

# The interregnum under the British flag - Paul Kruger

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In Chapter VII of his memoirs exiled ZAR President describes his efforts to win back independence through negotiation

## CHAPTER VII

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### THE INTERREGNUM UNDER THE BRITISH FLAG

The commission appointed to take the protest A to England consisted of Dr. Jorissen and myself. We took Mr. W. E. Bok with us as secretary and left, in May 1877, for Port Elizabeth, thence to set sail for England. Shortly after our departure, Shepstone wrote to Lord Carnarvon, the then Colonial Secretary, stating that I myself had told him that, if the deputation failed, I would become a loyal subject of the new Government, even as I had been of the old. He also knew that Dr. Jorissen had declared that the annexation was inevitable and that its repeal would be a public misfortune.

As far as I am concerned, I declare this statement to be absolutely untrue. I never told Shepstone this nor anything of the kind ; moreover, my further actions of themselves give the lie to any such assertion.

On arriving in England, we found that the rumor had been spread, by means of newspapers and letters, including a letter of Dr. Jooste, of Potchefstroom, first published in the Zuid Afrikaan, that only a handful of irreconcilables, with myself at their head, had declared against the annexation. I denied this report with the greatest emphasis and said that it was easy to arrive at the truth by taking a plebiscite of the whole Republic, which would show for certain whether the majority were for or against the annexation.^ I personally wrote a letter in which I denied the imputation touching the " handful of irreconcilables " and suggested a plebiscite of the whole population.

Dr. Jorissen had scruples against signing this letter, and I sent it alone, on my own responsibility.

The British Government rejected the proposal with the foolish statement that a vote of this kind would involve too much trouble and expense. This shows 126 THE INTERREGNUM that England always remains true to herself: she makes assertions and, as soon as she is given the opportunity of convincing herself of their inaccuracy, resorts to cowardly and insipid evasions, but at the same time repeats her assertions, until she herself, and sometimes the world with her, begins to believe in their truth. In November 1877, the deputation left England and, on the homeward journey, visited Holland, France and Germany, to try to move those Powers to intervention, but, of course, without result, in spite of the friendly reception accorded to us.

About the end of December, I reached my home in the Rustenburg District and, in January of the following year, went to Pretoria, where some thousand burghers were waiting for my report. The proceedings at this meeting were not a little stormy when it became known that we had failed to receive a satisfactory reply from the British Government. One of the burghers, M. W. Vorster, moved a resolution, which was passed unanimously, that an universal plebiscite should be taken, so that the burghers might express their general opinion on the annexation. At a subsequent meeting, at Nauwpoort, in the Potchefstroom District, this resolution was again brought forward and passed, and a committee was appointed to institute the plebiscite and to sign an eventual petition. Ex-President Pretorius was elected chairman of the committee.

Shepstone was greatly dissatisfied with this resolution, declared that he could not allow the plebiscite to be held and demanded that I should give up this plan. I thereupon rode to Pretoria, accompanied by Messrs. Pretorius and Viljoen, and, in an interview with Shepstone, told him that I could not interfere with the plebiscite, as I had said, during my stay in England, that this measure would prove that the majority were against the annexation, and I did not wish to be branded as a liar. I added:

"If you admit that I was right and that the report which you sent to England on the feeling of the people was untrue, then the vote will be quite unnecessary."

Shepstone then gave his consent to the holding of the meetings, provided that the burghers came unarmed; and the members of the committee were requested to take strict care that none but burghers who were really entitled to vote should vote at the meetings.

Our committee met at Doornpoort in April 1878, when it appeared that 125 petitions, with 6,591 signatures, had been handed in against the annexation, and 31 petitions, with 587 signatures, in its favor.

This clearly showed the feeling of the people, the more so when one remembers that the total male white population of the Republic, as given in Shepstone's report to the Colonial Secretary, numbered only about 8,000, and among those who had not been able to attend the meetings there must have been many more opponents of the annexation. The committee now resolved to send a new deputation to England, with instructions to hand in the proofs of the objection of the majority of the people to the annexation of the Republic.

Piet Joubert, the future general, and myself were chosen to form this second deputation; and Mr. W. E. Bok again accompanied us as secretary. The expenses of the journey were to be defrayed by a collection among the burghers, and 1,900 was subscribed for this purpose before the meeting broke up. The deputation took with it a petition, addressed to Lord Carnarvon, declaring that the people of the Republic were convinced that the British Government was misinformed as to the real feeling of the Boer population, that they could not believe that England would wish to govern another nation against its wish, that they had therefore decided to prove to her that the great majority were opposed with heart and soul to the annexation, and that they hoped that the Government, after examining the accompanying memorials, would repeal the proposed annexation on the grounds of incorrect information. How little our people knew England at that time! To-day no one would presume to reckon on England's acceptance of any such argument as that set forth above.

On our way to England, we asked for an interview with the High Commissioner and Governor of Cape Colony, Sir Bartle Frere, at Cape Town.

He was very amiable, but absolutely refused in any way to support us in our endeavours, declaring that he saw no reason to do so, as the Boers would be very happy under the British flag.

In July 1878, the deputation landed in England and found that, in the meanwhile, Lord Carnarvon had been succeeded as Colonial Secretary by Sir Michael Hicks-Beach. The change was anything but favourable to the people of the Republic. Moreover, on our arrival in London, we received a letter from Sir Theophilus Shepstone in reply to the petition which we had handed to him personally on our departure.

In this letter, Shepstone made a violent attack on Joubert and myself and threw it in our teeth that, if there was any dissatisfaction in the country, we were the cause of it. In our first interview with Sir Michael Hicks-Beach, he declared that he would only treat by correspondence, and so a long and strongly-worded memorial was drawn up, setting forth the right of the Republic to an independent existence and the iniquity of the grounds on which it had been sought to justify the annexation. A protest was also made against the annexation as a breach of the Sand River Convention, which the British Government had concluded with the Boer emigrants in 1852, and, lastly, we expressed the hope that the sense of justice of the British Nation would no longer oppose the restitution of an

independence which had been recognized by the great powers.

Sir Michael's reply, as was to be expected, was a complete disappointment to us. The Colonial Secretary only promised to introduce a sort of self-government as soon as the condition of the country permitted, and added that the pursuance of that policy of reconciliation would depend above all on the attitude of the delegates.

We replied briefly that we could not believe that a policy such as that which England was now adopting could serve to allay the existing dissatisfaction and to bring about friendly feelings. Later, in a longer memorandum, we again defended the Republic's title to its independence; but all to no purpose.

The delegates had to return to South Africa without accomplishing any results.

On the occasion of this second visit to England, I was presented by an English friend of the Boers with a gold ring, engraved with the words:

"Take courage, your cause is just and must triumph in the end."

The inside of the ring is engraved with the figures which represent the result of the plebiscite on the acceptance or rejection of the annexation. I still wear this ring as my only ornament.

On our return journey, in the autumn of 1878, we again visited the Continent. In Paris the great International Exhibition was in progress. On this occasion, I saw my first balloon and took part in an ascent. High up in mid-air, I jestingly asked the aeronaut, as we had gone so far, to take me all the way home. The aeronaut now asked who his passenger was and, when we returned to the earth, presented me with a medal to remind me of my journey through the air. Our deputation landed at Durban in December 1878.

In the meantime, the situation in South Africa had assumed a very serious aspect. Secucuni, who had formerly been persuaded by the English, when it served their turn, to declare that he would not make peace, had not troubled his head about the change of government and kept to the lesson under the new Government which he had learnt under the old.

Whereas formerly he had always been supported in his refusal to recognize the sovereignty of the South African Republic over his territory, he was now required to keep the peace, as his territory belonged to the Transvaal. At last, an expedition consisting of volunteers and blacks, under Colonel Rowlands, was dispatched against him, but without effecting much. And the worst of all was that the Zulu king, Cetewayo, was also in rebellion against the British Government.

England had equally refused to acknowledge the Republic's claim on his territory, but, immediately after the annexation, herself laid claim to it as constituting an unquestionable part of the dominions of the erstwhile Republic. Sir Bartle Frere asked me, on my arrival at Durban, to assist the British Commander-in-chief, Lord Chelmsford, with information as to the best ways and means of waging war against the Zulus.

I gave a ready and sincere compliance with this request. I advised the British commander to make every halting-place into a camp, by collecting the wagons together, as the Boers had been used to do, and always to be well provided with good spies and scouts, so as to keep thoroughly informed of the enemy's movements.

Sir Bartle Frere asked me to accompany one of the Commander-in-chief's columns as adviser and leader. I at first refused. But, when he pressed me and declared that I might name my own reward for this service, I said:

"Very well, I accept. I will take 500 burghers and hand Zululand over to you, if you will give me the reward I want."

Sir Bartle Frere was a little offended when I offered to do with 500 men the work for which the English had placed so many soldiers in the field, and asked:

" Do you mean to say that your people are so much better than our soldiers?"

" Not that," I replied, " but our method of fighting is better than yours, and we know the country."

Sir Bartle now asked what reward I required. I said, " The independence of my country and people," whereupon the High Commissioner refused to discuss the subject further. Later, Shepstone also asked me, by letter, to come to the assistance of the English with a Boer commando. I replied that the annexation and the breach which this had caused between the people of the South African Republic and the British Government made a friendly cooperation of the two races impossible. I could not but refuse my assistance to those who paid no attention to the urgent entreaty of the people that their independence should be restored to them.

With their usual arrogance, the English despised the Zulu impis, and the result was the bloody defeat of Isandlhana (22 January, 1879), in which about 1,200 English soldiers were cut to pieces. This taught them wisdom; they went to work more cautiously and, in the Battle of Ulundi (July, 1879), Lord Chelmsford succeeded in completely defeating the Zulus. Later, Cetewayo was taken prisoner and the war brought to an end. It was generally stated in Africa, at the time, that the English had bribed Cetewayo's general to surrender his king to them.

According to this account, the general thereupon persuaded Cetewayo to go to a certain spot which he declared to be safer than that in which Cetewayo then was. Cetewayo listened to this proposal and was easily surrounded and taken prisoner by the English. Whether all this, however, happened as related is not certain.

In the meanwhile, in March 1879, Sir Theophilus Shepstone had been replaced by Sir Owen Lanyon, a man absolutely unfitted for this difficult post. As a soldier, Sir Owen, of course, had no knowledge of civil administration; and, moreover, he was totally unacquainted with the manners, language and nature of the Boers.

After our return to the Transvaal, our deputation called a mass meeting to report on the results of our mission. This meeting was held on the 10th of January 1879, at Wonderfontein. About 3,000 Boers assembled and more would undoubtedly have come, if many had not been prevented from attending the meeting by the swollen state of the rivers and by the prevailing horse-sickness, which always rages at its worst at that season of the year.

Meanwhile, Sir Bartle Frere had distributed among the burghers an open letter to myself and Joubert in which he said, among other things, that he hoped that we would make it clear to the people that the annexation was irrevocable. At the meeting, after first thanking the burghers for their numerous attendance and for the welcome which they had given the deputation, I exhorted them to remain unanimous and to allow no discord or differences of any kind to come between them, as only unanimity, obedience and combined efforts would enable them to regain their freedom.

The meeting passed a resolution thanking us for the trouble and sacrifices which we had made, and declaring that the people would not rest content with the decision of the British Government.

Some of the burghers thought that the time had now come to seek to obtain from the British Government by force what they were not inclined to give of their own free will; but I explained to them that the time had not yet come, and was supported in my endeavors to maintain peace by Joubert and Pretorius. A burgher stepped forward and said:

"Mr. Kruger, we have been talking long enough; you must now let us shoot the English."

I asked him, in reply:

"If I say, 'sah!' will you bite? And if I say, 'bite,' will you hold tight?" [I "Sah!" is the ejaculation employed in South Africa in setting on a dog to bite. - **Translator's Note.**]

The man made no reply.

At the same meeting, it was resolved to send Piet Joubert to Natal, where Sir Bartle Frere then was,

in order to communicate to him the determination of the people not to submit to England. This mission, however, had not the smallest result, except that Sir Bartle Frere promised to come to the Transvaal in order to convince himself in person of the state of affairs. With this intent, a new meeting was called at Kleinfontein Farm, and Sir Bartle Frere was invited to attend.

On the appointed day (18 March, 1879) four or five thousand burghers met at Kleinfontein. Joubert gave an account of his mission and its failure, and ended with the words:

"The question which the people has now to put to itself is, Shall it submit or not?"

I also made a speech in which I impressed upon my hearers that they must not disturb the peace by taking imprudent steps, but leave the matter to the committee which would not fail to let them know as soon as it thought that all peaceful measures had been exhausted.

This admonition was very necessary, for many of the burghers were greatly excited and spoke openly of the need for " shooting the English."

More voices were raised at the meeting proposing that the burghers should help the Zulu king, Cetewayo, with whom England was then at war, in order jointly with him to overwhelm the English.

I combated this proposal with all my might, and said that the thing was not Christian and that one must never join with savages in war against a civilized nation. And thus this plan was stifled at its birth.

Meantime, Sir Bartle Frere, who had promised to attend this meeting, had not arrived. He had left Natal for Kleinfontein, but was traveling very slowly. Possibly he hoped that the delay would discourage the Boers, or that we would return to our homes without its being necessary for him to appear.

From Heidelberg he sent word to inform the meeting that he would have no time to stop at the camp as he had to go to Pretoria. He received an answer, however, saying that we had long been waiting for him and relied upon seeing him. He then determined to come. As he approached the camp, the leaders of the committee rode out to meet him and escorted him into the camp. The burghers stood closely gathered and preserved a deathly silence.

No one saluted him, although at first he bowed to the burghers to right and left. In the course of a debate that ensued, it was decided to meet again a few days later, and then to discuss the several points at issue. Sir Bartle then went on to Pretoria.

Frere attended the new meeting, escorted by the Governor, Sir Owen Lanyon, a number of officials and an armed body-guard. He reproached the committee with being the cause of the dissatisfaction.

The committee took little notice of this remark and its only reply was that the people were not content to accept the annexation. Finally, the High Commissioner struck another note, and said that he must admit that he had been misinformed, for he now saw that the opposition to the annexation was a powerful one and that it proceeded from the best men among the Transvaal people.

The committee suggested to him that it should again set forth the objections of the people in a petition to the British Government, and asked him to forward this petition accompanied by a report on what he had seen and heard. He declared that he was prepared to recommend the petition to the earnest consideration of the British Government, although personally he was opposed to the repeal of the annexation. Shortly after, the meeting broke up. It appeared afterwards, however, that Sir Bartle Frere wrote to the British Government that he regretted he did not have enough guns to disperse the rebels. How typically English!

After Sir Bartle Frere's visit, the committee sent letters to the Orange Free State and Cape Colony asking them to support the request for the repeal of the annexation. The Volksraad of the Orange Free State, by a large majority, passed a resolution in which the hope was expressed that the endeavours of the burghers to recover their independence might be crowned with success.

In Cape Colony, a deputation waited on Sir Bartle Frere with the same object. Of course, it received, together with many fine speeches, the stereotyped reply of the English statesmen, that the thing was past and done with.

In the meanwhile, Sir Garnet Wolseley had been sent to South Africa with special powers. He was appointed High Commissioner beside Sir Bartle Frere with special instructions to settle Zulu and Transvaal matters.

This is the man who uttered the famous phrase:

"So long as the sun shines, the Transvaal will be British territory; and the Vaal River shall flow back to its sources before the Transvaal is again independent!"

At about that time, Sir Garnet was engaged in suppressing Secucuni, an enterprise in which he at last succeeded with the aid of his greatly superior force.

After the Kleinfontein meeting, the Committee announced that a new meeting would be held at Wonderfontein. This caused Sir Garnet Wolseley to issue a proclamation in which he pointed to the danger to which those who attended the meeting would expose themselves, their families and property. He also threatened to punish all such persons for high treason.

This proclamation, however, was quite ineffective, for five to six thousand persons attended the meeting, which was held at Wonderfontein on the 10th of December. The burghers were enthusiastic in the highest degree. They thought that the time had now certainly come to begin the war; but, while rejoicing at the unanimity that prevailed among the burghers, I thought it my duty to address one more word of warning to them.

I pointed out to them that England was a powerful nation, and expressed the fear that many of them, once the war had broken out, would become discouraged and go back to their farms. It was not safe to decide on war at this moment of excitement.

Late that night, I walked through the camp to listen to the conversations which the burghers were holding at their camp-fires. I was anxious to ascertain how my warning had been taken. Many of the remarks that fell upon my ears were very characteristic. For instance, I heard one man say:

"I think Kruger is betraying us."

"No," said another, "I will never believe that of him, for he has done too much for us and he is still working too hard that he should be accused of such a thing."

"But," replied the first, "if he doesn't intend to betray us, why won't he let us shoot the Englishmen?"

"Ay," said the other, "I think his plans are wrong, but I won't believe that he's betraying us."

Very well satisfied with my observations, I returned to my tent and thanked God that my people were so firmly determined to recover their independence.

At the same meeting, a popular resolution was passed which declared that the people demanded to remain free and independent; that the burghers had never been subjects of Her Majesty and never wished to become so; that they asked for the restitution of their independence and the restoration of the Volksraad; and that the last-named body must take the necessary measures to ensure that independence. Pretorius and Bok were sent as delegates to acquaint Sir Garnet Wolseley with this resolution.

However, these two gentlemen were arrested on a charge of high treason, Pretorius at Potchefstroom and Bok at Pretoria.

It goes without saying that this incident aroused great dissatisfaction. A large number of burghers at once determined to set Pretorius free by force.

But the latter wrote a letter in which he begged them to abandon that intention. In consequence of

these events, I went to Potchefstroom. On my way, I learnt that, in spite of Pretorius' request, a number of armed burghers were on their road in front of me, with the intention of setting Pretorius free. I galloped after them as fast as my horse could carry me and caught them up close to the village. After many arguments I at last succeeded in persuading them to give up their plan.

That same evening, Pretorius and Bok were released on bail. But the British authorities now pressed Pretorius until he at last consented to travel through the country and read out a proclamation of the British Government intended to convince the burghers of the error of their ways. At the same time they supplied him with horses for his journey.

The burghers whom I had persuaded to turn back were still gathered in a body at Nauwpoort, not far from Potchefstroom, and I with them, when Pretorius came up and read out the proclamation of the British Government. The burghers must submit peacefully, it said, for their freedom had not been taken from them and the present situation was only the bridge by which they might attain self-government. When Pretorius had finished, I turned to the burghers.

"Burghers," I asked, "do you understand what the British Government offers you? I will try to explain to you what this self-government, in my opinion, means. They say to you, 'First put your head quietly in the noose, so that I can hang you up : then you may kick your legs about as much as you please!' That is what they call self-government."

The burghers entirely agreed with this view, and, on the next day, Pretorius wrote to Sir Garnet Wolseley that he must give up the idea of continuing his journey, since the burghers were firmly determined to recover their independence, and it was of no use to try to persuade them to a different way of thinking.

Shortly after these occurrences, a scheme for the confederation of South Africa was down for discussion in the Cape Parliament. The Transvaalers considered it of the highest importance, in the interest of the freedom of their country, to bring about the failure of this project for a united South Africa under the British flag, since, in the event of its acceptance, there would be no chance left for the repeal of the annexation.

Joubert and I were, therefore, sent to Cape Town to urge our friends in the Cape Parliament to oppose this proposition. On our way to Cape Town, we were received everywhere with the greatest heartiness. At Cape Town itself we had an interview with a number of members of Parliament, at which I insisted, in the strongest terms, on the need for rejecting the plan and declared that the Republic would never accept a federation arrived at in this manner, above all as the burghers themselves had no voice in the matter and would not allow foreigners to determine their future for them.

"Do not wash your hands in the blood of your brothers!" were the words with which I parted from the members.

Fortunately the plans for a confederation were rejected.

During our stay at Cape Town, a member of the Upper House came to Joubert and me to invite us to pay a visit to Sir Bartle Frere. We refused; but, when the invitation was repeated, and it was added that Sir Bartle wished to speak to us privately, I said:

"I will come, if you can tell me which Sir Bartle Frere it is that wishes to see us; for I know four of them. The first came to us at Kleinfontein and assured us that he had not come with the sword, but as a messenger of peace. But, later on, I read in an English Blue Book that, on the same day, a Sir Bartle Frere, the second, therefore, had written to the British Government, 'If only I had had enough guns and men, I would soon have dispersed the rebels.' I made the acquaintance of the third Sir Bartle Frere through his answer to our petition for the repeal of the annexation: he then said that he had informed the British Government that he had met some five thousand of the best Boers at Kleinfontein and that he recommended their petition to the Government's earnest consideration. Afterwards, I saw in the English Blue Book that, on the same day, a Sir Bartle Frere, obviously a

fourth, had informed the British Government that he had met only a handful of rebels. Now these four cannot possibly be one and the same man; if, therefore, you can tell me which of the four Sir Bartles wishes to see us, we will think about it."

It is needless to add that Sir Bartle Frere's emissary was unable to answer the question and returned with his mission unfulfilled.

During the stay of our deputation at Cape Town, the Tory Ministry fell, and Gladstone, who had often spoken against the annexation, became Premier of the new Cabinet. Joubert and I now formed new hopes, and, in May 1880, wrote to Gladstone from Cape Town, laying the situation before him and earnestly requesting him to do justice to the country, to repeal the annexation and to restore the Sand River Convention of 1852.

We were bitterly disappointed on receiving an answer from the Liberal statesman informing us that he was unable to annul the annexation or to advise Her Majesty to abandon her suzerainty over the Transvaal. We returned to the Transvaal and reported to the committee on our mission. The general conviction was now arrived at that further meetings and friendly protests were useless.

The best course appeared to be to set quietly to work and to prepare for the worst by the purchase of arms and ammunition. The greatest prudence and the strictest secrecy had to be observed in order to avoid suspicion: this was the only possible way of preparing for the decisive struggle.

Source: <http://www.politicsweb.co.za/politicsweb/view/politicsweb/en/page71656?oid=646147&sn=Detail&pid=71616>