

IF RHODESIA HAD ENTERED THE UNION IN 1922

An article appeared recently, March 1965, in the English magazine *History Today* in which the author, W. A. P. Phillips, showed how nearly Nelson intercepted Napoleon on his way to Egypt in 1798 and suggested that the consequences of such an interception might have been very great indeed. Although I do not wish to suggest that the consequences of the incorporation of Rhodesia into the Union would have been comparable to those of an early end to Napoleon's career, nevertheless, in this article I should like to suggest some of the possible consequences for South Africa and Rhodesia, if Rhodesia had accepted the Union Government's offer and entered the Union as a fifth province in 1922.

I have suggested in another place¹ that the rejection of the Union Government's terms by the Rhodesian electorate was primarily due to the lack of security felt by the railwaymen and the civil servants under these terms. Now let us suppose that the Union Government had so altered its terms that they would have been acceptable to the majority of railwaymen and civil servants and that most of these had consequently voted for incorporation into the Union, but that the South African terms were otherwise unaltered. What would have been the probable consequences of this course of action?

In the referendum there was a total poll of 14,856; there were 93 rejected votes, 8,774 in favour of Responsible Government and 5,989 in favour of Union; Responsible Government, therefore, had a majority of 2,785. The three Bulawayo constituencies provided a majority for responsible government of 1,107 and the two Salisbury constituencies a further 603, so that these five constituencies provided a majority of 1,710, leaving the other eight constituencies to provide between them a majority of only 1,075, hardly more than 130 each.² These figures seem very significant in view of the fact that Bulawayo was the headquarters of the railways and Salisbury was the capital and these two towns, therefore, had the largest numbers of railwaymen and civil servants, respectively. That this was the case was affirmed by a newspaper report from Salisbury after the referendum in which it was stated that most of the railwaymen, women, junior civil servants and younger voters had voted against Union.³

It seems not unreasonable to conclude that, if by a generous treatment of their claims the Union Government had won over 80% of the civil servants (they had expressed their admiration for Smuts's ideals), and 50% of the railwaymen (allowing for the implacable hostility of their leaders), the vote of Southern Rhodesia would have been for incorporation by an even larger margin than it actually was for responsible government, since there were approximately 2,000 railwaymen and 2,150 civil servants⁴ who

1. *Incorporation in the Union of South Africa or Self-Government: Southern Rhodesia's Choice*, 1922 (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of South Africa, 1964).

2. *Bulawayo Chronicle*, 8.11.1922.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Official Year Book of the Colony of Southern Rhodesia*, No. 2, 1930, p. 652.

together with their wives, since women gained the vote in Southern Rhodesia in 1919, formed approximately 40% of the electorate in 1922.

On the supposition that Rhodesia had joined the Union, let us see what influence this might have had on South African politics. The first important date to consider is 1924. The Government emerged from the election of February 1921 with a majority of 22⁵ but by 1924 this had been reduced to 8 by by-elections.⁶ The loss of a further by-election at Wakkerstroom made Smuts decide to go to the country as a result of which the Pact was returned with a majority of 27; but what if Smuts had had a majority of 18 and not 8? The Terms of Union promised Rhodesia 10 seats in the House of Assembly to start with and although one can not presume that the South African Party would have won all ten of these seats in a general election, it is safe to state that all ten members would have supported Smuts against the Nationalists considering the amount of anti-Nationalist feeling in Rhodesia, even if some of the ten were ex-Responsible Government Association men in parliament as independents or as members of a local Rhodesian party akin to the Natal Home Rulers of the same era. It seems then unlikely that Smuts would have gone to the country in 1924 if Rhodesia had been incorporated into the Union and a general election would, therefore, probably not have taken place until 1926 when the five years' term of the parliament elected in 1921 had expired.

The 1924 election occurred at the end of a period of depression and drought, and, therefore, a period adverse to the government — a factor which must materially have affected the issue in favour of the Pact. By 1926, however, the position in this regard had changed radically for the better and it is very much open to question if the South African Party, especially with ten extra Rhodesian seats, would have been defeated and whether the Pact Government would have come into existence — with all that implies.

Another occasion on which the inclusion of Rhodesia in the Union might well have changed the course of South African history was the general election of 1948. Here, however, we must be even more careful as the longer the lapse of time the more hypothetical changes become. While it is fair enough to assume that conditions in Rhodesia would have altered so little between 1922 and 1926 that all ten Rhodesian seats would have gone to the South African Party or its allies, even though reluctant ones, we cannot make the same assumption of 1948. Many changes can take place in 26 years and to say definitely what the position in Rhodesia would have been after 26 years of union is quite impossible, but one can at least speculate and speculation can at times be very interesting especially if it is based on fact and is not pure fantasy; so let us do some speculation.

During the referendum campaign two diametrically opposed ideas were expressed as to what would happen to Rhodesian land in the event of the

5. Eric A. Walker: *A History of Southern Africa* (3rd Edition, 1959), p. 573.

6. Walker, *op. cit.*, p. 604.

incorporation of Rhodesia in the Union. In Rhodesia the Responsible Government Association claimed that the country would be flooded with poor whites from the Union⁷ and further that much of the £500,000 a year development grant promised to Rhodesia would be spent on providing farms and equipment for indigent Afrikaans-speaking farmers from the other provinces of the Union.⁸ In South Africa, on the other hand, the Nationalists claimed that under Smuts's promises land settlement in Rhodesia would remain under Rhodesian control, that Rhodesia would continue to exclude poor whites from its land settlements and that settlers would be brought from England solely for party purposes and racial reasons.⁹

Which, if either, of these two opinions would have proved correct is impossible to say, but I think it fair to assume, in view of the assumptions I made about 1924, that land settlement would largely have gone in accordance with Rhodesian wishes until the great depression, but not so altogether after that, as the Union Government would surely have looked to land settlement schemes in Rhodesia as one means of relieving depression conditions in the rest of the Union.

I do not think that the presence of Rhodesia in the Union would have had any effect on the formation of a Coalition Government and that this would have inevitably taken place, as in fact it did. And surely such a government would have felt itself compelled to make use of much Rhodesian land available for land settlement schemes for impoverished Union farmers? It is also fair to assume that once free movement of Europeans was permitted between Rhodesia and the other parts of the Union, there would have been a gradual influx of Afrikaans-speaking South Africans into Rhodesia to settle there on their own resources. As a check for these assumptions let us consider briefly the development of Natal since Union. In 1910 Natal was very largely an English-speaking province. In the succeeding years there was a steady increase in the number of Afrikaans-speaking inhabitants, but in spite of this Natal remains even today largely English-speaking. It is then fair enough to assume, even allowing for Rhodesia's comparatively small population in 1922, that even under Union it too would have remained basically English-speaking, especially in view of the above considerations, although perhaps not to the same extent as Natal.

It must also be assumed that by 1948 the number of Rhodesian representatives in the House of Assembly would have increased. In the Terms of Admission it was stated that Rhodesia would gain additional representatives up to a total of 17 at the rate of one for every 3,250 European male adults in excess of 12,085, the number then in Southern Rhodesia.¹⁰ In order to reach the maximum of 17 the European male adult population of Rhodesia

7. *The Rhodesian*, 30.9.1922.

8. *Rhodesia Herald*, 15.9.1922; report of a Responsible Government Association meeting at Gatooma.

9. *Die Burger*, 2.8.1922.

10. Terms of Admission I (1)(a), *British South Africa Company Government Gazette Extraordinary*, 31.7.1922; Government Notice No. 341 of 1922.

would have to increase to 34,835 which would mean a total white population of some 90,000. In point of fact the European population of Southern Rhodesia in 1946 was 82,382¹¹ and therefore it seems safe to assume that under Union, by 1948, Southern Rhodesia would have had 17 members in the House of Assembly. Even if there had been a considerable influx of Afrikaans-speaking Europeans into Southern Rhodesia after 1922, it would seem safe to assume on the foregoing presumption that the majority of the Southern Rhodesian M.P.s would have been supporters of General Smuts. Let us suppose that 12 members belonged to the United Party and 5 to the *Herenigde Nasionale Party*, as Dr. Malan's party was known at the time.

In the actual event the United Party was left in a minority of five,¹² but if 17 Rhodesian seats had been divided as above, it would have had a majority of two. Two is hardly a working majority you may say, but at present in a House of 630 members the Labour Party in Britain is carrying on with an overall majority of only four. If Smuts had been able to carry on as Prime Minister after 1948, who knows what would have happened? Perhaps the Nationalists would have gained power in 1953 at the latest in any case, but perhaps with a continued flow of immigrants from Britain the United Party would have strengthened its position or perhaps Smuts would have made use of the United Party's large majority of votes, if not seats in another way. It was estimated, making due allowance for uncontested seats, that the United Party had an actual majority of some 150,000 votes in 1948. Unfortunately, from its point of view, these were mostly concentrated in city seats with overwhelming majorities and the country seats were won by the Nationalists with small majorities. Now, if with the help of Rhodesian votes, the United Party had been returned even with a very small majority in 1948, it could have introduced legislation to establish in South Africa what had originally been adopted but subsequently rejected by the National Convention, i.e. Proportional Representation. This could have been adopted in such a way that parliament would have reflected more accurately the strength of the parties in votes as a whole and not given an artificial majority to one side, gained by, for them, a fortunate distribution of the electorate. If this had been done in 1948 it would surely have had a profound effect on the history of South Africa since.

While it must be admitted that the whole of this article, especially with regard to the 1948 election, is highly speculative, it does I think, show that certain events in a nation's history can rightly be called turning points because of the effect, positive or negative, they have on the subsequent course of events, and it is clear that the choice made by the Southern Rhodesian electorate in favour of responsible government in 1922 was, as far as both Southern Rhodesia and South Africa were concerned, one such event.

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11. *Chambers Encyclopedia*, Vol. II, p. 674, 1950 edition.

12. Walker, *op. cit.*, p. 771.