jan Hofmeyr.

Sleutelwoorde

Nasionale Party; Verenigde Party; Groot Brittanje; Suid-Afrika; parlement; Jan Smuts; D.F. Malan; apartheid; segregasie; internasionale verhoudinge; 1948 algemene verkiesing; Sir Evelyn Baring; Patrick Gordon Walker; republikenisme; Statebond; Volksraad; Afrikanerparty; Jan Hofmeyr.