

A FEW THOUGHTS ON THE GENESIS OF THE ANGLO-BOER WAR, 1899-1902

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In 1999 we celebrated the centenary of the beginning of the Anglo-Boer War. For the last hundred years specialists asked different questions related to this war. Since the start of the war they tried to find out how and why it had broken out.² And how it happened that two small states dared to declare war against one of the greatest powers of that time. A war which they could not expect to win. There have been many theories which tried to explain the origins of this war, such as the threat of Afrikaner domination, a capitalistic conspiracy, and British determination to uphold its paramountcy in the region. They tried to evaluate which motives, political or economic, were more essential. Some tried to find out who was responsible: J Chamberlain or A Milner.

Of course many more questions have been asked, and many more problems discussed. But behind all of those another question is hidden: Was the Anglo-Boer War inevitable?

Most specialists do not accept the notion of inevitability. Determinism in fact never was in fashion among historians. Most of them consider it to be simply non-historical. Authors argue convincingly that the British government was not deliberately preparing for war in 1899. One of the main arguments is reluctance of the British government to engage in military preparations.³

In the introduction to I Smith's, *The origins of the South African War, 1899-1902*, the editor wrote "that war is never inevitable".⁴ It is difficult to argue with this kind of statement, and I do not intend to do so. If anybody would ask if the Anglo-Boer War was inevitable, the answer should surely be no. But in my opinion this is a wrong question. I am wondering if we should not rather ask what

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² To mention a few: the famous work of John A Hobson, *The War in South Africa: Its causes and effects* (London, 1900), or LS Amery's, *The Times history of war in South Africa*, 7 Vols. (London, 190-1909).

³ See Iain Smith, *The origins of the South African War, 1899-1902* (Harlow, Essex, 1996), p. 337.

⁴ Smith, p. VIII.

both sides should have done to avoid the war? Joseph Chamberlain thought they could if they could "speak the necessary words".⁵ Was it really possible? An answer does not seem to be that easy.

I would like to concentrate on the year 1899 only. During that year some important events happened which will allow us to find answers on the above stated questions.

Since the beginning of 1899 the situation was quite tense. Kruger's electoral victory in 1898 made Alferd Milner very anxious. For him it was the ultimate proof that internal reforms in Transvaal were impossible without outside pressure, at least in the immediate future. This left him only one option for resolving the Transvaal question - a war.⁶ The British Cabinet, including the Colonial Secretary, Joseph Chamberlain, were much less emphatic about the future relations with the South African Republic. They still hoped to reach a peaceful settlement. They strongly believed "that Kruger when firmly summoned would always climb down".⁷ Therefore even at the beginning of 1899, they were not ready to accept war as the only option left, although at least since the Jameson Raid, it had been accepted as one of the possible ways of resolving the problem of Transvaal.⁸

The beginning of 1899 brought an improvement in the British international situation. In 1898 Kitchener had completed the conquest of the Mahdist State in the Sudan. At the beginning of December 1898, France had left Fashoda to the British. The Anglo-German agreement of 30 August 1898 reduced the threat from that side. Therefore Great Britain gained a free hand in South Africa.

From November 1898 up to the end of January 1899 Milner was in London. Using his connections with the press and political élites, Milner utilised this time to educate British society and policy-makers about the situation in South Africa, and

⁵ J.L. Garvin, *The life of Joseph Chamberlain*, Vol. 3 (London 1934), pp. 438-9.

⁶ A Milner to J Chamberlain, 23 February 1898, in Cecil Headlam (ed.), *The Milner Papers. South Africa*, Vol. 1 (London 1931), pp. 220-4.

⁷ Garvin, p. 44.

⁸ Since 1896 Chamberlain at least twice considered the possibility of going to war with Transvaal, the first time in 1896 when Kruger declined Chamberlain's offer to come to London for a conference. J Chamberlain to Fairfield, April 1896, in E. Drus, "Select documents from the Chamberlain Papers concerning Anglo-Transvaal relations, 1896-1899" in *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, Vol. 27(76), 1954, pp. 160-1. The second time the case was not so clear, but at least the cabinet was ready for a military demonstration in March 1897. See Smith, pp. 136-7. In fact, in both cases, the main idea was to demonstrate British determination. The increased activity of the British Intelligence in Transvaal shows that this option was treated seriously.

about the dangers connected with the rising power of the South African Republic.⁹ He was very content with the results, and believed that most of the British decision-makers were sharing his views. Therefore he returned to South Africa ready to start his active and aggressive policy.¹⁰

In analysing the situation in 1899, I would like to concentrate on some crucial events, which could be seen as the important junctions where both sides could make decisions which could have changed relations for the better, and make the war avoidable.

The first of these episodes is the Bloemfontein Conference. The facts related to this conference are widely known. Many historians described it giving all the details.¹¹ Therefore I want to concentrate on a few aspects of this event only.

First of all it is good to recall the goals which both sides wanted to achieve during the conference. For Great Britain the main issue of this conference was the treatment of the Uitlanders. It was widely believed at that time that they composed the great majority of the white population of the South African Republic.¹² The enfranchisement of the Uitlanders was seen as a way to take over Transvaal. Therefore Milner proposed five years' retrospective franchise. He also wanted Transvaal to create seven additional new seats for the Rand.¹³ The important fact is that Milner was not ready to reach a compromise in this question. Kruger was supposed to accept or decline the British proposal.¹⁴ According to Milner the rest of the problems like the dynamite monopoly, the status of Swaziland, the question of the British South Africa Company's indemnity for the Jameson Raid, or arbitration, could be discussed, but only after acceptance of his franchise proposals.

Kruger's attitude was different. He wanted to negotiate a whole number of issues. He was ready to step back on the question of the Uitlander franchise, but he

⁹ See AN Porter, "Sir Alfred Milner and the press, 1897-1899" in *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (1973), p. 334.

¹⁰ See Milner to Lord Selborne, 23 and 31 January 1899, in Headlam, pp. 301-2.

¹¹ JS Marais, *The Fall of Kruger's Republic* (Oxford, 1961), pp. 263-84; Thomas Pakenham, *The Boer War* (London, 1980), pp. 61-70; Smith, pp. 272-89.

¹² See Chamberlain to Sir H Robinson, 4 February 1896, "Correspondence on the subject of the recent disturbances in the South African Republic, London 1896", *British Parliamentary papers*, C.-7933, p. 84; or "Estimate of population and relative proportion of races in South African States, British Colonies and Protectorates, September 1899", *Balfour Papers*, British Museum, Add.MS.49717, f. 11.

¹³ See Marais, pp. 281-2.

¹⁴ Vice. Milner to Earl of Selborne, 17 May 1899, in D George Boyce (ed.), *Earl of Selborne, 1895-1910* (London, 1990), pp. 79-80.

wanted a *quid pro quo*.¹⁵ Therefore he wanted to discuss all the problems at the same time. He was ready to make some electoral reforms. Already on 23 May 1899 Kruger had introduced a project of reform which would shorten the residence period to nine years. During the conference he proposed further reforms, and agreed to a seven-year retrospective franchise, and two additional seats in the Volksraad for the Witwatersrand. But that was the limit of his concessions. He thought that he had shown enough flexibility. He wanted something in exchange, and proposed a whole list of problems which they could discuss. He wanted Great Britain to accept the annexation of Swaziland by Transvaal. He also wanted to discuss the indemnity for the Jameson Raid. But the most important for him was the question of arbitration, which would weaken British claims to sovereignty over the South African Republic. Under no circumstance Kruger was ready to accept that Milner would dictate. Both sides stood firmly by their points.

How big were the differences between the two sides? As to the franchise for the Uitlanders the British proposals were: a five-year retrospective franchise, and nine places for Witwatersrand in the Volksraad. The South African Republic's proposals were: a seven-year retrospective franchise, and four places for Witwatersrand in the Volksraad. As far as the other questions are concerned: Great Britain was strongly opposed to the Swaziland annexation by the Transvaal,¹⁶ the British Government accepted the idea of BSAC indemnity to the Transvaal for the Jameson Raid, but opposed "extravagant demands" of the Republic.¹⁷ Great Britain was not completely opposed to the idea of arbitration but had a lot of reservations. Therefore Chamberlain advised Milner to avoid this topic.¹⁸

Looking through this list of differences, we can see that they were quite easy to overcome with a bit of flexibility, especially on the side of Lord Milner. Only on the question of the Swaziland annexation Great Britain was utterly determined. On the other questions it was rather hesitant. Both on the indemnity and arbitration issues, British politicians had quite a lot of reservations but did not oppose those ideas as a whole. It was at least a good starting point for negotiations.

Only on the issue of the franchise for Uitlanders the differences were more substantial, but still rather slender: just two years in the length of the waiting period (five required by the British, and seven by the Boers). They were bigger with respect to the redistribution of seats, but Chamberlain advised Milner to be flexible

¹⁵ Marais, pp. 280-1; Smith, pp. 283-4.

¹⁶ Marais, p. 281.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Garvin, p. 403.

in this respect.¹⁹ But the High Commissioner was not flexible. He went to Bloemfontein to dictate, not to make compromises. Even before the conference Milner had written to Conyngham Greene that Kruger had only one option, and that was to accept his proposals, otherwise the conference would break down.²⁰ Such an attitude was not very encouraging, and in fact led to a fiasco. Despite Chamberlain's advice Milner decided to break the conference down on 5 May 1899 and despite Chamberlain's annoyance, no one pressed for Milner's resignation. The first chance to achieve compromise had been lost.

But why did Milner assume such an attitude? And why was Kruger not willing to accept his proposals? The High Commissioner knew that British claims to sovereignty, especially the notion that the preamble to the Pretoria Convention was still valid, had a doubtful basis.²¹ He knew that in fact only the fourth point of the London Convention gave Great Britain some, and a very vague, sort of control over Transvaal. Therefore he preferred not to lean on the letter of the law, but on the spirit of it, and the widely accepted doctrine of British paramountcy in southern Africa.²² He had seen the issue of the Uitlanders as an important tool in subordinating the South African Republic. It is widely known that most of the British politicians believed at that time that they composed the majority of the Transvaal white population.²³ Differently than Chamberlain, who was constantly suspicious of the Uitlanders and their political motives, Milner was sure that after the Jameson Raid they had no other option than to turn to Great Britain. In his opinion London should positively answer their advances. This would give Great Britain a handy tool. In the beginning of 1899 he managed to persuade Chamberlain and the cabinet to take up the franchise issue.²⁴ Therefore London accepted it as the most important topic of debates during the Bloemfontein Conference.

But why were these two years of differences in residence so important to Milner? The answer lies in the numbers. According to British estimates something like 15 000 Uitlanders might have obtained the franchise under the five years' residence proposal, while on a seven years' basis, this number would be around 10 000, but only two years after the conference. But even more important was the fact that

¹⁹ Chamberlain to Milner, 24 May 1899, in Headlam, p. 399.

²⁰ Milner to Mr Conyngham Greene, 12 May 1899, in Headlam, p. 378.

²¹ See Marais, p. 123; Smith, p. 176.

²² Milner to Chamberlain, 25 May 1898, and 2 June 1899, in "South African Republic. Correspondence relating to the status of the South African Republic", *British Parl. Pap.*, C.-9507 (London, 1899), pp. 6, 30.

²³ See Chamberlain to Robinson, 4 February 1896, in "Correspondence on the subject of the recent...", *British Parl. Pap.*, C.-7933 (London, 1896), p. 84; or "Estimate of population...", September 1899, *Balfour Papers*, British Museum, Add.MS.59717, f. 11.

²⁴ See Smith, pp. 263-72.

if Milner's proposals would be accepted, the Uitlanders would form around two-thirds of the total enfranchised population within five years.²⁵ This meant that they could take control of the republic. But for this a redistribution of seats in the Volksraad was needed. Therefore Milner, despite Chamberlain's advice, was also uncompromising in this respect.

Although Kruger showed much more flexibility, he was not ready to make concessions that would satisfy Milner and the British Government, at least not for nothing. His attitude could be seen as a bit awkward, especially if we remember that less than three months later, he was quite willing to accept the five-years' retrospective franchise. We should recognise it as a pattern in Kruger's way of negotiating. He never ever made straightforward concessions. He always tried to bargain, to get some kind of *qui pro quod*. We can follow this pattern at least since the Goshen-Stellaland affair, and the Warren Expedition. As Chamberlain once said: "Mr Kruger procrastinates in his replies. He dribbles out reforms like water from a squeezed sponge."²⁶ In his opinion to agree at once would mean to capitulate, and he was not ready to do that. What is more, it seems that he was really afraid that Uitlanders could take over the Transvaal. As the British he had only rough estimates, not precise data. And although he knew that the Boers were more numerous than the British expected, he had no clear data concerning the number of Uitlanders. There was no official census, and they lived mostly in the Witwatersrand area, where they constituted a great majority.²⁷ Therefore he was not ready to accept Milner's proposals.

A second chance appeared over two months later, in August. Earlier, on 19 July 1899, Kruger had persuaded the Volksraad to accept new franchise arrangements, which limited the period of residence to seven years, and gave Uitlanders 6 seats in the Volksraad of 32. In this situation "(n)o one [in the British cabinet] would dream of fighting over two years in the qualification period".²⁸ Happily for Chamberlain and Milner the franchise reform was so complicated, that it was easy to question its value. Chamberlain therefore proposed "(a) joint Enquiry by British and Boer delegations for the purpose of reaching a satisfactory agreement on the franchise".²⁹ This meant a change in British policy. Both

²⁵ Smith, p. 311; See also Marais, p. 283.

²⁶ Chamberlain's speech, 26 August 1899, in Garvin, p. 438.

²⁷ According to the 1896 census over 40 000 Uitlanders, mostly British, were living in Johannesburg and only a little more than 6 000 Boers. See Marais, p. 1; and J Bryce, *Impressions of South Africa* (London, 1900), s. 424.

²⁸ Chamberlain to Milner, 18 July 1899, in Headlam, p. 468.

²⁹ Chamberlain to Milner, 27 July 1899, in "Further correspondence related to the proposed political reforms in the south African Republic". *British Parliamentary papers*, C.-9518 (London 1899), p. 11.

Chamberlain and Milner were aware that the Uitlander franchise would be an inadequate *casus belli*. They looked for better motives, and the new republican franchise law gave them a chance. They did not toss away those reforms, but declared that the British cabinet could accept them only after a joint inquiry of both governments would agree to their provisions. Chamberlain also proposed a new conference, in Cape Town, between the President of the South African Republic and the British High Commissioner. So Great Britain showed to the world her willingness to negotiate and it was Transvaal's turn to respond properly.

The Transvaal government could not accept Chamberlain's proposal, because it would mean that it accepted British claims to sovereignty over the republic. Therefore Kruger decided to turn down Chamberlain's proposal, but looked for a possibility of doing so without provoking Great Britain. At the same time Chamberlain and Milner decided that if Transvaal turned down the British proposal, the next step would be sending an ultimatum.³⁰

Transvaal however, found a way to avoid answering the British proposal. On 12 August Jan Smuts started conversations with Conyngham Greene, the British Agent in Transvaal, which eventually lasted for three days, up to 14 August. During those meetings Smuts made proposals for a final solution of the disagreements existing between the two countries. In fact, Smuts conceded everything that Milner had demanded during the Bloemfontein Conference. The Uitlanders would be granted five years' retrospective franchise. The Rand would be given eight new seats in the Volksraad (with the existing two. This would make a total of 10 seats for the mining areas in the chamber of 36). Smuts assured him that in future a quarter of the seats would be guaranteed for the Witwatersrand. New citizens would have equal rights with respect to the election of the State President and the Commandant-General. He also assured the British agent that details of the new franchise would be consulted with him. On 14 August the Transvaal government accepted Smuts' proposals, and offered to advise the Volksraad to adopt them.³¹ In return the Transvaal government wanted Great Britain to drop the demand for a joint inquiry, and using Green's words, "the Government of the S.A.R. will assume that H.M. Government will agree that their present intervention shall not form a precedent, etc. Further that H.M. Govt. will not further insist on the assertion of Suzerainty, the controversy on this subject being tacitly allowed to drop. Lastly arbitration, from which the foreign element is excluded, to be conceded as soon as

³⁰ Chamberlain to Milner, 8 and 14 August 1899, in Headlam, pp. 432-3.

³¹ For Smuts's account of the discussions, see Smuts report on the conversations with the British Agent, 14 September 1899, in WK Hancock and Jean van der Poel (eds.), *Selections from the Smuts papers*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge, 1966), pp. 283-99; for Conyngham Green's account see: Conyngham Greene to Milner, 14 August 1899 in Headlam, p. 488.

the franchise scheme has become law.³² It's worth mentioning that Greene did not present them as demands, but rather as suggestions or plans, and that would lead to serious misunderstandings.

Milner was dismayed. Transvaal gave all he wanted in Bloemfontein. Theoretically there stood nothing on the way to an agreement. But he was highly distrustful. At that stage he preferred non-conditional capitulation, or direct conflict. But Chamberlain and other members of the cabinet saw a chance for further negotiations and talks.³³

On 21 August 1899 the situation changed. On that day, Francis Reitz, the Transvaal State Secretary, sent a "rider" which explained that the proposals for the franchise reform were expressly dependent on Great Britain's consent to the following points: "(a) In future not to interfere in internal affairs of the South African Republic. (b) Not to insist further on its assertion of the existence of suzerainty. (c) To agree to arbitration."³⁴ Chamberlain, and the British Cabinet, decided that they could not accept the conditions attached to the Boer proposal. The final answer had to be sent on 28 August. It accepted the republic's concessions. As to the conditions, Chamberlain accepted the principle of arbitration (without the foreign element), but the two further conditions were rejected.³⁵ Theoretically the doors for negotiations were still open, but in the light of Reitz's "rider", it was difficult to suppose that Pretoria would accept negotiations on British terms. And in fact, on 2 September the South African Republic withdrew its proposals of 14 August, and returned to the earlier offer of seven years' retrospective franchise.³⁶ The second and most serious chance to achieve compromise had been lost. Most historians agree that since that date war was virtually unavoidable.

Theoretically the chance of reaching some sort of understanding seemed so well in August, but still they came to nothing. We should ask - why not?

Paradoxically it is quite easy to understand why both sides did not reach any agreement over Smuts's proposals, although they were, theoretically, more to the British liking. In fact they were unacceptable. The British proposal of a joint inquiry enabled London to shift the ground from the Uitlander franchise to paramountcy

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Smith, pp. 351-2.

³⁴ For the full text of F Reitz's "rider", see "Further correspondence regarding political affairs...", *British Parl. Pap.*, C-0521 (London 1899), p. 47.

³⁵ Chamberlain to Milner, 28 August 1899 in "Further correspondence re. Political affairs in the S.A.R.", *British Parl. Pap.*, C-9521, pp. 49-50.

³⁶ The South African Republic's official note of 2 September 1899 in "Further correspondence...", *British Parl. Pap.*, C-9521, pp. 52-4.

as a main issue. Therefore the generous Transvaal offer, made on 13 August, was not enough. Just two months earlier it would have been difficult for Great Britain to throw away this proposal. Now the situation had changed. British paramountcy was what counted. So when the British cabinet realised that the Transvaal offer was strictly conditional, and two of the three conditions were "(a) (i)n future not to interfere in the internal affairs of the South African Republic; (b) (n)ot to insist further on its assertion of the existence of suzerainty",³⁷ they could not accept this proposal. British suzerainty, and the right to interfere in Transvaal's internal affairs, not the franchise for Uitlanders, were crucial for them.

Similarly, the Boers could not step down from their demands. For Kruger Transvaal's internal sovereignty was crucial. He was ready, under pressure of the Cape Afrikaners and some advisors (like F Reitz and J Smuts), to accept a liberal, and in his opinion dangerous franchise reform, but only as a price for the United Kingdom to drop claims to the suzerainty over Transvaal.

Historians arguing that Great Britain was not deliberately preparing for war in 1899, have a problem to explain the British attitude during the Bloemfontein Conference and the August negotiations. Usually they make a scapegoat of A Milner or J Chamberlain, or both of them.

They stress the criticism on the side of some important members of the cabinet towards both Milner and Chamberlain in their dealings with the South African Republic.

Some point out that even Chamberlain several times criticised Milner as being too stiff and leaving no space for manoeuvre.³⁸ He was also greatly annoyed that the High Commissioner had brought the Bloemfontein Conference to an abrupt end.³⁹ His differences with Milner rested mostly on the basis of his belief that under steady and strong pressure Kruger would capitulate to the British demands, and war although possible was not unavoidable.⁴⁰

The rest of the cabinet, especially Balfour and Michael Hicks-Beach, were even more critical of Milner. But they also dispraised Chamberlain. Balfour, as early as April 1897, remarked that "(h)is [i.e. Chamberlain's] favourite method of

³⁷ See Reitz's "rider" in "Further Correspondence regarding political..." *British Parl. Pap.*, C.-9521, p. 477.

³⁸ Chamberlain's minute on Milner to Chamberlain, 4 May 1899, Colonial Office, Public Record Office, CO 417/279.

³⁹ Smith, pp. 287-8.

⁴⁰ Robert V Kubicsek, *The Administration of Imperialism. Joseph Chamberlain at the Colonial Office* (Durham, N.C., 1969), pp. 105-9.

dealing with the South African sore is by the free application of irritants..."⁴¹ In 1899 he criticised Milner and Chamberlain's lack of flexibility. He pointed out that British politicians should also take into account Boer points of view, and reminded that all Uitlander grievances, although very serious, did not justify a resort to force.⁴² He criticised Uitlanders as being unreasonable, and said that the tone of the Milner and Chamberlain despatches made compromise more difficult.⁴³ Similarly Sir Michael Hicks-Beach, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, had many reservations as to Milner and Chamberlain's dealings. He advocated patience as the best way of dealing with Kruger. He did not agree with Chamberlain's interpretation of the Pretoria Convention. In his opinion only the breaking of the London Convention could justify British complaints.⁴⁴ Later he warned that continuous increases in British demands "must surely tend to make the Boers think that their concessions - which, if honest, are an advance on Milner's own proposals at Bloemfontein - are useless, as their only effect is to make us ask for more".⁴⁵

Lord Salisbury also showed some criticism towards both Milner and Chamberlain. Like Balfour he criticised a lack of flexibility and too strong language towards Pretoria. He was especially critical towards Milner for being disinclined to reach any sort of peaceful settlement.⁴⁶ He was also against the constant increases of British demands, at least as long as mutual relations remained peaceful. His opinion was that "(i)t would give us no additional strength; and it would widely extend the impression of our bad faith, which, unfortunately, and most unjustly, prevails in many quarters abroad, and has been of much value to the Boers".⁴⁷

But then one can wonder that if they were so critical and displeased, why did they not toss away Milner, or press Chamberlain to change British policy? Both the Bloemfontein Conference and the August offers created possibilities of reaching some sort of understanding.⁴⁸ But they allowed Milner and Chamberlain to waste both - why then?

⁴¹ The Earl of Balfour to Lord Salisbury, 10 April 1897, cited in Jason Ternes, *Balfour and foreign policy. The international thoughts of a conservative statesman* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 54.

⁴² Memorandum by Balfour, 1 May 1899 in *Cabinet Papers*, Public Record Office, CAB 37/49, No. 29.

⁴³ See Balfour to Chamberlain, 6 May 1899, *Balfour Papers*, British Museum, Add.MS.49773, ff. 162-5; Balfour to Chamberlain, 21 July 1899, cited in Marais, p. 304.

⁴⁴ Sir M Hicks-Beach to Chamberlain, 30 April 1899, cited in Smith, pp. 268-9.

⁴⁵ Hicks-Beach, 31 August 1899, cited in E Drus, p. 178.

⁴⁶ Lord Salisbury to Chamberlain, 17 August 1899, cited in Smith, p. 351.

⁴⁷ Lord Salisbury's Memorandum respecting Transvaal negotiations, 5 September 1899 in Drus, p. 179.

⁴⁸ It is worth mentioning that on both occasions Transvaal did not propose anything which would change the letter of the London Convention of 1884. Its provisions were not even mentioned during those negotiations.

There were several factors. First of all we should remember that the positions of Chamberlain and Milner were exceptionally strong. Milner had a lot of connections among the British political élite, both Conservative and Liberal. He also had more than good relations with the press, and used them to strengthen his position. He also managed to take control over the channels of communication between South Africa and the Colonial Office. Therefore he could to some extent control the flow of information, and in this way influence government decisions.⁴⁹

Chamberlain's position was also much stronger than the position of Colonial Secretary had usually been. Traditionally it was a minor government post, but Chamberlain was the leader of the coalition partner, the Unionists. Therefore his position was exceptional. In fact he was seen as the second person in the cabinet. As to colonial issues, Salisbury left him a free hand.⁵⁰ In this way his position in the cabinet was nearly independent.

But still it was not a position of total independence. Despite their connections and influence they were not in a position to manipulate the rest of the government. Salisbury, Balfour and Hicks-Beach were too well-experienced politicians and diplomats to be so easily led to do anything. And if they were totally disapproving of Chamberlain and Milner's policy, they were in a position to stop them - but they did not.

To toss away Milner in times of a growing crisis would be unwise. It could send a wrong message to Pretoria that British politicians were wavering, and they were not. As one of the specialists wrote, Salisbury's cabinet was "in fundamental agreement on the objectives of South African Policy".⁵¹ In fact none of them questioned the main objective of the Chamberlain-Milner policy - British paramountcy in South Africa. They even accepted the possibility of war. What they criticised, was the methods used by Chamberlain and Milner, and their lack of patience and flexibility.⁵² In their opinion Chamberlain and Milner did not manage to establish an acceptable *casus belli*. Salisbury and Balfour were experienced

⁴⁹ Kubicek, pp. 106-9.

⁵⁰ Garvin, pp. 7-10; Marais, p. 69.

⁵¹ AN Porter, *The origins of the South African War. Joseph Chamberlain and the diplomacy of Imperialism, 1895-1899* (Manchester, 1980), pp. 264-5.

⁵² Memorandum by Balfour, CAB 37/49, No. 29; Hicks-Beach to Chamberlain, 30 April 1899, cited in Smith, pp. 268-9; Lord Salisbury's Memorandum respecting Transvaal negotiations, 5 September 1899 in Drus, p. 79.

diplomats, and specialists in international relations, and they wanted to create a situation where Transvaal could be blamed for the expected war.⁵³

If we look closer, the criticism of some members of the cabinet was mostly for internal use. Outside the official mind of the cabinet was quite uniform. The very same critics supported the official line of policy in South Africa in many letters and speeches. Balfour who had so critically written about the Chamberlain-Milner policy in South Africa, in other letters showed full support for their line of action. In one of them he wrote: "Undoubtedly the position in South Africa is one of difficulty; but ... it seems clear (1) that the attitude taken up by the Transvaal Government is in itself unreasonable; (2) that it is producing a feeling of unrest throughout South Africa ...; (3) that the illegal laws which exclude the Uitlanders have been contrary to declarations made by the Boers in 1881, and (4) that friendly argument, unaccompanied by other pressure, has never yet extracted anything, however reasonable, from the President or his Government."⁵⁴ With the passage of time his attitude became even more radical. By the end of July he categorically announced: "(I)f all the resources of diplomacy were ineffectual 'to untie the knot', other means would be found to do so."⁵⁵ In September he very frankly wrote in one of the letters: "It is the existence of the South African Republic, with its large armed forces, its inequitable laws, and its provocative Executive, which creates this condition of permanent disquiet - I hope, however, things will soon be on the mend."⁵⁶ So taking into account those opinions we can easily recognise a politician who was as much dedicated to British supremacy in South Africa, as Chamberlain or Milner. The case was the same with Salisbury, who more than once criticised the Transvaal and stressed British rights to sovereignty over the Transvaal. In fact, he was the one who reasserted the "suzerainty" claim in January 1896, using among others, the preamble to the Pretoria Convention.⁵⁷ According to the Earl of Selborne, during the last days of July, he stated that "the real point to be made to South Africa is that we, not the Dutch, are Boss".⁵⁸

So most of the cabinet members supported the claims to sovereignty over Transvaal, and paramountcy in South Africa. To be exact, not only the government, but also the opposition accepted this doctrine. Most of the Liberals were very

⁵³ Balfour to Chamberlain, 6 May 1899, *Balfour Papers*, British Museum, Add.MS.49773, ff. 162-5; Balfour to Chamberlain, 21 July 1899, cited in Marais, p. 304; Lord Salisbury's Memorandum in Drus, p. 179.

⁵⁴ Balfour to Fowler, 28 June 1899, *Balfour Papers*, B.M., Add. MS.49853, f. 101.

⁵⁵ *The Times*, 28 July 1899, p. 8.

⁵⁶ Balfour to Mr Hobhouse, 12 September 1899, *Balfour Papers*, B.M., Add.MS.49853, ff. 114-5.

⁵⁷ Lord Salisbury to Lascales, 7 January 1896 in Porter, *The Origins of the South African War...*, p. 86.

⁵⁸ Selborne to Milner, 27 July 1899 in Boyce, p. 92.

critical of Government conduct in respect of the relations with Transvaal. They accused Chamberlain of a too aggressive diplomacy, which would lead to war.⁵⁹ But notwithstanding most of them accepted the doctrine of British paramountcy in South Africa. They were in agreement with the cabinet opinion that Transvaal was not an independent state.⁶⁰ Only the most radical of them, like William Harcourt or David Lloyd-George, differed in opinion, but they were in the minority.

So the doctrine of British supremacy in South Africa was widely accepted, and that limited options. The longer Transvaal kept its independence, the greater was the risk that the British colonies in South Africa would sever their ties with the empire. One of the historians⁶¹ accurately used a phrase from *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, by Thucydides: "What made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear this caused in Sparta."⁶² The same can be said about the situation in South Africa, at least since the discovery of gold in 1886. Great Britain was determined to block any chances of the emergence of an independent United States of South Africa.⁶³ Up to the beginning of 1896 the initiative had been left to the Cape Colony's politicians, and most of all to Cecil Rhodes. It was believed that despite Transvaal reservations, some sort of South African federation was still possible. And at that time British politicians were quite ready to accept the republican status of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State in such a federation. They only wanted them to accept British hegemony over such a union.⁶⁴

The catastrophe of the Jameson Raid forced London to take over direct responsibility. It was known that the chance to achieve any sort of federation had been reduced to practically zero. This event added to the growth of a feeling of distrust and fear between the British and the Boers. The rise of nationalism, which was getting an antagonistic taint, also added to the rising fears of ethnic conflict in South Africa. This made the atmosphere much denser. The growth of Transvaal's power increased fears of Boer domination in the area. Those fears were embodied in the Selborne Memorandum of 25 March 1896, in which it was stressed that Transvaal had already become the key to the future of South Africa as the richest among South African states and colonies. Selborne therefore warned that "if the Cape Colony and Natal remain separate self-governing Colonies; if Rhodesia

⁵⁹ J Bryce to Sir H Campbell-Bannerman, 5 October 1899 (?), *Campbell-Bannerman papers*, B.M., Add. MS.41211, ff. 48-9.

⁶⁰ Memorandum on the conference of 4 October 1899 at 6 Governor Place, *Herbert Gladstone Papers*, B.M., Add. MS.45995, f. 20.

⁶¹ Smith, p. 393.

⁶² Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* (edn. London, 1954), p. 25.

⁶³ Memorandum by Lord Selborne, 26 March 1896 in Boyce, p. 34-7.

⁶⁴ Lord Ripon to Lord Rosebery, 5 September 1894, *Ripon Papers*, British Museum, Add. MS.43516.

develops into a third self-governing Colony, and if the Transvaal and the Orange Free State remain independent Republics, what then? I think nothing can prevent the establishment of the United States of South Africa.⁶⁵ The growth of Transvaal's wealth, and the development of a situation since the Jameson Raid of, in British opinion, the excessive acquisition of armaments, meant that the doctrine of British paramountcy in South Africa could not be taken for granted.

So British politicians started to look for ways to assure British supremacy in the region. It meant the need to strengthen British control over Transvaal. Therefore they were not ready to compromise over the issue of British suzerainty over Transvaal. Of course it did not mean that Great Britain wanted to annex Transvaal as a colony. Even during the last weeks of the peace it was ready to accept the republican status of the Transvaal. The goal was to create safeguards which would make it impossible for Transvaal to defy British paramountcy in South Africa, not to take over direct rule.⁶⁶

They tried to do that by forcing franchise reform on the Transvaal, which would immediately give voting rights to a considerable number of Uitlanders. Ultimately, they hoped to acquire British majority in the republican electorate. One could see that in case of the Bloemfontein Conference. But for the British cabinet it was not enough. Still at least some British politicians considered the Uitlanders untrustworthy,⁶⁷ so they also looked for other assurances, and that meant a new convention guaranteeing British sovereignty over the Transvaal. Clear signs of this tendency could be observed during the August negotiations. The Transvaal concessions concerning the franchise reform, although far-reaching, were unacceptable in British opinion because they were accompanied by conditions, in which Pretoria wanted London to drop all claims to suzerainty. For British politicians the franchise and suzerainty came in one package.

The goals of British policy were at last clearly stated in September. As early as 2 September, Chamberlain presented Milner with a list of possible demands, which included: (1) the recognition of British suzerainty; (2) the conduct of Transvaal foreign affairs by the British Government; (3) the franchise as in the Cape Colony; (4) municipal rights for the Witwatersrand; (5) disarmament, and (6) the federation of the South African states and colonies.⁶⁸ After a few days of debate the British Government sent a "final offer" which in vague words repudiated

⁶⁵ Memorandum by Lord Selborne, pp. 34-7.

⁶⁶ Chamberlain to Hicks-Beach, 27 [29?] September 1899, in Drus, p. 188; see also Smith, pp. 409-20.

⁶⁷ Garvin, pp. 74-6; J van der Poel, *The Jameson Raid* (Oxford, 1951), pp. 23-4.

⁶⁸ Smith, p. 365.

Transvaal's claims to be a totally independent state. The wording of this document was careful and not decisive,⁶⁹ but we should remember that behind this document Chamberlain's memorandum on "the South African Situation" was hidden, which was more direct and clear. Chamberlain proposed the following demands, on which the cabinet had agreed: "1. An explicit recognition of our suzerainty and control over foreign relations of the Transvaal State. 2. Acceptance of the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council, with the addition of a Transvaal Judge to decide questions of legal interpretation. 3. A retrospective five years' franchise with eight additional seats for mining districts, and redistribution according to population at stated periods. 4. Full municipal rights to be granted to the mining districts. 5. Disarmament. 6. Indemnity for expenses incurred after the refusal of the terms in the despatch now proposed."⁷⁰

British demands were clear - surrender or fight. With full clarity they were expressed in "the proposed ultimatum to the South African Republic", which, although never delivered, still clearly presented British goals in respect of the Transvaal. The conditions were explicit and left no illusions. Great Britain demanded among others: "1. The repeal of all legislation since 1881 injuriously affecting the rights and privileges of aliens. 2. Full municipal rights to be granted to the mining districts. 3. Guarantees for the independence of the Courts of Justice. 4. The removal of the religious disabilities. 5. The establishment of a Tribunal (from which any foreign element will be excluded) to which all questions of interpretation of the Conventions may be submitted, as well as any other matter mutually agreed upon. 6. The concessions of most-favoured-nation rights to Great Britain, not only in commercial matters but in all matters affecting British interests or the position of British subjects, whether white or coloured. 7. The provisions of the treaty with Portugal allowing the passage of arms through Portuguese territory to be surrendered, and an agreement to be arrived at with Her Majesty's Government for the reduction of the excessive armaments of the South African Republic."⁷¹ If we compare this document with the resolutions of the London Convention, everybody can clearly see that in this ultimatum Great Britain simply wanted Transvaal to surrender its independence, disarm itself, and accept the status of a protectorate, not only dependent concerning foreign policy, but not completely free in its internal affairs.⁷² In fact, although formally still an independent republic, Transvaal was to

⁶⁹ Garvin, pp. 442-3.

⁷⁰ J Chamberlain's Memorandum, "The South African situation", Cabinet Papers, P.R.O., CAB 37/50, No. 70.

⁷¹ For the full text of the British ultimatum, see "The proposed ultimatum to the South African Republic", 9 October 1899, Cabinet Papers, P.R.O., CAB 37/51, No. 77.

⁷² The London Convention burdened the Transvaal with only a few restrictions. It forbade transgression of existing boundaries (to the west and east) - Article II. It put vague restrictions on the Transvaal's treaty-making power - Article IV. It also forbade imposing higher duties on

be reduced to a status even worse than that of the dominions or self-governing colonies with responsible government.⁷³

All those concrete proposals were introduced in September and October 1899, but we should not conclude that those plans were made at that time. We know that Chamberlain wanted a new convention at least since 1896.⁷⁴ Similarly Salisbury in the same year revived British claims to sovereignty over Transvaal, based on the Pretoria Convention.⁷⁵ There is a possibility that the ultimate version of British demands was prepared at that time but that the general ideas had existed in the British official mind at least since the Jameson Raid.

Now the question remained if the South African Republic could accept such demands. Of course theoretically it could. But we can ask if any state which have some feeling of self-respect could in any situation accept such demands?

We have already seen that Kruger was ready to make some substantial concessions. Afrikaners from the British colonies several times advised him to agree to British demands, even at the price of sovereignty.⁷⁶ Similarly foreign governments, especially the Netherlands and Germany, advised the Transvaal to accept British demands, and warned that it should not expect to gain any support in Europe.⁷⁷ Under such pressures and advice from the Orange Free State's President M Steyn, and also F Reitz and Jan Smuts, he agreed to make some concessions, as during the August negotiations, but he wanted something in exchange. The fiasco

British goods than on goods from other countries - Article XIII. And at last, it forbade the Transvaal to limit the freedom of immigration of white people - Article XIV. But it accepted Transvaal's complete internal freedom, and at least partial freedom in regional policy. See "The London Convention, 27th February 1884", in GW Eybers (ed.), *Select constitutional documents illustrating South African History, 1795-1910* (London, 1918), pp. 469-74. In comparison, the articles of the proposed new convention stripped the South African Republic of almost every aspect of independence.

⁷³ The "Colonial Laws Validity Act" of 1865 stated that "every representative Legislature shall, in respect to the colony under its jurisdiction, have and be deemed at all times to have had, full power to make laws respecting the constitution, powers and procedure of such Legislature", cited in the *Cambridge history of the British Empire*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge, 1940), p. 688; In fact, at the end of the 19th century they had complete internal freedom.

⁷⁴ It is worth to mention the invitation which he sent to Kruger to come to London for the negotiations, to resolve all the controversies existing between the United Kingdom and the Transvaal. Although Chamberlain, in theory, accepted the internal independence of the Transvaal, he was not ready to accept revoking Article IV of the London Convention. What is more, he wanted the Transvaal to acknowledge the position of Great Britain as a paramount power in South Africa. See Chamberlain to Robinson, 17 March 1896, *Cabinet Paper*, Colonial Office, P.R.O., CO 417/180, f. 4510; see also Garvin, pp. 126-37; Marais, pp. 108-14.

⁷⁵ Porter, *The origins of ...*, p. 86.

⁷⁶ Smith, pp. 347, 378.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 347.

of the August negotiations convinced Kruger, and other Boer politicians, that Great Britain was not interested in compromise, but capitulation. But even before August some Boer politicians had pointed out the ever rising British demands, which forced them to doubt the good faith of the British cabinet.⁷⁸ The fiasco of the August negotiations only worsened the situation. The British accepted the Transvaal concessions, but declined two of its demands. What is more, London stated that, if the answer to its despatch: "is not prompt and satisfactory, and if it becomes necessary to despatch further troops, H.M. Government will feel justified in withdrawing previous suggestions for compromise and will formulate their own demands for a settlement",⁷⁹ and this was unacceptable. So, on the 2nd of September the Transvaal government withdrew Smuts's proposals, and returned to the previous seven-years' franchise proposal. It also denied that Great Britain had any rights to suzerainty. It seems that at that stage the Transvaal government finally recognised that the British goal was nothing else but Transvaal capitulation. Although Afrikaner leaders from the Cape Colony, like Jan Hofmeyr and Sir Henry de Villiers, still pressed Kruger to make some further concessions, he declared that they had reached the final line. He stated that "(w)e are fully impressed with the very serious position in which we are placed, but with God before our eyes we cannot go further without endangering, if not totally destroying, our independence."⁸⁰

But the question remains, why did the South African Republic decide to go to war with Great Britain, when it had everything to lose by fighting? First of all there was the question of honour and self-respect. Today we are too ready to underestimate such motives regarding them as irrational. It is sometimes difficult for us to accept that honour or self-respect could play such an important part in making crucial decisions, even in international politics. It is good to be reminded that the Falkland War was not fought for more rational or bigger reasons. And we know that several times different Boer politicians suggested that it was a question of self-respect, and that they were not ready to accept such humiliation without fighting.⁸¹

For Boers British proposals meant capitulation, and the acceptance of a dependent status of the South African Republic. They simply assumed that if they were about to lose their independence, they could as well lose it in an honourable fight. President Kruger, on the eve of the outbreak of the war, declared frankly:

⁷⁸ A Fischer to J Hofmeyr, 31 July 1899, cited in fragments in Smith, pp. 347-8.

⁷⁹ Chamberlain to Milner, 28 August 1899, in Headlam, p. 493.

⁸⁰ Fischer to Hofmeyr, 16 September 1899, cited in TRH Davenport, *The Afrikaner Bond. The history of a South African political party, 1880-1911* (Cape Town, 1966), pp. 105-6.

⁸¹ See J Smuts to T to Water, 4 September 1899 in Hancock & Van der Poel, pp. 308-9.

"The Republics are determined, if they must belong to England, that a price will have to be paid which stagger humanity."⁸²

But it was not cold determination which induced Transvaal to go to war with Great Britain. The Boers believed that they could win this war, despite all the disproportions in power.⁸³ The memories of the first Anglo-Boer War of 1880-81 influenced their determination. And Transvaal was at that time much stronger than it had been earlier. Transvaal had much more, and much better weapons than before. It had enough ammunition to fight for months or even years.⁸⁴ It had the support of the Orange Free State, and well-established hopes for help from colonial Afrikaners. Together with the OFS its forces were several times stronger than twenty years earlier, and in October they were still twice as big as the British forces in South Africa.⁸⁵

They believed that they could take the offensive at the beginning, and then hold their positions until Great Britain would agree to negotiate. Therefore they decided they had nothing to lose by standing firm. We can say that their hopes were in vain, but we have the comfort of after knowledge that they were not.

Looking at the last year of peace, everybody can clearly see that there were several chances to avoid the war. Both sides missed at least a few chances to reach an understanding. But we must also acknowledge that the chances that either side would have spoken "the right words" were extremely small. Both sides considered that they could not possibly accept the other's demands without losing face and vitally threatening their respective interests in the region.

⁸² P Kruger's statement in the *New York Herald*, cited in Garvin, p. 476.

⁸³ It is clearly visible in the Smuts Memorandum of 4 September 1899 in Hancock & Van der Poel, pp. 313-29.

⁸⁴ During 1896-1899 Transvaal imported over 70 000 rifles, 30 000 000 pieces of rifle ammunition, 45 modern artillery pieces, and 31 machine guns. See Amery, pp. 68-9; Pakenham, p. 41.

⁸⁵ Around 54 000 fighters. See JH Breytenbach, *Die Geskiedenis van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog in Suid-Afrika, 1899-1902*, Vol. 1 (Pretoria, 1969), s. 153.