

## **Uranium politics of gatekeeping: Revisiting the British government's policy vis-à-vis South Africa, 1945–1951**

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### **Introduction**

This article investigates British atomic relations with South Africa in a Commonwealth perspective after the Second World War, and spans the period 1945 to 1951. The year 1945 signalled the use of nuclear weapons technology that ensured both an end and the beginning of two global but dissimilar wars: the Second World War and the Cold War respectively. These mark the beginning of an increased quest for uranium residue for peaceful and military purposes by the principal state actors in these wars. After the Second World War, US power was on the rise and British power was declining. Britain therefore became a junior partner in future British/US (atomic) relations. Britain sought to balance this symmetry. A British Commonwealth relation in the atomic field with South Africa was a good way to achieve this objective.

Specifically, this article takes a historical look at the special relationship in the aftermath of the Second World War, when attention was shifting to South Africa as a steady supplier of uranium products required for the fuelling of the Western nuclear industry. The question is, to what extent was the US access to South Africa's uranium dependent on the British Commonwealth links? I conclude in this article that the argument by Ritchie Owendale in 1983 that the United States relied on the British Commonwealth connection to obtain uranium from South Africa was only partially correct while Smuts was prime minister and was certainly not the case after 1948.

In this article I employ a descriptive methodology to discuss the evidence available in various archives in Britain, South Africa and Canada, to provide historical perspective on the extent to which Britain was able to use South Africa's uranium residue for political leverage. The findings show the weakness of Britain's position after the Second World War and the declining influence of Commonwealth ties as a factor in international politics. They show that even someone as closely attuned to links between Britain and the Commonwealth as J.C. (Jan) Smuts, was concerned not to subordinate South African interests to those of Britain.

A discussion is provided on British atomic relations with the Jan Smuts government (1945–1948), showing British inability to retain a firm hold over the dominions, and how this led to further intensification of US interest in South African uranium negotiations. The section that follows

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investigates British relations with the D.F. Malan government (1948–1951), which had a markedly different outlook than the Smuts government. The discussion then leads to the unifying factor of the Korean War that resulted in the eventual agreements between all parties concerned.

### **British atomic relations with the Jan Smuts government, 1945–1948**

At the end of the Second World War, the atomic bomb dropped by the United States on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 suddenly awakened the international community of states. They realised that uranium was the next valuable resource to power their nuclear industry in a Cold War international system. Just before the end of the war, in 1944, Winston Churchill asked the South African prime minister, Jan Smuts, to survey South Africa's uranium deposits.<sup>1</sup> The Union of South Africa had an abundance of this resource and a number of Western countries coveted it. The Combined Development Agency (CDA) was established by the US and Britain that same year to procure uranium for British and American nuclear weapons programmes.<sup>2</sup> Britain maintained a Commonwealth connection with the Union and wanted to use this connection to its advantage even towards the United States. But first Britain had to convince the successive leaders of the Union that it was better for South Africa to allow Britain to serve as gatekeeper.

Uranium became the focus of attention in South Africa's atomic relations with Britain between 1945 and 1948. At the end of the war, the C.R. Attlee government was gravely concerned about the strategic vulnerability of Britain in the forthcoming nuclear age. Until an effective means of relieving this vulnerability was found, the British government was determined to maintain a vigorous Anglo-American atomic partnership. Access to raw materials was one of the few bargaining counters at Britain's disposal if the US government proved reluctant to continue the wartime pattern of atomic collaboration. The discovery of large reserves of uranium (in the gold ore on the Witwatersrand mines), a discovery made just as the Pacific war was brought to an end by the release of the two atomic bombs, was almost immediately recognised by British ministers and officials as having special significance for Anglo-American atomic relations. In negotiations with the Americans, this uranium could have tremendous strategic value for Britain before it had even been extracted from the gold ore. The Commonwealth connection with South Africa strongly shaped (in a not altogether realistic way) British as well as American expectations about how the Union government would dispose of this new resource. Despite an initially cautious attitude displayed by Jan Smuts (something which came as a rude shock in Whitehall),<sup>3</sup> the British government found that progress could be made towards securing advantage from South African uranium by

1. F. David, "South Africa as a Nuclear Supplier", in W.C. Potter (ed.), *International Nuclear Trade and Nonproliferation: The Challenges of the Emerging Suppliers* (Lexington Books, Toronto, 1990) p 273.
2. W. Taya, *Progress or Proliferation? South Africa's Nuclear Future* (Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington DC, 2008).
3. Smuts had reservations about the use of nuclear power and its consequences for the future.

appealing to Smuts's strong Commonwealth instincts. Ensuring that Britain was not left out in the cold as a second-class, non-nuclear power was a cause to which Smuts was apparently willing to rally.<sup>4</sup>

Reports in the summer of 1945 that South Africa might possess some of the world's largest uranium deposits were welcomed in London where there were high hopes that the resources of the Empire/Commonwealth would continue to strengthen Britain in the nuclear age.<sup>5</sup> Within the restricted circle of politicians and officials responsible for Britain's atomic energy policy, it seems to have been widely assumed that because the British government was acting to protect the strategic position of the "heart of the Empire", the Union government would naturally make its uranium resources available to Britain, particularly when Smuts, the great champion of the Commonwealth system, was prime minister. This assumption was strengthened by the wartime agreements which recognised the Empire/Commonwealth (excluding Canada) as being a British responsibility. The Union was not considered to be an area where Britain and the United States were committed to joint control of uranium and thorium resources through the agency of the Combined Development Trust (CDT).<sup>6</sup> A suggestion from the British ambassador in Washington that a spirit of co-operation should be shown by immediately bringing South African uranium under joint Anglo-American control, drew the response from Whitehall that "although we do not at all exclude the possibility of an ultimate tripartite arrangement, this is much too valuable a card for the British Commonwealth to throw away".<sup>7</sup>

The disposal of Commonwealth uranium resources was one of the issues raised during high-level atomic discussions held in Washington in November 1946. President H.S. Truman (US) and prime ministers Attlee

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4. Some of the archival documents referred to in the text were examined at the National Archives (formerly the Public Record Office) Kew, London. Others were consulted at the Seeley Historical Library in Cambridge.
  5. A British report estimated South African and Swedish reserves to be more than double the known reserves of the Belgian Congo, which at that time was by far the largest producer, and more than ten times the known reserves of Canada, which had been the only other source of uranium available to the Western allies during the war. Note that sources from the National Archives in London (hereafter NA), include those of the Ministry of Supply, including the department of atomic energy and the UK atomic energy authority (hereafter AB); the Cabinet minutes and memoranda (hereafter CAB); the Dominions Office (hereafter DO) and the Commonwealth Relations Office (hereafter CRO); and the Foreign Office (hereafter FO). See NA, CAB 82/26, Report by the director of Tube Alloys, Wallace Akers, 31 August 1945.
  6. The Combined Development Agency (CDA), formerly the Combined Development Trust, was concerned with uranium production and procurement.
  7. This was the view of Sir John Anderson and Dennis Rickett. Anderson was the chairman of the British Advisory Committee on Atomic Energy (ACAЕ). During the war he had been the minister responsible for atomic energy in the Churchill government. Rickett was the secretary of the ACAЕ. Quoted in M. Gowing, *Independence and Deterrence: Britain and Atomic Energy, 1945–1952, Volume 1, Policy Making* (Macmillan, London, 1974), pp 352–353. See also NA, CAB 134/6, ACAЕ, 27 September 1945; DO 35/2051, Rickett - Anderson, 17 October 1945; FO 800/5'57, Halifax - Foreign Office, 18 October 1945.

(Britain) and W.L. Mackenzie King (Canada) dealt with the question of international control. A settlement on technical collaboration and raw materials allocation was left largely in the hands of a few British and American ministers and officials. Speaking for the US government, General Groves stated that:

the quid pro quo for any new agreement would have to be an undertaking whereby Britain would bring all uranium and thorium situated in the British Commonwealth under the control of the CDT for allocation in accordance with demonstrated demand.<sup>8</sup>

The American demands on raw materials were accepted by the British side, which hoped that it had gained in return a commitment to collaborate in the exchange of information. The United States government had apparently been willing to concede that the Commonwealth was indeed a British responsibility (based perhaps on their own misconceptions regarding the nature of Britain's ties with the dominions).<sup>9</sup>

Policy-makers in London completely misjudged how Smuts would respond to a request to procure South African uranium.<sup>10</sup> His hesitation in December 1945 to grant Britain an option to purchase all South Africa's disposable uranium had caused great consternation and embarrassment in Whitehall where it was considered that "without some definite assurances of supplies from South Africa ... our whole programme for the development of atomic energy and our bargaining position with the Americans would be

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8. Quoted in Gowing, *Independence and Deterrence*, p 352.

9. A. Bullock, *The Life and Times of Ernest Bevin, Foreign Secretary* (Heinemann, London, 1983), p 195. The conclusion of the talks was embodied in the Groves-Anderson Memorandum. Unfortunately for the British side, the memorandum drew a distinction between "basic scientific research" and information on the development, design, construction, and operation of plants. This distinction later proved to be decisive because the US did not feel obliged to share the latter type of information.

10. In looking for an explanation for Britain's apparently poor understanding of relations with the dominions, one notices the absence of dominions office representation on the major decision-making bodies like the GEN 75 Cabinet Committee and the ACAE, which was chaired by Anderson. (The more important atomic policy matters were discussed by the GEN 75 committee, rather than by Cabinet as a whole.) The dominions office was not represented at all on the ACAE until its third meeting, and the committee's chairman, judging by his performance during the war, did not know how to conduct relations with the dominions. (Gowing has commented on the unfortunate effect in Canada of Anderson's high-handed proconsul attitude.) Lord Addison, the secretary of state for dominion affairs, did not always attend the GEN 75 meetings. His first appearance seems to have been at the seventh meeting in November 1945. After the war, Anderson's prominence, in conjunction with a lack of dominions office influence, seems to have produced unfortunate results not only in relations with Canada, but also those with South Africa. See NA, CAB 134/6, Minutes of the ACAE (45) 3rd meeting, 27 September 1945, and ACAE (45) 9th meeting, 9 December 1945; CAB 13012, GEN 75, 8th meeting, 18 December 1945; PREM 8/116, GEN 75, 9th meeting, 19 December 1945.

gravely prejudiced.”<sup>11</sup> The request for the option had come from Attlee himself, which made the answer from Smuts seem all the more surprising. Smuts pointed to the dearth of knowledge on the economic possibilities of uranium. It “would be most difficult for this or any other government”, wrote Smuts, “to commit itself even in principle to an obligation the implications of which none can foresee”.<sup>12</sup>

In Whitehall, the root cause of this hesitation was not apparent. The matter was so delicate and such vital issues were at stake that it was thought prudent to consult Sir Evelyn Baring, the British high commissioner to the Union. It was supposed that Smuts could not really be worried about economic considerations because the British government was prepared to be very flexible with the terms of any contract. Moreover, it was assumed that the Smuts government would not wish to sell uranium to any country other than Britain.<sup>13</sup> There were, on the other hand, warnings that unless

United Kingdom financial participation is considered essential to secure decisive strategic or political objectives, our financial position surely points to arrangement whereby any burden would be borne by the Union itself or by the Union and USA, or at most to the proportion which appears to be necessary on supply grounds for United Kingdom domestic usage.<sup>14</sup>

The limitations imposed by Britain's financial weakness seem to have been disregarded – temporarily at least. It was precisely because of its wider political and strategic importance that finance was not permitted to be a determining factor on this issue either then or later.

Personal contact at the highest possible level was considered in Whitehall to be the best way of proceeding with the Union. The intention was to sway the Union government by enlisting the support of those South Africans who appeared to be most sympathetic to British interests. This would be done by explaining the wider strategic significance of uranium for the entire Commonwealth. Baring was told that a full exchange of scientific and technical information with the Americans was of first importance on imperial as well as domestic grounds.<sup>15</sup>

In the event, the first move was an approach by Baring to Smuts supported by another message from Attlee. Smuts was told that an important phase had been reached both in Britain's own plans for research and development and in Anglo-American co-operation. In each case the outcome will be of great consequence to all the members of the

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11. Minutes of the ACAE (45) 3rd meeting, 27 September 1945; ACAE (45) 9th meeting, 9 December 1945; CAB 13012, GEN 75, 8th meeting, 18 December 1945.
  12. NA, DO 35/1777, Liesching - Machtig, 30 January 1946; C. Douglas-Home, *Evelyn Baring: The Last Proconsul* (Collins, London, 1978), pp 148–149; NA, DO 35/1774, Attlee - Smuts, 15 December 1945; and the reply, 21 December 1945.
  13. NA, DO 35/1777; DO 35/1774.
  14. NA, AB 16/562, Lee - Sayers, 19 October 1945.
  15. NA, DO 35/1774, Draft message to Baring, undated [January 1946]; Douglas-Home, *Evelyn Baring*, p 149.

Commonwealth. The matter was not resolved to Britain's satisfaction until Smuts came to London for the meeting of Commonwealth prime ministers in May 1946. He told Lord Portal, the senior official responsible for atomic energy in the ministry of supply, that South African uranium would be made available. Despite this assurance, the plain fact was that the South African government was not yet committed to sell any amount of uranium to Britain. Smuts had apparently not been told about the special position of the Commonwealth in the Combined Development Trust arrangements. As yet, he saw no reason why some uranium should not be sold directly to the United States.<sup>16</sup>

Even Smuts (who seemed more sensitive than any other South African prime minister could ever be on the implications for the Commonwealth of the relative decline of British power) was not willing to commit instantly on the Union providing uranium to Britain in the general strategic interests of the Commonwealth. The economic significance for the Union of its uranium seems to have been grossly underestimated in Whitehall. Gold production was not expected to carry on at current high levels indefinitely. The economic potential which Smuts saw in uranium was revealed when he stated his intention that in future the Union would face two ways – towards uranium and to gold. Before agreements could be signed, the economic implications of uranium and its effect on gold production had to be discussed in close detail with the leaders of the mining industry. Furthermore, the Union government had its own relations with the United States to consider. Direct sales of uranium to the US would provide dollars (which even the Union was anxious to acquire after the war). Such sales might also generate goodwill in Washington where, as Keynes had reported in October 1945, the Americans were proposing a Lend-Lease settlement “which stings the Boers to the maximum extent”.<sup>17</sup> The Smuts government was also interested in attracting mining capital from New York. Smuts had no intention of disregarding the Union's own great interests in the possession of uranium. He seemed, nevertheless, to have been willing to admit that British strategic needs might have to be a major consideration (even if they could not be a determining one) in the formulation of South African policy on the disposal of uranium.<sup>18</sup>

### **Losing grip of the dominions**

Although the British government hoped, and indeed expected, that its British dominions (former colonies) would do all they could to assist in the

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16. NA, DO 35/1777, Attlee - Smuts, 6 February 1946 and note by J. Wilmot, 20 May 1946; R. Bullen, et al. (eds.), *Documents on British Policy Overseas, 1, Britain and America: Atomic Energy (12 December 1945–31 July 1946)* (HMSO, London, 1987), p 272.

17. Bullen, *Documents on British Policy Overseas*, p 272.

18. J.M. Keynes, “Activities 1944–1946: The Transition to Peace”, in D. Moggridge (ed.), *The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes*, 24 (Macmillan, for the Royal Economic Society, London, 1971–1989) p 531. The American government had never been happy about the Union's use of scarce resources to keep gold production at a high level during the war, and they intended to extract a large payment for the Lend-Lease supplies received by South Africa.

advancement of British atomic capabilities, it felt unable to offer much in return. At the meeting of Commonwealth prime ministers in May 1946, the representatives of the three southern dominions were told that Commonwealth atomic collaboration was only possible to the extent that it did not prejudice Anglo-American relations.<sup>19</sup> Until an understanding had been reached with the United States, Commonwealth co-operation would be confined to raw material production.<sup>20</sup> Knowledge of atomic technology, shared through the temporary posting of dominion scientists to British research establishments, provided a valuable, if limited, basis for Commonwealth collaboration. All the dominion leaders indicated that they would be willing to support the British atomic effort with raw materials and manpower. A fully collaborative Commonwealth atomic project would, on the other hand, have to be left in suspense pending the resolution of Anglo-American differences.<sup>21</sup>

Most of the bargaining power which the British government derived from its supposed special relationship with prospective uranium suppliers in the Commonwealth was expended in obtaining a large share of Congo supplies in 1946.<sup>22</sup> There was little else left to offer to gain access to American technical information. The United States government, and particularly Congress, was unwilling to share atomic secrets with anyone. The passage of the MacMahon Act in August of that year placed an enormous obstacle in the path of future collaboration. The British decision in January 1947 to proceed with the construction of atomic weapons had intensified the need for American technical assistance but in the absence of any progress with the Americans, attention turned in the spring and summer of 1947 to improved Commonwealth collaboration.<sup>23</sup>

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19. In accordance with the Quebec Agreement, the Union had been excluded from wartime atomic development because the United States wanted to keep the technology under wraps while the war was still on. The British government thought a closer atomic association with the Union was desirable. National Archives of South Africa, Pretoria (hereafter NASA), Transvaal Archive (hereafter TAB), Sources from TAB include the J.C. Smuts Papers (hereafter A 1). See NASA, TAB, A 1/92, PMM (46) 11th and 18th meetings, 3 and 22 May 1946.

20. From the time of the initial identification of the Union's large reserves, the US government took a keen interest in and devoted considerable resources to solving the problem of extracting uranium from low-grade South African ore. The Union government agreed to send samples of ore overseas, and investigations proceeded simultaneously in the US, Canada, Britain, and South Africa. By mid-1947 the combined effort had produced an effective extraction process. This demonstrated that where the Commonwealth had something valuable to offer, the US was more than willing to collaborate. See L. Taverner, "A Historical Review of the Events and Developments Culminating in the Construction of Plants for the Recovery of Uranium from Gold Ore Residues", *Journal of the South African Institute of Mining and Metallurgy*, 57, 1956, pp 125–143.

21. Gowing, *Independence and Deterrence*, p 98.

22. In March 1946, there had been a sudden realisation that a serious shortage of uranium was imminent if the output from the Congo diminished before the end of 1947. British negotiators threatened to withdraw from joint supply arrangements if Britain were not allocated a substantial quantity of uranium oxide in 1946. Gowing, *Independence and Deterrence*, pp 96, 98–9; Department of Foreign Relations of the United States (hereafter FRUS), 1, 1946, pp 127–31.

23. Gowing, *Independence and Deterrence*, p 122.

Some visionaries in Whitehall were attracted by the idea of atomic development in Africa. Superficially this must have appeared as a means of side-stepping the financial and political difficulties which stood in the way of a Canadian-based project.<sup>24</sup> In the summer of 1947, Britain tried again -- there was a revival of Ernest Bevin's suggestion that a pile be built, as a joint Commonwealth venture, in central Africa in order to take advantage of the water-power potential of the Victoria-Nyanza area.<sup>25</sup> The advent of atomic weapons added a new dimension to the old vision of imperial economic development. This was the dispersal of war-industry within the Empire/Commonwealth in order to relieve the vulnerability of the whole to atomic attack. Sir Henry Tizard, the influential British defence scientist, favoured atomic development in central Africa for this reason. Both Tizard and John Cockcroft (a British physicist), saw many arguments in favour of trying to get something done in Africa.<sup>26</sup> Tizard had in mind that South Africa should find a large part of the monies if the scheme seemed a good one. He proposed writing to Basil Schonland, the head of the South African Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), inviting him to Britain in the hope that he would persuade his government to sponsor the project. However, Lord Addison, the secretary of state for dominion affairs, felt considerable doubt about this method of approach. He warned that Northern and Southern Rhodesia would have to be consulted. Arthur Creech Jones (the colonial secretary) felt bound to say at once that there would be "serious political difficulties in allowing the South African government to sponsor a project in Rhodesia. Anything which gave the Union a major say in a territory forming part of Britain's colonial empire would be politically dangerous."<sup>27</sup>

In addition to the political difficulties, there were technical objections to an African project. Portal pointed to the "very strong technical case" against trying to "spread more widely the resources that are available for laying what must be the foundation of the whole Commonwealth effort in atomic energy." If a case could be made for a plant in Rhodesia, wrote Portal, "it must rest on political and strategic rather than on technical

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24. Late in 1946, the chief British military representative in Washington suggested that Britain should build its second pile in Canada, and that it might be a co-operative venture involving all the dominions. Attlee replied that there were insufficient manpower and material resources. Britain refused to proceed with such a project unless the US was prepared to pass on technical information. The US declined to do this. See Gowing, *Independence and Deterrence*, pp 134–135, 141–142, 144.

25. The previous year, the foreign secretary had proposed that the construction of a pile in Africa or Australia should be discussed at the 1946 prime ministers meeting. With such a scheme, the US would no longer be able to withhold technical assistance on the grounds of strategic vulnerability. The plan seems to have been abandoned for fear of souring relations with the US which was steadfastly opposed to any increase in the number of countries with access to secret information. See NA, AB 16/283, Bevin - Attlee, 24 April 1946.

26. NA, AB 16/283, Bevin - Attlee, 24 April 1946.

27. Gowing, *Independence and Deterrence*, p 148; I. Drummond, *British Economic Power and the Empire* (George Allen & Unwin, London, 1972), p 31; NA, AB 16/393, Tizard - Portal 10 July 1947; Alexander - Bevin and Addison, 3 July 1947; Creech-Jones - Alexander, 7 July 1947.

grounds”.<sup>28</sup> The African project was eventually rejected by the Atomic Energy Official Committee (AEOC) without reference to the political difficulties which would follow from an extension of South African influence in Africa. The scarcity of British technical resources and the desire to avoid giving the United States an excuse for non-collaboration were the determining factors in this decision.<sup>29</sup>

Indeed the US recognised that its raw materials position might become precarious if it failed to gain access to Commonwealth sources of supply. Therefore, in the late summer of 1947, the US tried to adopt a more forthcoming attitude on atomic collaboration with Britain. At the same time, some American disquiet was expressed at the lack of British progress in obtaining a contract for South African uranium. A British offer in May 1947 to purchase South African uranium was met, at first, by an encouraging response. However, too many production difficulties remained unresolved. The Smuts government wanted further consultations with the gold-mining industry. By October, British representatives in Washington needed to give their American friends some indication of definite action to resume discussions with the Union so as to keep the boat steady.<sup>30</sup> Britain's financial weakness (which had become worse as a result of the convertibility crisis) began to loom as a possible obstacle to a satisfactory British bargain with South Africa. The British Treasury warned that it “had not contemplated investment of this order in a product which would not be revenue producing in the ordinary sense of the word”.<sup>31</sup> There were suggestions that the South Africans themselves might rescue the British position. The important thing, the Treasury felt, was to induce the South African government to take this on.<sup>32</sup>

British representatives in Washington had a more realistic outlook. The normal financing of South African gold-mining companies had already run into difficulties on the London capital market. The “snag” was that sterling capital investment in the Union “nowadays in effect means loss of gold to the United Kingdom”. American financing of uranium development would be “inevitable in greater or less degree”.<sup>33</sup> This, British representatives thought, might in some ways be an “unpalatable prospect since we would thereby have at least to share the present inside track as regards South African uranium supplies, but also what may prove to be a very profitable field of investment”.<sup>34</sup> The British embassy urged that:

the facts be faced now and that, with all their disadvantages, we make the best we can of them. This “best” we assume to be a programme of joint

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28. NA, AB 16/393, Tizard - Portal 10 July 1947; Alexander - Bevin and Addison, 3 July 1947; Creech-Jones - Alexander, 7 July 1947.
  29. NA, AB 16/393, Portal - Tizard, 15 July 1947.
  30. NA, AB 16/393, Portal - Tizard, 15 July 1947.
  31. NA, AB 16/393, Portal - Tizard, 15 July 1947.
  32. Gowing, *Independence and Deterrence*, p 380; NA, AB 16/514, Munro - Makins, 6 October 1947; and Blunt - Montagnon, 15 October 1947.
  33. NA, AB 16/514, Munro - Makins, 6 October 1947; and Blunt - Montagnon, 15 October 1947.
  34. Munro - Makins, 6 October 1947; and Blunt - Montagnon, 15 October 1947.

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investment under the aegis of the [Combined Development] Trust or the CPC which will at least ensure us as large a share as we can afford and give us an exact knowledge of what the Americans are doing.<sup>35</sup>

If the British government tried to stall, it was feared that under “the compulsion of raw material starvation, the Americans would for better or for worse, and whether we like it or not, shortly try to make their own arrangements with the South Africans”.<sup>36</sup>

If the British government lacked sufficient financial resources, then more reliance would have to be placed on Britain's most powerful collaborator in the Union. In Whitehall, hopes remained high that Smuts might help Britain by accepting less generous terms. Baring was asked to approach Smuts, telling him that Britain was being strongly pressed to push ahead with negotiations. In response, Smuts said that he would welcome discussion of the issue during his visit to London for Princess Elizabeth's wedding. Baring advised that the best results would be obtained by making “a completely frank statement to Smuts of the extent of our need for South African production and the greatness of our financial difficulties”.<sup>37</sup> The British high commissioner suspected that Smuts was likely to listen sympathetically to the argument that Britain “cannot afford a price calculated to give a large margin of profit for a commodity which will probably be of no use in peacetime”.<sup>38</sup> In face-to-face discussions with Attlee, Smuts adopted a helpful attitude. He thought that there would be no difficulty in reaching agreement with Britain and the United States on price and supply arrangements in 1948. Most significantly, Smuts indicated that his government would, if necessary, supply some of the required capital. A sympathetic collaborator could, it would seem, provide a substitute for financial largesse at least when it came to striking a bargain in which Britain's strategic security and her status as a great power seemed to be at stake.<sup>39</sup>

Although the British government appeared to have been favourably placed with respect to the acquisition of South African uranium, securing full United States atomic collaboration proved to be as difficult as ever. At secret talks held in Washington at the end of 1947 and early in 1948, British, Canadian, and American representatives produced a *modus vivendi* atomic agreement.<sup>40</sup> Preferring an agreement which included a limited exchange of information to no agreement at all, the British government conceded that unallocated stocks of uranium in Britain and the whole of the Congo's output of uranium should be made available to the United States. Britain undertook to encourage uranium production within the Commonwealth and ensure that as large a quantity as possible of this was made jointly available.

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35. Munro - Makins, 6 October 1947; and Blunt - Montagnon, 15 October 1947.

36. NA, AB, 16/514, Munro - Stewart, 17 October 1947.

37. NA, AB, 16/514, Munro - Stewart, 17 October 1947.

38. AB, 16/514, Munro - Stewart, 17 October 1947.

39. AB 16/514, Commonwealth Relations Office (hereafter CRO) - Baring, 2 October 1947, Baring - CRO, 28 October 1947, Cabinet Office - Washington, 4 December 1947, and file note dated 13 November 1947; FRUS, 1, 1947, p 895–896.

40. By definition, an arrangement allowing conflicting parties to coexist peacefully.

Furthermore, the British right to consultation on the American use of atomic bombs (a right which in Britain was considered to be of little real value) was abandoned. In return, the United States accepted that Britain should be given the go-ahead to produce fissile material. Restrictions on the British right to develop atomic energy for industrial purposes were lifted. Britain would be permitted to exchange some information with Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. There would be limited Anglo-American atomic collaboration, but no full exchange of technical information.<sup>41</sup>

### **Intensification of US Interest**

The plans for an integrated Commonwealth project (which were under consideration before the negotiations for the *modus vivendi* agreement began) foundered on American hesitation. Collaboration with the United States was neither so good nor so bad that Britain would want to push ahead with such a project. Until the United States abandoned its restrictive attitude, Britain's main concern in atomic relations with Commonwealth countries was to gain maximum leverage from their uranium resources.<sup>42</sup>

By 1948, South Africa remained the only Commonwealth source of supply which could be exploited in this way. Convincing the United States to leave the procurement of South African uranium in British hands continued to be a problem. The US interest in nuclear capability and the Union's uranium sources was driven by the rapid development and complexity of the American military industry.

With an unrestrained penchant for figurative language, Roger Makins, a senior British atomic official, explained the situation for the benefit of British representatives in Washington. "Left to ourselves", he wrote:

we should not think of approaching Field Marshal Smuts again at the moment, both on the grounds that it is a mistake to hustle a Dutchman, and on the particular ground of the forthcoming elections with all the uncertainties they may hold for Smuts and ourselves.<sup>43</sup>

But, Makins continued,

we are well aware of the American itch to get into the South African picture and we want by all means to avoid the impression that we are trying to fob them off for some inscrutable reason of Commonwealth policy.<sup>44</sup>

R. Gordon Munro of the British embassy in Washington was given full discretion "to play the hand" as best he could with the Americans. He was asked not to get involved in political discussion in the Combined Development Agency, partly on principle and partly to spare him the primitive beliefs about the British Empire of Joe Volpe – an American representative. Makins was quite prepared to put an American mining

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41. Gowing, *Independence and Deterrence*, pp 249–250, 267 and 295.

42. Gowing, *Independence and Deterrence*, pp 323–324 and 329–30.

43. Quoted in Gowing, *Independence and Deterrence*, pp 323–324.

44. Quoted in Gowing, *Independence and Deterrence*, pp 323–324.

expert who had just returned from the Union “into bat again” in the hope that this would satisfy the Americans for the time being. If American pressure continued, an approach to Smuts would be considered. It would be necessary to find out first whether Smuts was ready to talk “since we do not want to send anyone on a wild goose chase”.<sup>45</sup>

The British Cabinet Office thought it best, in any event, to wait before making any further approach to Smuts. He had been “most co-operative” in November 1947 while making it clear that he would not be willing to formulate a uranium policy until later in 1948. He was unlikely to respond differently to additional pressure after so short an interval. Moreover, the Cabinet Office saw that the success of Smuts in the elections was “by no means certain”. A National Party victory would bring:

... new and untried personalities into power: their security sense might be rudimentary and while their desire to develop South African resources and their attitude towards the Soviet Union are likely to be firm, it would be well to let them settle down before confronting them with the complicated problem of atomic energy policy.<sup>46</sup>

The advice from Whitehall was that:

if Smuts wins we can approach them forthwith. If the Nationalists win, some months should elapse before any approach is made. The Americans, with their rather elementary conception of British Commonwealth affairs, may think that we are trying to put them off and may be tempted to try a direct approach to Smuts themselves.<sup>47</sup>

Such an approach, British representatives in Washington were told firmly, had to be studiously avoided. “If any approach is made to Smuts it should be made by us.”<sup>48</sup> In the end, the British fear was confirmed when the National Party won the election and D.F. Malan came into power.

### **The question of NP government, 1948–1951**

The fall of Smuts seems to have come as more of a shock in Washington than in Whitehall. On 29 May 1948, David Lilienthal, the chairman of the United States Atomic Energy Commission, recorded that “old Smuts has just been defeated by the Nationalists, anti-British, highly nationalistic

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45. NA, AB 16/2001, Makins - Munro, 24 March 1948. Attlee was inclined to think that some senior British representative would have to go to the Union. He suggested that Makins himself should do so. In Washington, Munro felt it essential that Makins should travel to the Union. Quite apart from the prestige of Makins in this field, it was of the “utmost importance” because he knew “first-hand the international atomic scene”. Munro wrote: “I do not, *repeat* not think that the duty should be relegated to CRO or Ministry of Supply”. He went on to say that only Makins and one or two officials in Washington had this knowledge. See also NA, AB 16/2001, Munro - Makins, 13 April 1948.

46. NA, AB 16/1514, Cabinet Office - Washington, 23 March 1948.

47. AB 16/1514, Cabinet Office - Washington, 23 March 1948.

48. AB 16/1514, Cabinet Office - Washington, 23 March 1948.

crowd. What now?"<sup>49</sup> Ministers and officials in London should well have been asking themselves the same question.

Initially, little was known of the Malan government's plans for uranium. The South African ambassador in Washington admitted that he had no idea what effect the change of government would have in this field. Smuts had kept matters almost entirely in his own hands. Under these circumstances, no continuity could be provided by South African officials, who by and large, remained in place. British representatives in Washington were advised from Whitehall to calm down any apprehension on the part of the Americans about the result of the South African elections. The view in the Cabinet Office was that the National Party government was firmly anti-communist. They did not seem to have an effective majority, and in any case they were "not likely to neglect the development of South African resources".<sup>50</sup>

Despite the change of government in the Union, Taverner and Schonland, the South African officials sent by Smuts to discuss uranium contracts in London and Washington, carried on with their mission. American negotiators were surprised that Schonland did not ask for any of the political quid pro quo's which might have been expected, for example reservation of a certain quantity of uranium for South African needs; exchange of information on development of atomic energy; and South African participation in the CDA.<sup>51</sup> It seemed to the American side that "even with the Smuts government we should be lucky if we secure a firm arrangement on the bases now proposed without any of these points being raised".<sup>52</sup>

National Party ambitions were only revealed in September 1948. In that month the South African ambassador in Washington approached the state department asking for United States support on certain matters as a type of quid pro quo for the proposed arrangements for supplying uranium. This was the start of what appears to have been a crude South African effort to muster support for the forthcoming session of the United Nations (UN) general assembly. Whitehall found "no record of any similar sort of approach having been made to our present Government by the South Africans".<sup>53</sup>

Whatever its precise motives, the Malan government was not eager to rush into a contract for the sale of uranium. The large number of unresolved production problems would have made negotiations difficult in any case.

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49. FRUS, 1, 1947, p 896; D. Lilienthal, *The Journals of David E. Lilienthal*, vol 2, *The Atomic Energy Years, 1945-1950* (Harper & Row, New York, 1964), p 352.

50. NA, AB 16/394, British Joint Staff Mission (hereafter BJSM), Washington - Cabinet Office, 2 June 1948; AB 16/1514, Cabinet Office - Baring, 29 May 1948.

51. The Combined Development Agency (CDA), formerly the Combined Development Trust, was concerned with uranium production and procurement. The Combined Policy Committee (CPC) concerned itself with coordinating atomic collaboration between Britain, Canada, and the US.

52. NA, AB 16/1514, BJSM - Cabinet Office, 30 May 1948.

53. AB 16/1514, BJSM - Cabinet Office, 30 May 1948.

Talks planned for late 1948 were postponed first to the spring of 1949 and then to November 1949.<sup>54</sup> Although a tentative basis for a uranium contract was reached between representatives of South Africa, Britain, and the United States at discussions held in Pretoria in November 1949, South African ministerial dissatisfaction was soon made known. As a project previously pursued by Smuts it was not favoured. The devaluation of sterling produced a 40 percent rise in the sterling price of gold. Gold production had become correspondingly more attractive. Disagreements over prices remained. Furthermore, no progress had been made toward granting the Union a special position in atomic energy councils.<sup>55</sup>

The principal obstacle to the attainment of a special position by the Union seemed to have been the National Party government's lack of clarity regarding its uranium objectives.<sup>56</sup> This was evident when T.E. Dönges, the South African minister responsible for atomic energy, made an approach of his own to Baring. He indicated that the Union did not want membership of the Combined Policy Committee (CPC) or the CDA. It desired a position analogous to that of Belgium which, as a major uranium supplier, had privileged access to classified information.<sup>57</sup>

If the South African government had pressed hard for specific privileges, it undoubtedly would have had more success. When Smuts was in power, the attitude of C.D. Howe, the Canadian minister who dominated atomic policy, was that as "the position of South Africa is likely to be parallel with the position of Canada, in that both are primarily suppliers of raw materials, I do not see that Canada can object to the proposed association" of the Union with the CPC and CDA.<sup>58</sup> In November 1949 the Canadian government was ready to consider any arrangement regarding the Union which commended itself to the British and American governments.<sup>59</sup> The United States government planned from the start to adopt a hard line. The British government might have been expected to press for the inclusion of another member of the Commonwealth in the atomic inner circle. The complicating factor was the need to consider atomic relations with Belgium and Australia.<sup>60</sup> The British government was having difficulty enough

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54. There were reasons for delay on the American side as well. The US was concerned about the effects on the negotiations with the Belgians of offering a relatively high price to South Africa. See R.G. Hewlett and F. Duncan, *Atomic Shield, 1947-1952*, 2, *A History of the US Atomic Energy Commission* (Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, 1969) p 174.

55. FRUS, 1, 1949, p 626; Gowing, *Independence and Deterrence*, pp 333, 381.

56. Gowing, *Independence and Deterrence*, pp 333, 381.

57. NA, AB 16/394, Baring - Leisching, 9 November 1949.

58. AB 16/394, Baring - Leisching, 9 November 1949.

59. After Smuts's defeat, C.J. Mackenzie, chief official in the Canadian atomic project, still advised it would be a "great mistake if South Africa were not taken into the inner circle as an important contributor as they certainly know the whole picture". See Documents on Canadian External Relations, 1948 (hereafter DCER), Howe - Heeney, 30 April 1948; Mackenzie - Heeney, 2 June 1948; NA, AB 16/394, 26 November 1949.

60. FRUS, 2, 1948, pp 707-709; Australia would expect, as a member of the Commonwealth, to be granted any advantages obtained by the Union. The Belgian

attaining its own collaborative aims with the Americans. It was poorly placed to advance South African aims. By allowing the United States to participate in uranium negotiations, the National Party government had probably hoped to increase its own influence in Washington. If the Union government were going to attain a special position, it would not be able to rely on Britain to secure it.<sup>61</sup>

It remained clear during 1949 that Britain's links with actual and prospective uranium suppliers was her chief source of strength in atomic dealings with the United States, mainly because she was now a junior partner and this was one chip she was holding (and only tentatively, one has to add). In that year a uranium shortage once again appeared likely. In an effort to obtain uranium under British control, the United States government put forward a plan which included a full integration of British and American atomic programmes.<sup>62</sup> The chief of staff and Ernest Bevin, the foreign secretary, were not comfortable with a scheme which would have left Britain wholly dependent upon atomic production facilities located in the United States. The British government did not, however, feel that it could hold out for better terms. British ministers thought that it would be impossible to use raw materials as a major bargaining point.

By the time that talks among British, Canadian, and American representatives resumed in Washington at the end of 1949, a collapse in uranium output no longer seemed imminent. The major American rationale for atomic collaboration had thus evaporated. So Britain's influence in raw materials procurement – something which had been considered a trump card – in the end did not prove to be a decisive advantage. The British government had felt unable to force a showdown over raw materials supply largely because Britain might have ended up as the loser. Any possibility of improving atomic collaboration came to an end with the news of Klaus Fuchs's arrest early in 1950. Upon learning that this naturalised British atomic scientist was to be arraigned in London on charges of spying, "The roof fell in today, you might say" – an apt description of the British position.<sup>63</sup>

Britain's position was so badly shaken by the Fuchs case that some senior American policy makers contemplated excluding Britain from any share of South Africa's uranium. The secretary of defence, Louis Johnson,<sup>64</sup> proposed that in light of the recent disturbing disclosures, negotiations with South Africa should "take place in an atmosphere of a straight business

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Congo was the dominant supplier, but the Belgian government had not been given a voice in the combined bodies.

61. Gowing, *Independence and Deterrence*, pp 333 and 381; FRUS, 1, 1949, p 626.

62. Gowing, *Independence and Deterrence*, pp 254–265 and 783; FRUS, 1, 1949, pp. 473, 476–79 and 489.

63. Bullock, *The Life and Times of Ernest Bevin*, p 724

64. In August 1949, Johnson had said that there was no point in trying to bolster Britain's position through aid schemes or atomic collaboration. While the US "would be glad to use any part of the British Empire that was valuable" to it in joint defence plans, "as the Empire disintegrated we should write off the UK and continue cooperation with those parts of the Empire that remained useful to us". FRUS, 1, 1949, p 514.

transaction between the US and the Union of South Africa only". The state department refused to support the defence department attitude. Britain was not to be excluded from negotiations with the Union.<sup>65</sup> The state department's position to continue British inclusion in uranium deals with South Africa seemed favourable to the British, and henceforth Britain sought to please the Americans. The Korean War provided the opportunity to do this.

### **The Korean War**

The outbreak of the Korean War that lasted from June 1950 to July 1953 heightened the American desire to see South African uranium production developed as expeditiously as possible. The British Cabinet Office recognised that "we must clearly support the USA in the drive for greatest possible uranium output even though this flows entirely from US increased requirements."<sup>66</sup> The British high commissioner to the Union was instructed to support the approach by the American ambassador aimed at impressing upon the South Africans the urgent need to begin uranium production.

Under this prompting, the Union government agreed to further contract negotiations. A memorandum was signed in Johannesburg on 23 November 1950. A lucrative offer was made to ensure that uranium production in South Africa proceeded forthwith. The agreement reached in November 1950 covered virtually the whole output of four named South African producers for various periods up to 1964. Finally, although the Combined Development Agency (CDA) was established by the US and Britain in 1944 to procure uranium from the Union for their nuclear weapons programmes,<sup>67</sup> its most significant efforts only came to fruition when in 1951 it established the South African firm Calcined Products (Pty) Limited (Calprods) to produce uranium.<sup>68</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Between the end of the Second World War and the United Party's defeat at the polls in May 1948, South Africa's relations with Britain in the field of atomic energy formed a small yet significant part of a larger picture, which for the Attlee government was dominated by the need to relieve Britain's acute strategic vulnerability in the nuclear age. International control had been one possibility. Almost every other solution seemed to demand the maintenance of Anglo-American atomic collaboration. In comparison with the United States, the Commonwealth had little to offer to an atomic partnership. Furthermore, co-operation with any of the dominions other than Canada threatened to prejudice a close relationship with the Americans.

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65. Hewlett and Duncan, *Atomic Shield*, p 426.

66. NA, AB 16/1670, Acheson - Franks, 9 February 1950; AB 16/1927, Cabinet Office - Washington, 27 September 1950; and Makins - Cliffe, 29 September 1950.

67. Taya, *Progress or Proliferation?*

68. IAEA South Africa Country Profile, accessed online at [http://www.pub.iaea.org/MTCD/publications/PDF/cnpp2003/CNPP\\_Webpage/PDF/2002/Documents/Documents/SouthAfrica2002.pdf](http://www.pub.iaea.org/MTCD/publications/PDF/cnpp2003/CNPP_Webpage/PDF/2002/Documents/Documents/SouthAfrica2002.pdf). Cited in Taya, *Progress or Proliferation?*

The makers of Britain's atomic policy expected all of the dominions to recognise that the strategic position of Britain should be the first concern of the entire Commonwealth. Initially at least, Smuts (in common with the Canadian government) did not view the situation in quite that light. South Africa's own immediate and substantial interests in the atomic field could not be ignored. Both the Canadian and South African governments were concerned about the economic aspects of uranium production, as well as with their own relations with Washington.

No significant amounts of uranium were produced in South Africa until 1953, so if the Union's possession of uranium really was, as Ovendale has claimed, crucial for the British Labour Party government's defence programme,<sup>69</sup> then it was in the negotiations to obtain American atomic collaboration that this uranium had its real significance. The strength which Britain derived from South African uranium was not based on possession of it, or even on rights to purchase it. It was based, rather, on the existence of the Commonwealth connection with the Union which the Americans believed would lead Smuts to ally his government with Britain on the question of uranium sales. The presence of Smuts and strength of the Commonwealth connection with South Africa were Britain's real assets. However, the National Party's success in the general election of 1948 removed one of these assets and cast doubts upon the other. The British bargaining position in Washington was in decline. From being difficult, it became desperate.

As for Ovendale's suggestion that the United States relied on Britain to obtain uranium from South Africa, that was only partially true while Smuts was prime minister. It was certainly not the case after 1948. Britain played no part in American purchases from Canada. Why should she in the case of the Union? By early 1950, the value of British atomic stocks in Washington had declined to such an extent that the British government was on the verge of being excluded altogether from access to South African uranium. That this did not happen was as much a measure of Britain's strength with respect both to potential sources of supply elsewhere in the Empire/Commonwealth and to existing sources of supply for example in Belgium, as it was an indication of Britain's indispensability in dealings with South Africa. As it was, the American government took the lead in negotiations while Britain was relegated to a supporting role.<sup>70</sup>

### Abstract

The year 1945 signalled the use of nuclear weapons technology that ensured both an end of one war and the beginning of another – two global but dissimilar wars: the Second World War and the Cold War respectively.

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69. R. Ovendale, "The South African Policy of the British Labour Government, 1947–51", *International Affairs*, 59, 1983, p 50; M. Gowing, "Britain, America and the Bomb", in D. Dilks (ed.), *Retreat from Power: Studies in Britain's Foreign Policy of the Twentieth Century*, 2, (Macmillan, London, 1981).
70. Ovendale, "The South African Policy" p 50; FRUS, 1, 1948, p 783; FRUS, 2, 1950, pp 587–88.

These marked the beginning of an increased quest for uranium residue for peaceful and military purposes by the principal state actors in the wars. It is suggested that the US relied on British Commonwealth connection to obtain uranium from South Africa between 1947 and 1951. However, after consulting multi-archival sources in Britain, Canada and South Africa, I argue that this earlier assertion is incorrect. It was only partially correct while Smuts was prime minister of the Union of South Africa and was certainly not true after 1948.

**Key words:** Commonwealth; uranium; Britain; Union of South Africa; United States; atomic relations; Second World War; natural resources; Jan Smuts government; National Party government.

### Opsomming

Die jaar 1945 het die gebruik van kernwapentegnologie ingelui, wat sowel 'n einde as 'n begin verseker het van twee wêreldwye, maar ongelyksoortige oorloë: die Tweede Wêreldoorlog en die Koue Oorlog onderskeidelik. Dit baken die begin af van 'n verskerpte soeke na uraanresidu vir vreedsame en militêre doeleindes deur die hoofrolspelende state in dié oorloë. Daar is gesuggereer dat die Verenigde State staatgemaak het op Britse Gemenebesbande om tussen 1947 en 1951 uraan vanaf Suid-Afrika te verkry. Na raadpleging van veelvoudige argiefbronne in Brittanje, Kanada en Suid-Afrika, voer ek aan dat die vroeëre bewering foutief is. Dit was slegs gedeeltelik waar terwyl Smuts eerste minister van die Unie van Suid-Afrika was en was beslis nie waar na 1948 nie.

**Sleutelwoorde:** Gemenebes; uraan; Brittanje; Unie van Suid-Afrika; Verenigde State; atoomverhoudings; Tweede Wêreldoorlog; natuurlike hulpbronne; Jan Smuts regering; Nasionale Party regering.