



South African diplomats in Australia, 1949 to the early 1960s*

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On 1 November 1945 the Chifley government sent a cable to Smuts, South Africa's prime minister and minister of external affairs, proposing an exchange of high commissioners.¹ In taking this action, the Australian government saw South Africa as a normal Commonwealth country with which the establishment of diplomatic relations was natural and desirable at a time when Australia was rapidly expanding the number of its overseas missions.

The tendency then, and for some years, was to regard South Africa as a vital link in Australia's communications with the United Kingdom. Australia, this time the Menzies government, was accordingly also responsible for the airlink which first connected the two countries in 1952. A proving flight had been conducted in 1948. Then flown by propeller-driven aircraft, the air route led to the expansion of Australian territory when the United Kingdom transferred sovereignty over the Cocos (Keeling) Islands in the Indian Ocean, eight hours flying time from Perth and an essential refuelling stop en route to Southern Africa.

The wider context of the Australian initiative was the sense of isolation which has always marked that country's perception of its place in the world. As Miller put it, "distance has played a large part in determining Australia's attitudes to external relations".² Australian prime minister Andrew Fisher's view in 1910 that, thanks to its geographic position, South Africa held for Australians the keys of East and West,³ remained valid until the 1960s.

Smuts, who never had much time for Australians,⁴ sought to fend off the proposal.⁵ An "acute shortage of personnel" made it difficult to reciprocate and, accordingly, the

* © David Tothill 2003. Paper prepared for presentation at the 26th Annual Conference of the African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific (AFSAAP), Flinders University, Adelaide, South Australia, 1-3 October 2003.

¹ National Archives of Australia (NAA), A461/1, A348/1/18, O. 27815, 1 November 1945. See my article "Early Australian-South African Connections up to the Establishment of Official Relations in 1945", *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 54, No. 1, April 2000, pp. 73-76.

² J.D.B. Miller, "Australia in the Commonwealth: a troubled adjustment to a changing Commonwealth", *The Round Table*, No. 240, November 1970, p.579.

³ Speech at the Mount Nelson Hotel, Cape Town, 9 December 1910. NAA, A2/1, 11/3154.

⁴ Apart, perhaps, from J.G. Latham with whom he worked on Article 22 of the League of Nations Covenant at the 1919 Versailles conference. See my article "White man's country: an aspect of mid-twentieth-century Australia", *Kleio*, XXVII, 1995, p. 170. Smuts would probably have agreed with British permanent under secretary Sir Alexander Cadogan that H.V. Evatt, Australia's wartime and early post-war attorney-general and minister of external affairs, was "the most frightful man in the world". D. Dilks, ed., *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan O.M. 1938-1945* (New York, 1972), p. 745. A generation earlier this would have summed up his attitude towards W.M. Hughes, Australia's prime minister during the First World War. His personal feelings towards these Australians perhaps compounded his stand-offish attitude towards their country. In any case, the existence of the animus



appointment should be delayed “until such time as a convenient date could be agreed upon”.⁶ However, on 9 April 1946, the day that the Australian cabinet approved his appointment for “not more than three years”, external affairs cabled its South African counterpart that Sir George Knowles, since 1932 solicitor-general, head of the attorney-general’s department and chief parliamentary draftsman, was to be the high commissioner. There was, the cable held, “considerable public feeling ... that the initial step should be taken” and it expressed the hope that Knowles could “proceed to South Africa in June or soon afterwards”.⁷

This time Smuts did not demur. Expressing the hope of reciprocating “as soon as possible”, he requested Australia’s “ready understanding of the circumstances” which precluded “an immediate appointment”.⁸ His government continued to plead shortage of staff.⁹ Shortly before the May 1948 general election Smuts apparently asked J.R.F. Stratford, United Party MP for Parktown, whether he wanted to go to Australia. He declined for personal reasons.¹⁰ There the matter rested until Evatt notified the new South African prime minister, Dr D.F. Malan, of his intention to announce Alfred Stirling’s appointment as high commissioner in succession to Knowles who had died in Pretoria the previous November.¹¹ At the same time Evatt reminded Malan of the lack of a South African high commissioner.¹² Malan promised to give this “important matter” his “earliest attention”.¹³

When Evatt passed through Cape Town on the last day of the year on his return to Australia after the 1948 session of the United Nations general assembly, he again

would not have helped him be more receptive to Australia’s proposal. He simply did not attach much importance to the connection.

⁵ NAA, A461/1, A348/1/18, I. 3510, 7 November 1945.

⁶ BTS, 4/2/32, Vol. 1, Smuts’s handwritten instructions on Canberra’s telegram.

⁷ NAA, A1066/1, M45/21/6, Strahan to Evatt, 9 April 1946; O. 7010, 9 April 1946. It seems that Evatt, as attorney-general, wanted to rid himself of Knowles (as he did of Hodgson, the head of his other department, external affairs) in favour of someone like K.H. Bailey with whom he could work better. Knowles would have retired under normal circumstances at the age of sixty-five in March 1947. See A. Dalziel, *Evatt the enigma*, Melbourne 1967, pp. 29-30 and P.G. Edwards, *Prime Ministers and Diplomats: The making of Australian foreign policy 1901-1949*, Melbourne, 1983, p. 179.

⁸ BTS, 130/10, Vol. 1, minister of external affairs, Cape Town to minister of external affairs, Canberra, No. 24, 12 April 1946.

⁹ See Knowles’s report on his interview with F.S. Waterson, NAA, A4231/2, Pretoria Despatch No. 44/46, 14 November 1946.

¹⁰ NAA, A1838, 201/10/7, Pt. 1, No. 5/48, Marshall to minister of external affairs, 10 March 1948.

¹¹ From a post-operative thrombosis following a prostate operation after some sixteen months in South Africa. M.J.S. Knowles, “Canberra in the early government period”, *Canberra Historical Journal*, New Series, No. 19, March 1987, p. 8. Knowles was given a state funeral. His remains were repatriated to Australia, unlike those of a later Australian head of mission, J.C.G. Kevin, who was buried in Pretoria.

¹² BTS, 130/10, Vol. 1, minister of external affairs, Canberra to minister of external affairs, Pretoria, No. 13, 6 June 1948.

¹³ NAA, A1838/1, 201/10/6/1, Pt. 1., minister of external affairs, Pretoria to minister of external affairs, Canberra, No. 35, 14 June 1948.



reminded his hosts that they had no man in Canberra.¹⁴ (He and his wife and seven-year old adopted daughter were the government's guests for the time - seven hours in Cape Town and twelve in Durban - they spent on South African soil.) In a press interview in Durban, he said Australia was "looking forward eagerly to a reciprocal appointment by South Africa".¹⁵ According to Stirling, Evatt got on "very well" with Malan and Eric Louw who had represented South Africa at the general assembly session over which he had just presided.¹⁶ The same applied to the governor-general, G. Brand van Zyl, to the extent that Evatt appropriated one of his cricket books!¹⁷

The February 1949 announcement of the appointment of Dr P.R. Viljoen, South Africa's high commissioner to Canada, as high commissioner to Australia was greeted with a sigh of relief in that country. Politicians and press were beginning to view the lack of a South African presence as a slight. ("South African neglect of Australia is neither flattering nor farsighted.")¹⁸ Menzies told the house of representatives that Viljoen was highly regarded in Canada.¹⁹ His Australian colleague in Ottawa, F.M. Forde,²⁰ had earlier reported on him favourably, saying that he was "one of the outstanding personalities in diplomatic life in Ottawa"²¹ and that he had the highest regard for him.

Sailing from Cape Town on 20 May 1949 on board the "Dominion Monarch", the ship which carried most travellers between the two countries until the late 1950s, Viljoen and his party²² arrived in Sydney on 7 June. For the first week it was not entirely clear whether the high commission would be established in Canberra or Sydney, whereupon Viljoen came down in favour of the former. The question arose because, unlike the South Africans in respect of Pretoria, the Australian authorities did not object to missions establishing themselves in centres other than Canberra, only a few

¹⁴ See *The Cape Argus*, 31 December 1948; *The Pretoria News*, 31 December 1948; *Die Burger*, 31 December 1948 and 1 January 1949; *Cape Times*, 1 January 1949. See also A.T. Stirling, *Lord Bruce: The London Years*, Melbourne, 1974, pp. 430-31.

¹⁵ *The Natal Daily News*, 3 January 1949; *The Natal Mercury*, 4 January 1949.

¹⁶ He seems, by contrast, to have disliked Smuts. Sole says that he "revelled in the humiliations" Smuts received at the 1946 session of the UN General Assembly "in part with Australian assistance". Sole got that first-hand from Evatt's "court jester", Sam Atyeo. D.B. Sole, *This above all: Reminiscences of a South African diplomat*, unpublished, 1990, pp. 103-04; also letter, 30 June 1994.

¹⁷ Stirling, *Lord Bruce*, p. 431.

¹⁸ BTS, 4/2/32, Vol. 1, Article from *Pix*, 6 September 1947, attached to Baker to secretary for external affairs, 30 September 1947. See also *House of Assembly Debates (HA Deb.)*, Vol. 64, 30 August 1948, Col. 1142.

¹⁹ *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates (CPD)*, Vol. 201, 15 February 1949, p. 234.

²⁰ A former deputy leader of the Australian Labor Party (ALP), deputy prime minister and, for a few days after John Curtin's death in 1945, prime minister.

²¹ NAA, A1838/T17, 1500/1/30/1, Forde to department of external affairs, 8 January 1949. Not that there were many diplomats in Canada at the time.

²² Comprising his wife, G.C. Nel, a second secretary, and his wife and children, P.R. Killen, a cadet, and typist Miss J.M. Richards.



government departments having yet moved there from Melbourne.²³ Diplomatic missions located in Sydney at the time were those of Belgium, Finland, Israel, Italy, Norway and Sweden. There were then fourteen missions in Canberra.²⁴

Canberra was to all intents and purposes a company town with one major employer, the federal government.²⁵ Just about all accommodation, office and residential, lay within the government's gift. Properties were not for sale, only for rent. Even today foreign governments rent the ground on which their diplomatic premises stand on ninety-nine year leases. The city had to be built from scratch. In addition to erecting public buildings including office space, the federal government also built dwellings for officials. These took two forms: houses for married couples and hotels, boarding houses and hostels for single people.

Canberra's isolation and small size - it had less than 20 000 inhabitants in 1949 - meant that the elite, including the handful of foreign diplomats, was thrown together to an extent unknown in larger and more established capitals. This had pluses and minuses. Always on the assumption that there was enough money for travel to relieve the boredom, the city's very intimacy favoured diplomatic life. By 1960, however, the sense of diplomatic intimacy was receding. In October of that year *The Canberra Times* estimated that the city had "a diplomatic population of between 800 and 1,000, representing 27 countries".²⁶

Particularly as a result of Robert Menzies's policy, Canberra developed as a city during his second term as prime minister (1949-66). While not a Canberra enthusiast during his first term (1939-1941), Menzies became one during his second and he probably did more than anyone to turn the "garden without a city" and the "six suburbs" that had "lost their way", as Canberra was called in 1954, into a true national capital.²⁷ For a politician, Menzies was perhaps unusual in that he liked and felt comfortable in the company of diplomats. Being for a long time the only cabinet member to live in Canberra,²⁸ a relatively modest house called The Lodge having been provided for the prime minister from 1926, he often came into contact with them. Some became personal friends.

²³ By 1957 only eleven of twenty-seven departments had their headquarters in Canberra. BTS, S4/7/2/1/5, "Post Report - Canberra - 1957", Annexure "C", p. 3.

²⁴ Brazil, Canada, Ceylon, Chile, China, Denmark, France, India, Ireland, Netherlands, New Zealand, United Kingdom, United States and USSR. .

²⁵ Viljoen observed in his first post report that 90 per cent of the population were civil servants. BTS, S4/7/2/1/5, Viljoen to secretary for external affairs, 30 June 1950, "Post Report: Canberra", p. 13. He meant the working population. Perhaps it wasn't as bad as that because in 1954 "8700 people, or 31 per cent of the population" were said to be "employed in one way or another by the Commonwealth". E. Sparke, *Canberra 1954-1980*, Canberra, 1988, p. 25.

²⁶ 4 October 1960.

²⁷ Sparke, *Canberra 1954-1980*, p. 1. Menzies gave a brief account of his role in *The Measure of the Years*, Melbourne, 1970, pp. 142-48.

²⁸ See, eg., *The Canberra Times*, 16 September 1953 (editorial: "Ministerial absenteeism in Canberra".)



Negotiations for a suitable house for Viljoen commenced six months before his departure from South Africa. Their successful conclusion permitted him to depart at that stage or at least to reside in Canberra. Therefore, he could move immediately into a nine roomed house at 26 Balmain Crescent, Acton, on campus at the new Australian National University. Belonging to the university, the house is still standing. Earlier the Belgian minister, who was contemplating a move to Canberra, had found it unsuitable.²⁹ If he had taken it there would, according to the Australian authorities, have been no possibility of a suitable house for Viljoen for a “considerable period” and he would have had to consider “remaining in Sydney”.³⁰

Viljoen did not like the house. He wanted to move to a larger residence but it was “one of the largest owned by the Commonwealth”. Besides, there was a “waiting list for houses of over 2,300 applicants including many senior and executive public servants”.³¹ In his memoirs Alan Watt recalled his own difficulties in obtaining a house in 1950 on his appointment as secretary for external affairs.³² At least Viljoen was accommodated. His staff, especially Nel who experienced five changes of residence during his first year in Australia, were less fortunate. On arrival in Sydney, Nel took a two-bedroom flat for two weeks before moving to a hotel in Canberra. He was allocated a government house after a year.³³ Killen and Miss Richards, the typist, were accommodated in a hostel.

The South Africans retained 26 Balmain Crescent as their high commissioner’s residence until the completion in mid-1957 of the double-storey Cape Dutch style house at 2 Perth Avenue, Yarralumla, known as “South Africa House”, which has housed the head of mission ever since. As for office accommodation, the high commission was allocated a set of four offices in East Block (a building which now houses the National Archives) for which no rent was charged.³⁴ Being required to give way to the prime minister’s department, the high commission moved in February 1950 to five offices on the second floor of East Row, Sydney Building, Civic, a privately owned building leased to the Australian government and sub-let by it. The annual rental payable to the Australian government was £A210 (£SA168).³⁵

Viljoen hoped it would not be necessary to move again until the South African government built its own offices.³⁶ However, a fire in the early hours of the morning of 28 December 1950 gutted the South African premises. The fire was perhaps the

²⁹ NAA, A1838/T17, 1500/1/30/1, Verstraeten to Oldham, 17 March 1949. Viljoen claimed that it had also been rejected by two other heads of mission. BTS, 4/6/36, Vol. 1, Viljoen to secretary for external affairs, 1 July 1949.

³⁰ NAA, A1838/T17, 1500/1/30/1, O. 3055, 7 March 1949.

³¹ *Ibid.*, Edwards to Viljoen, 30 June 1949.

³² A.S. Watt, *Australian Diplomat: The Memoirs of Sir Alan Watt*. Sydney, 1972, pp. 198-200.

³³ BTS, S4/7/2/1/5, Viljoen to secretary for external affairs, 30 June 1950, “Post Report: Canberra”, p. 4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, Viljoen to secretary for external affairs, 3 March 1950.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, Nel to secretary for external affairs, 3 March 1950.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, Viljoen to secretary for external affairs, 3 March 1950.



most dramatic experience to befall the high commission and embassy in the five and-a-half decades of their existence to date. The South Africans then moved to the Old Community Hospital Building, Acton, owned by the Australian National University, about 150 yards from Viljoen's residence. Made of wood, the building had been used as a store for superfluous furniture.³⁷

The high commission worked there rent free for the next four years. It relocated in February 1955 to Industry House, Barton, where it spent six-and-a-half years. From September 1961 to 1967, then an embassy as a result of South Africa's departure from the Commonwealth, it was located at Green Square, Jardine Street, Kingston. It spent the balance of 1967 and 1968 at 3 Zeehan Street, Red Hill. In all, therefore, the South Africans experienced six changes of offices before they moved for the seventh and last time to the present chancery in 1968.

Viljoen had already reached retirement age by the time of his appointment to Australia. On paper he was the ideal envoy to an agricultural and pastoral country. A qualified veterinarian, he obtained the MRCVS at the Royal Veterinary College in London in 1912 and his doctorate in veterinary medicine at Berne, Switzerland, in 1921. During the First World War he was awarded the Military Cross for his work with the horses used in the 1915 German South-West Africa campaign - none died of disease. He was successively professor of veterinary science at the Transvaal University College (1919), deputy director, veterinary services (1920), chief of veterinary field services (1926), deputy director of Onderstepoort (where vets are trained) (1927), under secretary for agriculture (1931) and secretary for agriculture and forestry (1933).

As with Knowles's appointment (see footnote 7 above), there may have been special reasons for Viljoen's appointment to Canada. C.J. Burchell, the contemporary Canadian high commissioner to South Africa thought so. He believed Viljoen - the "father of the Control Board system"³⁸ - to be a scapegoat for the poor food distribution system in South Africa during the later stages of the war. ("It appears that the sole reason for appointing this man to Canada is to get him out of the Civil Service ... and out of the country".)³⁹

Viljoen's best years lay behind him when he came to Australia and he gave few signs of what his entry in the *Dictionary of South African Biography*⁴⁰ calls his "exceptional intellectual talents" and "extraordinary capacity for work". He was in indifferent

³⁷ BTS 4/2/32/2 Vol. 1, Viljoen to secretary for external affairs, 29 June 1951. (Translation.)

³⁸ He was Chairman of the National Marketing Board from 1937 to 1945 and a member of the National Food Council from 1940 to 1945. *DSAB*, Vol. IV, p. 746. See also F.D. Tothill, *The 1943 General Election*, Unpublished MA dissertation, University of South Africa 1987, pp. 77-78.

³⁹ Canadian Archives (CA), DEA Records, File 167(S), Burchell to Robertson, 6 November 1944. See also B.D. Tennyson, *Canadian Relations with South Africa: A Diplomatic History*, Washington, DC, 1982, p. 105.

⁴⁰ Vol. IV, p. 746.



health when he arrived and within six months he was hospitalised for more than three weeks with an abnormal heart rhythm. The condition was brought on by over-exertion when he had to change a car wheel while returning to Canberra from a visit to Wagga Wagga in southern New South Wales. (His term fell partly inside and partly outside the era of chauffeur-driven cars for South African heads of mission.)

In respect of what he was supposed to do, it was then South African practice (perhaps confined to non-career appointees) to provide heads of new missions “with a set of general directives and background papers covering the more important aspects” of the subjects with which they would be concerned. It was expected that much of his time would “be taken up in promoting a sympathetic understanding of the Union’s problems”⁴¹ In fact, as with other South African missions at the time, much of the mission’s attention, fully occupying the most junior diplomatic official, in this case P.R. Killen, was devoted to administering itself.

Within a month of his arrival, Viljoen was writing that government and administrative decentralisation made it necessary “to travel extensively”. Other high commissioners visited other parts of Australia regularly and he would have to do so too.⁴² He was to be disappointed. He was kept on a tight rein financially and, compared to his immediate successors, he did relatively little travelling. As time passed he complained frequently about how little there was to do in Canberra for a man such as himself who liked to be busy. Thus:

Canberra is a very isolated place with only a small population and, when Parliament is not sitting ... I would normally be visiting other parts of Australia ... but ... you have practically stopped all travelling, with the result that during the Parliamentary recess, which lasts several months, I have very little to do ... and this has given me this feeling of frustration.⁴³

A few weeks later he pleaded: “I hope you will try and let me do a little more travelling as it is deadly (for me!) to sit in a small place like Canberra with little work to do”. Complaining about “the curtailment of trips to Sydney and Melbourne”, he said that he had

to refuse some very important invitations, such as a dinner in honour of the Prime Minister at Melbourne, a reception in honour of the Minister of External Affairs at Sydney [and] the opening of the most important

⁴¹ BTS, 1/25/1A, Vol. 1, Forsyth to Viljoen, 19 May 1949. An interesting commentary on this instruction, which applied to all South African missions, was provided by Miss E.A. Warren of Australian external affairs. She reported after a 1954 conversation with C.A. Smith, the South African information attaché, her impression “that much of his activity here will be to put the South African ‘Colour line’ across”. NAA, A1838, 201/10/7, Pt. 1, Record of conversation Warren/Smith, 9 July 1954.

⁴² BCB, Vol. 19, 31/6 (Secret), Viljoen to Forsyth, 5 July 1949.

⁴³ BTS, Viljoen., Vol. 7, Viljoen to Forsyth, 8 February 1951.



agricultural and industrial show in Australia which opens in Sydney today.⁴⁴

He expanded on the rejected invitations a few months later, saying that they caused him embarrassment “as the real reason for these refusals cannot be divulged”⁴⁵. On the other hand, at a time when airfares to Sydney and Melbourne were cheap - £2.10.0d to Sydney and £5 to Melbourne⁴⁶ - and Viljoen himself told D.D. Forsyth, the secretary for external affairs, at their final interview on his retirement that his representation allowance was “on the over-generous side and could conveniently be reduced by £200 or £300 per annum”,⁴⁷ he could presumably have afforded to pay for short distance air travel and short term accommodation out of his own pocket.

Forsyth eventually gave way. He said that things “should be a little easier” after the previous year’s freeze on expenditure when even an officer “found guilty of misconduct” could not be recalled “because we had not the money to pay for his passage!”⁴⁸ However, apart from a ten day visit to Tasmania in April 1951 which was covered by a standing authorisation, Viljoen did not take him up on that because he decided to cut short his term⁴⁹ and he returned to South Africa in October. He paid his first and only official visit to Western Australia when his ship called at Fremantle.⁵⁰

Alan Watt, the Australian secretary of external affairs, recorded that Viljoen complained to him about the life of diplomatic inactivity in Canberra at their farewell interview. He referred to a head of mission’s difficulties there as opposed to Sydney or Melbourne and he wondered what “advice he should give to his Government as to where South Africa should plan her long-term representation in Australia”. Watt thought that Viljoen was

far from well and that his view may be coloured a little either by a feeling that he has not been able to do as much as he would have wished for his Government or by some suggestion from South Africa that he has not done as much as he should.⁵¹

Seeking to encourage, Forsyth wrote flatteringly when in July 1950 Viljoen gave notice of his intention to return to South Africa the following June, pleading

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 16 March 1951.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 18 May 1951.

⁴⁶ J. Gibbney, *Canberra 1913-1953*, Canberra, 1988, p. 254. By late 1957 these had risen to £3.15.0d and £8.10.0d respectively. A visiting South African official, E.J.L. Scholtz thought they were “extraordinarily cheap”. BTS, 4/6/36, Vol. 6, Scholtz to secretary, December 1957, p. 8.

⁴⁷ BTS, 4/2/32, Vol. 2, Forsyth to under-secretary, 6 December 1951.

⁴⁸ BTS, Viljoen., Vol. 7, Forsyth to Viljoen, 5 April 1951.

⁴⁹ At his urging this had been extended by a year.

⁵⁰ BTS, Viljoen, Vol. 7, Forsyth to under-secretary, 6 December 1951.

⁵¹ NAA, A1838/T17, 1500/1/30/1, “Record of Conversation with High Commissioner for South Africa”, 15 September 1951.



Canberra's isolation: "It will be a pity to lose you for Australia. All reports go to show that you have both done jolly well there".⁵² In reply, Viljoen quoted a letter he had received from G.P. Jooste, South Africa's ambassador to the United States referring to a meeting with the Australian prime minister, Robert Menzies: "Mr. Menzies spoke in the most glowing terms of yourself and Mrs. Viljoen and went out of his way to assure me how much he valued your friendship".⁵³ Six months after his retirement Malan told the house of assembly that Viljoen had done "excellent work".⁵⁴ Even so, considered retrospectively, his term was one of the least successful.

Viljoen did not, as the *Dictionary of South African Biography* suggests, return to South Africa for health reasons.⁵⁵ Having lobbied for and obtained an extension of his term for a year, he subsequently cut it short by eight months. He had brought his pregnant younger daughter and her two children to Canberra during her husband's service with the South African squadron in Korea. When his son-in-law returned to Pretoria after an accident he felt that his daughter should join him. He did not want her to travel alone and he was unwilling to pay for his wife or himself to accompany her out of his own pocket. (This predated the establishment of the direct air link by more than a year).⁵⁶

There ensued an interregnum of two years and five months after Viljoen's departure in October 1951, when the high commission was in the charge of G.C. (Gert) Nel who had thirteen years departmental experience and two posts behind him (Lourenço Marques and Cairo.)

Having invested much time and money not to mention emotional capital in the careers of their senior officers, bringing them to a level where they are considered worthy of head of mission status, departments of foreign affairs are not unnaturally inclined to behave as if only the doings of their substantive heads of mission have significance. Junior officials who may find themselves temporarily heading a mission tend to be viewed in the light of pre- and post-castaway "admirable Crichtons",⁵⁷ and waved aside as being of little importance. Normally that would be the case because interregnums between heads of mission tend to be short, a few weeks or months at most.

Diplomatic service is a hierarchical occupation - the higher the rank, the higher the pay and the more attention outsiders, especially the media, pay a diplomat. Yet high rank and high salaries are not measures of achievement. What departments tend to overlook is that foreigners regard whoever is the head of mission as the personification of his government and country. And when a chargé d'affaires serves in that capacity for years, securing in the process the confidence of the receiving govern-

⁵² BTS, Viljoen, Vol. 7, 15 August 1950.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, Viljoen to Forsyth, 29 August 1950.

⁵⁴ *HA Deb.*, Vol. 78, 24 April 1952, Col. 4325.

⁵⁵ Vol. IV, p. 746.

⁵⁶ BTS, Viljoen, Vol. 7, Viljoen to Forsyth, 4 July 1951.

⁵⁷ After J.M. Barrie's butler of that name.



ment, the latter tends to regard him as the equal of a substantive head of mission irrespective of his position in the order of precedence.

So it was that Nel was accepted by the Australian government as a full representative of his government and country. In the absence of significant issues in bilateral relations requiring the attention of a more experienced and senior officer, the forty year old Nel (when he took over as head of mission) was a man for all seasons and what the situation required. Minister of transport Paul Sauer wrote to Dr Malan about him after his 1952 visit to Australia:

the Prime Minister, Mr Menzies, and the Governor-General, Sir William McKell, both unsolicited, spoke particularly highly of him and gave me the impression that they would like him to stay on.⁵⁸

Forsyth's notes on his final interview with Viljoen the previous December recorded the latter's view that "Mr Gert Nel ha[d] shaped very well and is very popular with everyone with whom he comes in contact".⁵⁹ Shortly after taking over as high commissioner in 1954, J.K. Uys reported that "everywhere you go they speak of him [Nel] with the highest praise. Everybody knows Gerrie".⁶⁰ A few months later he wrote that he "had scarcely set foot in Australia when, completely unsolicited, he heard the most positive remarks and words of praise about Mr Nel". Before his departure from South Africa he had "heard from at least two heads of department about the good work Mr Nel was doing" in Australia. And finance minister Havenga had spoken well of him, calling him a hard working chap.⁶¹

Nel's name also featured prominently (in his absence) at the customary lunch the prime minister and cabinet gave Uys a few months after his arrival. Ministers told Uys that Nel "was always up with the job".⁶² Uys would not have known of the contemporary Australian report that Nel was among the "three closest friends" of the previous Indian high commissioner, Kumar Shri Duleepsinhji, the one-time Cambridge University, Sussex and England cricketer,⁶³ and that at a time of tension between the Indian and South African governments.

⁵⁸ BTS, Viljoen, Vol. 7, Sauer to Malan, 24 September 1952. (Original in Afrikaans.)

⁵⁹ BTS, 4/2/32, Vol. 2, Forsyth to Spies, 6 December 1951.

⁶⁰ BTS, Uys, Vol. 3, Extract from Uys to Scholtz, 9 April 1954. (Original in Afrikaans.)

⁶¹ BTS, Nel, Vol. 3., Uys to secretary for external affairs, 17 June 1954. (Original in Afrikaans.) Havenga had met Nel when he attended the January 1954 Conference of Commonwealth Ministers of Finance in Sydney.

⁶² BTS, Uys, Vol. 5, Uys to secretary for external affairs, 8 July 1954. (Original in Afrikaans.)

⁶³ NAA, A1838/2, 169/11/128, Pt. 1, Note by J.E. Oldham, 11 May 1954. Duleepsinhji was once thought of as a rival to the famous Australian, Donald George Bradman. I. Rosenwater, *Sir Donald Bradman: A biography*, London, 1978, p. 295 and M. Page, *Bradman: The Illustrated Biography*, South Melbourne, 1983, p. 87.



Needless to say, the words of praise did not lead to accelerated promotion for Nel. Bruce Lockhart wrote of the British service that “promotion in any government service abroad is often accelerated by the favourable reports brought back to London by influential and important visitors”. He himself had profited from that phenomenon during his time in Moscow.⁶⁴ That did not apply to the South African service when Nel was in Canberra. In any case, the merit system which sorted the wheat from the chaff in the rest of the public service was then thought to have no place in the department of external affairs. That was because “it was found impossible to assess with equity the merits of person[s] serving in various centres throughout the world vis a vis their colleagues in the same grade”.⁶⁵

If Nel did not scale the heights in his career it may have been because of a tendency to obsequiousness towards his superiors for, while he lacked a Sole’s intellectual penetration, he was a conscientious administrator and there was nothing wrong with his reporting. Sole has another explanation: “he was an Afrikaner who did not support the Nationalist Party”⁶⁶ and “he had an American wife who made little attempt to speak Afrikaans”. Sole feels that both “these elements had in varying degrees their impact on the careers of other officials of the Department”.⁶⁷

Although Nel was not a substantive head of mission, his performance *en poste* was comparable to those who were. In effect he succeeded Viljoen and, from a practical point of view, the Australians tended to regard him in his two year five month stint as acting high commissioner (a month longer than Viljoen’s term) as superior to Viljoen in all but rank. There was, however, the question of Australia’s status as receiving country and they welcomed J.K. Uys’s appointment in March 1954. External affairs minister R.G. Casey announced it himself.⁶⁸ Indeed, at the cabinet lunch for Uys gratification was expressed at his seniority: “The fact that your country has seen fit to appoint to Australia one of its most senior career diplomats is a great compliment to us”.⁶⁹

If, as Australian ministers said, Nel was “always up with the job”, it was, in fact, he who was indirectly responsible not only for Uys’s appointment to Australia but also those of the latter’s successors right up to the demise of white South Africa in the early 1990s. More than a year into his term as acting high commissioner he wrote the departmental under-secretary McDonald (Don) Spies a personal letter giving his views of the importance to South Africa of its representation in Australia.

⁶⁴ R.H. Bruce Lockhart, *Retreat from Glory*. New York, 1934, p. 98.

⁶⁵ BTS, 24/2, Vol. 3, undated paper “Diplomatic and Consular Service” attached to Taljaard to Kelly, 2 February 1953.

⁶⁶ He was the brother-in-law of Dr E.G. Malherbe, Smuts’s head of military intelligence during the Second World War and later principal of the University of Natal.

⁶⁷ D.B. Sole, Letter, 26 December 1994.

⁶⁸ BTS, 4/2/32, Vol. 2, DEA, Canberra, PR 101, 10 November 1953; *The Canberra Times*, 11 November 1953.

⁶⁹ NAA, A1838/238, 201/10/1, Pt. 1, “Draft speech of welcome to the High Commissioner for the Union of South Africa”, 1954.



He assumed that because the high commissioner's post had been vacant for fourteen months, the department could then be considering an appointment.⁷⁰ Senior posts in the Australian public service, including external affairs (whose secretary, Arthur Tange, was younger than he was)⁷¹ were held by relatively young officials. It would, therefore, be appropriate to appoint one of the departmental counsellors. If preference were to be given someone from outside the service, his age should be equivalent to that of a counsellor⁷² - between forty-five and fifty. Viljoen was sixty-two and infirm when he arrived in Canberra. Nel had told Spies previously:

Australia is very, very big and Canberra is very, very small, but entertainment is on a large scale. In order to participate properly requires the powers of a young or at least an energetic person. Unfortunately Dr Viljoen was never in the best of health in Canberra and it must sometimes have affected him severely.⁷³

Spies passed Nel's letter of 21 November to Forsyth who seized on it with alacrity: "Thank you! This letter will be brought to the attention of PM if the question of appointment again comes under discussion."⁷⁴

Nel's suggestion was probably decisive. The department tended to follow the line of least resistance and when an appointment was made for the first time it followed almost automatically that all succeeding appointees would be officials of similar rank if not background. Uys had been a foreign service officer for twenty-five years.

J.K. Uys can be considered in terms of Australian diplomat Walter Crocker's aphorism that the "best Ambassador is always more than a civil servant".⁷⁵ He was a supreme civil servant and for that reason an indifferent diplomat, at least in respect of his effectiveness in the diplomatic milieu. That was never a hindrance⁷⁶ in a career which took him to a deputy-secretaryship in the department of external affairs (1960-65) and as head of mission twice to the Federal Republic of Germany (1957-60; 1965-69) and to Australia (1954-57; 1969-71). Uys is, in fact, the only South African to

⁷⁰ BTS, S4/5/45, Vol. 2, Nel to Spies, 28 February 1953. (Original in Afrikaans). A copy is also on BCB, Vol. 1, 2/1.

⁷¹ BCB, Vol. 1, 2/1, Nel to Uys, 7 December 1953, p. 2. (Original in Afrikaans).

⁷² BTS, S4/5/45, Vol. 2, Nel to Spies, 28 February 1953.

⁷³ BTS, 4/2/32, Vol. 2, Spies to Nel, 21 November 1951, pp. 6-7. Handwritten. (Original in Afrikaans).

⁷⁴ BTS, S4/5/45, Vol. 2, Nel to Spies, 28 February 1953. Handwritten copy of Forsyth's comment, 9 March 1953. Spies conveyed Forsyth's thanks to Nel in BCB, Vol. 1, 2/1, Spies to Nel, 13 March 1953.

⁷⁵ W.R. Crocker, *Australian Ambassador: International relations at first hand*, Melbourne, 1971, p. 63.

⁷⁶ The measure of a diplomat is not what foreigners think of him but how he is perceived by his departmental superiors if a career official and by his head of government and foreign minister if a politician.



have served as head of mission twice in the same posts.⁷⁷ He was valued for his head office accomplishments, spending more than eighteen years of his forty-four year foreign service career at head office, an unusually lengthy span for members of the early department.

Uys was also the epitome of the *vurige* (fiery) Afrikaner in the sense that he tended to see the world through Afrikaner eyes, weighing it against Afrikaner values. For him, only Afrikaners could be within the covenant, though English-speaking South Africans could achieve a degree of righteousness by virtue of their command of Afrikaans and by an attitude of homage towards what he regarded as South Africa's dominant culture. That was an ethnic rather than a political statement and it never harmed his career, at least not when perhaps it could - the years of Smuts's second premiership (1939-48). Ironically, his daughter's marriage to an Australian made him an object of suspicion to similarly ethnocentric Afrikaners.⁷⁸

Despite revelling in Afrikaner ethnicity (perhaps because of it), he did not especially endear himself to his Afrikaans-speaking subordinates. One, the future foreign minister, R.F. Botha, never a man to sit back and await guidance or direction from seniors, was later inclined to reminisce about his experiences with Uys under whom he served in West Germany from January to October 1960. Finding Botha's raw enthusiasm hard to deal with, Uys would remonstrate ineffectually, apparently more in sorrow than in anger, "Remember, Botha, guidance moves from the top downwards!"⁷⁹ Botha does not agree with the above assessment of the ethnic Uys. He writes:

He was not an example of what I considered to be a forward-looking Afrikaner. ... It did not matter who was in power. It did not matter whether you were English or Afrikaans speaking. What mattered was his obsession to stay within the rules and to give the most restrictive interpretation to the rules. Politics did not matter. The rules. The regulations. He found his security within the letter of the rules. Prescriptions. An Ambassador abroad could not buy at State expense an ashtray if the transaction was not fully motivated and prior approval obtained. It was as simple as that. He was a pipe smoker. I remember seeing a page on file with a hole burnt in the middle. He encircled the hole with his pen adding at the bottom of the page... 'Much to my regret a

⁷⁷ So far as is known, Carel de Wet is the only other South African to have been head of mission twice at the same post, London (1964-67; 1972-76).

⁷⁸ Sole, *Reminiscences of a South African diplomat*, p.211.

⁷⁹ "Onthou, Botha, leiding kom van bo, af!" Personal recollection.



spark from my pipe fell on the paper. I accept responsibility.' That epitomises Johann Kunz Uys.⁸⁰

A hard-worker, a man of integrity, completely incorrupt and not unintelligent, Uys lacked subtlety and imagination not to mention political judgement. His reporting revealed him not infrequently out of his depth. Comments by his Australian interlocutors tended to confirm that. Thus the adviser on Commonwealth relations in the Australian department of external Affairs,⁸¹ J.E. Oldham, recorded him asking soon after his arrival:

whether it was better to be factual in putting South Africa's case and problems to the people of Australia. I said that I had recently heard an address by Mr. Nel to the Canberra Branch of the A.I.I.A.,⁸² and the view of the audience, which ... was a worthwhile one, was that they enjoyed the factual way Mr. Nel had spoken. Mr. Uys then stated that he was shortly to address a Rotary Club meeting outside Canberra and what line should he take. I said that Australians desired facts, rather than suave explanations.⁸³

There were probably two reasons why Uys secured a second term in Australia. Firstly, the elder of his two daughters, Anna, had remained there (in Melbourne) after her marriage shortly before her parents departed for West Germany in June 1957. However, while he was fond of his daughter, perhaps the main reason was that he wanted to occupy the official residence, having left Australia on the eve of its completion. His second term in Canberra was his last overseas posting before his retirement in 1972. He died in 1978.

The twenty year-old Anna Uys's wedding on 23 March 1957 to Flt Lt Ian Sutherland of the Royal Australian Air Force was one of the events of the Canberra season. The governor-general and the prime minister and their wives were among the three hundred guests at the reception held at the Hotel Canberra.⁸⁴ Uys's Australian file contains a query from Casey to the chief of protocol, F.H. Stuart, whether, since he and fellow-minister Philip McBride could not be present, they were expected "to give a wedding present either individually or jointly with other ministers". The conventional Stuart replied that it was accepted practice if asked to a wedding to give

⁸⁰ R.F. Botha, letter, 2 November 1994. It seems that the incident of the hole in the paper occurred when Uys was in Australia and Botha a cadet at Head Office.

⁸¹ An imposing title for a rather inconsequential job, external affairs minister R.G. Casey having decreed that Oldham should not again serve abroad. Information supplied by the late Dr W.J. Hudson who refers circumspetly to the Oldham case in *Casey*, Melbourne, 1986, p. 232.

⁸² Australian Institute of International Affairs.

⁸³ NAA, A1838, 201/10/7, Pt. 1, J.E. Oldham, "Record of conversation with the High Commissioner for South Africa on 1 April 1954".

⁸⁴ *The Canberra Times*, 20, 23 & 25 March 1957 and *The Herald* (Melbourne), 23 March 1957.



a present. Plimsoll, Waller and himself of the department could not attend but were sending cheques.⁸⁵ (The marriage subsequently ended in divorce.)

Other highlights for Uys during his first term were the Australian leg of the 1956 Springbok rugby tour of Australasia and that year's Olympic games in Melbourne. Uys helped secure the addition of the opening, Canberra match to the Springbok team's schedule. He was approached by the New South Wales rugby union and he took the matter up with Dr Danie Craven, the South African team's manager. D.P. Olivier, the official secretary at the high commission, who coached and captained the Northern Suburbs team, was vice-captain of the ACT team on that occasion. The Springbok team arrived in Canberra on the morning of 15 May, played the match in the afternoon (which it won by 41 to 6) and attended Uys's reception at the Hotel Canberra that evening. So did the visiting South African Women's hockey team. This was in effect the annual Union Day reception which Uys was permitted to hold early. The year 1956 was, therefore, a rather sporting one for him.

The 1950s were a less profligate time in South African diplomacy than was to be the case later. External affairs minister Louw decreed that meeting the various South African teams on arrival at Sydney was not a legitimate object of official expenditure. Nor was Uys's attendance of the rugby tests.⁸⁶ There would probably be an outcry if such standards were applied today!

Not unnaturally, the foreign service reflected the mores operative in white South African society at large. In April 1956 Uys enquired what his attitude should be towards non-white diplomats, citing the fact that dancing sometimes took place at receptions and pointing out that "In the Union mixed dancing is frowned upon. Indeed, it is strongly disapproved."⁸⁷ After consulting *inter alia* with Eric Louw, Spies, the under-secretary, replied a month later by way of a personal letter: "You will ... realise what a sensation it would cause here if a photograph or report should be published of a member of the Uys family dancing with a non-white, and it is felt that you should tactfully ensure that something like that doesn't happen".⁸⁸

Uys was the high commissioner at the time the official residence was planned and built. He revelled in the work, reporting early on:

Correspondence and related duties in connection with the building and furnishing of the new residence are attended to by me personally as these duties can, in the

⁸⁵ NAA, A1838/T20, 1500/1/30/5, Inward & outward teletype messages 414 & 478 of 7 & 8 March 1957 respectively.

⁸⁶ BCB, Vol. 21, 44/1, Spies to high commissioner, Canberra, 27 April 1956 (original in Afrikaans) and BTS, 4/3/32, Vol. 2, Spies to high commissioner, Canberra, 13 August 1956.

⁸⁷ BTS 1/25/6, Vol.1, Uys to acting secretary for external affairs, 24 April 1956. (Original in Afrikaans.)

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, Spies to Uys, 26 May 1956. (Original in Afrikaans.)



nature of things, not be delegated to the junior staff of the Mission. This work takes up quite a bit of my time but it is interesting to follow operations step by step. In the long run it will save time, and maybe money.⁸⁹

It was probably typical that he was “on the site every morning before office hours to see for myself how the job is done without in any way interfering with operations”. Excluding the furnishings, some of which survived at least until the 1990s,⁹⁰ his unique contribution was to choose the site and therefore, by extension, that of the later chancery. Earlier, Viljoen and Nel, who had no other connection with it, had between them recommended the residence’s style and the approximate dimensions of its public rooms (which, if not today, were appropriate for the time.) Uys handed his letter of introduction to Menzies on 11 March 1954. A month later he was reporting on a new site, Block 6, Section 58, Acton, which had become available.⁹¹

He included a description: “to the South West is the majestic building of the Embassy of the United States of America. ... Bordering on the North Eastern corner, but on a lower elevation, the Greek Legation has obtained a site with an area of approximately 1½ acres. On the Southern side ... runs Perth Avenue, so that in effect the whole area would be a corner property”. There was also talk in “planning circles” that the new Federal Parliament would be erected on Capital Hill in which event the residence would have a “ringside seat”. It did, forty years later.

Today (2003) the South African diplomatic compound is, as it has been for thirty-five years, one of Canberra’s showpieces. Containing the chancery and the residence and taking up some five landscaped acres in the suburb of Yarralumla, it is bordered on three sides by Rhodes Place to the north, State Circle to the east and Perth Avenue to the south; and on the fourth, to the west, by an overgrown lot reserved since 1959 for Pakistan’s chancery and official residence⁹² and further down by the grounds of the Commonwealth Club.⁹³

Designed in the Cape Dutch townhouse style with a neo-classical front portico, overlooking State Circle and overlooked by the parliament building on Capital Hill, the chancery is one of the most prominently situated, handsome and admired in

⁸⁹ BTS, 4/6/36, Vol. 4, Uys to acting secretary, 1 May 1956.

⁹⁰ For an account of the building and furnishing of the residence, see my article “Housing the South African High Commissioner” in the *Canberra Historical Journal*, New Series, No. 39, March 1997, pp. 19-28.

⁹¹ The boundary between Acton and Yarralumla was readjusted in 1966. Block 6, Section 58, Acton became Block 6, Section 44, Yarralumla.

⁹² The then Pakistani Foreign Minister, Manzur Qadir, laid a foundation stone on 13 April 1959. *The Canberra Times*, 11 April 1959.

⁹³ The Commonwealth Club was founded in 1955 at the suggestion of the Indian high commissioner, General K.M. Cariappa, a former commander-in-chief of the Indian Army (*The Canberra Times*, 22 May 1953) who was its first chairman. The name refers to the British not the Australian Commonwealth. Cariappa succeeded K.S. Dulepsinhji.



Canberra. Not that it and the residence are universally admired. Forty years ago a professional architect called the residence “an inaccurately drawn cardboard backdrop for the finale of a musical comedy about Cecil Rhodes”.⁹⁴ One wonders what he would have made of the architectural discord the original plan for the ground now so harmoniously occupied by the South African chancery would have produced. It had been reserved for the Greek residence and chancery which would then have overlooked the back of the South African residence. The ground was, however, too small for the buildings the Greeks contemplated.⁹⁵

If Australian ministers were complimentary about Nel, a retrospective on Uys’s first term suggests they were less likely to have been so about Uys himself. If they had known of it, quite likely they would have endorsed the opinion in the Australian high commission’s 1957 annual report that his successor, A.A.M. Hamilton, “was of much higher calibre”.⁹⁶ As individuals and officials Uys and Hamilton could hardly have been less alike - Uys the bald, dour, unimaginative Afrikaner public servant and the balding, prematurely white-haired, English-speaking, Oxford-educated Hamilton, a “cheerful and incessant conversationalist”⁹⁷ with a slight stammer. Hamilton was almost forty-eight and Uys almost forty-seven when they arrived in Canberra, their first head of mission post, but Hamilton’s white hair made him seem much older.⁹⁸

Hugh Gilchrist at the high commission in South Africa predicted correctly that the Hamiltons would be “very popular in Australia”.⁹⁹ In fact, of all South African ambassadorial couples in Canberra in the fifty-four year history of the post they may well have been the most successful. Perhaps Hamilton’s greatest asset was his wife, the former Emily Cardross Grant, an Anglican clergyman’s daughter and a graduate of the University of Cape Town with a master’s degree in child psychology. She was always known as Jill and he had met her on board ship when returning to South Africa from England in the 1930s.¹⁰⁰

Just about wherever he went, so did she and they spent almost as much time travelling as all of his predecessors combined, in the process visiting most parts of Australia, even Cairns in the far north of Queensland, a thousand miles from Brisbane and almost as distant from that city as *it* is from Adelaide. As Hamilton himself puts it,

⁹⁴ R. Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness*, rev. ed., Melbourne, 1968 (1960), p. 32.

⁹⁵ BTS, Hamilton, Vol. III, Hamilton to Scholtz, 20 November 1959.

⁹⁶ NAA, A1838/1, 1348/1, Pt.1, Annual Report 1957, Part B, p. 8, para. 39. Shortly before Uys’s second term, an Australian official observed that he was “remembered in the Department as a pleasant but undistinguished Head of Mission”. NAA, A1838/395, 1500/1/30/21, Davis to minister, 17 August 1968.

⁹⁷ NAA, A1838/T54, 1500/1/30/8, Memo. 397, Gilchrist to department of external affairs, 6 August 1957.

⁹⁸ He looked positively decrepit in the photograph in the 15 October 1959 issue of *The Border Morning Mail* (Albury). The photograph accompanying Crouch’s 20 January 1959 article in the *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg) - see below - taken when Hamilton had just turned forty-nine, gives the impression of a man some fifteen years older.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, Memo. 397, Gilchrist to department of external affairs, 6 August 1957.

¹⁰⁰ *Mainichi Daily News* (Tokyo), 22 January 1973.



they traversed the country “from Cairns to Hobart and from Sydney to Perth”.¹⁰¹ Not altogether flatteringly did Wally Crouch, a young Australian journalist who had worked in South Africa, call him the “walkabout envoy”. Crouch disliked white South Africans and his use of the term in that context in a South African newspaper may have been a private joke.¹⁰² The travelling was in pursuit of what Hamilton conceived to be his “chief task”, the “political and public relations side”, what could also be called the representational side.¹⁰³ Viljoen would have been disconcerted if he had known of Hamilton’s mobility.

Hamilton had read History and English at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), graduating in 1931 with first class honours in history. At Wits he had been among W.M. Macmillan’s “best pupils”, whose number also included C.W. de Kiewiet and Lucy Sutherland, who were allowed to assist their professor sort through the papers of the missionary Dr John Philip, later destroyed in a 1931 fire.¹⁰⁴ At Wits one of his teachers was Margaret Hodgson, later Margaret Ballinger, whom he was to host when she came to Canberra in September 1960 to deliver that year’s Dyason lecture.¹⁰⁵ An Ainsworth Scholarship took him to New College, Oxford, where he read politics, philosophy and economics, going down with a second class degree in 1934. Thereafter he qualified for a diploma at the Geneva School of International Studies, later working in the League of Nations secretariat in Geneva for six months.

Anthony Albert Mordaunt Hamilton¹⁰⁶ was born in Paarl on 9 December 1909 to an anglicised Afrikaner mother and an Australian father. The Cape civil service had recruited his father in Victoria just after the Anglo-Boer war. Stationed at Paarl, Hamilton *père* married the daughter of an old Cape Dutch family.¹⁰⁷ Anthony Hamilton joined the department of external affairs on 3 October 1944 as a legation secretary, a rank converted later to second secretary, at the age of almost thirty-five. Ironically, his application to join the department of external affairs in the mid-1930s

¹⁰¹ A.M. Hamilton, *Antipodean Days 1957- to '61*, Unpublished, August 1993, p. 2. Mr Hamilton prepared this seven page memoir of his time in Canberra at my request.

¹⁰² See Gilchrist’s notes on his conversation with Crouch in Durban in July 1957. NAA, A1831, 201/2/5, Pt. 6, Annex to Memo. 367, 19 July 1957; and *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), 20 January 1959, “The Walkabout Envoy - the name Australians give our ambassador”. The term “walkabout”, derived from perceived Aboriginal behaviour, has pejorative connotations in Australia implying shiftlessness and unreliability. The reference in Crouch’s piece to Hamilton having succeeded “Mr Stanley Uys”, who was then the political correspondent of the *Sunday Times* (Johannesburg), may also have been a private joke.

¹⁰³ BTS, Hamilton, Vol. III, Hamilton to Scholtz, 20 November 1959.

¹⁰⁴ W.M. Macmillan, *My South African Years*, Cape Town 1975, pp. 163, 218.

¹⁰⁵ An annual event between 1949 and 1977, the Dyason Lectures provided a prestigious forum. Earlier lecturers included Bertrand Russell, Salvador de Madariaga, Julian Huxley, William O. Douglas, Kenneth Younger, Arnold Toynbee, Gunnar Myrdal and Kingsley Martin. *The Canberra Times*, 6 November 1958 and 8 October 1959. Mrs Helen Suzman was the 1975 lecturer. For the text of Margaret Ballinger’s 1960 lecture, “South Africa: A problem in race relations - challenge and response”, see *Australian Outlook*, Vol. 15, No.1, April 1961, pp. 5-28.

¹⁰⁶ He dropped the name Albert as an adult.

¹⁰⁷ A.M. Hamilton, letter, 2 October 1993.



had been rejected. He had been a locally-recruited press officer and political adviser at the British high commission, a capacity in which he was employed from 1939.

For three years before joining the British high commission he wrote leading articles on international and economic subjects for the *Cape Times*. That brought him to Smuts's attention who, he says, encouraged him to take the job at the high commission.¹⁰⁸ Before that for a year he had assisted Sir Howard d'Egville, the long-time secretary-general of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association.¹⁰⁹ In 1944 he discussed possible employment with the Argus company¹¹⁰ but external affairs was "very keen on getting" him and urged the public service commission to give him "as high an allowance or salary as possible".¹¹¹

Gregory Clark, a former Australian foreign service officer, stresses the importance to the sending country of a close relationship between its ambassador and the head of government of the receiving country.¹¹² That was how it was in early modern diplomacy. David Kelly tells of the British ambassador in Berlin on whom the Kaiser called during a walk, finding him in holed pyjamas. The Kaiser would refer to the incident, no doubt with amusement, at their subsequent meetings. That was the sort of relationship ambassadors were expected to cultivate.¹¹³ These days, as it was perhaps in the 1950s, that is the counsel of perfection. But that is what Hamilton achieved and he deserves full marks for that aspect of his work in Australia.

Less than a year after his arrival he was writing to external affairs minister Louw:

my wife and I have been fortunate in developing a friendly and informal relationship with the Australian Prime Minister and Dame Pattie Menzies. Lately we have been exchanging visits on Sunday evenings at our houses and last Sunday Mr Menzies and Dame Pattie had an informal supper with us.¹¹⁴

His personal letters to his head of department, G.P. Jooste,¹¹⁵ give the impression that the Hamiltons and the Menzies enjoyed a relationship of some intimacy. From

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 28 October 1993

¹⁰⁹ From 1911 to 1960.

¹¹⁰ BTS, S4/5/2, Vol. 7, Hamilton to Forsyth, 14 August 1944.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, Pohl to Swart, 12 May 1944.

¹¹² G. Clark, "The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs - What's wrong with our Diplomats", *The Australian Quarterly*, Vol. 47, No. 2, June 1975, especially pp. 27-28.

¹¹³ *The Ruling Few: or the Human Background to Diplomacy*, Fourth impression, London, 1953, (1952), pp. 117-18.

¹¹⁴ BTS, 4/2/32/1, Vol. 1, Hamilton to Louw, 31 July 1958.

¹¹⁵ The letters to Jooste that came to my notice in the South African Archives were dated 10 March 1959 (BCB, 4/2/32/1, Vol. 1); 4 August 1959 (BCB, Vol. 12, 25/11); 22 April 1960 (BCB, Vol. 20, 32/13); 21 October 1960 (BCB, Vol. 5, 6/10 (S)). There was one letter to Louw dated 31 July 1958 (BTS, 4/2/32/1, Vol. 1) which Louw had passed to the prime minister (Strijdom) and a letter Hamilton addressed to the department on 27 October 1960 (BCB, Vol. 6, 8/0, Vol. III).



practically the beginning, the relationship was conducted on a Bob and Tony basis.¹¹⁶ Robert Kennedy, a member of Menzies' staff until early 1961, gives perspective to it:

To be invited to the Lodge is an honor; to be invited to dinner is to walk with the mighty. Few people receive the accolade, because the Prime Minister is not a gregarious soul ...

He dines out only when he has to, or on rare occasions because he wants to. He holds a dinner party at the Lodge usually only when he has to ... Only one member of Cabinet can qualify as a regular diner at the Lodge: the amiable and earthily-amusing Athol Townley who, more than anybody else in Australia, has made a fine art of knowing how far to go with the Prime Minister - who is so perfect an actor, so accomplished a listener, that many fall into the trap of going beyond the bounds of what the Prime Minister considers a reasonable thing. Many a promising political career has foundered on this rock.¹¹⁷

Two years into his Canberra posting Hamilton told E.J.L. Scholtz, South African external affairs's chief administrative officer, that he had made it his

special job to cultivate a close relationship with the Prime Minister and many members of the Cabinet. In all modesty I am sure that I can say that I have established a closer relationship with these Ministers than any other member of the Diplomatic Corps; and I have done more than any other head of mission to entertain the members of Parliament and the press.

And prophetically:

All this, I am sure, is of the greatest importance for the job; and, even if we don't see startling and dramatic results from it, it is obviously important in setting the tone of our relations and inducing a sympathetic approach to our affairs, which at moments of crisis could still be of special value to us.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ There is Hamilton's own evidence in this regard, *i.e.* *Antipodean Days*, p. 1. From Menzies's side, examples are brief acknowledgements of receipt he addressed Hamilton on 27 January and 6 February 1961 in respect of material sent him. BCB, Vol. 20, 32/13 (Secret).

¹¹⁷ Quoted in C. Hazlehurst, *Menzies Observed*, Sydney, 1979, p. 366.

¹¹⁸ BTS, Hamilton, Vol. III, Hamilton to Scholtz, 20 November 1959.



It was, during the Sharpeville crisis the following year when he could report:

I have been immensely encouraged by the reactions of very many responsible people. Apart from the staunch friendship of the Prime Minister I have had messages or personal expressions of sympathy from the Deputy Prime Minister, Mr. McEwen, most other members of the Cabinet, numerous Members of the Liberal and Country Parties in Parliament and a great number of friends all over Australia.

Even the leader of the opposition, Arthur Calwell, took “the unusual step” of telephoning to assure him that “he was not trying to make difficulties for us”. He was bound to express the Labour view on the shootings and South Africa’s racial policies but would try to be “helpful and constructive”. His speech was in fact relatively mild.¹¹⁹ Later, Calwell invited Hamilton “into his office” and said that he did not want him “to think that he was unfriendly to South Africa. He knew how much the Republics had suffered in the South African war and understood how complex our problem was”.¹²⁰

Some weeks later Hamilton told Jooste that Menzies had

shown a massive friendship for South Africa in these last anxious weeks ... It has cost him a great deal in the way of bitter personal attacks from people who normally support him, widespread criticism in the press and, quite tangibly, as he said to me, at least 1,000 votes in the by-election in Mr. Casey’s former constituency near Melbourne. He has had floods of abusive letters, one correspondent charging him with ‘hypocrisy and cowardice’! He found some ironic amusement in this: as a politician, he thought it was going a bit far to be called a coward when he would have found it so much easier, and politically profitable, to have gone along with the violent of opinion. (Incidentally, his Cabinet colleagues, Mr. Menzies told me, were quite divided on the subject, but he had been able to persuade the waverers!)¹²¹

Hamilton was fortunate to be able to move immediately on arrival into the newly-built residence which was strategically situated between the prime ministerial Lodge and the parliament building, within walking distance of both and not much more than five

¹¹⁹ BTS, 136/3/10, Vol. 1, Cypher OTP telegram No. P.8, high commissioner, Canberra to secretary for external affairs, 31 March 1960.

¹²⁰ BCB, Vol. 20, 32/13, Hamilton to secretary for external affairs, 1 April 1960.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, Hamilton to Jooste, 22 April 1960.



minutes from the first-mentioned. His predecessors lived some distance away. Geography therefore undoubtedly contributed to Hamilton's relationship of easy familiarity with Menzies who would often stop by on his way home from parliament, sometimes arriving unannounced. One time he did so was in March 1960 to discuss the day's debate in parliament on the Sharpeville shootings and to give Hamilton "moral support".¹²²

Michael Landale, the son of the contemporary chief of protocol W.G.A. Landale, and decades later himself a senior officer in the department of foreign affairs and trade, a friend of the younger of the two Hamilton daughters and then in his teens, recalls opening the door to the prime minister one afternoon.¹²³ Landale describes the Menzies/Hamilton friendship as "a close, personal one. I am sure it was Anthony Hamilton's judgement, historical perspectives and great good humour that appealed to the Prime Minister".¹²⁴

From what Hamilton himself says, one deduces that it was a matter of personal chemistry¹²⁵ besides which they shared a Scottish background. Not to be overlooked is that Jill Hamilton also struck a chord with Menzies and his wife Dame Pattie. The Hamiltons were included in intimate dinners at The Lodge such as, for example, when Menzies entertained the new governor-general, Lord Dunrossil, on the day of his swearing-in. Only one other couple was present.¹²⁶ This is not to suggest that Hamilton was, as is sometimes the case with foreign diplomats, an *éminence grise* or Rasputin in respect of Australian domestic politics. Quite clearly he was not.

Not unnaturally, Menzies was loath to see his friend go and news of his impending departure for his next post, Stockholm, which Hamilton conveyed to him personally in January 1961, caused something of a stir in official Canberra. At the time Hamilton reported Menzies's reaction to Tange, the secretary for external affairs, and to Bunting, the secretary of the prime minister's department. Menzies had taken over the external affairs portfolio on Casey's retirement a year previously. He was, Tange noted Hamilton saying, "upset at the news and had commented that the decision was poor timing. He had said that he was considering writing to Jooste".¹²⁷

It is not unusual for influential people who have been close to a diplomatic envoy to regret his departure and to want to take the matter up with his government.¹²⁸ Albeit

¹²² Ibid., Hamilton to secretary for external affairs, 1 April 1960.

¹²³ M. Landale, letter, 28 January 1994.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ See, for example, his *Antipodean Days*.

¹²⁶ BTS, 1/25/1, Vol. 1, Hamilton to secretary for external affairs, Cape Town, 9 February 1960. Hamilton singles this dinner out for special mention in his memoir *Antipodean Days*.

¹²⁷ NAA, A1838/265, 1500/1/30/11, Record of conversation Tange/Hamilton, 6 January 1961. See also File note E.J. Bunting, 10 January; Bunting to Tange, 10 January and Tange to minister, 11 January.

¹²⁸ In the old diplomacy, although rare, it was not unknown for heads of state to insist on the appointment of specific individuals as envoys to them. Cecil cites the example of the Czar of Russia insisting on General von Werder even though the German Emperor preferred someone else. Emperor



unusual for a head of government-cum-foreign minister (as he was at the time), Menzies's attitude would have fallen into that category. At this remove it is difficult to assess the value of the relationship to him. He did not refer to it in either of his autobiographical works, *Afternoon Light* (1967)¹²⁹ and *The Measure of the Years* (1970) although there is mention of it in his unpublished papers.¹³⁰ Perhaps for him it was light relief from the cares of office, a manifestation of what Crocker called "a characteristic which became increasingly marked with the years - to get recreation from boon companions, most of whom, like himself, could hold their liquor if not their tongues".¹³¹

Hamilton is viewed as one of white South Africa's most successful career diplomats, a man who brought lustre to the occupation. Yet a generation after they worked together in Canberra his reputation was attacked by his information officer there, E.M. Rhodie, the later controversial secretary for information, who served in the high commission between November 1957 and June 1960. Rhodie wrote in 1983, five years after his fall, that Hamilton was "a prime example of men at senior level in Foreign Affairs who did not want to promote South Africa's case, who deliberately kept the lowest possible profile, and who did not want to rock the boat". Not only could Hamilton and his wife barely speak Afrikaans, but his "political hostility towards the government of Dr Verwoerd could hardly be contained".¹³²

It was not that Hamilton could "hardly" contain his hostility towards the Verwoerd government. He did not contain it at all. According to Rhodie, Hamilton once told Menzies in his presence that it was "time these damned Nationalists realise that they are not going to get away with their stupidities".¹³³ That observation would not have come as a surprise to Australian external affairs officials because Hamilton's views were known even before he arrived in the country. A file note a week before he reached Sydney claimed that he had "on a number of occasions made observations to members of our Embassy in Washington implying a lack of sympathy with the more extreme policies of his own Government".¹³⁴

In allegedly maintaining a low profile Hamilton was, Rhodie said, rarely "seen or heard to address any meetings to promote South Africa's case, either on radio or

Wilhelm complied so as not to give offence. L. Cecil, *The German Diplomatic Service, 1871-1914*, Princeton, 1976, p. 171.

¹²⁹ In 1967 Hamilton wrote to the editor of *The Times* (London) about a misprint in an extract from *Afternoon Light*. Copies of the correspondence, including also a copy of a letter from Menzies to Hamilton is on BTS, 1/25/3, Vol. 2. See also *The Times*, 18 October & 18 December 1967.

¹³⁰ Hamilton and Menzies corresponded after the former left Australia. The Menzies Papers held by the National Library of Australia, reference ANL, MS. 4936/1/14/116, contain some of the correspondence.

¹³¹ W.R. Crocker, *Travelling back: the memoirs of Sir Walter Crocker*, South Melbourne, 1981, p. 185. The Hamilton/Menzies association was a family one. Ability to hold liquor would not have come into it.

¹³² E.M. Rhodie, *The real information scandal*, Pretoria, 1983, p. 44.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹³⁴ NAA, A1838/T54, 1500/1/30/8, file note dated 30 August 1957 by J.C.G. Kevin headed "South African High Commissioner to Australia: A.M. Hamilton".



television". He also "spent so much of his time in the garden" that "his son Tim used to say to us: 'My father is the highest paid gardener in Australia'." Rhoodie reported Hamilton's attitude to members of the South African delegation to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association's 1959 meeting in Canberra. He was nonplussed when the head of the state information service wrote a few weeks later that Eric Louw was not concerned about Hamilton's political beliefs nor that he "spent only three to four hours of his day at the office".¹³⁵ (Louw knew it was more important Hamilton should enjoy access to the highest levels of the Australian government).

Of Rhoodie's charges only one, that Hamilton was out of sympathy with the National Party government, had substance and it would have been more professional if he had kept his views to himself. Ideally, it should have been said of him as it was of J.P. Quinn as Australian chargé d'affaires in The Hague between 1948 and 1950: "While remaining completely loyal to his Government's policy, [he] was able to present it to the Dutch in a way that, whil[e] not making it any more acceptable, reduced the offensive impact; and his own high personal standing with the Dutch was never impaired".¹³⁶

However, given the general opprobrium in which the South African government was held even then, Hamilton's attitude did not induce in his Australian interlocutors the contempt which would normally be the case in such circumstances. Instead, they seem to have considered his attitude commendable. Oldham, the Commonwealth relations adviser, called him "one of the ablest diplomats sent to Australia". He had "a difficult task to perform" but carried it out "with considerable skill". He was also sufficiently wide in outlook to see what was "ultimately the best for his country".¹³⁷ That was a measure of how the National Party government was viewed abroad.

In respect of the other charges, Hamilton's profile was probably higher than that of any head of mission in Canberra at the time. And while the garden may, as he said later, have been his "chief recreation",¹³⁸ it was also very much part of his job. It could hardly have been otherwise in circumstances where the Australian prime minister "spoke enthusiastically about the new residence, which is very close to his own and which he passes frequently each day [and] had been watching its building with great interest".¹³⁹ Menzies's interest was commemorated in August 1959 when Hamilton had him plant a willow tree at the bottom of the garden, in the corner closest to State Circle. The bronze plaque which marks the tree was cast in Sweden during Hamilton's term there.

¹³⁵ Rhoodie, *The real information scandal*, pp. 43-44.

¹³⁶ R.W. Furlonger in *John Paul Quinn - Recalled by some of his friends for his children*, 1968, p. 16.

¹³⁷ NAA, A9421, 223/1/1, Record of conversation Oldham/Hamilton, 17 September 1959, p. 2, para. 6.

¹³⁸ Hamilton, *Antipodean Days 1957- to '61*, p. 7.

¹³⁹ BTS, 4/2/32, Vol. 2, Hamilton/SEA, 20 September 1957.



Hamilton's remark about being the highest paid gardener in Australia was a joke but Rhodie took it literally.¹⁴⁰ The practice of diplomats taking to the airwaves to put their point of view was not evident in the Australia of the time. Emeritus professor Joan Rydon, one-time professor of politics at La Trobe University, Melbourne, says that

There was little discussion of public affairs on radio or television in the 50s or 60s. There would have been little opportunity for any diplomat to use the media to promote his country. ... When television came, there was even less emphasis on current affairs and I know of no attempt by diplomats to make use of it.¹⁴¹

Television reached Sydney and Melbourne, Australia's largest cities, only in 1956, in time for the Olympic Games. It had, however, long been the practice among political leaders to make use of commercial radio to convey their message.¹⁴² Uys gave a farewell broadcast on the ABC network, *i.e.* non-commercial radio, and Hamilton delivered at least one radio address, introducing the ABC programme marking Union Day 1959. Rhodie could hardly have objected to the content of his message which was expressed more elegantly than he himself could have done:

South Africa stands at the centre of the great problem of our times - the adjustment of race relationships between peoples of immensely different backgrounds and achievements. Such an adjustment will not be attained except by a long and complex process; but white South Africans understand perfectly well that their future, as a community and a nation, is bound up with their success in helping forward an adjustment which will be fair to all the races that inhabit our beautiful and exciting country. At no time has the discussion of policy been so earnest, or so wide-ranging in its examination of fundamental factors.

In the meanwhile great progress is being made in the welfare of our native peoples - in the housing schemes which are rapidly eliminating the slums of the great cities, in education and health services. Much of this is lost to sight in the controversy over policies.¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ Rhodie, *The real information scandal*, p. 44; A.M. Hamilton, letter, 2 October 1993.

¹⁴¹ Dr Joan Rydon, Letter, 4 December 1994. Rhodie, however, claimed to have made television appearances in Australia. *The real information scandal*, p. 884.

¹⁴² Dr Joan Rydon, letter, 4 December 1994; BTS, 4/2/32/1, Vol. 1, Hamilton to Louw, 31 July 1958.

¹⁴³ NAA, A1838, 201/10/7, Pt. 1, "Radio address by the High Commissioner for South Africa, Mr. A.M. Hamilton, Union Day, 1959".



Nor could Rhodie have objected to what Hamilton said in Cairns, Qld., during a visit in June 1959:

The South African Government fully realised that the time must inevitably come when the native people there would demand a share in running their own affairs ... the South African Government did believe - and had said so time and time again - that there was no limit to the development of the natives in their country. If that development was not controlled - remembering that outbreaks of nationalism tended to go to extremes - the white population in South Africa (numbering only three million people in the entire country) would be absolutely swamped.¹⁴⁴

However, earlier during the same visit to Queensland Hamilton was reported to have said - it is not clear whether he volunteered this - that he had two views on apartheid, personal and official. His personal view was that he did not know whether it would work or not. Officially, however, the government believed that it “will work, will enable the races to live together, and open the way for the native to develop to the extent of his capability”.¹⁴⁵

Hamilton would explain South African complexities by projecting that country's ratio of white to non-white on to Australia, saying at the commencement of a visit to Western Australia in April 1958: “It is the same as if there were 40,000,000 aborigines here and 10,000,000 whites”. Therefore, “Australia should be one of the few countries in the world capable of understanding the position in South Africa”,¹⁴⁶ an idea successive South African heads of mission would seek to put to Australians until the 1990s.

Perhaps, as Rhodie implied, Hamilton did not want to be associated in the public mind with the white supremacist policies of the National Party government. But that did not prevent him from expressing the white supremacist point of view in his public statements and more subtly than Rhodie could. His report on the Malayan Independence celebrations, which he attended en route to take up his post in Canberra, shows him to have been a captive of the prejudices of his day:

¹⁴⁴ *The Cairns Post*, 17 June 1959. Interestingly, under the headline “Problems of segregation: Not always fully appreciated”, there appeared in that newspaper the next day a report on remarks made by the visiting assistant chief chemist of Shell, South Africa, R.C. Hickman, who seemed fully conversant with what its proponents would have considered the “positive” aspects of apartheid. He claimed that the “South African native himself actually wanted the policy of segregation”.

¹⁴⁵ *The Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), 9 June 1959.

¹⁴⁶ *The West Australian* (Perth), 9 September 1958.



The test will come if, in Malay hands, the administrative machine runs down and the economy of the country begins to suffer. The Malays are a pleasant and easy-going people, and none of their leaders gives the impression of any great drive or determination. The deplorable condition of the airport at Djarkarta, observed even at a superficial glance, was striking indication of what can happen when the firm hand of the European administrator is withdrawn. It would be an optimistic observer who could be sure that the Malays have an inherent quality which would preserve them from the Indonesian fate ...¹⁴⁷

Quite likely what he objected to was not the policies but that they were the product of a rampant Afrikaner nationalism.

Herbert Hans Woodward succeeded Hamilton in Canberra, his third head of mission post after Nairobi (1955-59) and Cairo (1959-61). It was during his term in Australia that South Africa left the Commonwealth. He was therefore his government's last high commissioner and first ambassador to Australia. In age he was two years Hamilton's junior (he was born on 19 November 1911) but he had seven more years experience in the department of external affairs which he joined in 1937 after eight years in customs and excise. He was posted to Brussels less than a year later, thence to Washington after the fall of Belgium in 1940.¹⁴⁸ Spending the next eight years in Washington, he was transferred to Ottawa in December 1948 and back to Pretoria in September 1951. He married a Canadian, Kathleen McNeish, in 1944.

Woodward lacked Hamilton's rapport with the head of his department, a *sine qua non* for success, as it still is. His wife's Afrikaans or the lack of it was among the factors impeding the later stages of his career. In the mid-1950s, however, he was in the ascendant. On the occasion of his appointment to Cairo, for example, Louw described him to Gilchrist as "a very good man".¹⁴⁹ His posting to Nairobi was indicative of the role chance plays in diplomatic affairs as well of the power South African cabinet ministers then enjoyed over public servants.

He succeeded J.K. Christie who, having fallen foul of Eric Louw, was removed from his post at short notice and transferred to the department of commerce and industries¹⁵⁰ soon after Louw became minister of external affairs in January 1955. At

¹⁴⁷ BTS, 91/8/1, Vol. 10, Circular minute A46 of 1957, 18 October 1957, p. 6.

¹⁴⁸ See B.G. Fourie, *Brandpunte: Agter die skerms met Suid-Afrika se bekendste diplomaat*, Cape Town, 1991, pp. 14, 16 for references to him in that period.

¹⁴⁹ NAA, A1838/1, 201/10/6, Pt. 1, Memo. 27, Gilchrist to department of external affairs, 19 January 1959, attachment, Record of conversation Gilchrist/Louw, 5 January 1959. Gilchrist departed South Africa on 9 January and the report was signed by his successor, Phillips.

¹⁵⁰ In which he had spent almost a decade, serving *i.a.* in London and Singapore, before he joined external affairs in 1944. He had worked in the department of labour between 1924 and 1935.



first it seemed that Christie would be appointed superintendent of the Guano Islands off South Africa's east coast! The file contains no indication of Louw's reasons. A note from Forsyth to Spies recorded cryptically: "Apparently this decision is based upon complaints, the nature and source of which I do not know". A postscript suggested that he knew more than he was prepared to put in writing:

I understand Mr. Christie travelled on the same boat with the Minister as a fellow passenger as far as Mombasa last October, I think. Did Mr. Christie return from leave in the Union at about that time? If not, in what circumstances was he on the boat?¹⁵¹

It was, however, common knowledge in the department of external affairs in the late 1950s that Christie, sailing tourist class, had omitted to pay his respects to Louw, a cabinet minister, albeit heading another department (finance), who was a first class passenger on the same vessel. In the end matters probably worked out as Louw intended because Christie returned to the department not long after his forced departure, taking Woodward's place in Pretoria as counsellor in charge of the international organisations, Africa and coding sections.¹⁵² Just over a year later he was transferred on promotion to Berne, Switzerland, as envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary and subsequently to Lourenço Marques as consul-general. He retired on grounds of health in 1960, three years prematurely.

Quite likely because the facts supported him, Woodward's role in the Tambo/Segal visa fiasco did him no harm. After Sharpeville Oliver Tambo, deputy president-general of the African National Congress (ANC) and Ronald Segal, editor of the quarterly magazine *Africa South*, fled the country without passports or valid travel documents to go to New York to address the United Nations security council. For the South African authorities they were "agitators"¹⁵³ and earnest attempts were made to have them returned under the fugitive offenders act. These efforts were probably foredoomed to failure because the men's route took them initially through British-controlled territory and, as Sir John Maud, the British high commissioner, told Jooste at the time, the British government would be acutely embarrassed if it should be asked to return them to the Union.¹⁵⁴

At the end of March and during the first half of April 1960 H.L.T. Taswell, the South African high commissioner in Salisbury in the then central African federation, did what he could when Jooste asked him to intercede with the federal authorities to prevent the men, who later joined forces with another fugitive, Yussuf Dadoo, from

¹⁵¹ BTS, Christie, Forsyth to under-secretary, 24 January 1955.

¹⁵² BTS, S4/5/48, Scholtz to Christie, 23 November 1955.

¹⁵³ BTS 136/3/10, Vol. 1, department of external affairs to permanent delegation, New York, No. 35, 31 March 1960.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, File Note by G.P. Jooste, 1 April 1960.



entering the federation.¹⁵⁵ When they did so, he tried to have them returned to South Africa. Taswell's best efforts were unavailing. Not that it was necessarily aware of his role, *The Rhodesia Herald* (18 April 1960) called the process "A Gilbertian tale". In June the American ambassador, Philip Crowe, complained separately to the department and to Louw personally that "he had tried very hard to persuade the state department not to grant Tambo a visa on the grounds that he was a communist, the ambassador specifically saying that he had no doubt on this point".¹⁵⁶

But, having done his best, the South African legation in Cairo had let him down because in effect it denied that Tambo was a communist. He had thereupon been granted a United States visa. According to Louw's note on his conversation with Crowe a week later, the latter had wanted to help in the Tambo case but his efforts were frustrated by the South African minister in Cairo who told his United States colleague there that "he had no reason to object if the American government wanted to help Tambo get to the United States".¹⁵⁷ At that time Crowe was himself under attack in the government-supporting newspaper *Die Transvaler* for his contacts with the extra-parliamentary opposition. Louw subsequently issued a statement repudiating the newspaper.¹⁵⁸ In the first week of July a file note had Woodward denying the allegation. More importantly, however, the note referred to the existence of a secret American document, possibly a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) report, claiming that the South African government had never called Tambo a communist. There was also America's "own revolutionary origins and consequent policy of keeping its doors open to political refugees".¹⁵⁹

Woodward's Australian colleague in Cairo, J.P. Quinn, who may have met him in Pretoria during his term as acting high commissioner in 1951-52 - they overlapped for six months - reported on him thus:

Since my arrival I have had fairly frequent contacts with Woodward who is English speaking (from Natal) career officer with good presence. Canadian born wife and two school age daughters. Political views similar to Hamilton's but he is temperamentally more reserved and less sanguine. Slightly hard of hearing. I know no reason why he should not be suitable for position.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁵ See various items on BTS, 136/3/10, Vols. 1, 2, and 3 including Jooste's note of 31 March 1960 on Vol. 1 on his telephone conversation with Taswell and the latter's account of his actions (attached to Taswell to department of external affairs, 19 April 1960).

¹⁵⁶ BTS, 136/3/10, Vol. 5, Unsigned note to Stewart, 6 June 1960.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, Louw to acting secretary, 17 June 1960. (Original in Afrikaans).

¹⁵⁸ *Die Transvaler*, 26 March 1960; NAA, A1838/2, 201/8, memo. 155, Davis to department of external affairs, 4 April 1960.

¹⁵⁹ BTS, 136/3/10, Vol. 5, file note in Afrikaans on Oliver Tambo, 6 July 1960.

¹⁶⁰ NAA, A1838/265, 1500/1/30/11, I. 884, 11 January 1961.



The Woodward family arrived in Australia under dramatic circumstances. Mrs Woodward was taken to hospital when the ship on which they were travelling, the s.s. Arcadia, berthed at Fremantle, leaving her husband and daughters to continue the voyage to Sydney. She joined them in Canberra later, crossing the continent by train.¹⁶¹ It was during Woodward's term that the first commercial representative was appointed to the embassy (1961) as well as the first military attaché (1963). Hamilton had suggested the addition of these posts to the establishment.¹⁶² In respect of the military attaché, his November 1959 motivation was the classic one of the white bastions which gave the two countries' "strategic positions ... fundamental points of similarity": "We are determined to maintain a white nation at the foot of the African continent; the Australians must survive in an Asian environment". In that connection he reported "informal hints" from the heads of the army and the airforce "that this is something that they themselves would like and that if we showed an interest they would put the matter up to their Ministers".¹⁶³

Word came back from Pretoria that the minister of defence, F.C. Erasmus, was not interested for reasons of expense and shortage of personnel.¹⁶⁴ Four years later, however, Erasmus's successor J.J. Fouché thought it a good idea and Woodward was instructed to take the matter up with the Australian authorities.¹⁶⁵ If they would perhaps have been receptive in 1959, that was by no means the case in 1963 after Sharpeville and three years of the newly-independent African states flexing their muscles at the United Nations.

Australian external affairs officials accordingly made it clear, informally, that they wanted the South Africans to drop the proposal. Their grounds were that the appointment might be "misinterpreted" by the Australian public, that the Australian armed services envisaged no gain from it and that it would be "unwelcome to Australia's African Commonwealth associates".¹⁶⁶ The next month, July 1963, a ten-year projection prepared for the chiefs of staff of South Africa's strategic significance to Australia concluded that this would be minimal.¹⁶⁷

Woodward persevered and on his own initiative discussed the matter with Menzies personally. Menzies said he had no knowledge of the request which "had not been

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, EA Canberra 888, 6 April 1961; EA Canberra 1079, 10 April 1971.

¹⁶² BTS, Hamilton, Vol. III, Hamilton to Scholtz, 20 November 1959; BCB, Vol. 1, 2/1 (alternatively BTS, Vol. 229, 1/25/5, Vol. I), Hamilton to secretary for external affairs, 20 November 1959; BCB, Vol. 9, 15/34, Vol. 1, Hamilton to secretary for external affairs, 19 August 1960.

¹⁶³ BCB, Vol. 1, 2/1, Hamilton to secretary for external affairs, 20 November 1959.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, Botha to South African ambassador, Canberra, 26 March 1962. (Original in Afrikaans).

¹⁶⁵ BTS, 4/2/32/4, Vol. 1, De Villiers to secretary for foreign affairs, 18 March 1963. (Original in Afrikaans); Cypher OTP telegram No 3, secretary for foreign affairs to South African embassy, Canberra, 4 April 1963.

¹⁶⁶ BTS, 4/2/32/4, Vol. 1, Cypher OTP telegram No 8, South African embassy, Canberra to Secretary for Foreign Affairs, 6 June 1963.

¹⁶⁷ NAA, A9421/1, 224/1, "The strategic significance of the Republic of South Africa up to 1973", attached to minute by the chiefs of staff committee at a meeting held on 26 July 1963.



discussed in Cabinet or reported to him in any way". He accepted Woodward's view that the departmental attitude amounted to "the beginning of punitive action against South Africa". He "was personally opposed to the imposition of sanctions in any form". While he had made known "his doubts on the wisdom of South Africa's policy toward the non-Whites", this "did not qualify his own desire that relations between Australia and South Africa should continue on the friendliest terms". He saw no objection to the appointment, thought Australia should reciprocate and undertook to raise the matter in cabinet. As for the department of external affairs, its officials were

to his regret, inclined to act at times, like a bevy of frightened clerks who scurried for shelter when the Afro-Asian states mentioned a racial issue in the United Nations and elsewhere. These tactics, he said, solved very little. They merely whetted the appetite of those who opposed South African policies. Within the Commonwealth family he found the demands of new members to be both dangerous and destructive.¹⁶⁸

Woodward subsequently made written representations to Menzies¹⁶⁹ who indicated that he had discussed the matter with his cabinet colleagues and that Woodward could "shortly expect a favourable reply".¹⁷⁰ A few days later Woodward reported receipt of an external affairs note that the appointment of a military attaché was acceptable to the Australian government.¹⁷¹

Not all diplomatic relationships are justified by the facts of the bilateral relations they are set up to consolidate or extend. Objectively-speaking, neither Australia nor South Africa would have been worse off without representation in the other. That could well still be the case. The Australian government initially overestimated the importance of its relations with South Africa. From its own point of view, its insistence on exchanging high commissioners with South Africa in 1945-46 was ill-advised. It courted South Africa against the background of Smuts's international eminence and did not anticipate the controversy that would soon envelop his and his successors' domestic policies. Nor did it anticipate Smuts's own fall less than two years later.

On the Australian side, the lack of substance soon became apparent. On several occasions during the 1940s and 1950s the high commissioner's post was left vacant¹⁷² as perceptions of its value diminished. Even so, periodic departmental assessments concluded that the post *had* value *inter alia* because it was "our only African post".¹⁷³

¹⁶⁸ BTS, 4/2/32/4, Vol. 1, Woodward to secretary for foreign affairs, 11 June 1963.

¹⁶⁹ NAA, A1838/275, 1500/1/30/15, Woodward to Menzies, 25 July 1963.

¹⁷⁰ BTS 4/2/32/4, Vol. 1, Woodward to secretary for foreign affairs, 23 August 1963.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 28 August 1963.

¹⁷² November 1947 to August 1948; August 1950 to July 1952; and July 1957 to April 1959.

¹⁷³ NAA, 1838/1, 201/10/6, Pt. 1, Desmond to Lee, "The political importance of our South African post", 30 January 1952.



That surrendered in turn to the more negative stance represented by the view articulated in the late 1950s that South Africa's "policies and attitudes are a source of embarrassment to the West, and particularly to the United Kingdom, the United States and ourselves in our policies with respect to South and South East Asia and Africa".¹⁷⁴

By 1960 the Australian high commissioner in South Africa was seen as "hampered by the physical and political isolation of the Government to which he [was] accredited".¹⁷⁵ And by 1963 Australian officials contemplated having to choose between South Africa and black Africa, to the former's disadvantage: "In view of the voting power of the African states in New York and because of Australia's sensitivity on such matters as New Guinea and aborigines, any such choice could hardly favour the Republic".¹⁷⁶

From their side, the South Africans were insufficiently interested to appoint their own high commissioner immediately. By the time the government came to appreciate the connection's value for what might be called "cosmetic reasons", South Africa had become controversial internationally and an embarrassment to its western interlocutors. At the United Nations the latter found themselves having to balance the voting support they rendered South Africa and the criticism this drew from Afro-Asian countries with the need for South Africa's vote in Cold War confrontations.

The lengthy absence of a substantive head of mission is a sure pointer to a lack of substance in a diplomatic relationship. At least after Nel, the South Africans took care to leave no lengthy gaps and, ever since, relatively senior career officials have generally been appointed to head the mission.

In his time, Robert Menzies facilitated their work. One of the ironies about his relationship with Hamilton was that whatever the latter told him was actual and had impact, whereas he was not exposed to the detail of what his own diplomats were reporting from Pretoria. External affairs' staff in Canberra was too small to process "the volume of paper coming in"¹⁷⁷ and reports from South Africa were not passed automatically to the top level of the department let alone to the political level of government. In 1954 one external affairs officer observed rather plaintively to another that it "might be worthwhile" to pass Menzies a certain despatch from the high commissioner in South Africa because it "might help show the South Africans to him in their true light".¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁴ NAA, A1838/2, 201/11/1 Pt. 2, Memo. 668, Nicholson to department of external affairs, 14 November 1958.

¹⁷⁵ That was in the context of a lobbying effort in Africa to win support for Australian policies "on Trusteeship and related matters". NAA, A1838/1, 201/10/6/1, Pt.1, O. 8367, 22 May 1960, para. 4.

¹⁷⁶ NAA, A9421/1, 201/1, Pt. 1, departmental paper "Prospects for South Africa", p. 13. Attached to memo. 213, Lee to Australian embassy, Pretoria, 2 September 1963.

¹⁷⁷ Crocker, *Australian Ambassador*, pp. 58-59.

¹⁷⁸ NAA, A1838/2, 201/11/1, Pt.2, Handwritten note to Shaw, 10 November 1954. Focussing *inter alia* on National Party policy towards the establishment of a republic, the despatch - A4231/2 Pretoria 1-16



From the early days of his second term as prime minister, his actions showed Menzies to be sympathetic towards white South Africa. His liking for South Africans extended even to abrasive and republican Afrikaners such as the South African minister of external affairs, Eric Louw, as well as the racist prime ministers Hans Strijdom and Hendrik Verwoerd. In that, he ran ahead of cabinet colleagues such as Richard Casey and an even greater distance ahead of some, but not all, of his officials, not to mention much of Australian public opinion. As prime minister and minister of external affairs at the critical time for South Africa of international outrage over Sharpeville, followed by the 1961 Commonwealth prime minister's conference, he steered his colleagues in the desired direction. He handled the matter in cabinet in such a way that South Africa's departure from the Commonwealth had a minimal effect on Australian-South African relations.

If Hamilton was close to him, officially if not personally and privately he was as accessible to the former's predecessors, Viljoen, Nel, and Uys, and to his immediate successor, Woodward, as he was to Hamilton. Viljoen reported a few months after Menzies became prime minister that he was "on very friendly terms" with him and had been so even before his election.¹⁷⁹ On the eve of his departure the following year, Menzies wrote to him "on behalf of Mrs Menzies, my daughter and myself ... to say how warmly we have appreciated the very cordial personal relations which we have enjoyed with Mrs Viljoen and yourself".¹⁸⁰

Uys did not enjoy a personal relationship with Menzies but he experienced no difficulty obtaining an audience when Pretoria asked him to approach the Australian authorities to have the Russian defector Vladimir Petrov or his wife testify at the (now notorious) Treason Trial. Menzies instructed the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) to render assistance.¹⁸¹ The Petrovs were thought to have first-hand knowledge of communist activity in South Africa. They declined to testify personally or by deposition *inter alia* because they did not want further to provoke the Soviet Union.¹⁸² Nor, on the occasion of Thomas Boydell's first visit in 1956, did Uys experience difficulty introducing him to Menzies.¹⁸³ The latter's hand is also evident in the arrangements for Boydell's controversial talks to Australian schools in 1959.¹⁸⁴

Diplomatic achievement is of an ephemeral nature. Thus the official residence and the chancery were the most tangible and lasting contributions made by white South African officials in Canberra between 1949 and 1994. All four of the early heads of

1954, Ministerial Despatch No. 10/1954 (undated) - also dealt with the unveiling of the Kruger Statue on Church Square, Pretoria, and Malan's retirement as prime minister.

¹⁷⁹ BCB, Vol. 2, 6/5 Vol. I, Viljoen to Forsyth, 3 March 1950.

¹⁸⁰ BTS 4/2/32, Vol. 2, Menzies to Viljoen, 3 October 1951.

¹⁸¹ See various items on BCB, Vol. 12, 23/14 (S).

¹⁸² *Ibid.* Note handed Uys by the head of ASIO's ACT office.

¹⁸³ *The Canberra Times*, 18 October 1956.

¹⁸⁴ See my article "Trying to sell apartheid to 1950s Australia" in the November 2003 issue of *The South African Historical Journal*.



mission had a hand in the residence: Viljoen and Nel recommended its style and approximate dimensions; Uys chose the site; while Hamilton was responsible for the first garden. He also set in motion the plans for a chancery in the Cape Dutch town house style. Menzies was in on the project from the beginning. In May 1955 Uys recorded that on the occasion of a family dinner on the 8th of that month, a Sunday, he had shown Menzies and Dame Pattie the plans for the residence which they considered “beautiful”.¹⁸⁵

Apart from being there and administering themselves, the South Africans’ principal task was to put the best possible gloss on developments in their country to the Australian “establishment”. The audiences they reached were minute. Apart from ministers and officials in Canberra, they consisted *inter alia* of Rotary clubs in various parts of the country and the crowds at the agricultural and other shows they opened. If, therefore, as Hamilton said, the South African flag “appeared in places where it had never been seen before”,¹⁸⁶ that was often in hamlets out in the Australian bush.¹⁸⁷ For the idea (and propriety) of diplomats communicating with a mass audience by means of radio or television had yet to take hold.

The South Africa these men represented is as gone with the wind as ever was the Old South immortalized by Margaret Mitchell. In Australia their doings, comings and goings, form part of the early history of Canberra.¹⁸⁸ And their dealings with the long-time prime minister, Robert Menzies, reveal a side to him that is not generally known. But in post-1994 South Africa, their activities may have greater significance from an anthropological or sociological perspective than from the political point of view.

After all, politically, who now wants to know, or cares, about the preoccupations of a group of undeniably racist white officials who represented an increasingly marginalized regime internationally, which came to an end, not with the bang confidently predicted down the years by those deceived by the rhetoric of Afrikaner nationalism, but with the proverbial whimper? To these men Canadian historian Carl Berger’s view is applicable: “our knowledge of the outcome makes it difficult to enter into the minds of men who lived in another age and who did not know that they worked in vain for a cause that would never be realized”.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁵ He also seems to have shown the plans to most of official Canberra including other heads of mission. BTS, 4/3/6, Vol. 3, Uys to secretary for external affairs, 23 May 1955, p.3. (Original in Afrikaans.)

¹⁸⁶ BTS, Hamilton, Vol. III, Hamilton to Scholtz, 20 November 1959.

¹⁸⁷ The Australian equivalent of the South African *platteland*.

¹⁸⁸ Canberra’s sole newspaper, *The Canberra Times*, then owned and edited by the Shakespeare family - see *The Canberra Times*, 12 March 1963 (“City Foundation Was *The Times*’ Genesis”) - took an interest in diplomats. Its “Canberra Diary” column is an excellent guide to what they were doing.

¹⁸⁹ C. Berger, *The Sense of Power: Studies in the ideas of Canadian imperialism 1867-1914*, Toronto, 1970, p. 6.