



BOOK REVIEWS

SOUTH AFRICA IN A CHANGING COMMONWEALTH

The Imperial Idea and its Enemies by **A. P. Thornton.** Published by Macmillan, 1959.

The Commonwealth and the World by **J. D. B. Miller.** Published by Duckworth, 1958.

The Afro-Asian States and their Problems by **K. M. Pannikar.** Published by George Allen & Unwin, 1959.

"IDEAS in politics, as elsewhere, are forced to fight a grinding battle with circumstances." With this terse remark, Professor Thornton introduces his book 'The Imperial Idea and its Enemies'. And this comment will serve as a convenient text on which to base discussion of two other works which have recently appeared. Professor Thornton and Professor Miller are each concerned with the basic factor of power in international society and, more particularly, in the Commonwealth. Dr. Panikkar shares their equal concern with the role of ideas in political struggle, but confines himself to a consideration of the internal problems facing the new States in Africa and Asia.

The first part of Professor Thornton's book is a masterly description of the origins and development of the 'Imperial idea' as expressed in the beliefs of such men as Rosebery, Curzon, Milner, Smuts and Amery. In recent years the reputations of these men have declined, as has the ideology they expressed, under the combined attacks of nationalism and democracy. What then was this ideology?

In the author's words it was "their faith, that it was the role of the British Empire to lead the world in the arts of civilization, to bring light to the dark places, to teach the true political method, to nourish and to protect the liberal tradition . . . to act as trustee for the weak . . . to command, and deserve, a status and prestige shared by no other." Like other ideologies, the Imperial brand was a happy mixture of morality

and power, as the last phrase in the quotation makes clear. And Disraeli, the greatest of all Imperialists, realized this and put into words what his party felt but could not articulate. Professor Thornton's book is one long detailed illustration of Disraeli's view (and that of his Imperialist successors) that "the extent and magnitude of the British Empire provided visible expression of the power of England in the affairs of the world." British relations with South Africa serve the author well as an example of the changing nature of the imperial idea.

In the years after the 'tribal peace' of Vereeniging, the imperial idea fell into disrepute and with it the influence of Cromer, Curzon and Milner. The Liberal victory of 1906 was an equally severe setback to the 'proconsuls' and their Conservative allies, as men began to think seriously about domestic matters and 'the condition of England.' The service class was left to harmonize the ideals of Empire and build a solid structure of imperial unity and strength, a task which by training and inclination it was singularly unfitted to do. The Milner Kindergarten remained a Kindergarten, and there was no third generation of Balliol men to carry on the proconsular tradition. And yet the problem of imperial administration could not be ignored, however unpalatable the Liberals found some aspects of the Imperialist faith. Liberals were committed to the notion of responsible self-government, and their opportunity finally came with the debate on the Union of South Africa Bill in 1909-1910. In the space of half a dozen pages Professor Thornton outlines succinctly the dilemma in which forty years of Imperial policy had placed both the British Government and the Conservative Opposition Front Bench. It was one thing to want to give the Boers self-government, quite another to cut off the indigenous non-white population from the protection of the Colonial Office that it had enjoyed against the local whites.

The twin principles of imperialism—responsible self-government (recognized in the constitutional progress made by Canada and Australia) and the tutelage, protection and uplift of the subject non-white peoples within the Empire—met in collision over the debates on South Africa. Both Liberals and Conservatives foresaw the need to maintain some kind of Imperial unity in South Africa, if British power was to have significance in a world where countries like Germany and the United States were rapidly becoming a threat to Britain's traditional economic and military dominance. This aim could best be served by coming

to terms with the Boers through the grant of responsible government to them. This had not always been Liberal Party policy, as Professor Thornton makes clear; Asquith, in opposition, had agreed with Milner, and indeed with Chamberlain¹, about the dangers of leaving the future of the non-white population in the hands of the Boers. In 1909 the Liberals were thus in the same position as their predecessors under Gladstone had been in 1881. At that time Hicks-Beach, speaking for the Conservative opposition, had criticized the Liberals for giving self-government to the Boers and ignoring the claims of the non-white population "whom," he said, "you are bound to care for in the future as in the past." Yet, in 1910, only a few voices, some from the Labour benches—Macdonald² and Keir Hardie among them—were raised against the proposal. Sir Charles Dilke's speech in the House on this occasion was an acute analysis of the Imperial dilemma; he stressed the dependence of the non-whites on the Imperial connection; to ignore their claims was to betray the Imperial ideal. Keir Hardie followed to argue "that this was the last chance the Imperial government would ever have to intervene for good in the affairs of South Africa." But such moral arguments for the maintenance of the Imperial connection failed to break the determination of the two front benches to consolidate British power in South Africa on the basis of co-operation with the Boers.

Certainly the Liberal decision of 1910 enabled Botha and Smuts to view South Africa's continuing association with Great Britain amicably. Whether any alternative policy for maintaining Imperial control over native affairs would have been possible, is a matter for considerable speculation. It is doubtful whether South African nationalists, British or Boer, would have been prepared to accept this limitation on their right to govern themselves. The persistent resentment felt by at least half the white population at the British connection, even in the attenuated form of the Balfour Declaration of 1926, leads one to be sceptical. Indeed, Smuts and Hertzog were prime movers in the negotiations to get the status of the dominions redefined after the First World War. The relations of Whitehall with settlers of predominantly English stock in areas like Kenya and the Rhodesias have been difficult enough; one is tempted to think that they could only have been worse in South Africa, with a national group which

¹ Chamberlain to Milner. 6th. March, 1901. (i.e. before the Peace was signed.)

² Macdonald, with prophetic insight, was sceptical about the "entrenched clause" protecting the coloured vote on the common roll.

owed little or no allegiance to Britain and which possessed all the characteristics of a colonial group in the modern sense of the term.

The Liberals in 1910 were in fact dealing not with one colonial group, but with two, the major of which, if only in numbers, was non-white. Peace and security could only be bought by appeasing one group at the clear expense of the others. In 1910 peace and security were as important to the Liberals, power and status to the Conservatives, as they are important to any colonial power at any time. Both parties realised, the Liberals perhaps unwillingly, that peace and security depend on power and on status. A friendly white-dominated South Africa was in the short run more important than a long-drawn-out struggle with a white élite over the rights and privileges of the non-whites, as yet to challenge white supremacy.

Given Britain's position in 1910, and the widespread realization that the dream of Imperial Federation had become obsolete, the new arrangements with South Africa appeared to give the Imperial idea a fresh start. It was to take two world wars to broaden the concept of Commonwealth (as the Imperial idea subsequently became) to include the non-white peoples. Sir Oliver Lyttelton's remark—"You cannot raise great eulogies and paeans on the granting of responsible government, without taking the full consequences of your actions"—is an ironic comment on the position of those self-same non-whites in South Africa who are the least privileged members of the new, so-called multi-racial Commonwealth.

Professor Miller's book is in many ways complementary to Professor Thornton's. Part I of "The Commonwealth in the World" offers a lucid and realistic account of the development of the Commonwealth. Professor Miller is specifically interested in the foreign policies of the individual Commonwealth States, and so he analyses each State in turn. The familiar precept, "foreign policy begins at home", has considerable significance in any attempt to analyse South African policy: Professor Miller very ably reveals the connection between our domestic conflicts and the image our diplomats attempt to project abroad of South Africa's role in international society. In a fascinating discussion on the relationship between national interests and foreign policy, he states: "Ultimately, ideas of national interest depend upon the ideas which men have of the place which they would like their

country to occupy in the world; and these ideas change in time, apart from never being unanimous within a country at a given time" (p. 88).

The most compelling "idea" dominating South African domestic policy and, *ipso facto*, its foreign policy, is the doctrine of white supremacy; ". . . every issue must sooner or later be submitted to the test of whether it will help or hinder the maintenance of white supremacy" (p. 189). In his view there is very little division among the white ruling groups on the necessity for such a policy; and party approach to foreign policy may, in this respect at least, be properly labelled bi-partisan. He then lists the following factors as important in governing any definition of South African national interest: first, South Africa's isolated position at the tip of a predominantly non-white continent; secondly, the evident need to increase the pace of economic expansion; thirdly, the English-Afrikaans conflict over the status of South Africa, or the republican issue; and, finally, the rise of the new Afro-Asian States, with their bitter resentment of racial discrimination, and the corresponding polarization of the world into two hostile coalitions, both trying to persuade the uncommitted States of their good intentions.

Given these factors as conditioning South African foreign policy, what policies are in fact being pursued? Professor Miller cites the technical and economic co-operation with other countries in Africa South and East of the Sahara, as a policy specifically directed at gaining recognition of "South Africa's domestic jurisdiction over her own territory and peoples." He cites the opposition of both major parties to Communism as a further example of bi-partisanship. For the Nationalists, this policy represents a retreat from the isolationist position held during World War II and earlier. He concludes: "To this extent South Africa is probably more anxious for alliance with other anti-Communist countries than any other member of the Commonwealth" (p. 196). This may well be true, but where are such allies to be found outside the Commonwealth, South African membership of which is a source of constant irritation to the extreme republican wing of the Nationalist Party? Under certain circumstances it is just possible that a military alliance might be signed with the Federation; it is hardly likely, however, that Ghana would be receptive to similar overtures. In any case, the majority of newly independent Afro-Asian States, whether inside or outside the Commonwealth, appear reluctant to enter

into precise military obligations, and South Africa's racial policy makes such an alliance even less likely.

It is true there are rumours that African States may be encouraged to establish diplomatic missions in South Africa. But can the Government assume that the diplomats appointed will refrain from discussing matters of common interest with Chief Luthuli? Their presence might easily lead to embarrassing 'incidents', of which there have been several in recent months. In any event, exchange of diplomats by South Africa, Ghana and Nigeria is hardly in the same category as an alliance in Professor Miller's sense of the word. The reader need hardly be reminded that South Africa, unlike Australia, New Zealand, Canada and Pakistan, has no share in any regional pact designed to prevent Communist aggression, despite its vital interest in the matter. Certainly, as Miller points out, the British and French in East and West Africa respectively are reluctant to forge precise military arrangements with the Union. Under these circumstances, the Department of External Affairs has apparently been forced to regard the British South Atlantic Fleet and the buffer State of the Federation as the best protection for the Union. It is also significant that the United States of America, the great underpinner of N.A.T.O. and S.E.A.T.O., has been, together with Britain, reluctant to underwrite South African foreign policy.

Professor Miller also makes it clear that South Africa has "the most widespread representation of the Dominions." The list of South African diplomatic missions is extensive, and one can only assume that the Union Government is conscious of the need to defend its policies vigorously in other parts of the world. It would hardly appear to be succeeding very well in this; and the overseas press, which is obviously a prime source of information on South African domestic affairs, has never been so hostile. One is left to conclude that South Africa is cast in a peculiarly defensive position in her internal relations and one which by its very nature makes foreign policy an extremely difficult and hazardous undertaking for the present government.

Finally, Professor Miller mentions some very compelling reasons for South Africa's continued membership of the Commonwealth. He lists the benefits that accrue to South African industries, wine and fruit in particular, from Imperial Preference and the British capital investment in the gold mines. He quotes

a passage from a leading article in *'Die Burger'* as the main theme of South Africa's present membership of the Commonwealth. "For example we believe that military and African affairs cannot with advantage be discussed in the presence of India. . . . The meaning of South Africa's Commonwealth membership lies in our relations with individual Commonwealth members, rather than with the whole wide heterogeneous circle" (pp. 203-4). In Miller's view it is a fact of political life that it is better to belong to one international association rather than none at all, as would assuredly be the case if South Africa were to contract out of the Commonwealth. In other words, the Commonwealth provides a 'listening post' for South African diplomacy; if she were to resign, the disadvantages of association—attacks by India on her non-white policy and an increase in the number of non-white members, to mention only two sources of dissatisfaction—would still remain. The Commonwealth principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of member States is certainly to her advantage; outside the Commonwealth, this principle might no longer operate with respect to her former friends and neighbours within the association. Indian criticism of South Africa would possibly intensify; and Britain, if not Australia, might no longer feel constrained tacitly to defend South African policy at the United Nations.

Altogether this is a tough, realistic analysis of the Commonwealth today and, in particular, South Africa's position in it. Events since Sharpeville have only served to underscore the issues that Professor Miller has set down so lucidly; Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Britain herself have fought hard against any 'formal' discussion or vote within the Commonwealth on South Africa's racial policies. However, antagonism to the Union is growing, led especially by Malaya and the soon-to-be-admitted Nigeria; and the Commonwealth itself is straining on the question of South African membership. Should the Union decide to become a republic and apply for the automatic approval of Commonwealth members essential to her own continued membership, there is no certainty that the approval *will be* automatic.

Dr. Panikkar is well known as a scholar of considerable distinction and a diplomat with a wide range of experience. His new book consists of a series of six lectures delivered at the Sorbonne on the problems confronting the Afro-Asian States. It is a refreshing analysis of the aftermath of colonialism from one who is himself the product of a colonial environment.

To the South African his remarks on the nature of democracy in underdeveloped countries have considerable relevance.

“A third factor which affects the functioning of democracy in the new States is the lack of independent thinking connected with political problems. Democratic institutions provide only a machinery of political action; its leadership has of necessity to be concerned with the day to day problems of administration and with formulation of general policies. But it does not generate ideas” (p. 21).

Dr. Panikkar stresses repeatedly the importance in a democracy of “a process of co-operative thinking which is continuously going on, being debated, argued about and studied in detail”, and he quotes the Fabian Society in Britain, the research organizations of the political parties, and the specialized groups studying national problems and “providing public men with ideas concerning every aspect of national life.” He is thinking no doubt of the role played by Chatham House in Great Britain, the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, the Institute of Strategic Studies, and of course the research faculties in the universities of Britain and the United States.

In this respect South Africa is still an “underdeveloped area”. The unofficial opposition groups, the Congresses and the Liberal Party, for example, are so deeply involved in their day-to-day struggle against the ruling white oligarchy that there is little time and energy left for long-term planning on the basis of full-time research backed with the necessary financial resources. And certainly the society that South Africa has become since Sharpeville makes any real “process of co-operative thinking” impossible.

The Congress movement in India was led by educated Indians who had had at least the benefit of higher education under British rule. The Labour Party in Britain owes much to the early Fabians and the work of men and women like the Webbs, many of whom had the leisure and inclination to think about the kind of society they hoped to build in the future. The present South African government has made university education for non-whites a means of indoctrination within a totalitarian framework of control. It is clear that the new tribal colleges will offer an inferior education; it is extremely doubtful whether they will produce adequately trained doctors, engineers and lawyers, let alone become fertile breeding grounds for the ideas which any

democratic society must draw upon if it is to survive and develop.

Dr. Panikkar points out that "one of the remarkable features of the growth of democracy in England, France and America has been the re-emergence of universities as vital centres of political thought." Certainly our South African universities have done a surprising amount of work on political and social problems in the country, considering their staffing and financial problems; but few would deny that it has been done under difficult conditions and in an atmosphere where government has been on the whole extremely hostile to the growth of a free, independent and critical university spirit.

Dr. Panikkar's book deserves to be read by all who are interested in the political and economic development of the Afro-Asian states. Their problems are immense, and whether they succeed will depend, as the writer says, "on many factors, not the least of which are the vision of their leaders, the response of the general public . . . and the assistance and sympathy of more advanced nations" (p. 96). We too have men of vision in government, but their view of the future is one utterly repugnant to the majority of people in this country. The only response we apparently count on from the white public (i.e. the effective governing group) is a hardened conservative one, content to express itself in voting for parties whose programmes are based on fear and prejudice. It is at least a consolation to know that the non-white public can count on the sympathy, if not the assistance, of more advanced nations like India, whose rulers accept values of Western civilization, defined in terms quite foreign to the present South African defenders of that much maligned concept.

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