

BOTHA-HERTZOG AND THE VEREENIGING PEACE NEGOTIATIONS

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During the peace negotiations of 1902 Generals Louis Botha and J.B.M. Hertzog played an outstanding role. In the assessment of their efforts, consideration must constantly be given to the ways in which their backgrounds, characteristics and personalities differed.

Louis Botha was born in Greytown (Natal) on 27 September 1862. He grew up in the North-western Free State, in the district of Vrede and gained his education in simple farm schools during little more than two years. Botha participated as a member of the Boer volunteers in the Zulu wars of 1884, and was rewarded with a land grant along the south-eastern border of the Transvaal. In December he married an Irish girl, Annie Emmet, and in 1887 he was elected, as one of the two members for the district of Vryheid, to the First Volksraad of the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek — a position he occupied up to the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War.¹ Botha became a member of General Lucas Meyer's commando, and owing to exceptional military insight he gained speedy promotion; his progress, indeed, was meteoric. As military strategist his victories, especially those at Colenso, Spioenkop and Vaalkrans, were unparalleled. It was no wonder that, at the age of 37, he was appointed acting Commandant General of the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republic's forces.² In consequence he also served as leader of the Transvaal deputation to the Middelburg conferences in 1901 and played an important role in the ultimate peace deliberations in 1902.³

James Barry Munnik Hertzog was born on 3 April 1866 in the district of Wellington. The Hertzog family later moved to Kimberley and Jagersfontein. In 1881 Hertzog went to Stellenbosch for further education, and there, in 1889, gained the B.A. degree. Hertzog continued his studies in Amsterdam, gained his doctor's degree with a theses entitled: "De Income-Bond, Zyn rechtskarakter en de woorde sijner ekonomische en jurisdische beginsele..."⁴ In 1893 he became an advocate in Pretoria and on 9 October 1894 he got married to Mynie Neethling. In 1895 Hertzog was appointed a judge of the Free State bench. On the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War, with the permission of President M.T. Steyn, he became legal adviser to the Chief Commandant on the western front, as well as assessor of the council of war. After the collapse of the Boers' strategy of positional warfare he became a champion of the war of movement. On 17 June 1900 he was promoted to the rank of Combat General and, after the re-organisation of the Free State forces Assistant Chief Commandant. During the latter phase of the war he was the government's principal legal adviser.⁵

In addition to the differences in background and life circumstances of the two generals, their personalities and life philosophies also set them on opposite ends of the pole. Botha was a successful, progressive farmer, with exceptional leadership qualities. His was a dynamic personality with a spontaneous charm, inherently his own. Nevertheless he always remained a dignified, simple and natural person. He saw service in terms of duty, vocation and the honour associated with performance of the task. From his earliest days he had learnt never to be satisfied with second place. This perhaps explains why everything

he undertook was crowned with success.⁶ Yet the outstanding impression the world gained of him was that characteristic vaguely referred to as personal magnetism. "Strangers who saw him for the first time loved him. There was an indescribable something about him which caused men looking at him for the first time to pledge their friendship for all time. The light in his blue eyes seemed to mesmerize men, to draw them, willingly or unwillingly, to him. It was... a mysterious, involuntary influence exerted (on) everyone with whom he came in contact... he was the handsomest man in the Boer Army. His voice, his eyes, his facial expression and his manners all combined to strengthen the man's powers over others..."⁷

Rightly it was said by General J.C. Smuts: "If he had culture as he had chivalry and commonsense, there would not be his equal in South Africa."⁸

Although Botha was gifted with dynamic personal charm, he was very sensitive to criticism, whether directed at him personally or at the Government. The post-war political milieu and events were responsible, no doubt, for excessively increasing that sensitivity to criticism.

Hertzog was a modest, courteous, friendly, honest and serious person. He was a hard worker and although not exceptionally gifted, was nevertheless discerning and endowed with a go-getting spirit. Hertzog was an outspoken anti-imperialist, since he abhorred the expansion of a great nation at the expense of a small one.⁹ Above all, he was inspired with the desire to attain the recognition of the Afrikaner nation, and a dedicated champion of equal language rights. Sometimes he became angrily impatient when the realisation of the latter ideal proceeded too slowly.¹⁰ These ideals constituted the guiding principles of his political thinking.

Hertzog was by no means a good speaker. An unprepared speech could land him in wordiness. This sometimes resulted in political misunderstanding.¹¹ Nevertheless Hertzog "Now and again, in a prepared speech, produced a gem of almost flawless purity."¹²

The disparity in their backgrounds, education, personalities, life-styles and political priorities almost guaranteed that complete unanimity could never exist between Botha and Hertzog. These differences inevitably became more acute and obvious the more closely they came into contact. This was the underlying reason which not only drove a wedge between the two leaders but was also to divide the Afrikaner people into two camps.

The first signs of differences of opinion had already revealed themselves during the Klerksdorp meeting of the governments of the two Boer Republics in 1902. Both republics were eager to conclude peace, provided it could be achieved with the retention of independence. This principle was subscribed to by both Botha and Hertzog. Alternatives other than independence with peace were viewed with doubt. It was precisely in this connection that Botha and Hertzog could not reach agreement concerning the alternative viewpoint to be adopted.

Hertzog was a proponent of the prosecution of war, if peace implied the loss of independence. He was optimistic about the course of the war because conditions in the two Republics since 1901 had shown marked improvement. In his speech he referred to the success achieved subsequent to the beginning of 1901, when it had also been alleged that conditions were hopeless. Furthermore, Hertzog surmised that the British forces had also suffered heavy losses, although he conceded that the Boers were not informed about the exact situation in this regard.¹³

Hertzog's standpoint regarding the retention of his country's independence had a strong emotional element in it and revealed a deeply-rooted patriotism. But his arguments did not greatly impress, since his assertion with regard to the enemy was not based on indisputable facts. Nevertheless no-one doubted his honesty or questioned his integrity and leadership.

Botha did not share this optimistic attitude with regard to unconditional prosecution of the war. He maintained that the Boer forces were weakening. The Boers' manpower on the northern and south-eastern front had declined in one year from 9 750 to 5 200.¹⁴ The volk would have to decide whether the war ought to be continued: "Wij moesten toen duidelijk aan hem gezegd hebben dat alleen geloof en volharding ons konden verlossen en dat er geen ander redmiddel was." Botha also feared that no further help could be expected from the Cape Colony. The inadequate communications, the numerical preponderance of the enemy and the thinning out of the Boer forces, made the consideration of peace proposals essential. The success of 1901 was tempered by the enemy's conquests and the destruction of large areas of the Republics. For the leaders, death or exile would be preferable to the enemy's yoke, but, as opposed to this, there was a duty to be discharged towards the people.¹⁵

Botha's pragmatic approach was immediately disclosed in these words. As militarist and strategist he could manifestly judge the unenviable and indeed lamentable position of the Boer forces on the battle front more accurately than Hertzog.

Although at this stage Botha and Hertzog took up positions in opposition to each other. This did not actually result in open confrontation. They only chanced to express divergent pleas for concerted future action. The Afrikaner aspiration for unity and complete co-operation was not threatened or harmed. Their divergent personal views and interpretations of alternative constitutional approaches could not then be regarded as actual political differences of opinion. But hereafter personality clashes would grow into obstacles which would gradually thwart co-operation. The relationship between the two leaders was not as yet disturbed, since the British governments' action prevented an open breach.

Britain was not prepared to consider the proposals of the Boer Republics. The British were prepared to negotiate only if the Republics gave up their independence. This led to the summoning, by the republican governments, of national representations, to consider the British peace terms.

The British attitude at this stage in no way influenced Botha's or Hertzog's point of view. During the Vereeniging deliberations both of them directed the attention of the people's representative to realities which could not be ignored.

On 16 May 1902 Botha drew attention to the decline of the fighting power of the two republics. The war

casualties had caused an acute shortage of manpower at the front, while the irregular supply of stores hampered the successful prosecution of military operations. Botha questioned the meaning of the term "bittereinde". No-one could say with precision where the bitter end might be. "Is it the stage at which everyone is in his grave or is exiled?" This should not be regarded as the bitter end. Such an attitude could result in the destruction of the nation. He saw the correct interpretation of the bitter end as that stage up to which the people fought and could continue no further. He pointed out that he was prepared to continue prosecuting the war, since his family were well provided for, yet, as far as he was concerned, it was not his own interests but those of the people that counted. He laid particular emphasis on the fact that dilatory methods ought not to be allowed to continue till the people were driven to unconditional surrender."

Two weeks were to pass before Hertzog addressed the gathering. He pleaded for the continuation of the war. In his opinion the argument regarding the weakening of the people was neutralised by sacrifices undergone by the English people during the war. He was not prepared to accept the failure of the deputation abroad. He remained optimistic that they (the Boers) would ultimately attain success. Therein he saw the possibility of deliverance. The reports about conditions in the two republics saddened him also. He acknowledged that no war had ever been waged where the people had proportionately suffered and offered up so much as (our) people in this war. It was precisely because of the great sacrifices endured that he was disappointed in the meeting, since the discussion had "robbed (many burgers) of their courage". He feared that, if the war was continued, many burgers would defect to the enemy. The discussions did not convince Hertzog that the British peace terms should be adopted. He was a staunch supporter of the policy of proceeding along the accepted route of relentless resistance.¹⁴

The difference of opinion between Botha and Hertzog ultimately amounted to choice between two alternatives: prosecution of the war or surrender with the loss of independence. Botha, as a clear-sighted realist, felt it his duty to urge the people to accept peace on the British terms. As a hard-headed jurist Hertzog, in his turn, opposed the absolute immutability of surrender. The restoration of independence in a conflict, thus he was no supporter of a dictated peace.

It must be noted, however, that the difference of opinion between Botha and Hertzog had not yet resulted in any conflict of political ideals, principles or policy. They were forced to accept the British decision. Hereafter Louis Botha and Barry Hertzog girded themselves for one goal — to achieve the reconstruction and uplifting of the Afrikaner.

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