

# PORT NATAL HARBOUR AND THE COLONIAL POLITICS OF NATAL 1894-1897

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## Port Natal-hawe en die Natalse plaaslike politiek, 1894-1897

Gesien in die lig van die groot somme geld wat op hawe-ontwikkeling in Natal gedurende die negentiende eeu bestee is, is dit te verwagte dat Port Natal-hawe 'n belangrike strydvraag in die plaaslike politiek geword het, veral ook as gevolg van die rol van die politikus Harry Escombe. Escombe was voorsitter van die Håweraad sedert die instelling van hierdie liggaam in 1881. Dit het hom in 'n unieke posisie in Natal geplaas, veral omdat die koloniste dié raad as 'n medium beskou het om hulle onafhanklikheid van Britse en selfs Natalse regeringsbeheer te toon. Teen 1894 het die lede van die haweraad en die publiek Escombe egter nie meer heelhartig ondersteun nie. Dit was as gevolg van Escombe se botsing met die hawe-ingenieur, Cathcart Methven. Hierdie persoonlikheidsbotsings en opponerende gesigspunte met betrekking tot ingenieursbeginsels (skuurkrag en die verlenging van die noordpier, teenoor baggerwerk en die verlenging van die suidpier) het daartoe gelei dat die hawe 'n definitiewe rol in die politiek gespeel het. Die koloniale gemeenskap was in twee definitiewe kampe verdeel. Escombe se persoonlike en politieke posisie is ten nouste geraak en die hawekwessie het ongetwyfeld 'n rol gespeel in die val van die Escombe-ministerie in 1897.

Seen against the background of the enormous sums which were spent on harbour development in Natal in die nineteenth century, it is hardly surprising that Port Natal harbour became an important issue in local politics, especially also as a result of the role of the politician Harry Escombe. Escombe had been chairman of the Harbour Board since its inception in 1881 and this placed him in a unique position in Natal as the Board was seen by colonists as a medium by which they could show their independence from the control of Britain and even the Natal government. By 1894, however, the members of the Harbour Board and the public were no longer completely behind Escombe, mainly as a result of his clashes with the harbour engineer, Cathcart Methven. These personality clashes and opposing viewpoints with regard to engineering principles (scour and a lengthening of the north pier, versus dredging and a lengthening of the south pier) led to the harbour playing a definite role in politics. Colonial society was divided into two definite camps. Escombe's personal position and his political standing was closely affected and the harbour issue unquestionably played a role in the fall of the Escombe ministry in 1897.

## Introduction

Although Port Natal harbour had some influence on the politics of Natal during the 1850s, 1860s, and 1880s, it was only in the 1890s, and especially as a result of the role of Harry Escombe, that the harbour became a prominent issue in the politics of Natal. This was in spite of the fact that construction of the outer works came to a halt in 1894.

Harry Escombe, "that excellent citizen, liberal minded, public spirited gentleman" as the *The Natal Mercantile Advertiser* described him,<sup>1</sup> became chairman of the Harbour Board in 1881 and in this capacity gained almost unfettered power over the affairs of the harbour. He held the reins for fourteen years and personally influenced nearly all decisions on the development of the harbour. Escombe's chairmanship of the Harbour Board placed him in a unique position in Natal, which he did not want to

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30-7-1880.

relinquish after the Board was dissolved in 1894, even though he was no longer the Minister responsible for Harbour Affairs. While Edward Innes was harbour engineer from 1881 to 1888, the hold which Escombe had on harbour affairs was not questioned. After the appointment of Cathcart Methven in that position in 1889, personality clashes and opposing viewpoints with regard to engineering principles led to the harbour playing a greater role in politics. Colonial society was divided into two definite camps. Escombe's personal position and his political standing was closely effected and the harbour issue unquestionably played a role in the fall of the Escombe ministry in 1897.

### **The dissolution of the Harbour Board and Methven's fate**

Although Escombe resigned as chairman of the Harbour Board at the beginning of 1894 and he was not appointed Minister of Public Works in the first cabinet of John Robinson, but Attorney-General, it did not mean that he had lost interest in the harbour. On the contrary, he declared in May 1894 that "my life, as far as I am concerned, is pledged to the opening of the Harbour to vessels of the deepest draught, at all times of the tide, by night as well as by day. Whether I am a Minister or not a Minister, whether I am in office or out of office, whether I am on a Board or off a Board, that is the work which I have set myself inside of constitutional rights and powers".<sup>2</sup> As Escombe was also involved so intimately with politics, the harbour would of necessity play a role in this area as well.

After Escombe's resignation from the Harbour Board, it was clear to most observers that the further existence of the Board, which had for so many years directed the works at the harbour, was threatened. On 10 April 1894 a bill "To provide for the better regulation of the Ports and Harbours of Natal" was laid on the table. According to this Bill, all the officials of the Harbour Board would become civil servants and all the duties which the Harbour Board had fulfilled according to Act 29 of 1880 would be managed by the Governor and Governor-in-Council and the government would set up rules and regulations for the general administration of the harbour.

The reaction of the press foreshadowed the attitude of the two most important newspapers in the ensuing years. *The Natal Mercury* hailed the Bill and declared that matters concerning the harbour would be handled more efficiently since the minister could report directly to parliament.<sup>3</sup> *The Natal Witness*, on the other hand, was opposed to the Bill and indicated that the division between Escombe and Methven, which had become evident in previous years, was the real reason behind it.<sup>4</sup>

The division outside parliament was also reflected within it. John Robinson must have been aware that the Bill could be contentious because he asserted that if the government took responsibility for the harbour "there will be much less risk hereafter of those wranglings and contentions that have existed in the past ... things will go on much more smoothly as regards the control of Harbour affairs than perhaps they have done in the last year or two." Others supporting this view were of the opinion that the Harbour Board had obtained wide powers "by a 'fluke' and oversight of the Governor"<sup>5</sup>, which was in many ways quite true.

The debate indicated that the government had some strong opponents, although it was not yet possible to identify an organised opposition. These members were perturbed that the Harbour Board, which had provided such excellent service in the past in controlling one of the most important public works, now had to disappear. It was surmised that Escombe played a role in the decision as it was common knowledge that he could after 1891 no longer control the body as he had done in the past. It was also suspected that the government, under the prodding of Escombe, had planned the move "to slaughter the Engineer; and to uphold Escombe's ideas on the harbour." J.P. Symons also remarked "I am sorry we have

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2. Legislative Assembly Debates, 25 April - 11 July 1894, Vol. XII, 16-5-1894.

3. 11-4-1894.

4. 21-4-1894.

5. Legislative Assembly Debates, 25 April - 11 July 1894, Vol. XXII, 16-5-1894.

no Opposition ... it is time there was some criticism".<sup>6</sup> In spite of opposition the Bill was accepted and Act 3 of 1894 dissolved the Harbour Board.

The Board, which had been in existence for fourteen years, had been a unique institution in many ways, and had always relied heavily on public support to maintain its position in spite of opposition from the government and even the Secretary of State. It often executed works which had been accepted neither by the government nor by professional advisers. Now, however, the instigator of the Board no longer saw a function for a quasi-independent organ in a colony which had been granted responsible government. In many ways, it was clear to most that Escombe, in spite of his high sounding statements, had already decided to dissolve the Harbour Board, which by the nineties no longer supported him completely.

The differences of opinion that existed between Escombe and some sections of the Board, spilled over into the press and the public at large. In May 1894 F.S. Tatham, a member of the Legislative Assembly, declared that "If there is one thing in this country upon which men's minds are divided, if there is one thing which is contentious from top to bottom, it is the question of whether or not certain works are not to be carried on at the harbour".<sup>7</sup>

It was clear to many that Escombe was not only keen to rid the colony of a Harbour Board, but at the same time also to remove Cathcart Methven. Even before Act 3 of 1894 became law, Escombe had sent out a letter of dismissal to all officials of the Board, but while letters of re-instatement as civil servants were at the same time drawn up for all the other officials, Methven's name was missing from the list.<sup>8</sup>

Although both T.K. Murray, Minister of Lands and Works, and Escombe, Attorney-General, declared that the dismissals were necessary for reducing expenditure, their statements did not explain why all the members of the engineering staff, with the exception only of Methven, were reinstated.<sup>9</sup> Although it was not made public at the time, Robinson actually informed the Governor confidentially that the cabinet had no other choice but to end Methven's services, as the engineer "had been intriguing with their political opponents, and trying to thwart them in various ways".<sup>10</sup> Although Escombe kept mum about the real reasons for disbanding the Harbour Board, he admitted in 1895 before a parliamentary committee that "Mr. Methven's continuance in office became impossible after ... August 1891"<sup>11</sup>, the date when the chairman of the Harbour Board and the engineer in charge clashed openly for the first time about plans for the development of the harbour. Yet Escombe expressed his surprise when Methven was given his notice of dismissal in 1894 and even had the audacity to state that "I had no more to do with the notice given to Mr. Methven than the man in the moon. I did not know that the notice was to be given until I heard the statement made by Mr. Murray".<sup>12</sup> One should bear in mind that Escombe had actually formulated the letters of resignation and was therefore lying when he mentioned that he had no knowledge of it.

## Public reaction

It seems as if the public and press saw through Escombe's charade. The reaction from all sides was vehement, although the Natal Governor was at first confident that

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6. Legislative Assembly Debates, 25 April - 11 July 1894, Vol. XXII, 15-5-1894.

7. N.G.G. Vol. XLVI, No. 2685, 30-6-1894.

8. M.J.P.W. 6, Minute Papers of Harbours, 1-1599, Minute Paper, N.H.B., 3150/1894, L & W 903/1894, 18-6-1894: Letter of re-engagement, 5-6-1895.

9. M.J.P.W. 6, Minute Papers of Harbours, 1-1599, Minute Paper, L & W, 1143, 1894, 16-7-1894: Minister of Lands and Works - Engineer-in-Chief, Harbour Works Department, 28-7-1894; Legislative Assembly, L.A. No. 12, Second Ad Interim Report (No. 13) of Select Committee (No. 1, 1895) on Harbour Matters, 30-7-1895, answer to question 1552.

10. G.H. 1300, Copies of confidential despatches to Secretary of State, 1871-1895: Hely-Hutchinson - Ripon, 3-8-1894, p. 491.

11. Legislative Assembly, L.A. No. 12, Second Ad Interim Report (No. 13) of Select Committee (No. 1, 1895) on Harbour Matters, 30-7-1895, answer to question 1407.

12. *Ibid.* Answer to question 1532.

the whole issue would die down quickly and quietly.<sup>13</sup> Robinson, on the other hand, while expecting some comment, was surprised at the course taken by the agitation which was without parallel in his experience. Escombe was so upset by the sharp attacks of the press that he even refused to read newspapers.<sup>14</sup>

The increasing anti-government sentiment appeared mainly in two newspapers, *The Natal Witness* and *The Natal Advertiser*. The editorial comments were usually offensive and often even libellous. Hely-Hutchinson was of the opinion that the main reason for the vehemence of the attacks lay in the fact that the owner of both newspapers, H. Davis, had not been offered a seat in the Legislative Council and for this he held a grudge against Robinson. The Natal Governor even maintained that Davis had promised his support to the Robinson ministry on certain conditions, and when this was refused he declared that they (Robinson and Escombe) would rue the day when they incurred the enmity of the press which he (Davis) controlled.<sup>15</sup> Davis kept his word and every day for months, in nearly every editorial, anti-government propaganda on the harbour issue poured forth. The dismissal of Methven, but especially the sly way in which it was done, was used to discredit the government. The harbour became an obsession with the press, in spite of the fact that the pro-government newspaper, *The Natal Mercury* (which was owned by the Robinson family and would naturally not join in the fray), saw the affair as "the very quintessence of parochialism".<sup>16</sup>

The newspaper attacks focussed on Escombe, who, it was said, was leading Robinson and the rest of the cabinet by the nose with his persuasive eloquence, indomitable will and strength of purpose. "Supposing Mr. Escombe had not been in the Ministry, would it have ever occurred to Sir John Robinson ... to jeopardise his political career by dismissing the Engineer?", *The Natal Advertiser* queried with insight. It was clear to many that the ideas of the Attorney-General determined the harbour policy of the government and that if the government were to decide to reinstate Methven, Escombe would tender his resignation.<sup>17</sup>

Letters to the press mostly censured the government. One writer prophetically said that the dismissal of Methven would act as a boomerang and return as a death blow to the government<sup>18</sup>, while another saw the actions of the government as "the most extensive confidence trick on record".<sup>19</sup>

The increasing criticism of the government was not limited to newspapers only. In Durban a petition signed by 455 "influential people" was drawn up, in which the government was requested to revoke the dismissal of Methven.<sup>20</sup> Most of the petitioners were apparently persons who were normally government supporters, except in the Methven case.<sup>21</sup> It was stated that if an election was held at that stage in Durban, Robinson and Escombe would easily be outvoted.<sup>22</sup> Although this assumption is debatable, it does indicate that a possible opposition to the government had found an effective and safe platform to attack the government.

A number of political meetings were also held throughout the colony to debate the issue. The government made the error of not confiding in the voters and as a result a number of wild accusations were made at the meetings in the rural areas in the presence of people who at the best of times, knew little about harbour works. Methven's supporters for instance, argued that dredging, which Escombe favoured, was ridiculous even though the harbour engineer had also endorsed it to some extent. During a meeting at Verulam on 16 August 1894 the two speakers, Henry Binns and J.L. Hulett, predicted that the government would fall as a result of its

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13. G.H. 1300, Copies of confidential despatches to Secretary of State, 1871-1895: Hely-Hutchinson - Ripon, 3-8-1894, p. 491.

14. Legislative Assembly, L.A. No. 12, Second Ad Interim Report (No. 13) of Select Committee (No. 1, 1895) on Harbour Matters, 30-7-1895, answers to questions 945, 792.

15. C.O. 179/191, Natal No. 15463, Confidential: Hely-Hutchinson - Chamberlain, 9-8-1895.

16. 18-8-1894.

17. 25-8-1894.

18. *The Natal Mercury*, 16-8-1894 (Justice).

19. *The Natal Mercury*, 16-8-1894 (C. Reeves).

20. *The Natal Witness*, 17-8-1894.

21. *The Natal Witness*, 18-8-1894; *The Natal Witness*, 24-8-1894.

22. *The Natal Advertiser*, 20-8-1894.

harbour policy. It was clear to the speakers that Act 3 of 1894 was nothing more than "a miserable hoax ... to remove the Engineer".<sup>23</sup>

Similar statements were expressed at other meetings. In Stanger Binns again attacked the government for its inability to inform the voters and stated that many had lost confidence in the government because the harbour works had been neglected and thus the commerce of Natal had been subordinated to the inconsistency and foolishness of one man - Escombe.<sup>24</sup> At Umgeni the meeting accepted a resolution that it "does not approve of the action of the ministry in regard to Mr. Methven's dismissal, but approves of the ministry abandoning their policy or, in the interests of the colony, resigning their seats". A proposal of support for the government on the harbour question, could not find a seconder.<sup>25</sup>

Although similar sentiments were expressed at other meetings, T.P. O'Meara, a qualified engineer, held the opinion that the opponents of the government were actually more in opposition to Indian affairs than the harbour issue. He was sure that the opposition "did not care a straw for Mr. Methven; they would use him as long as they wanted him, and then throw him overboard like a squeezed orange".<sup>26</sup>

### Parliamentary opposition and government response

The opposition's emphasis on harbour matters can indeed be questioned. In many ways it was a safer subject than Indian affairs, which were more contentious. Yet, it is unusual that the opposition was able to obtain so much support for their cause in such a short span of time. Henry Binns had previously crossed swords with the government and Hely-Hutchinson had actually described him as early as March 1894 as the possible leader of the opposition,<sup>27</sup> but it was only during the second half of 1894 that the attack on the government intensified - and that around the harbour issue.

The heightened criticism of the government was not lightly brushed aside by the cabinet. On 13 September 1894 the Governor still remarked that the ministers had accepted the agitation philosophically,<sup>28</sup> but by the end of October Robinson was counting heads to ascertain whose support he could rely on in the Legislative Assembly.<sup>29</sup> The government, however, still chose to remain silent on the issue. This was seen by the opponents as an acknowledgement of guilt, especially by the sharpest critic of the government, Rev. A.K.D. Edwards, minister of St Paul's in Durban and the so-called 'Man in the Street'. In a vicious pamphlet, entitled "The Harbour Question Past and Present ..." <sup>30</sup>, Edwards stated that while Natalians were ostensibly under the mild paternal guidance of Robinson, they were actually under the vigorous and autocratic rule of the Attorney-General, Escombe, whom he described as "the backbone, shank-bones, indeed the entire bone-structure and ganglionic centre, of an otherwise somewhat moluscuous Ministry". Edwards warned that if the government did not react "The 'Annals of Natal' will tell of the fall of the first Responsible Ministry".

Methven, the person around whose head most of the debate was raging, had not changed his views on solving the problems at the harbour. He was adamant that if the scour was concentrated and directed by outer works, especially a lengthened north pier, across the Bar, the result would be far more permanent and reliable than from dredging, the method proposed by Escombe.<sup>31</sup>

23. *The Natal Advertiser*, 20-8-1894.

24. *The Natal Witness* 15-11-1894.

25. *The Natal Mercury*, 15-11-1894.

26. *The Natal Mercury*, 24-12-1894.

27. G.H. 1301, Copies of confidential despatches to Secretary of State, 1871-1895: Hely-Hutchinson - Ripon, 22-3-1895, p. 79.

28. G.H. 1300, Copies of confidential despatches to Secretary of State, 1871-1895: Hely-Hutchinson - Ripon, 13-9-1894, p. 494.

29. G.H. 1300, Copies of confidential despatches to Secretary of State, 1871-1895: Hely-Hutchinson - Ripon, 26-10-1894, p. 508.

30. Pietermaritzburg, 1895.

31. N.H.D. II/4/1, Engineer's Office, Government Notices, 1881-1907, Government Notice No. 64, 1895, Report by the Engineer-in-Chief of the Natal Harbour Works for the year 1894: Methven - Minister of Lands and Works, 18-1-1895.

The repeated utterings of Methven raised Escombe's hackles.<sup>32</sup> Whereas the Natal government had declined to become directly involved in arguments about the harbour and Methven, feelings became so heated that Robinson and Escombe held a public meeting in Durban on 15 February 1895 - the largest meeting in the colony up to that time.

In his speech Robinson attacked Methven by saying that the harbour engineer had laid himself open to be made the subject, centre and focus of a political crusade against the government he served, and thus the government had no option but to dismiss him. By doing this, Robinson wanted to prevent "every officer at the head of a department ... (from becoming) a political agitator and propagandist to upset the constitutional authority of the government". This statement contradicted all the previous statements by the government that Methven had been dismissed for financial reasons.

Robinson's speech and a further explanation by Escombe at the same meeting that Methven had colluded with the "enemies" of the government, did not appease the crowd and the harbour policy of the government was rejected by a large majority of the audience.<sup>33</sup> Hely-Hutchinson considered the meeting of such importance that he sent a copy of the newspaper reports on it to the Secretary of State in London.<sup>34</sup>

Cathcart Methven was visibly upset by the statements at the meeting and he asked the Prime Minister to publish his reply, which duly appeared in the *Government Gazette*.<sup>35</sup> It seems as if the government still wanted to indicate that it was acting impartially by giving the harbour engineer a chance to defend himself. Methven's accusation that the two ministers had damaged his prestige as engineer and that he had not been given a chance to reply publicly to the many accusations against him, together with the rising tide of criticism levelled against the government, seems to have led Robinson and Escombe to decide to hold an official enquiry with regard to the engineer's department. Methven would then be granted the opportunity of putting his case<sup>36</sup> and it was hoped this would be the end of the whole controversy.

The political storm which greeted the letter of Cathcart Methven and the news of a public enquiry indicated that Port Natal harbour was the general topic of discussion amongst the colonists. Robinson later testified that the whole controversy at that time was "without parallel in my experience".<sup>37</sup> The matter was exacerbated when F.R. Moor, Minister of Native Affairs, declared that the government had become tired of spending money on the grounds of pure speculation - referring to the harbour plans of Methven - while there were other worthier causes.<sup>38</sup> Although the matter was in actual fact *sub judice* both government members and the general public kept the topic alive. Numerous letters appeared in the newspapers and a number of public meetings were held in centres across Natal to discuss "the burning question in politics".<sup>39</sup> In Ladysmith the possibility of the government falling as a result of the Methven-affair was mooted.<sup>40</sup>

Escombe was again singled out for most criticism. The accusation was made that he as a lay person had dared to venture into the field of engineering.<sup>41</sup> The recurrent attacks visibly disturbed Escombe. "The thing was sickening ... I used not to read

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32. *The Natal Witness*, 18-1-1895.

33. *The Natal Mercury*, 16-2-1895.

34. G.H. 1277, Copies of despatches to Secretary of State, 1891-1895, No. 18: Hely-Hutchinson - Ripon, 16-2-1895, p. 504.

35. N.G.G. Vol. XLVII, No. 2721, 26-2-1895.

36. *Ibid.*

37. Legislative Assembly, L.A. No. 12, Second Ad Interim Report (No. 13) of Select Committee (No. 1, 1895) on Harbour Matters, 30-7-1895, answer to questions 969, 972.

38. *The Natal Mercury*, 8-3-1895.

39. *The Natal Witness*, 5-4-1895.

40. *The Natal Mercury*, 29-3-1895.

41. *The Natal Mercury*, 8-4-1895.

the papers. I would take up the paper and ... chuck it away"<sup>42</sup>, he testified later. Robinson was also given his fair share of criticism. It was declared for instance that the Prime Minister had belittled himself and that his attack on Methven at the Durban meeting had been "cowardly, mean, low, disgraceful".<sup>43</sup>

Hely-Hutchinson kept the British government informed about each and every move of the government and the opposition, but the British officials were less than interested. "Nothing to do with us", a clerk wrote in the margin of one of the Governor's letters,<sup>44</sup> while another exclaimed, "I don't know why he supposes we are so deeply interested in a purely local squabble. He is always mentioning it".<sup>45</sup> What was considered as puny in Britain, however, was considered very important in Natal politics.

### The public enquiry

In April 1895 the government published a list of 14 complaints which the Select Committee would investigate with regard to Methven. The most serious of these complaints was instigation and participation by the harbour engineer in a political agitation and disloyalty to the government.<sup>46</sup> The other complaints ranged from the supply of incorrect measurements to withholding information.

The Select Committee appointed on 2 May 1895 was generally considered impartial as it consisted of three members who had previously attacked the government on the harbour issue, three who were openly government supporters, while the seventh member declared that he had "an open mind" on the harbour question. Robinson hoped that the report of the committee would quell the political agitation which had kept the colony occupied the previous months.<sup>47</sup> Hely-Hutchinson was uncertain whether a parliamentary select committee was the right choice. Such an investigation could, if the report went against the government, place it in an unworthy position.<sup>48</sup> This was true, but the cabinet did not heed his admonition.

The evidence laid before the Select Committee indicated clearly that the dice had been loaded against Methven long before his dismissal. T.K. Murray acknowledged that he disliked Methven from the start and maintained that the harbour engineer had to be suspended, irrespective of the outcome of the inquiry.<sup>49</sup> It is clear that Murray's testimony, more than anything else, swayed the committee. J.H. Wallace, one of the members of the Select Committee, later declared that "I think it was injudicious under all the circumstances to suggest to Mr. Methven - to tell Mr. Methven - that practically whatever happened, he would have to go".<sup>50</sup>

The evidence of Robinson did not save the position of the government either. The Prime Minister underscored what Murray had said and declared that it was impossible to retain the services of Methven. He admitted that he had come to this decision long before the Durban public meeting, and this meant that the committee of inquiry was nothing but a farce. Escombe also did not help the government out of its predicament. He insisted for instance that the engineer had "killed that (Harbour

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42. Legislative Assembly, L.A. No. 12, Second Ad Interim Report (No. 13) of Select Committee (No. 1, 1895) on Harbour Matters, 30-7-1895, answer to question 1494.

43. *The Natal Witness*, 6-4-1895; *The Natal Witness*, 23-3-1895.

44. C.O. 179/191: Hely-Hutchinson - Chamberlain, 9-8-1895.

45. C.O. 179/191: Hely-Hutchinson - Ripon, 6-6-1895.

46. Legislative Assembly, L.A. No. 12, Second Ad Interim Report (No. 13) of Select Committee (No. 1, 1895) on Harbour Matters, 30-7-1895.

47. Legislative Assembly Debates, 25 April - 9 August 1895, Vol. XXIII, 2-5-1895.

48. G.H. 1301, Copies of confidential despatches to Secretary of State, 1895-1900: Hely-Hutchinson - Ripon, 25-5-1895, p. 89.

49. Legislative Assembly, L.A. No. 12, Second Ad Interim Report (No. 13) of Select Committee (No. 1, 1895) on Harbour Matters, 30-7-1895.

50. E.G. Hobson, *The effect of Durban harbour on Natal's politics, 1874-1898* (Durban, 1961), p. 66.

Board ... the moment the Engineer sought to carry out a plan different to that authorised by Parliament". This statement completely contradicted his previous statements that the only reason why the Board was dissolved was because of the advent of responsible government. Escombe's bitter remarks about a collaboration between Binns, Methven, and certain Natal newspapers against him, did not improve the case of the government.<sup>51</sup>

Although no minutes exist of the Select Committee's deliberations, it is clear that Murray's weak testimony, Robinson's evasive answers and Escombe's sarcasm, weighed against the cool reasoned exposition of Methven, tilted the scales against the government. On the most important complaints, namely agitation against the government and disloyalty, as well as misrepresentation of facts and neglect of duty, Methven was exonerated completely and was found guilty only on a number of small counts. The most damning finding of the committee was that the accusations levelled at Methven were in fact trivial and therefore a waste of time.<sup>52</sup>

The investigation and report overshadowed the sitting of the Legislative Assembly during 1895<sup>53</sup> and drew much comment from the Natal public.<sup>54</sup> The report was in large measure a clear censure of the actions of the government with regard to harbour affairs and especially their treatment of Methven. Hely-Hutchinson agreed that the findings were a discredit to the government and believed that Escombe and Robinson would have done better had they refrained from discussing Methven's conduct in public.<sup>55</sup>

In spite of the damning report the government was able to tide the storm. The reason for this was probably that the opposition in parliament was as yet not as strong as the opposition outside parliament. An amendment in which confidence was expressed in the government's handling of the harbour affairs was passed by 18 votes to 12.<sup>56</sup>

### Consequences of the enquiry

Although the government had survived the storm, the reputation of the cabinet had definitely been damaged. Affairs such as Indian immigration, finances and education also led to dissatisfaction at the time, but it was the "harbour scandal" which was the weakest link in the government's policy. The government was charged with unfairness.<sup>57</sup> Methven's supporters, or more accurately the opponents of the government, were quick to grasp a chance to capitalise on the situation and headlines such as "The Methven Persecution" appeared frequently.<sup>58</sup>

Escombe was again singled out for the harshest criticism. He was accused of "cruel injustice" and was hounded because he had not kept a previous promise to abide by the findings of the committee.<sup>59</sup> It was openly said that the Methven affair would prove to be the death knell of the Robinson government and the terms "Methvenites" and "Ministerialists" were used to describe the two factions both in and outside parliament.<sup>60</sup>

51. Legislative Assembly, L.A. No. 12, Second Ad Interim Report (No. 13) of Select Committee (No. 1, 1895) on Harbour Matters, 30-7-1895, answers to questions 1276, 1277, 1278, 1285, 1297.

52. Legislative Assembly, L.A. No. 12, Second Ad Interim Report (No. 13) of Select Committee (No. 1, 1895) on Harbour Matters, 30-7-1895.

53. *The Natal Mercury*, 17-8-1895.

54. *The Times of Natal*, 1-8-1895.

55. G.H. 1301, Copies of confidential despatches to Secretary of State, 1895-1900: Hely-Hutchinson - Chamberlain, 9-8-1895, p. 100.

56. Legislative Assembly Debates, 25 April - 9 August 1895, Vol. XXIII, 1-8-1895; G.H. 1301, Copies of confidential despatches to Secretary of State, 1895-1900: Hely-Hutchinson - Chamberlain, 9-8-1895, p. 99.

57. *The Times of Natal*, 8-8-1895.

58. *The Times of Natal*, 7-8-1895.

59. *The Times of Natal*, 31-7-1895.

60. *The Natal Witness*, 30-8-1895.



As in the past, a large number of political meetings continued to be held to discuss the harbour report - the only topic which seemed to interest the voters at the time.<sup>61</sup> Representatives who had voted with the government were asked to resign<sup>62</sup> and in Pietermaritzburg an unruly crowd did not give T.P. O'Meara, a well-known "ministerialite" a chance to speak.<sup>63</sup> During a meeting at Ladysmith one speaker was so carried away that he declared that "every epithet applied to the Government - dishonest, unjust, and immoral - was merited, and for the way they had treated the Harbour Report they might call them most mean and most contemptible".<sup>64</sup>

Similar assertions were made at other meetings. *The Natal Witness*, which revelled in attacks on the government, wondered whether the whole affair was not making Natal the laughing stock in South Africa while more serious problems such as "the Indian being placed on the same level as themselves in political rights" was being disregarded by the public.<sup>65</sup> Other newspapers followed suit and *The Natal Mercury* was aghast that personal matters and not more serious policy differences served as cleavage between two political parties.<sup>66</sup> Whether as a result of the newspaper trying to quell the heated feelings, or whether the fickle Natal public found other things to occupy them, it is clear that by the end of 1895 the agitation on the harbour question had died down to a large extent.<sup>67</sup> The announcement by Robinson that the government had decided to obtain the services of two authorities on harbour matters, may also have helped to calm feelings.<sup>68</sup>

### The end of the dispute and the end of Escombe's premiership

But the end was not yet in sight. Methven now started playing a more forceful role. He had to a large extent been in the background during much of the controversy, but he suddenly appeared and sued the government for unlawful dismissal and breach of contract.<sup>69</sup> The court case which was heard at the beginning of 1896 was not successful for the harbour engineer and the case was dismissed.<sup>70</sup> *The Natal Mercury* was ecstatic about the dismissal of the case<sup>71</sup> which it termed "this ridiculous exaggeration", but *The Natal Witness* warned that the judge's decision did not really exonerate the ministry: "They may think that they have been white-washed, but in the opinion of every fair-judging man ... they are not the better for it than so many white sepulchers".<sup>72</sup>

Although the statement of *The Natal Witness* could have indeed been true, the issue was laid at rest during 1896. The Natalians were at this stage more perturbed about the impending rinderpest epizootic and encouraged by the improved trade returns resulting from the completion of the Natal railway line to Johannesburg. This also had a dramatic effect on the number of ships docking at the harbour.<sup>73</sup> During the same year the two authorities on harbours, Sir Charles Hartley and J. Wolfe Barry, also visited Port Natal harbour<sup>74</sup> and it was hoped that they would finally come up with a plan to solve the vexing Bar problem.

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61. *The Natal Witness*, 2-9-1895.

62. *The Natal Witness*, 4-8-1895.

63. *The Natal Witness*, 21-8-1895.

64. *The Natal Witness*, 16-9-1895.

65. 5-9-1895.

66. 5-9-1895.

67. G.H. 1301, Copies on confidential despatches to Secretary of State, 1895-1900: Hely-Hutchinson - Chamberlain, 19-10-1895, p. 120.

68. Legislative Assembly Debates, 25 April - 9 August 1895, Vol. XXIII, 1-8-1895; 2-8-1895.

69. M.J.P.W. 11, Minute Papers on Harbours, Minute Paper L & W 1855/1895: Shepstone, Wylie & Binns - Minister of Lands and Works, 24-8-1895.

70. G.H. 1228, Copies of correspondence to Secretary of State, 1895-1898, No. 22: Hely-Hutchinson - Chamberlain, 1-2-1896, p. 87; *The Natal Witness*, 7-2-1896.

71. 4-2-1896.

72. 4-2-1896.

73. *Natal Blue Books, Report of Port Captain, 1896*.

74. Legislative Assembly Debates, 25 April - 9 August 1895, Vol. XXIII, 1-8-1895.

However, optimism in Natal at the beginning of 1897 proved to be short-lived. John Robinson retired early in the year and this was a heavy blow to most colonists because he had been able to win the confidence of most of the Natal parliamentarians. There was also a certain harmony in the cabinet which was primarily a result of his personal qualities.<sup>75</sup> Escombe, who took over as Prime Minister, was a completely different type of man, and one can suspect that the opposition to the government must have been thrilled because it was easier to find fault with Escombe than with Robinson. Harry Escombe had in his long political career never really succeeded in winning the confidence of the colonists, in spite of his strong personality and high intellect. He was often impatient and intolerant and could not curb his temper. He was, in contrast to his predecessor, unable to win the support of the northern districts or even Pietermaritzburg.<sup>76</sup> Escombe's biggest mistake was his total underestimation of the opposition. His role in the dismissal of Methven had not been forgotten and when the time was ripe, this was again used as a stick to beat him with.

The opposition had by 1897 centred around Henry Binns, who was also the strongest opponent of Escombe's harbour policy. Evidently Binns had close ties with the press, especially the editor of *The Natal Witness*, and this Pietermaritzburg newspaper played a very important role during the ensuing elections of that year.<sup>77</sup>

There is reason to believe that Binns's opposition to Escombe on the harbour question was sincere and that he truly believed that Methven's plans for the extension of the north pier and combined with tidal scour would lead to the best results. Whatever the truth, Binns was quick to seize on the harbour issue as soon as the Hartley-Wolfe Barry Report was tabled on the 15th August 1897.<sup>78</sup>

The report which was clearly a compromise between the views of Escombe and Methven gave substantial ammunition to both factions. The opposition was elated that the report endorsed Methven's ideas of lengthening the north pier and relying on tidal scour, while the government supporters pointed out that the report also favoured dredging. Not one of the sides wanted to capitulate. Binns indicated that dredging costs would be too high (it was already budgeted at £70 000 for 1897) and this was much more than was budgeted for education or roads. A new dredger, which was a necessity, would cost £65 000 and a further £9 000 to keep afloat while a dry dock - a necessity for the dredgers - would incur another £150 000 for a floating one and a quarter of a million pounds for a concrete one.<sup>79</sup>

It is no wonder that with these figures in hand, as well as the older tensions, that the harbour issue became a debatable point in the elections of 1897. Methven's dismissal was raked up again and opponents to the government harped on the fact that Methven had been proved correct and that he had been treated in a "non-British" way.<sup>80</sup> The supporters of the government tried in vain to keep the matter out of politics by arguing that "to exalt it once again into the position of 'a burning question' is a mistake which should be avoided. We have had enough of the merits and demerits of the north pier extension and dredging, and it will be a great misfortune if we are to have the whole controversy revived".<sup>81</sup> Escombe at this time declared that the government would abide by the report and follow it to the letter,<sup>82</sup> but even this was to no avail. The opposition press refused to believe the Prime Minister. Two of his ministers did not make matters easier for him as they had openly spoken out against the lengthening of the north pier, although their argu-

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75. J. Lambert, *Sir John Robinson and responsible government, 1863-1897* (Unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Natal, 1975), p. 237.

76. C.A. Gillitt, *Natal 1893-1897, The alignment of parties and the fall of the Escombe ministry* (N.p., 1965), Chapter 1, pp. 9, 10.

77. *Ibid.*; Chapter IV, p. 2.

78. *Natal Blue Books, Report of the existing works with proposals for further improvement of the harbour by Sir Charles Hartley and J. Wolfe Barry.*

79. *The Natal Witness*, 6-8-1897.

80. *The Natal Witness*, 13-7-1897 (Truth).

81. *The Natal Mercury*, 12-7-1897.

82. *The Natal Mercury*, 6-8-1897.

ments had been that other works, e.g. internal railways and the rinderpest, needed funds more urgently than harbour works.<sup>83</sup>

The harbour controversy became "one of the main planks in the election platform".<sup>84</sup> Hely-Hutchinson referred to it as "one of the chief subjects of controversy".<sup>85</sup> Each and every candidate referred to it in one or other way. At a meeting in Ixopo the main speaker, J. Baynes, mentioned the degrading and shameful action of the government in the Methven dismissal and maintained that the government would always carry the stigma of it. Natalians therefore had to vote against the "irresponsible, self-constituted engineer (Escombe) ... who retarded the work of the harbour and the advancement of prosperity of the colony".<sup>86</sup>

Similar sentiments were expressed by others, but other issues, especially the government's internal railway policy, became more important as the election progressed.<sup>87</sup> It is, however, undeniable that the harbour question had a major influence on the election results, although Escombe's dominant personality must reign as the prime reason for his election failure.<sup>88</sup>

The result of the election was a great shock to Escombe as he could only muster thirteen supporters in a parliament of 37 members. Important opponents of Escombe's harbour policy were elected - H. Bale, F.S. Tatham, A.H. Hime, W.B. Morcom, and H. Binns, who became the new Prime Minister.<sup>89</sup>

The new government did not wait long to show where they stood with regard to the Port Natal harbour. A day after Hime's appointment as Minister of Lands and Works he wrote to C.J. Crofts, the harbour engineer at that time: "I should like to have as soon as possible a report from you as to the best means of proceeding with the immediate extension of the North Pier".<sup>90</sup> The extension of this pier was indeed completed in 1900,<sup>91</sup> but Methven was never reinstated.

## Conclusion

Escombe who had for so many years been involved with the harbour, albeit not always with discretion, but always with dedication, and who had often declared that his life's work would be to make the harbour accessible to large ships, declared in one of his last speeches in parliament in 1897 that "previously every incident connected with the harbour has been regarded with the greatest interest, and I do not believe that the interest has ceased".<sup>92</sup>

This time Escombe was not correct. The interest in the harbour disappeared after the 1897 election. On 27 December 1899 Harry Escombe, the great protagonist of Port Natal harbour died<sup>93</sup> without experiencing the satisfaction of seeing the harbour open to ships of all sizes, at night as well as day as he had so fervently hoped. It is ironic, however, that Escombe whose unpopularity, caused amongst other things by his harbour policy and which played a role in the fall of his ministry, was shown to be correct with regard to his faith in dredging and his scepticism about the north pier. The South African Railways and Harbours destroyed the lengthened north pier in the 1940s and lengthened the southern breakwater.<sup>94</sup> Today Durban relies completely on dredging to keep the harbour open.

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83. *The Natal Witness*, 13-9-1897.

84. M.H. Comrie, *The ministry of Harry Escombe* (N.p., 1965), p. 53.

85. C.O. 179/200, Natal, No. 20659: Hely-Hutchinson - Graham, 22-9-1897.

86. *The Natal Witness*, 11-9-1897.

87. C.A. Gillitt, *Natal 1893-1897. The alignment of parties and the fall of the Escombe ministry*, Chapter 1, p. 1.

88. C.O. 179/200, Natal No. 23626, Hely-Hutchinson - Chamberlain, 8-10-1897.

89. G.H. 1328, Copies of letters to High Commissioner and General, 1892-1899: Hely-Hutchinson - Escombe, 5-10-1897, p. 426.

90. M.J.P.W. 14, Minute Paper L & W 2470/1897: A.H. Hime - Engineer-in-charge, Harbour Works, 6-10-1897.

91. C.W. Methven, 'The Harbours of South Africa; with special reference to the causes and treatment of sand-bars', *Institution of Civil Engineers, Minutes of Proceedings, CLXVI*, 1906, Paper 3602.

92. Legislative Assembly Debates, 24 November 1897 - 11 January 1898, 2-12-1897.

93. W.J. de Kock (ed.), *Dictionary of South African biography I* (Cape Town, 1968), p. 280.

94. E.G. Hobson, *The effect of Durban harbour on Natal's politics, 1874-1898*, p. 14.

Seen against the background of the enormous sums which were spent on harbour development in the 19th century, it is hardly surprising that the harbour became an important issue in local politics. Henry Binns declared correctly in 1891 that "the public of this Colony have always taken a very keen, and a very deep interest in all matters affecting the harbour. This may be attributed to various reasons. In the first place, because that interest is concentrated upon one port ... In the next place there is something intensely interesting in the fact that we have got a body of men in various capacities battling with the forces of nature, and then again we have the fact there is a certain amount of sentimental feeling entering into the consideration of harbour matters, because we have men who are engaged in, and who devote a large portion of their time to the problem which has to be solved at the Port".<sup>95</sup>

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95. Legislative Council Debates, Vol. XVI, 30 April - 7 August, 1891, 29-6-1891