

Running for cover

Parliament and the Anglo Zulu War. January – March 1879

By D P O'Connor

There is sad news this morning from Africa. Owing apparently to great carelessness a convoy of our people was surprised by Zulus and after a desperate resistance was utterly annihilated. The 24th Regiment with all its officers is cut to pieces, colours captured, artillery, rifles, ammunition, and stores gone. I have no heart to work today. (1)

Reginald Viscount Esher, February 11th 1879.

When Sir Bartle Frere disobeyed his instructions to desist from attacking the Zulus he placed the Conservative government of the day in a difficult position. Questions would no doubt be raised by the Liberal opposition as to whether Frere was acting in accordance with government policy, or whether the Colonial Office had failed to adequately supervise their subordinate, and any answers would open up opportunities to put the whole of South African policy under scrutiny and, indeed, question the whole competence of the government in the area of imperial policy in which it claimed special fitness. This position was made infinitely worse by the news of the defeat at Isandhlwana, because it now allowed the opposition to widen its interest into the areas of military competence and the reaction of the government to Frere's disobedience. For Viscount Esher, the news of Isandhlwana was depressing, but for his employer, Lord Hartington who, along with Lord Granville, was leader of the Liberal party, it presented an opportunity to embarrass the government that was too good to miss.

Disraeli's government had every cause to be embarrassed. Lord Carnarvon's confederation policy had been embarked upon without Cabinet approval or interest. Frere had been sent out to South Africa with very wide powers while the state of communications, in particular the lack of a telegraph at the Cape meant that he would necessarily be allowed an equally wide discretion. When Lord Carnarvon resigned in January 1878, the inexperienced Sir Michael Hicks-Beach replaced him and extended every support that he could to Frere, while the Cabinet, concerned primarily with the Russian invasion of the Balkans, the possibility of war in Afghanistan, and the financial collapse of the Egyptian authorities (which had ramifications for the security of the Suez route to India), virtually ignored South African affairs. However, when Hicks-Beach submitted Frere's request on 12 October 1878, (sent 10 September 1878) for reinforcements to the Cabinet, the Cabinet refused and Hicks-Beach was forced into an unsuccessful U-turn. Frere was determined on war and Hicks-Beach could not control him.

Frere's disobedience presented a number of dilemmas for the government. The first was how to deal with such an apparent failure of supervision without appearing to be incompetent, but there was a paper trail that led right back to Hicks-Beach and the rest of the Cabinet, which indicated that Frere had received almost *carte blanche* from the government to sort out South Africa. Any decent opposition could and would make toast of one or more Cabinet members with such material and no one was under any illusions about Gladstone's oratorical skill.

The second dilemma lay in that they had given permission after the fact of Frere's disobedience and had then trusted to fortune that the invasion of Zululand would be successful and redound to the credit of the administration. On the 13th January 1879, Hicks-Beach, faced with Frere's disobedience had chosen not to sack him on the spot but to back him retrospectively and wrote to Disraeli that,

On the whole, though Frere's policy – especially in the matter of cost – is extremely inconvenient to us at the present moment, I am sanguine as to its success, and think that we shall be able, without much difficulty, to defend its main principles here. I think it most fortunate that we sent out the reinforcements when we did. Frere had made up his mind not to be stopped by the want of them; but if the weakness of his force had led to any failure at first, a most serious war might have resulted, and we should have had to bear all the blame. Now he has got all the force he asked for, in time to finish off the affair easily and quickly, if his calculations as to what he is undertaking are at all accurate. (2)

The third dilemma lay in the question of what to do with Frere after Isandhlwana; if they sacked him it was a possibility that he would turn up in London during an election with the power to make some embarrassing revelations about the conduct of Colonial policy, but if they left him in South Africa, they would be accused of condoning insubordination. When the news of Isandhlwana reached London on the 11th February, two days before the recall of Parliament, the first instinct of the Cabinet was to sack him and throw him to the wolves, but this was quickly dismissed as impractical. Frere had to be kept in South Africa and prevented from revealing just

how much support he had received from Hicks-Beach, while at the same time punished sufficiently to satisfy enough Parliamentary opinion to prevent the Liberals enlisting the support of Conservative back-benchers with slim majorities to defeat the government in the coming debates.

The Government's solution was to officially censure Frere for exceeding his orders but confirm him in his appointment as High Commissioner, while at the same time sending out further and more detailed instructions to take effective control of policy out of his hands and place it firmly back in the hands of the Colonial Secretary. The Cabinet took the decision to formally censure Frere on the 19th February and then gave the delicate task of persuading him not to resign to Hicks-Beach.

To begin with, Hicks-Beach hoped to rely on the messages of support that both the Queen and Prince of Wales, among others, might be expected to send to Frere to prevent him from resigning, but then felt that something more would be required. To this end he sent, in advance of the official Censure despatch, a personal letter written on the 13th March 1879 urging him not to resign.

I think you ought to know...that but for the support of the Prime Minister...that I should have had to choose between resigning and consenting to supersede or recall you. I attach the greatest importance to your continuance in South Africa...I rely on you...to help me by not taking the despatch which will come in the light of a recall, or of such a censure as would justify your resignation.(3)

This was rank moral blackmail. In effect Hicks-Beach was asking Frere to swallow a public dressing down as a personal favour to Hicks-Beach in order to save the junior politician's career, and as a political necessity for the success of confederation, while at the same time implying that he had risked that same career for Frere and threatening him *sub rosa* with dismissal.

In addition to this, Hicks-Beach took a series of actions, which were designed to prevent Frere's voice being heard, and cover up his own part in the affair. His letter of 13th March was a private communication – 'what I say is for yourself alone' - which meant that Frere could not refer to it, or any other of the many letters of support that he had received from the Colonial Secretary, publicly. Frere's official replies were censored or held up so that they did not appear in the Parliamentary record until 1880, six months after the Parliamentary debates had taken place, when the general election diverted attention away from them. Even after the election, Hicks-Beach refused to allow the publication of his private correspondence with Frere and indeed, it was not until after his death that they came to light when his widow, Lady St. Alwyn, granted access to them in 1921. In short, Frere was stitched up.

For the Liberals, the main question was not what the Parliamentary attack should consist of, but who should lead it, and what they should aim to achieve by it. There was little chance of overturning Disraeli's majority in a vote, but there were certainly opportunities to hold individual Cabinet members, as well as the government as a whole, to a furious account. The radical MP for Birmingham, Joseph Chamberlain – who was later to have such an impact on South Africa – argued that the aim of the Liberal party was clear;

We want to din into the constituencies that the Government policy is one of continual, petty, fruitless, unnecessary, and inglorious squabble – all due to their bullying, nagging ways.

Sir Charles Dilke, who had until Isandhlwana regarded the South African issue as a minor one, agreed and it was decided that the two of them should lead the attack in the Commons, with the active support of Lords Granville and Hartington, while the Marquis of Lansdowne led the attack in the Lords. Gladstone took no part, mainly because he was preparing himself for a comeback as leader of the Liberals and was not yet ready to make his move to unseat Granville and Hartington.

The opening shots in the Parliamentary battle were fired by Disraeli in a Ministerial Statement of 13th February 1879 to the House of Lords, which had more than a passing resemblance to a rearguard action. Announcing the despatch of reinforcements, the Prime Minister began to play for time in the hope that better military news might, in the meanwhile, turn up.

My Lords, it is not wise either to depreciate the importance of such an event [Isandhlwana] or to exaggerate it. It is a military disaster – a terrible military disaster – but I think we may say it is no more... and it would, I think, be desirable that no-one should hazard an opinion as to the causes of the disaster until we receive those official and authentic accounts which are, of course, now on their way.(4)

Granville was not going to let him off the hook so easily however. As far as the Liberals were concerned this "dreadful calamity" required that the "gravest consideration should be given to all the antecedent circumstances" especially with regard to the annexation of the Transvaal in 1877 and Frere's "strong opinion that it is necessary to have a predominating influence over neighbouring states." He also wanted to know whether the roots of the defeat at Isandhlwana lay in the refusal of the government to send out the reinforcements that Frere had asked for. Earl Cadogan, the Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies, accused Granville of

spouting off without having the necessary information to hand and that once the papers were out his criticisms would “admit of easy and...satisfactory explanations.” Lord Carnarvon also demanded that the debate should wait for more information, while at the same time arguing that however much he was against a war with the Zulus, with “three such very distinguished and experienced Governors...namely, Sir Bartle Frere, Sir Henry Bulwer and Sir Theophilus Shepstone.... I would be inclined to believe that they were right in their judgement under the circumstances.” For Carnarvon, the Zulus were a “standing menace.” Lord Kimberley replied that, if war with the Zulus was inevitable sooner or later, then “it was better that that conflict should be later than sooner,” a view that was echoed by *The Times* a few weeks later.

If the first attack had gone rather well for the Liberals, the following day drew more blood. Lord Truro wanted to know why there had been “a distinct refusal” to provide Frere with reinforcements when he asked for them and then two regiments had actually been sent out. For him, this was strong evidence that “the first intention and policy of the government was that there should be no attack made on Zululand” but that they had then “changed their policy and waged war against the Zulus and that without waiting for additional reinforcements.” Again, the government attempted to stall by saying that the relevant papers were not yet available. Granville replied by accusing Hicks-Beach of having a policy that consisted mainly of “annexation in all parts of the world.”

Over the next two weeks, both sides prepared for the clash that would come when the Government would ask Parliament for an additional £1,500,000 to pay for the war in South Africa. Again, there was little chance that the money would be refused, but the vote would keep up the pressure on the government to accede to a full debate at the earliest opportunity and before a military victory would wipe out their disgrace. Already in financial difficulties because of a trade depression, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir Stafford Northcote, was mocked for his “singular ill-fortune” in having to find money for a war he had not anticipated, and questioned as to the propriety of granting money for a war that had not been debated by Parliament, but it was the Irish Home Rulers who made the most blistering attack. According to their leader, Charles Stuart Parnell, this was a “most unjust and flagitious war” which “had been carefully prepared” by a “carefully instructed” governor with “excuses...carefully prepared” but which “no protest of his” would stop. Mr. Sullivan, the MP for Louth, accused the Government of acting like Conquistadors, while Cetchwayo “only did what Queen Elizabeth did in the case of the Spanish Armada.” “Was ever hypocrisy so gigantic as yours.... I wonder where slumbers the public morality of England?” he continued:

In the Reading Room of this House, a couple of years ago, Her Majesty’s Ministers were kind enough to send up...to hang on the walls, maps of our latest acquisitions and seats of war. We had maps of Cyprus and the harbours of Famagousta and Limassol.... Then came the war in Afghanistan, which covered all that remained of the wall; and the other day, when the clerks of the Intelligence Department came to fix up our newest seat of war, it was discovered that we had so many seats of war that there was no room for any more maps on the wall.(5)

Hicks-Beach had no answer other than to play for time again by claiming that no proper debate could take place while “other despatches of ...great importance” were on the way. Joseph Chamberlain then finished the debate by declaring that he would support the extra funds being granted to enable the Zulus to be defeated and so avoided the charges of unpatriotic behaviour that would fall on the Irish MPs being made against the Liberals.

On the 14th March, Chamberlain carried out an extremely effective Parliamentary ambush that reduced the Commons to a near riot. Demanding to know why there had been no debate on the Zulu war he set up the MP for Dundee, E. Jenkins, for an attack that castigated Lord Chelmsford for Isandhlwana. Jenkins wanted Chelmsford sacked for “a *prima facie* case of incompetence” and “great military incapacity” and that his defence was “childish.” Furthermore, he accused the Queen, who had sent a message of support to Chelmsford, of shielding his incompetence. All of this was against procedural rules and the Conservatives howled so much that the Speaker was moved to intervene again and again, to no effect. Jenkins was assailed so wildly that the secretaries recording the proceedings could not make out what he was saying, and the senior Conservative backbencher, Sir Robert Peel, was moved to speak in his defence. Again though, it was a Liberal, Hartington, who got the last word in by saying that the whole question of South African policy should be discussed at the earliest opportunity. Hicks-Beach could only plead again that more papers were on the way.

Playing for time had absolute limits however and when the news of the Court of Enquiry into Isandhlwana was published in *The Times* on 17th March, the government could no longer resist. A date was set for a full debate to take place in the Lords on the 25th March and in the Commons on the 27th March while the despatch of Censure was sent to Frere on the 19th March. Could ever have Hicks-Beach felt more miserable; fighting for his political life by sacrificing Frere, a man of reputation, knowing that the most senior men in the party considered his actions to be flawed, and under attack from a determined opposition?

THE DEBATE IN THE LORDS, TUESDAY 25TH MARCH 1879.

The Liberal attack was led by the Marquess of Lansdowne and consisted of four main charges; that Frere had acted without authority in presenting the ultimatum to Cetshwayo; that the war was unnecessary; that the forces available for war were inadequate; that Frere should be recalled rather than merely censured. Lansdowne argued that Zulu policy had always been “to lean rather towards than away from their English neighbours” until the Transvaal annexation “placed us...on the level of those Dutch Colonists whose encroachments had rendered them the objects of bitter hatred.” Even if, however, Cetshwayo was an aggressive tyrant – and Lansdowne sought to play down those negative aspects of his rule - the correct policy for Frere to have followed was to “defer a collision as long as possible” essentially because he had no right to interfere with Cetshwayo’s rule. The promises of benign rule extracted by Shepstone at Cetshwayo’s coronation were only a “concession to his [Shepstone’s] personal influence” rather than a formal agreement and did not constitute a basis for an ultimatum. Furthermore, he continued, the ultimatum itself was ludicrous and, despite being warned by both Shepstone and Bulwer that war would result, Frere insisted on terms which “amounted to a declaration of war” which was not meant to be defensive in nature but an aggressive war of “invasion and subjugation.” Worse still, Frere had begun the war after having been refused the reinforcements that he had felt were necessary to success, intending to “do our best with such means as we have”. The government had no policy on this matter, he continued, and had been content to let Frere make it for them until things went wrong. Then they had passed an extremely severe censure on Frere – “could any censure be more complete or more decisive?” – but then affected to give him their full confidence to carry on with his work of confederation. The net result of allowing such a situation to continue, he argued, would be to encourage other Governors to carry “fire and sword” and “strife and suffering” across the globe whenever they felt like it.

Viscount Cranbrook, Secretary of State for India, countered with some pointless accusations that the Liberal attack was motivated by party considerations rather than principle and then began the difficult task of justifying the censure of Frere without implying that the government had lost control of its own policy. Frere was “too impetuous,” he agreed, in disregarding “directions that the war should be avoided” but he had good reason to fear a Zulu invasion. The troops that were sent out were for...

defensive measures; and Sir Bartle Frere is blamed for having precipitated the attack and taken upon himself the responsibility. He was blamed for that and that alone.

The policy of the government was to bring about confederation, he argued, and Frere, with his great experience and ability, was still the best man to drive it through.

If a man in a position similar to Sir Bartle Frere, in the exercise of a high sense of duty makes a mistake, and engages in something you would rather he had not done – if he be a man of great capacity, fitted to bring to a conclusion the work he has undertaken, let us correct him, but with moderation, and not condemn him absolutely. (7)

This was thin stuff and Lord Blachford began a long rebuttal that began with the question as to whether the government thought that Frere’s actions were “precipitate only because he acted without orders, or because he acted wrong” and then went on to attack the whole of government policy in South Africa. Frere, he argued, had managed to turn the Zulus from friends into enemies by the annexation of the Transvaal, and had then hoped to gain the reconciliation of the Boers to an unpopular imperial rule by giving them Zulu land in the Disputed Territories. Lord Carnarvon responded by defending Frere and gave his opinion that the war was fully justified by the Zulu threat and that “but for the unfortunate disaster at Isandula, I do not believe he [Frere] would have stood in need of defence here tonight.” This was probably correct, but it is doubtful if Hicks-Beach appreciated such candour.

Lord Stanley, a long time opponent of Carnarvon, pounced on it to accuse the ex-Secretary of State for the Colonies of “incurable greed for extending the limits of the Colonies,” “laxity with which he tolerated similar excesses” to Frere’s ultimatum and training colonial governors “to put their blind eyes to the telescope whenever the Government signals caution.” He also attacked the translation of Shepstone from champion of the Zulus to champion of the Boers as “the last man that the noble Earl should have employed” and Frere as “sanctimonious”. Earl Cadogan responded by pointing out that all the leading men in South Africa, including Bulwer and Bishop Colenso, whom the Liberals were inclined to make out as active opponents to Frere’s policies, had supported Frere.

The next two speakers in the debate were Lords Kimberley and Salisbury, both senior men with imperial experience and interests. The Liberal Kimberley chose to focus on the behaviour of Hicks-Beach when faced by Frere’s disobedience and accused him of vacillating between a desire to avoid war before the ultimatum, to support for Frere after it had been sent, and then changing back after news of Isandhlwana reached London. This

was a perfectly correct assessment of what had actually happened, but then Kimberley topped it by arguing that far from the government feeling aggrieved at Frere and expressing their displeasure in a censure, Frere should feel aggrieved at a government which first backed him and then censured him and were now inclined to back him again by confirming him in his position.

You had the proverbial three courses open to you. You may approve a Governor and support his policy; you may censure and recall him; either of these courses might be defensible. The third course is to censure and at the same time withdraw your confidence from a Governor, and this, which appears to me wholly indefensible, is the course which HM Government have in fact pursued. (8)

The Conservative Salisbury, who was in private no great admirer of Frere, responded by accusing Stanley of impugning the reputation of Frere, an absent man who could not defend himself, of advocating an imperial policy which would remove all discretion from governors in difficult positions, cause administrative paralysis and timidity in those who should be bold – even if Frere had “for a moment exaggerated that policy” – with the result that “your Empire will be gone.” To this humbug, the Duke of Somerset remarked that the problem seemed to be that Frere “appeared to be a man of very strong will, and the Colonial Minister [Hicks-Beach] a man of rather weak will” rather than any question of how much discretion a governor should enjoy. Disraeli claimed that whatever the case, he would not make a scapegoat out of Frere, a remark that no doubt raised a number of eyebrows, and that recalling him would be to change horses in mid-stream. Earl Granville got the last word in by arguing that neither Shepstone nor Frere were inclined to obey orders, that the war had been started against the best advice available, and that the censure was bound to lead to Frere’s resignation leaving the government in a situation where they had not changed horse in mid-stream, but dismounted.

The vote, of course, was a forgone conclusion, and Disraeli came away with a majority of 95, but with the credibility of his government severely dented. They were attempting to defend what was a fairly hopeless position and the appearance of a united front fooled few on the opposition benches, and probably even fewer of *The Times* readership who wolfed down with their marmalade the almost verbatim reports of the debate. By the end of the week, however, things would get appreciably worse for the government.

THE DEBATE IN THE COMMONS. 27th MARCH 1879

Motion of Sir Charles Dilke.

That this House, while willing to support HM Government in all necessary measures for defending the possessions of Her Majesty in South Africa, regrets that the ultimatum which was calculated to produce immediate war should have been presented to the Zulu King without authority from the responsible advisors of the Crown, and that an offensive war should have been commenced without imperative and pressing necessity or adequate preparation; and this House further regrets that after the censure passed upon the High Commissioner by HM Government in the Despatch of 19th March 1879, the conduct of affairs in South Africa should be retained in his hands.

Amendment of Colonel Mure.

And that a war of invasion was undertaken with insufficient forces, notwithstanding the full information in the possession of HM Government of the strength of the Zulu Army, and the warnings which they had received from Sir Bartle Frere and Lord Chelmsford that hostilities were unavoidable.

The debate in the Commons took place over the three nights of March 27th – 29th 1879 and was marked by the increasing bitterness of those MPs involved. To begin with the Conservatives were incensed at the Liberals’ attempts to exaggerate the failings of the government and manipulate procedure to make points that were outside Parliamentary precedence. This was particularly the case with the amendment to Dilke’s original motion made by Colonel Mure, which had the effect of calling into question Lord Chelmsford’s competence while he was still in the field, and which was withdrawn at the end of the debate so that the Liberals could claim that they had adhered to the tradition of not censuring officers personally. The Liberals were in turn exasperated at the government’s determination to retain Frere in South Africa, despite their obvious withdrawal of confidence in him.

Dilke began the attack on the government by reiterating much of what had been said previously in the Lords; Frere had turned a Zulu ally into an enemy by his support for the Boers and had then gone to war without permission. What was different was the violence of his language; Frere was part of “‘the scare’ or war party”

who had employed “small, petty, unworthy and miserable cavils” to discredit Bulwer, Colenso and the Boundary Commission; Frere was guilty of “outstanding rashness,” had attempted to “force the Gospel on a savage people” who only claimed to be “the children of the Queen.” When the government tried to halt his “offensive and aggressive” policy, said Dilke, he told them “that they did not know what they were writing about – that he was master and intended to have his way.” The results of allowing Frere to get away with his behaviour would inevitably mean handing over the right to make war to any governor moved by “his fears, by his temper, by his poetical fancies, or by his religion.” In comparison, Cetshwayo was portrayed as a perplexed, but ‘noble savage’, who only killed malefactors “because he had no prisons to put them in” – a completely ludicrous claim – and who, if he had any violent intentions at all, directed them at the Swazis and not the British.

Colonel Mure then directed the attention of the House to the fact that Hicks-Beach knew well in advance that Frere was determined on an invasion and, if only for the sake of the soldiers who would be sent into battle against a numerous and dangerous foe, should have sent out reinforcements before the defeat at Isandhlwana had forced him into it. The key to his argument lay in the fact that even Bulwer, the man who Hicks-Beach had “clung to the skirts of” in the hope of restraining Frere, had changed his mind about the dangers of a Zulu invasion and troops should therefore have been despatched earlier. Chelmsford, he argued, knew he had inadequate forces and had complained; that he had been defeated was, therefore, the government’s fault. Sir Alexander Gordon followed this up by accusing Hicks-Beach in particular of duplicity in giving retrospective backing to Frere in his despatch of 23rd January 1879, without sending any more reinforcements, and repeating the charge that Frere would never have been censured if Isandhlwana had been a British victory.

Hicks-Beach was expected to reply at this point, but with Chamberlain still to speak, tactics demanded that someone less vulnerable should reply to the motion. A. G. Marten therefore rose and pointed out the contradictions in the opposition’s case; either the government had been kept in ignorance by Frere or they had not and they couldn’t have it both ways. The opposition’s “new born zeal” for defending the empire by agreeing to the defeat of Cetshwayo was hypocritical and their contention that the government was hopelessly split on the issue was based only on “idle rumours” – a standard rebuttal that no-one really expected to be taken seriously. Chamberlain took no notice of it and launched into a ferocious attack on Frere which began by accusing him of “usurping the Prerogative of the Crown,” and a “contemptuous disregard” of Parliamentary authority, and then followed with a detailed step by step examination of South African policy which re-emphasised many of the charges made in the Lords. Frere had agitated all the frontier tribes rather than just the Zulus; Cetshwayo was no worse than the Turkish pashas that the government had supported for a century or more; Frere had set a precedent for other governors that had to be quashed if further “difficulties and even disasters” were to be avoided.

When Hicks-Beach rose to speak, he knew that he was fighting for his political life. The fact that the final vote would go the government’s way gave no comfort because he still had to impress his Cabinet colleagues, the back-benchers and the Press that he was a fit and competent minister rather than a political lightweight made play of by a Colonial Governor. His performance would have to be impressive and he therefore chose to go on the offensive against the Liberals before dealing with the details of South African policy. He began by arguing that Dilke was guilty of “an absence of fairness” in forgetting “the character and history” of Frere whom, he pointed out, had received all his appointments and promotions, save the High Commissionership, from the Liberals – a telling point. He then quoted the Liberal Lord Blachford on the corresponding character of Cetshwayo whom both Dilke and Chamberlain had set up as “the type of everything good,” reciting a litany of crimes and atrocities from ‘smelling out’ to the murder of the iNgcugwe girls, before pointing out the hypocrisy of the Liberals in being opposed both to capital punishment and standing armies in Britain, but in favour of them in Zululand. Taking a dig at the Irish Home Rulers he remarked that it was strange that they wanted to uphold peasant property rights in Ireland, but to strip the Boer settlers in the disputed territories of theirs. It was also, he spat, “easy to be wise after the event.”

This was a good start and as a straightforward party political attack it would be appreciated within his own party. What came next, however, was simply breathtaking in its economy of truth; Hicks-Beach claimed that the first inkling he had of Frere’s aggressive intentions came on 11th December 1878. In fact he had been hand in glove with Frere from the moment he became Colonial Secretary. Two examples from the many will suffice to show his lack of honesty; he had decided to delay the issue of medals for the Xhosa campaign “until it be seen whether it will be necessary to engage in any further military operations in the eastern portion of the colony” on 30th October; and he gave Frere the option of sending troops into Zululand via Delagoa Bay on 2nd October, after the Foreign Office negotiated rights of passage with Lisbon. Compounding his lack of candour, Hicks-Beach then excused the delay in arranging a Parliamentary debate on the grounds that he “should have failed in [his] duty if, before hearing [Frere’s] defence, we had expressed any opinion...on his conduct” when the truth was that he was waiting for a military victory to alleviate the anger at Isandhlwana while at the same time censuring Frere’s protests.

The one point he would concede to the opposition was that Frere had acted beyond his instructions and was worthy of censure, but he then launched into a long mitigation of the disobedience. It was unconvincing; Frere had delayed the Boundary award because he was busy in the Cape; Shepstone had radically altered his stance vis-à-vis the Zulus but “if a man in that position were not open to change his views, his opinion... would not be worth much”; that a war with the Zulus was “at some time or another... absolutely inevitable;” that Cetshwayo was leading a conspiracy to wipe out the white man in Africa. The ensuing censure was therefore, according to Hicks-Beach, only a “very slight reproof” and that both he and the government retained complete confidence in Frere’s ability to carry on with confederation. “I will venture to say there is no man who could have been chosen who is so well qualified as to carry out such a policy. Look what he has done already!” This brought the House down in hoots of derision, and Hicks-Beach was forced to clarify himself by enumerating Frere’s achievements as Governor, which, as a result, looked modest indeed. His ending, a rallying cry for support for “the path of prosperity, peace and self-government” in South Africa sounded particularly hollow when the annexation of the Transvaal had been so criticised. The Opposition found it doubly unconvincing and Knatchbull-Hugessen, a Liberal imperialist, ended the first night by saying that “Cetewayo had been to Sir Bartle Frere what ‘Old Bogey’ was to naughty children.”

The next night’s debate saw the exchanges becoming more bad tempered as recent events were examined in excruciating detail. R.A. Lowe accused the government – quite plausibly – of censuring Frere in order to avoid inflicting “a much greater wound on themselves.” The conservative Sir Robert Peel attacked Hicks-Beach’s defence of Frere as “absurd”, the ultimatum as “one of the most monstrous documents that ever disgraced the archives of the Colonial Office” and, to howls of protest, Isandhlwana the result of “gross incompetence of a General upon whose head rests the blood of [the fallen]”. Chelmsford, he felt, should be court-martialled and shot, while another Conservative, Sir Henry Holland, agreed that Frere had acted with “unstatesmanlike rashness.” Evelyn Ashley, in turn, dismissed Sir Robert Peel as “amusing, irrelevant, specious, and altogether unfair” while Mr. Onslow dismissed the charges against Chelmsford as vile slander “in the public journals by anonymous scribblers”. He would not, however, defend Frere and castigated his record as Governor of Bombay; “no-one left his Province in such a grievous state of financial ruin as he did. For his part, he did not look upon Sir Bartle Frere as one of the most able of Administrators.” This was an outrageous slur – the financial collapse of Bombay in 1865 was due to Viceroy Lawrence’s actions – and one that led Frere to complain that the government had not adequately defended him. Still, the Liberals were scoring points steadily in the debate and by the end of the second night, the government’s case was looking increasingly threadbare and many Conservative supporters were finding their loyalty to the front bench being strained to breaking point.

The third and final night’s debate began with a Liberal move to widen out the debate into an attack on the whole idea of confederation. Mr. Courtney, in an “impassioned harangue” argued that the policy was nothing more than a “foolish fad” and Lord Carnarvon guilty of “vain and feeble ambition,” while Frere and Shepstone had had designs on the whole of Southern Africa rather than simply Zululand and the Transvaal, which Hicks-Beach had encouraged. This was, in essence, true; Frere had wanted to consolidate British possessions in Southern Africa and extend control up to the Portuguese frontiers in Angola and Delagoa Bay, and the Colonial Secretary had given Frere much practical support. All of them, considered Courtney, needed their brains “washed with a weak solution of common sense.” Viscount Sandon countered that it was Courtney who needed his brains washed and accused the Liberal leadership of bribing the conservative Sir Robert Peel in a “dark and curious intrigue” to attack the government with a promise of the Governorship of South Africa if they won the next election. He also pointed out that if, as Courtney had it, all the present evils of South Africa had flowed from the decision to annex the Transvaal, then the Liberals bore equal responsibility for them because they had approved the annexation.

By this time, however, many MPs were growing tired of the seemingly endless argument and a number of speakers rose to protest at the pillorying of Frere and Chelmsford for the sake of party tactics. General Sir George Balfour was revolted at the attempts “to throw discredit on one who had rendered such services to his country as Sir Bartle Frere and who had now suffered for the mismanagement of the Colonial Office,” while Colonel Alexander, referring to the Zulu border incidents, “was at a loss to imagine” why he should have been censured for insisting “that we were bound to let every Kaffir sleep as securely within British dominions as we slept ourselves.” Mr Synan complained that the detailed perusal of the Colonial Office papers had been completely unnecessary and that “if they wandered on over all that sort of rubbish they would not be able to divide that night, and perhaps not until next week.” Hartington took the hint and delivered the final attack against the government with a promise “not to protract what observations I have to make.” The observations consisted of a carefully measured summing up of the case against Frere and Hicks-Beach and of the machinations behind the decision of the government to attempt to both censure Frere and then confirm him in his place. The last word came from the Chancellor of the Exchequer who, in turn, summed up the government’s position, dismissed the criticisms of the Liberals and then, in a thinly veiled threat to those Conservatives whose

loyalty was wavering, warned “that no man should give a vote upon any occasion in this House, unless he be prepared to take the consequences of that vote.”

The government did indeed win the vote with a majority of sixty, but it had been badly battered in the process and it was clear that they would be vulnerable on this issue if anything else went wrong. Hicks-Beach had survived his great crisis through the support of his Cabinet colleagues, but they had had some difficulty in concealing their irritation at him. To all intents and purposes the Liberals had won the argument in that they succeeded in showing that the war was unjust, the Zulus underestimated, and Frere out of control and they could deploy the defeat at Isandhlwana as their strongest and unanswerable proof. They had also succeeded in creating the impression that if there had been a victory rather than a defeat, Frere would never have been censured and so showing up the government to being rather more cynical than principled in their attitudes and behaviour. Ironically, the thing that Hicks-Beach had so wanted in the period when he was playing for time before the debates opened happened while he was being savaged in Parliament. On the 29th March 1879 the Zulu veterans of Isandhlwana were beaten at Khambula by Wood’s No.4 Column in the decisive engagement of the war and Hicks-Beach got his victory.

For historians of the Anglo-Zulu war the debates are problematical. Hansard is valuable for showing how Parliament reacted to the events at that time, but the information on which the various Parliamentarians based their arguments was both incomplete and flawed. Their information came primarily from the Command Papers or ‘Blue Books’ which contained a representative sample of the documents and despatches available to the responsible ministers at the time. This meant that the selection process was open to manipulation by the minister and, in this particular case, Hicks-Beach engaged in a very high degree of manipulation to cover up how close he had been to Frere. The Command Papers did not contain private correspondence either and this is important because it was customary for officials to elucidate the meanings expressed in official documents by private letters, and sometimes by verbal instructions known as ‘the word of mouth’, which were never written down. Furthermore, the information released to Parliament was in response to specific issues and as a result the war was debated as though it were an isolated issue when Frere certainly saw his policy as having wider implications for both South Africa and a global system of imperial defence. Last but not means least, the Zulu perspective is poorly explored, even though many MPs spoke in defence of Cetshwayo, largely because full intelligence on Zulu diplomatic strategy was not available. It is also important to remember that the arguments of both sides were deliberately partisan in nature – sometimes ludicrously so - and not designed to give a fair account of the events under scrutiny. However, the debates do show a high standard of research from many of the contributors, a wide variety of viewpoints and some very shrewd analysis from a variety of speakers and as such provide vital clues as to the real motives of those involved. Perhaps their greatest failing is that, when all is said and done, the debaters never did answer the central question of why Sir Bartle Frere should choose to disobey his instructions and start a war with the Zulus.

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