

Isandlwana: affairs at home

A report of the British Parliament's reaction to the news of the British defeat at Isandlwana, as reported by Louis Creswicke in May 1879. (With his intriguing observation of the Transvaal Boers' and Gladstone's reactions)

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Towards the end of 1877, Sir Bartle Frere was sending Hicks Beach, Secretary of State, letters containing ominous phrases such as, "it is quite clear that the war spirit is abroad, I have no doubt that the Zulus mean mischief". By October 1878, expectation of war with the Zulus was growing in London's political circles. Hicks Beach's obvious lack of control over Frere gave rise to some parliamentary badinage which culminated in Sir William Harcourt reading out to the House of Commons an imaginary letter from the Secretary of State to Frere:

Dear Sir Bartle Frere. I cannot think you are right. Indeed I think you are very wrong; but after all you know a great deal better than I do. I hope you won't do what you are going to do; but if you do, I hope it will turn out well.

The cabinet would not countenance war with the Zulus and Hicks Beach fired off a number of cautionary telegrams to Frere, to whom the question was no longer whether war was avoidable so much as the timing of its outbreak. Two days after the arrival of the news of the disaster at Isandlwana, Parliament met. The reverse in Zululand naturally engrossed all thoughts. Questions innumerable were addressed to Government as to the strength of reinforcements to be sent out - as to the further necessity for war at all - as to the so-called high-handed action of Sir Bartle Frere, and the so-called blunders of Lord Chelmsford. Scapegoats were wanted, and, as a natural consequence, the two most energetic and hard-worked of the Queen's servants were attacked.

A political pitched battle was imminent. The Ministers declined to withdraw their confidence from the Lord High Commissioner, though they passed on him censure for his hasty and independent proceedings. That the members of Government had a high appreciation of his great experience, ability, and energy was apparent, for they declared they had,

no desire to withdraw in the present crisis of affairs the confidence hitherto reposed in him, the continuance of which was now more than ever needed to conduct our difficulties in South Africa to a successful termination.

On the 19th of March 1879 the Secretary of State for the Colonies wrote to Sir Bartle Frere, to the effect that Ministers were unable to find, on the documents placed before them,

that evidence of urgent necessity for immediate action which alone would justify him in taking, without their full knowledge and sanction, a course almost certain to result in a war.

The day for discussion of South African affairs in the Upper House arrived. Lord Lansdowne moved, on the 11th March,

That this House, while willing to support Her Majesty's 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 advisers of the Crown, and that an offensive war should have been commenced without imperative and pressing necessity or adequate preparation; and the House regrets that, after the censure passed upon the High Commissioner by her Majesty's Government, in the despatch of March 19th 1879, the conduct of affairs in South Africa should be retained in his hands.

A keen debate ensued. The Opposition clamoured for the recall of Sir Bartle Frere, as the example of independent action set by him might be followed by other and more distant representatives of the Crown. The war was ascribed to Lord Carnarvon's impatience for South African confederation and his "*incurable greed*" for extending the limits of the Colonies, and the annexation of the Transvaal was declared to be a mistake, unless the Government was prepared to send out a large military force to South Africa.

The Government combated these arguments. They denied they had censured Sir Bartle Frere, and stated that they had passed no opinion on his policy, but merely asserted as a principle that "Her Majesty's advisers and they only, must decide the grave issues of peace and war."

It was argued that war with Cetchwayo (sic) was inevitable sooner or later, and that the Lord High Commissioner had thought it advisable to be prompt in the matter. His conduct, it was true, had not the entire approval of the Ministry, but every one knew it was unwise to change horses in crossing a stream, and his action had not been such as to outweigh the many considerations which required the continuance of his service in South Africa. Lord Beaconsfield, addressing the House, defended Sir Bartle Frere and expressed opinions on the policy of confederation as opposed to that of annexation, opinions which afford so much instruction in regard to our relations with the Transvaal that they are best repeated in their entirety.

“I generally find,” he said, “there is one advantage at the end of a debate, besides the relief which is afforded by its termination, and that is that both sides of the House seem pretty well agreed as to the particular point that really is at issue; but the rich humour of the noble duke (Duke of Somerset) has again diverted us from the consideration of the motion really before the House. If the noble duke and his friends were desirous of knowing what was the policy which Her Majesty’s Government were prepared generally to pursue in South Africa, if they were prepared to challenge the policy of Sir Bartle Frere in all its details, I would have thought they would have produced a very different motion from that which is now lying on your Lordships’ table; for that is a motion of a most limited character, and according to the strict rules of parliamentary discussion, precludes you from most of the subjects which have lately been introduced to our consideration, and which principally have emanated from noble lords opposite. We have not been summoned here to-day to consider the policy of the acquisition of the Transvaal. These are subjects on which I am sure the Government would be prepared to address your Lordships, if their conduct were clearly and fairly impugned. And with regard to the annexation of the province, which has certainly very much filled the mouths of men of late, I can easily conceive that would have been a subject for fair discussion in this House, and we should have heard, as we have heard to-night, though in a manner somewhat unexpected, from the nature of the resolution before us, from the noble lord who was recently the Secretary of State for the Colonies, the principal reasons which induced the Government to sanction that policy - a policy which I believe can be defended, but which has not been impugned to-night in any formal manner. What has been impugned to-night is the conduct of the Government in sanctioning, not the policy of Sir Bartle Frere, but his taking a most important step without consulting them, which on such subjects is the usual practice with all Governments. But the noble lord opposite who introduced the subject does not even impugn the policy of the Lord High Commissioner; and it was left to the noble duke who has just addressed us, and who ought to have brought forward this question if his views are so strongly entertained by him on the matter, not in supporting a resolution such as now lies on your Lordships’ table, but one which would have involved a discussion of the policy of the Government and that of the high officer who is particularly interested in it”.

“My noble friend, the noble marquis (Lord Salisbury), who very recently addressed the House, touched the real question which is before us, and it is a very important question, although it is not of the expansive character of the one which would have been justified by the comments of the noble lords opposite. What we have to decide to-night is this - whether Her Majesty’s Government shall have the power of recommending to the sovereign the employment of a high officer to fulfil duties of the utmost importance, or whether that exercise of the prerogative, on their advice, shall be successfully impugned, and that appointment superseded by noble lords opposite. That course is perfectly constitutional, if they are prepared to take the consequences. But let it be understood what the issue is. It is this - that a censure upon the Government is called for, because they have selected the individual who, on the whole, they think is the best qualified successfully to fulfil the duties of High Commissioner. The noble lords opposite made that proposition, and if they succeed they will succeed in that which has hitherto been considered one of the most difficult tasks of the executive Government; that is to say, they will supersede the individual whom the sovereign, in the exercise of her prerogative, under the advice of her Ministers, has selected for an important post. I cannot agree in the general remark made by the noble duke, that because an individual has committed an error, and even a considerable error, for that reason, without any reference either to his past services or his present qualifications, immediately a change should be recommended, and he should be recalled from the scene of his duties”.

“I remember myself a case not altogether different from the present one,” continued Lord Beaconsfield, alluding to Sir James Hudson, who, when Minister at Turin, had been charged with having expressed himself unguardedly upon the subject of Italian nationality. “It happened some years ago, when I was in the other House. Then a very high official - a diplomatist of great eminence, a member of the Liberal party - had committed what was deemed a great indiscretion by several members of his own party; and the Government were asked in a formal manner, by a Liberal member, whether that distinguished diplomatist had been in consequence recalled. But the person who was then responsible for the conduct of public affairs in that House - the humble individual who is now addressing your lordships, made this answer, with the full concurrence of his colleagues - denied that that distinguished diplomatist was recalled, and said that “great services are not cancelled by one act or one

single error however it may be regretted at the moment". That is what I said then, with regard to Sir James Hudson, and what I say now with regard to Sir Bartle Frere. But I do not wish to rest on that. I confess that, so keen is my sense of responsibility, and that of my colleagues, and I am sure also that of noble lords opposite, that we would not allow our decisions in such matters to be unduly influenced by personal considerations of any kind. What we had to determine is this; Was it wise that such an act on the part of Sir Bartle Frere as, in fact, commencing war without consulting the Government at home, and without their sanction, should be passed unnoticed? Ought it not to be noticed in a manner which should convey to that eminent person a clear conviction of the feelings of Her Majesty's Government; and at the same time was it not their duty to consider, were he superseded, whether they could place in his position an individual equally qualified to fulfil the great duties and responsibilities resting on him? That is what we had to consider. We considered it entirely with reference to the public interest, and the public interest alone; and we arrived at the conviction that on the whole the retention of Sir Bartle Frere in that position was our duty, notwithstanding the inconvenient observations and criticisms to which we were, of course, conscious it might subject us. And, that being our conviction, we have acted upon it. It is a very easy thing for a Government to make a scapegoat; but that is conduct which I hope no gentleman on this side, and I believe no gentleman sitting opposite, would easily adopt. If Sir Bartle Frere had been recalled - and if he had been recalled in deference to the panic, the thoughtless panic of the hour, in deference to those who have no responsibility in the matter, and who have not weighed well and deeply investigated all the circumstances and all the arguments which can be brought forward, and which must be appealed to influence our opinions on such questions - no doubt a certain degree of odium might have been diverted from the heads of her Majesty's Ministers, and the world would have been delighted, as it always is, to find a victim. That was not the course which we pursued, and it is one which I trust no British Government ever will pursue. We had but one object in view, and that was to take care that at this most critical period the affairs of her Majesty in South Africa should be directed by one not only qualified to direct them, but who was superior to any other individual whom we could have selected for that purpose. The sole question that we really have to decide to-night is, Was it the duty of Her Majesty's Government to recall Sir Bartle Frere in consequence of his having declared war without our consent? We did not think it our duty to take that course, and we do not think it our duty to take that course now. Whether we are right in the determination at which we have arrived is the sole question which the House has to determine upon the motion before it".

"The noble Duke opposite (the Duke of Somerset) has told us that he should not be contented without being made acquainted with the whole policy which Her Majesty's Government are prepared to pursue in South Africa. If the noble duke will introduce that subject we shall be happy to discuss it with him. No one could introduce it in a more interesting, and, indeed, in a more entertaining manner than the noble duke, who possesses that sarcastic faculty that so well qualifies him to express his opinion on such a matter. I think, however, that we ought to have had rather longer notice before we were called upon to discuss so large a theme, which has now been brought suddenly before us. If the noble marquis who introduced this subject had given us notice of a motion of this character, we should not have hesitated for a moment to meet it. I have, however, no desire to avoid discussing the subject of our future policy in South Africa, even on so general a notice as we have in reference to it from the noble duke. Sir Bartle Frere was selected by the noble Lord (Lord Carnarvon), who formerly occupied the position of Secretary to the Colonies, chiefly to secure one great end - namely, to carry out that policy of confederation in South Africa which the noble Lord had successfully carried out on a previous occasion with regard to the North American Colonies".

"If there is any policy which, in my mind, is opposed to the policy of annexation, it is that of confederation. By pursuing the policy of confederation we bind States together, we consolidate their resources and we enable them to establish a strong frontier; and where we have a strong frontier, that is the best security against annexation. I myself regard a policy of annexation with great distrust. I believe that the reasons of State which induced us to annex the Transvaal were not, on the whole, perfectly sound. But what were the circumstances under which that annexation was effected? The Transvaal was a territory which was no longer defended by its occupiers. The noble Lord opposite (Lord Kimberley), who formerly had the Colonies under his management, spoke of the conduct of Sir Theophilus Shepstone as though he had not taken due precautions to effect the annexation of that province, and said that he was not justified in concealing that he had not successfully consummated his object. The noble lord said he had not assembled troops enough in the province to carry out properly the policy of annexation. But Sir Theophilus Shepstone particularly refers to the very fact to show, that so unanimous and so united was the sentiment in the province in favour of annexation, that it was unnecessary to send any large force there to bring it about. The annexation of that province was a necessity - a geographical necessity.

Finally, it is interesting to note the reaction of the Boers to the British defeat at Isandlwana. Louis Creswicke, a popular writer of the day commented,

Our disaster at Isandlwana caused enormous excitement in Pretoria. Great and unconcealed rejoicing among the Boers took place: work was suspended, all heads were put together to make capital out of Great Britain's misfortunes. Notices were sent out on the 18th of March, summoning the burghers to a mass meeting to be held some thirty miles from the town. These meetings, it must here be noted, were scarcely attended by invitation. A large number of the people appeared on compulsion, brought "to the scratch" by threats. One of the menaces, a favourite one according to Mr. Rider Haggard, was that those who did not attend should be made 'biltong' of when the country was given back. Biltong is meat cut into strips and hung in the sun to dry. The result of the notices, backed by threats, was a meeting of some three thousand armed Boers, who evidently meant mischief.

The threatening aspect of the Boers caused the corps, known as the Pretoria Horse, raised for the purpose of acting as cavalry on the Zulu border, to be retained for service in and around the capital. While matters stood thus, and the general discontent seemed to portend even further hostilities, Sir Bartle Frere went to Pretoria for the purpose of discussing affairs with the Boer leaders. These all clamoured for their independence. They had gone as far as to assert it by stopping posts, carts and persons, and sending armed patrols about the country. Nothing definite resulted from this attitude, however, for before very long the conclusion - the successful conclusion - of the Zulu war appeared imminent, and those in revolt against British authority saw plainly that there would shortly be troops in plenty at hand to restore law and order. Consequently, for the time being, they subsided.

The Boers' feelings were well and truly "written on the wall", yet no one in Britain appeared prepared to take much notice of the new threat to British interests in South Africa. Within one year, even the Boers would see how much was done for the protection of the Transvaal at the cost of British money and British blood. Looking back, it is easy to perceive that, but for British intervention, the South African Republic would have been slowly but effectually swallowed up. Cetshwayo and Sekikuni between them would have made a meal of the Transvaal.

So much having been done for the security of the Boers and for the maintenance of British prestige, it is no marvel that Sir Garnet Wolseley thought himself justified in expressing the trend of British policy in plain terms. At the dinner given at Pretoria on the 17th of December, 1879, he took the opportunity of making the British programme well understood. He declared with emphasis, that there could be no question of resigning the sovereignty of the country.

There is no Government," he said, Whig or Tory, Liberal, Conservative, or Radical, who would dare, under any circumstances, to give back this country. They would not dare, because the English people would not allow them!"

At that time it was evident that Sir Garnet had never heard the story of the philanthropic Belarmine, an individual who gave himself to the she-bear to save her and her young ones from starvation. Or, if the tale was known to him, he probably took it for what it was worth, and never foresaw that the British Government would emulate the action of the self-sacrificing lunatic, and spend precious blood for the sole purpose of nourishing and resuscitating the powers of the languishing enemy.

Louis Creswicke wrote that British speeches and proclamations had ceased to impress the Boers. They had had too many of them, and they began to think the British Government a somewhat knock-kneed institution whose joints had ceased to hold together. Sir Garnet Wolseley, however, with characteristic energy and determination, dealt with the malcontents one by one, converting them, causing them to sensibly consider on which side their bread was buttered. Indeed, so diplomatically did he conduct his work, that a sop was given to the aggressive Pretorius, who, instead of being put in prison, as he deserved, was offered a seat on the Executive Council, with a salary attached. This he was inclined to jump at, but, at the time, public feeling ran too high to allow of his making a decision.

The fact was that the political speeches delivered by Mr. Gladstone in the south of Scotland, during the months of November and December, 1879, were putting a new complexion on affairs. They were reprinted the entire world over, and they were profusely circulated among the Boers. The Boer leaders and obstructionists at once saw in this British statesman their saviour, and were convinced that, on the return of Mr. Gladstone to power, their independence would be assured. They therefore sent Messrs. Kruger and Joubert as a deputation to the Cape, and these two gentlemen persuaded the Cape Parliament to reject the Confederation Scheme then being proposed by Sir Bartle Frere. Selections from the attacks on the Government, from which the Boers then

derived their encouragement and support, are here reprinted in order that the sincerity of Mr. Gladstone's attitude may be examined.

Speaking in Edinburgh, he said of the Government:-

They have annexed in Africa the Transvaal territory, inhabited by a free European, Christian, Republican community, which they have thought proper to bring within the limits of a Monarchy, although out of 8000 persons in that Republic qualified to vote upon the subject, we are told - and I have never seen the statement officially contradicted - that 6500 protested against it. These are the circumstances under which we undertake to transform Republicans into subjects of a Monarchy.

Now, Sir T. Shepstone's despatches show that the grounds on which the Transvaal was annexed were because the State was drifting into anarchy, was bankrupt, and was about to be destroyed by native tribes. He said, "that most thinking men in the country saw no other way out of the difficulty," and Carlyle has taught us what is the proportion between thinking men and the general public. He also said, in the fifteenth paragraph of his despatch to Lord Carnarvon of the 6th March, 1877, that petitions signed by 2500 people, representing every class of the community, out of a total adult male population of 8000, had been presented to the Government of the Republic, setting forth its difficulties and dangers, and praying it "*to treat with me for their amelioration or removal.*" He likewise stated, and with perfect truth, that many more would have signed had it not been for the terrorism that was exercised, and that all the towns and villages in the country desired the change.

Mr. Gladstone went on to say,

We have made war on the Zulus. We have thereby become responsible for their territory; and not only this, but we are now, as it appears from the latest advices, about to make war upon a chief lying to the northward of the Zulus; and Sir Bartle Frere, who was the great authority for the proceedings of the Government in Afghanistan, has announced in South Africa, that it will be necessary for us to extend our dominions until we reach the Portuguese frontier to the north. So much for Africa.

At Dalkeith he remarked:-

If we cast our eyes to South Africa, what do we behold? That a nation whom we term savages have, in defence of their own land, offered their naked bodies to the terribly improved artillery and arms of modern European science, and have been mowed down by hundreds and by thousands, having committed no offence, but having, with rude and ignorant courage, done what were for them, and done faithfully and bravely what were for them the duties of patriotism. You may talk of glory, you may offer rewards, - and you are right to give rewards to the gallantry of your soldiers, who I think are entitled not only to our admiration for courage, but to our compassion for the nature of the duties they have been called to perform - but the grief and pain none the less remain.

At Glasgow he continued in the same strain,

In Africa you have before you the memory of bloodshed, of military disaster, the record of 10,000 Zulus - such is the computation of Bishop Colenso - slain for no other offence than their attempt to defend against your artillery, with their naked bodies, their hearths and homes, their wives and families. You have the invasion of a free people in the Transvaal, and you have, I fear, in one quarter or another - I will not enter into details, which might be injurious to the public interest - prospects of further disturbance and shedding of blood.

These speeches, as may be imagined, did an incalculable amount of mischief. Besides fanning the smouldering sparks of discontent, they served up catchwords wholesale for that section of the British public whose political machinery is largely fed by catchwords. But, as has been decided by axiom, "*any stick will serve to beat a dog with,*" and the Transvaal difficulty was a convenient weapon for the attack on the Government. The real feeling of the Boer community was an outside matter, and, as we shall presently see, had nothing to do with the case, though in March, 1880, Mr. Gladstone had the satisfaction of receiving a letter from a committee of Boer malcontents, wherein "*he was thanked for the great sympathy shown in their fate.*" The thanks were a little premature. In April, 1880 the elections took place, and Mr. Gladstone came into power with a large majority. Then he was asked the great question: Would he maintain his oft-repeated pledge to retain the Transvaal, or would he continue to take up the tone of his Midlothian denunciations?

The riddle was shortly to be solved. In the debate on the Queen's Speech, the Prime Minister thus expressed himself:

I do not know whether there is an absolute union of opinion on this side of the House as to the policy in which the assumption of the Transvaal originated. Undoubtedly, as far as I am myself concerned, I did not approve of that assumption. I took no part in questioning it nor in the attempt to condemn it, because, in my opinion, whether the assumption was wise or unwise, it having been done, no good but only mischief was to be done by the intervention of this House. But whatever our original opinions were on that policy - and the opinions of the majority of those who sit on this side of the House were decidedly adverse to it - we had to confront a state of facts; and the main fact which met us was the existence of the large native population in the Transvaal, to whom, by the establishment of the Queen's supremacy, we hold ourselves to have given a pledge. That is the acceptance of facts, and that is the sense in which my right honourable friend, and all those who sit with him, may, if they think fit, say we accept the principles on which the late Government proceeded. It is quite possible to accept the consequences of a policy, and yet to retain the original difference of opinion with regard to the character of that policy as long as it was a matter of discussion.

And shortly after he wrote to Messrs. Kruger and Joubert:

It is undoubtedly matter for much regret that it should, since that annexation, have appeared that so large a number of the population of Dutch origin in the Transvaal are opposed to the annexation of that territory, but it is impossible to consider that question as if it was presented for the first time. We have to deal with a state of things which has existed for a considerable period, during which obligations have been contracted, especially, though not exclusively, towards the native population, which cannot be set aside.

Looking to all the circumstances, both of the Transvaal and the rest of South Africa, and to the necessity of preventing a renewal of disorders, which might lead to disastrous consequences, not only to the Transvaal, but to the whole of South Africa, our judgement is, that the Queen cannot be advised to relinquish her sovereignty over the Transvaal, but, consistently with the maintenance of that sovereignty, we desire that the white inhabitants of the Transvaal should, without prejudice to the rest of the population, enjoy the fullest liberty to manage their local affairs. We believe that this liberty may be most easily and promptly conceded to the Transvaal as a member of a South African Confederation.

The scene was now set for war between the Boers and the British.