For the first seventy years of the nineteenth century, British governments had been reluctant to extend their involvement in South Africa beyond the coastal colonies of the Cape and Natal. By the 1870s, however, important economic and political developments in South Africa prompted Britain to act in consolidating its interests throughout the Southern African region. These developments had significant consequences for the Indigenous populations of the area, for the British colonies and the Boer republics, and for the remaining independent African polities which had not yet succumbed to colonial rule.

The effects of the ‘mineral revolution’ and Carnarvon’s federation scheme: from 1869

The situation which had obtained in most of South Africa for the middle decades of the nineteenth century began to change rapidly from the 1870s, with the impact of the ‘mineral revolution’, and Carnarvon’s federation scheme. The ‘mineral revolution’, briefly, comprised the discovery and exploitation of the substantial diamond fields in and around what became the town of Kimberley in the northern Cape from 1869; and the exploitation of the even more substantial gold reef on the Witwatersrand (‘the Rand’ for short) in the southern Transvaal from 1886.

The ‘mineral revolution’ transformed the economic, social and political situation of South Africa over the next three decades. Major new towns – Kimberley on the diamond fields, Johannesburg and the towns of East and West Rand on the goldfields – rapidly developed. The men in charge of the new mines established a pattern of work practices which was to shape South Africa’s mining industry, and much of its economy, in the twentieth century. The mines themselves became dominated by just a few well-capitalised large companies, which agreed
among themselves the basics of their labour policies. Skilled and supervisory work were reserved for Whites; unskilled and heavy manual work were restricted to Africans – most of them migrants to the mining towns from elsewhere in Southern Africa – who were locked up in compounds under the draconian discipline enforced by the mining companies.

Rapid exploitation of this new mineral wealth made the interior of South Africa, for the first time, economically attractive to the British and colonial authorities, and led to a renewed British and colonial push into the interior. When, in 1871, Lieutenant-Governor Keate of Natal awarded political sovereignty over the area of the diamond diggings to the Griqua Chiefdom of Nicholas Waterboer, Waterboer promptly asked for British protection. Britain annexed the area in 1871; and in 1880, under the name of Griqualand West, Kimberley and the diamond fields became part of the Cape Colony, which thus expanded significantly northwards into the interior. The diamond revenues also added a significant boost to the Cape's colonial finances.

The federation scheme of the 1870s was an ambitious attempt by Lord Carnarvon, Conservative colonial secretary, to follow up the Canadian Confederation of 1867 by producing a similar federation of the major political units in South Africa. The scheme failed, but not without having a dramatic political and military impact on South Africa. The 'mineral revolution' and the federation scheme together reshaped the political geography of South Africa within three decades. By the end of the nineteenth century, the separate African polities had almost entirely disappeared under some form of European colonial jurisdiction, and Britain was also directly threatening the independence of the two Boer republics (see Map 7.1).

These results can be summarised as follows. The Basotho Kingdom, whose independence was seriously threatened in the second of two wars with the Boer republic of the Orange Free State, appealed for British protection. In 1868, it was annexed to the Cape, but colonial misgovernance led to a Basotho revolt; in 1884, it was removed from the Cape and became the separate protectorate of Basutoland (now Lesotho), under direct British rule. Meanwhile, in 1877, Carnarvon sent Theophilus Shepstone to annex the Transvaal, as part of his federation scheme. During the four years that Britain governed the Transvaal, it used British military power to break the Pedi polity in the northern Transvaal and bring it under White authority. In 1880, the Afrikaners of the Transvaal rose up in revolt, in what became the first Anglo-Boer War, of 1880–81. The outcome was that the Transvaal, by the Pretoria Convention of 1881 and the London Convention of 1884, regained almost complete independence under a nominal British ‘suzerainty’.
Between the Ninth (and final) Frontier War, of 1877–78, and 1894, the Cape annexed, piecemeal, areas of the Transkei, East Griqualand, Tembuland and finally Pondoland. By 1894, all of the modern Transkei lay within the borders of the Cape, completing the colonial incorporation of all the Xhosa-speaking peoples and their lands. In 1879, British
High Commissioner Sir Bartle Frere forced a major war on the Zulu Kingdom. Despite an initial British disaster, the Zulu were militarily crushed. By 1887, Britain had broken up Zululand into rival areas, and by 1897 most of it was incorporated into Natal.

The Tswana Chiefdoms, in the north-west, appealed for British help in trying to deal with incursions by White farmers from the Transvaal. In 1885, Britain annexed the chiefdoms south of the River Molopo; in 1895, they too were incorporated in the Cape Colony, which now extended its territory even further north to Mafeking on the western borders of the Transvaal. In 1895, Britain took over directly the Tswana Chiefdoms north of the River Molopo, to form a second British protectorate – Bechuanaland (now Botswana). The Swazi Kingdom became a protectorate of the Transvaal Republic in 1894. After the South African War, when Britain granted self-government to the Transvaal, in 1906, Swaziland was removed from the Transvaal to become the third and last of Britain’s protectorates in Southern Africa.

The cumulative results of these political moves were crucial to the future of South Africa. When gold was discovered on the Rand, in 1886, it was within a Transvaal again under Afrikaner republican governance and not under British rule. The struggle between Britain and the Transvaal over the control of the gold fields and the massive wealth which they represented led directly to the South African (or second Anglo-Boer) War of 1899–1902. And, by the time that war broke out, in October 1899, the independent African polities of South Africa had gone – they were all now under the rule of the Cape, Natal or the Transvaal, or else under direct British rule. However, we need to consider first what was happening to Indigenous (and other ‘non-White’) political rights in the two British colonies – the Cape Colony, which was expanding its political authority over a growing area of the South African interior, and Natal, which also expanded its authority into Zululand.

Changes in the Cape Colony: c.1870–99

In 1872, the Cape received full responsible government, on the same franchise as that introduced in 1853 – any adult male could qualify for the vote, provided that he was a British subject and he occupied, for at least twelve months, property worth £25 a year, or had an income of £50 a year (or £25 a year with board-and-lodging provided). There was no educational or literacy test to supplement the property qualification.

Prior to 1870, the non-European electorate in the Cape had been essentially a Coloured one, mainly in the western Cape. But the annex-
ation first of the Ciskei, in 1866, and then, from 1877, of the Transkei and its formal incorporation into the colony in 1885, increased substantially both the size and the proportion of the African population of the colony. In 1860, the colony’s population comprised about 314,000 Africans and 180,000 Whites, a ratio of less than 2 to 1. By 1891, the Africans had almost quadrupled in number to 1.148 million, while the Whites had only doubled to 376,000 – a ratio now of 3 to 1. Furthermore, the expansion of the colony’s borders to take in the Xhosa-speakers of the eastern Cape opened up the possibility of qualified men among them registering for the vote. In the 1880s, they began to register in large numbers, drawn mainly from the ‘respectable’ mission-educated elite, particularly among the Mfengu people. African voters were never to amount to more than a small percentage of the total voters’ roll in the Cape Colony; but their numbers were important in particular constituencies, in the eastern and northern Cape, including the diamond town of Kimberley, where Cecil Rhodes had made his fortune.

*Settler fears of ‘swamping’*

From the mid-1880s, the mission-educated Christians began to organise the African vote and to use it as a political weapon in the Cape elections. John Tengo Jabavu, a teacher and Methodist lay-preacher, founded the Xhosa-language newspaper *Imvo Zabantsundu* (‘Native Opinion’) in Kingwilliamstown in the Ciskei, in 1884. He argued that the Africans should not identify themselves with a particular political party or programme, but should acquire access to, and influence with, significant MPs and ministers by organising their vote in a few key constituencies in which they could hold the balance of power.

The increasing proportion of Africans in the Cape population, and the potential for growing numbers of them in the Transkei to register for the vote and use it, alarmed many White politicians. In 1877, Gordon Sprigg, a future prime minister of the Cape, explicitly defended the African vote as a ‘safety-valve, from which no “evil” had arisen’: ‘the Parliament and the country did not suffer from the Native vote’. He went on, with a surprising degree of frankness:

I will not now go into the large question of the difference of race and the causes of the superiority of one race to another; but it is my opinion that the black man here distinctly recognizes the superiority of the white man, and that for a very long time to come, perhaps for ever, the recognition will prevail to such an extent as to leave the representation in the hands of men of European descent. It is, in my opinion, extremely dangerous under a representative Government to establish the principle that the larger part of the population shall have no voice in the councils of the...
country. The true way to remove discontent is to provide a channel for its true utterance. It is the recognition of the soundness of this principle that has been at the bottom of many Reform Bills that have received the assent of the British Legislature. It is the refusal to recognise it that has led to so much disturbance and rebellion on the continent of Europe. Under Parliamentary Government representation is your safety-valve. Tie down your safety-valve and there is an explosion.\(^3\)

Ten years later, however, Sprigg, as prime minister, passed an Act that substantially restricted the scope of that ‘safety-valve’. One reason for this was the Afrikaner Bond – a political organisation established to represent the interests of White Afrikaner farmers; under the leadership of Jan Hofmeyr, it became a political force in the Cape parliament in the 1880s, and began to press for measures to curb the numbers of African voters.\(^4\) Despite his preference for not aligning with any political party, Jabavu naturally distrusted the Afrikaner Bond because it wanted to restrict the power of the African vote; he tended to favour a few English-speaking White Liberal MPs. In 1887, Jabavu told his *Imvo* readers: ‘History shows unmistakably that the votes of the natives have been used discreetly in the best interests of the country and of civilization, and that they have steadily and consistently been employed to strengthen the English or the party of right and justice in the House.’\(^5\)

**Pressures to restrict the franchise in the Cape**

Bond pressure in parliament produced Sprigg’s Parliamentary Voters’ Registration Act (1887), which made it more difficult for Africans to register for the vote. It extended the franchise to the Transkei – but excluded from the property qualification for registration as a voter ‘sharing in any communal or tribal occupation of lands, or place of residence’\(^6\); Cecil Rhodes, the millionaire whose De Beers company dominated the diamond town of Kimberley, was an MP representing the constituency of Barkly West; though in opposition, Rhodes joined the Bond in speaking in favour of the Bill. He stated that the Cape had previously allowed too many Africans to vote, but must now change; Africans should still be able to qualify for the vote, but not those living on communal tenure. Giving Maori the vote in New Zealand, he claimed, had proved a failure; on the other hand, Natal had effectively disfranchised its Africans and Indians, and the Cape should do the same. ‘We have got to treat natives, where they are in a state of barbarism, in a different way to ourselves. We are to to be lords over them . . . The native is to be treated as a child and denied the franchise.’\(^7\)

Jabavu and other African activists organised a campaign of petitions and protests against the Bill, calling it a ‘Bill to Muzzle the Natives’. Two chiefs and eight other Mfengu from the Oxkraal location in
Queenstown in the eastern Cape, stressing their loyalty and their long record as ‘allies of the British Government’ in fighting the Xhosa at the frontier, petitioned the queen to prevent them losing their vote and being ‘handed over and sacrificed to their old enemy the Dutch’. But the protests failed to prevent it becoming law, and petitioners’ fears that, despite the regressive proposals of the settler MPs, there would be ‘no further imperial interference so far as . . . natives are concerned’ would prove to be well-founded. At a stroke, this Act disfranchised about 20,000 voters, mostly Africans; one-third of the African voters of the eastern Cape lost their votes. Xhosa-speakers called the Act the tung’ umlomo (the ‘sewing up of the mouth’). Jabavu responded by organising local political groups to encourage Africans to register, which kept their numbers up; in 1891, in twelve eastern Cape constituencies, Africans still comprised 30 per cent of the electorate, and in another ten constituencies they formed 20–29 per cent. At the 1890 election, Africans still strongly influenced the election of one-sixth of the parliament’s MPs.

Following that election, the Bond renewed its pressure for measures to restrict the African vote; their leader, Jan Hofmeyr, argued that Africans were rapidly becoming the overwhelming majority of the Cape population; without some increase in the voting qualification, ‘the white population . . . would be utterly swamped’. Rhodes became prime minister with Bond support in 1890, and responded with the Franchise and Ballot Act (1892). This raised the property qualification by 200 per cent, from £25 to £75 a year, and added a basic literacy test requiring a voter to be able to write name, address and occupation. The colonial literacy rate then was: about 26 per cent for Coloured people; 11 per cent for Africans in the more settled areas; and only about 4 per cent for Africans in the frontier parts of the eastern Cape. The Act targeted tribal Africans of the Transkei (called derogatorily ‘blanket Kaffirs’: their tribal status was visible in their attire of coloured blankets rather than Western clothes). Jacobus Sauer, a minister in Rhodes’ cabinet, defended the Act as removing the vote from ‘the blanket Kafir, who did not work himself but sent his wife out to work for him’. In the debate on the Bill, Rhodes stated that the Cape had previously allowed too many Africans to vote; now they must exclude from the vote those living on communal tenure. He highlighted existing discriminatory franchise practices in colonies with mixed populations, under either Britain or responsible government – Natal, Griqualand West, Canada and New Zealand. Giving Maori the vote in New Zealand, he claimed, had proved a failure: although New Zealand had two Maori in the Council and two in the Assembly, it must be remembered ‘that the Maories [sic] were reduced from 250,000 to a population of 40,000, so
that there was no practical danger, the Maories being a fading race'. More than 10,000 Coloured voters petitioned against the Bill, but it passed the parliament easily, with a two-thirds majority, and reduced the African and Coloured voters from about 24 to 20 per cent of the Cape electorate. The Cape governor advised Britain not to interfere in local matters; and, despite misgivings about laws restricting the franchise, Colonial Secretary Ripon agreed not to intervene and ‘to abstain from advising Her [Majesty] to disallow the Act’.

This effect was compounded two years later by the Glen Grey Act (1894), a product of Rhodes’s second term as prime minister. The Act laid down that land held by African families in the Glen Grey Reserve could be held only on individual, rather than communal, tenure, thus drastically restricting the amount of land which each family could own. Since individual tenure would normally qualify men for the vote, it specifically excluded land held under Glen Grey title from qualifying for the vote. Africans again protested and petitioned – and again they did so in vain.

So, in the years leading up to the outbreak of the South African War, Cape politicians, afraid of the White voters being ‘utterly swamped’ electorally by the African vote, had substantially restricted the access of Africans to the franchise. There were three specific changes: the trebling of the property qualification from £25 to £75 a year, plus a literacy test; the disqualification of communal tenure as a means of satisfying the property qualification; and the disqualification of even individual tenure as a means of satisfying the property qualification if the land was held in the Glen Grey district. These restrictions limited both the number of Africans currently qualifying for the vote and the number who could qualify in the future. Yet – despite the expressed wishes of a number of White politicians – the colony had not retreated from the fundamental principle of the original Cape franchise of 1853, that it should not be based on an overt racial or colour distinction. Neither the Afrikaner Bond nor Rhodes (despite his admiration for Natal effectively disfranchising its Africans and Indians) had tried to remove this principle, although one should not underestimate the strategic advantages of maintaining a rhetorical commitment to inclusiveness while actively promoting its limitation in practice.

**Political considerations in the Cape**

Rhodes’s organising of the Jameson Raid, at the end of 1895, to try to seize the Rand gold mines lost him both the Cape premiership and the political support of the Afrikaner Bond. In attempting a political comeback, in the new Progressive Party, Rhodes was now prepared to court African and Coloured political support. In the hard-fought 1898
election, Rhodes used a phrase which he was to repeat and claim had always been his policy: ‘Equal rights for every civilised man south of the Zambesi’. A ‘civilised man’ he defined as any man, White or Black, ‘who has sufficient education to write his name, has some property, or works. In fact, is not a loafer.’ African political organisations, over the next decade, found it convenient to use this phrase, with Rhodes’s prestige, to support claims to the vote. In 1891, a group of eastern Cape Africans set up the South African Native Congress (SANC), as a rival organisation to Jabavu’s; Rhodes helped finance SANC’s newspaper *Izwi Labantu* (‘Voice of the People’), established 1897, in return for SANC’s political support of his Progressives. This re-orientation, in turn, pushed Jabavu’s organisation and newspaper into an alliance of strange bedfellows with the Bond. When the South African War broke out in October 1899, the Cape political scene was divided in numerous ways – but these were political divisions, not a simple division along racial lines.

In 1909, of a Cape electorate of 142,000, 10 per cent was Coloured and nearly 5 per cent African. In several constituencies, African and Coloured voters’ numbers continued to be sufficient to compel the candidates of the White parties to court their votes and exercise some influence on legislation. In theory, registered Coloured and African voters could also stand for parliament – though no African or Coloured man was ever elected to the parliament of the Cape Colony. In 1902, Coloured voters founded the African Political Organisation (APO) to advance Coloured political interests. Dr Abdullah Abdurahman, who became president of the APO in 1905, was elected to the Cape Town City Council in 1904, and to the Cape Provincial Council in 1914 – the only ‘non-White’ person ever to be elected to a political position in the Union of South Africa.

The optimistic view of the Cape franchise and what it could mean for Africans in the future was put by Sol Plaatje. Plaatje, a Tswana man born in the Boer republic of the Orange Free State, had received a basic mission education and thereafter had educated himself further. In 1894, he moved to a job in the Post Office in Kimberley. Plaatje fluently spoke and read English, Afrikaans and German, as well as at least three African languages; in Kimberley, he found himself part of an educated African elite, mostly missionary-educated Xhosa-speakers from the eastern Cape, who used their literacy skills to get clerical positions. As Kimberley was in the Cape, they were all qualified for, and took seriously their exercise of, the vote. This made them strong supporters of the British Empire and of the Cape Colony against the Boer republics, which offered no such political rights to Africans. Like the ‘Young Maori Party’ in New Zealand, they saw this gradual assimilation into...
the White political process to be the best route for Africans to pursue. Their optimistic liberal scenario was that more Africans would gradually qualify for the Cape franchise, and would gradually be integrated into the political system without any dangerous shocks. As the Cape White liberals suggested, Africans under British colonial rule might hope for a gradual enfranchisement similar to that which British working-class men had experienced progressively over the course of the nineteenth century. These hopes, however, were to be severely disappointed.

Changes in Natal: from c.1870 to 1899

Natal governments and parliaments, in the 1870s and 1880s, continued to manipulate the formally non-racial franchise to make it difficult for Africans to qualify and register as voters. African groups organised politically to try to change the policy or secure their own enfranchisement – but they tended to do so within a narrow constitutional framework, which did not challenge the fundamental basis on which the Natal government acted. As previously outlined, an 1864 Act had allowed an African to petition the governor to be exempted from customary ‘Native Law’, provided he could prove that he owned property, could read and write, and took an oath of allegiance to the Crown. The governor had full discretion to grant the petition – in which case, the African would become subject to colonial Common Law instead of Native Law – or refuse it. In 1880, eighteen Africans, who had been exempted from Native Law, petitioned the Legislative Council to enjoy the same rights as their White fellow-subjects. The petitioners stated that, although they accepted their disqualification from the franchise under the 1864 Act – and submitted ‘contentedly’ to having no voice in government, as they did not ‘well understand’ the matters on which the Council deliberated – they were concerned that their children should ‘be in a position by education’ to vote in the future. The petitioners made these concessions in traditionally respectful language, complaining only that ‘the Government . . . refuses them the assistance in educating their children which it extends to their wiser and richer white fellow-subjects’.

As this petition suggested, the Natal government continued to manipulate the theoretically colour-blind franchise to exclude almost all Africans; this did not change when responsible government was granted in 1893. By the end of 1908, about 1,800 Africans had been exempted from Native Law – but apparently only six of them had acquired the right to vote. The under-secretary for native affairs stated, in December 1906, that only three Africans had been granted the fran-
chise, and that, to his knowledge, another three had been refused it.22 This outcome shows some similarities with the political position of the Indigenous population of Canada in this same period.

The Indian ‘threat’

By the 1890s, the White voters and the government of Natal were more concerned with what they saw as the threat from the other ‘non-White’ community in the colony – the growing Indian population. Indian immigrants to Natal, initially as indentured labourers to work in the sugar cane plantations, had begun arriving in 1860; from 1870, most of the people from this group chose to stay on in the colony, with small grants of land. They became an important part of the Natal economy, as farmers growing fruit and vegetables, as shopkeepers, traders, artisans and craftsmen. Their number grew rapidly: in the 1890s, they totalled about 40,000, almost equal to the number of Whites; by 1911, they outnumbered the White population of Natal. Once there was a permanent and growing Indian community in Natal, the colonial government and the White voters became alarmed at the prospect of them getting the vote and dominating the electorate.

Under responsible government, after 1893, the franchise continued to be, in theory, non-discriminatory; but the government could not use against the Indians the same device of ‘Native Law’ which it had used to disfranchise Africans. And any move explicitly aimed against the Indian community would cause trouble with the Colonial Office in London, sensitive to protests on behalf of its millions of Indian subjects. Nonetheless, the Natal government, in 1894, introduced the Franchise Law Amendment Bill, designed to remove the vote from most Indians. It framed the Bill to disqualify from registering for the vote ‘persons belonging to Asiatic races not accustomed to the exercise of franchise rights under parliamentary institutions’ – which effectively excluded Indians from the vote without identifying the Indian community directly. In 1894, only 300–400 of the Natal Indian community of 40,000 were registered to vote. The Bill would not remove the vote from those already registered, but would allow no new Indian registrations. Prime Minister John Robinson stated the view, ‘universal amongst the European residents of the Colony’, that unless Indians were excluded from the franchise ‘the Electorate will at no distant date be swamped by voters who are wholly unfitted by their inexperience and habits to exercise intelligently and independently franchise privileges’.23

Justifying discrimination – the politics of race

Robinson justified the political disqualification of Indians on the ground that ‘the principle and practice of representative government
were evolved in countries where race unity exists’. He cited examples of countries, such as the USA and the Cape, where a liberal franchise was a danger because of a lack of ‘race unity’. Just as Rhodes, in 1887, had invoked Natal as an example of what the Cape should be doing, so Robinson invoked the Cape as an example of what to avoid. The Cape had been ‘compelled at last’ to restrict its franchise, by the amendments of 1887 and 1892. Referring specifically to the exclusion of the tribal, or ‘blanket’, Africans from the vote by disallowing communal property as a form of property qualification, Robinson stated that it could never be supposed that ‘in an intelligent community like the Cape Colony such an evil – I might say such a curse – as what is called the “blanket vote” could be perpetuated’. By contrast, Robinson praised his predecessors of the 1860s for preventing such a situation ever arising in Natal:

Twenty-eight years ago a Law was passed which practically prevented the Natives of this Colony – at any rate, without great restrictions and safeguards – from exercising civil privileges, and I think we have every reason to be thankful that those who had charge of the legislation and the government of the country at that date, were prescient to that extent. I dare not contemplate what would have been the results in this Colony now had the Native inhabitants of this Colony had as free an access to the franchise as they had in the Cape Colony.

Robinson argued that there is a fundamental distinction between civil rights, to which all were entitled – the ‘essential, inalienable rights, irrespective of race or colour, of every British subject . . . security to person and property, access to justice, freedom of speech, right of petition’ – and political rights, which were ‘a race privilege’ to be enjoyed by only particular sections of the population. The right to vote was ‘the most precious inheritance of an emancipated race . . . the outcome of incessant struggle through six centuries . . . the product of civilisation amongst Caucasian races, and especially among Anglo-Saxon races’. This precious Anglo-Saxon political freedom was threatened by the Indian incursion:

Unless something be done to arrest this evil, this evil that threatens in a greater and greater degree day by day and year by year, we shall undoubtedly . . . run the risk of having the European electorate of this Colony swamped by the intrusion of voters who, by reason of their incapacity, will be liable to be swayed this way or that by venal, unscrupulous, or merely Party influences.24

Some MPs went further than Robinson and used the very fact that they had disqualified almost all Africans from the vote as a reason for not giving it to the Indians. The treasurer claimed general agreement for his
statement that ‘the Native, at any rate, would have more right to exercise the privilege than the [Indian]’; but it would be ‘an utter anomaly’ and ‘contrary to all right principles’ if Indians were ever allowed to comprise the majority of members of the Legislative Assembly. Mr Arbuckle agreed with this version of the ‘thin end of the wedge’ politically racist argument: ‘If we grant the franchise to the Asiatics, then we must do the same for the Natives; and if that were done the Government of the Colony would get into the hands of the coloured people, which I am sure no one desires to see.’

Within the Natal Indian community, activists mobilised opposition to the Bill. They wrote letters to the newspapers and lobbied MPs; they sent deputations and petitions to the governor, and to the colonial secretary in London. But the Bill was passed by both Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council.

When, however, it arrived in London for Colonial Office endorsement, Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain raised objections to the Bill because it made race the overt criterion for disqualification by being directed at ‘persons belonging to Asiatic races’. He was concerned about its imperial implications for British rule over India, since the Bill did not distinguish between Asians who were aliens and those who were British subjects; and about its failure to make what he considered the necessary class distinctions, since it did not discriminate between ‘the most ignorant and the most enlightened natives of India’:

I need not remind you that among the latter class there are to be found gentlemen whose position and attainments fully qualify them for all the duties and privileges of Citizenship, and you must be aware that in two cases within the last few years the Electors of important constituencies in this country have considered Indian gentlemen worthy not merely to exercise the franchise but to represent them in the House of Commons.

The electoral reference was to the fact that two Indian men had been elected as MPs for London constituencies in the British general elections of 1892 and 1895, and were accepted as members of the House of Commons. Chamberlain went on to say that, while he appreciated ‘local conditions’ in Natal, the Bill

involves in a common disability all natives of India without exception, and provides no machinery by which an Indian can free himself from this disability, whatever his intelligence, his education, or his stake in the country; and to assent to this measure would be to put an affront upon the people of India such as no British Government could be party to.

Chamberlain was warning the colonial governor that Britain ruled a huge Empire, extending far beyond Natal, and that some consideration
of the feelings and views of its Indian subjects were required. And he was reminding the White colonists of Natal that the British governing classes approached their Indian subjects on the basis of class rather than race: while rejecting the vast mass of ‘ignorant’ Indians as unfit for political and social equality, they welcomed the small number of ‘enlightened’ wealthy Indian aristocrats and professionals, educated at British public schools and universities.

However, Chamberlain did not oppose the Bill’s fundamental principle, and suggested a way in which the Natal government could devise a measure which achieved the same aims, but in a way which ‘will render it possible for Her Majesty’s Government to acquiesce in it’. Natal replaced the Bill’s specific reference to ‘persons belonging to Asiatic races’ with the phrases ‘certain persons’ and ‘natives of Countries which have not hitherto possessed elective representative institutions’. The Natal government amended the Act accordingly; it thanked Chamberlain for ‘understanding the purpose of the Act’, and stated that there was no difference of opinion among the White colonists of South Africa on this question: ‘The fact that the control and good government of half a million unenfranchised natives in Natal – to say nothing of millions of natives throughout South Africa – are closely bound up with this question, is a fact that cannot be too often reiterated.’ The final version of the Act, in 1896, stated that no more persons were to be enrolled as voters who [not being of European origin] are Natives or descendants in the male line of Natives of countries which have not hitherto possessed elective representative institutions founded on the parliamentary Franchise unless they shall first obtain an order from the Governor in Council exempting them from the operation of this Act.

The following year, 1897, the Natal parliament passed an Immigration Restriction Act. Having now learned from Chamberlain the necessity of doing it without making Indians or Asians the target, they subjected all immigrants to a language test whereby they would be refused admission if unable to make written application in a European language of the immigration officer’s choice. At the Colonial Conference of 1897 Chamberlain commended this Act to all the other self-governing colonies as the right way of restricting Coloured immigration without making it obvious that this was what was being done. The other South African colonies adopted the Act, as did the Australian colonies, which made it the basis of the ‘White Australia’ policy under their new federation, and continued to apply the language test to restrict immigration until the 1960s.
The 1896 Franchise Act produced the desired result for the Natal government. In 1907, Natal had 23,686 registered voters; it was estimated that 23,480 of them (over 99 per cent) were White men; only 150 were Indian, and a mere 6 African. At the start of the twentieth century, Natal’s White men, though less than 10 per cent of the population and with a franchise that was in theory non-discriminatory, effectively monopolised the vote and political power.

A male suffrage

In the light of increasingly stringent legislative restrictions in both the Cape and Natal, any suggestion of extending the franchise to include women was quickly dismissed. Given the notional commitment of Britain’s South African colonies to racially non-discriminatory constitutional provisions, bringing about such legislative constraints on the franchise had already proved somewhat destabilising, particularly in stimulating African and Indian – and, to some extent, British and local settler – opposition. Such open display of the manipulation that was necessary to uphold European privilege contrasted uncomfortably with liberal rhetoric. It was perhaps not surprising, then, that the question of female suffrage was seen as further unsettling the complex task of maintaining minority rule by limiting the electorate to those whose values and interests were sympathetic.

In response to a small number of White activists, including the feminist writer Olive Schreiner and, later, members of the WCTU, the same sexist debates were occasioned by the prospect of women’s suffrage – fuelled in no small degree by the unpredictability of women’s support for male privilege – as were common in both Britain and the other settler colonies. In the Cape debates over the 1892 Franchise and Ballot Bill, for example, Mr Orpen proposed an amendment to enfranchise women. Although Orpen gave some consideration to the advantages female suffrage would hold, for instance in doubling the European electorate, those opposing the clause comprehensively dismissed it – and similar proposals elsewhere in Britain and the Empire – as degrading the suffrage; indeed, Merriman mockingly despaired that people would next be supporting ‘baby suffrage’. Significantly, the combined weight of class, gender and racial prejudices, to say nothing of demographic considerations, meant that the prospect of enfranchising non-European women was entertained neither by upper-class White women suffragists nor by male legislators. Colonial legislators were not ignorant of the fact, however, that specifically excluding non-European women from a female franchise would once again raise problems about discriminating on the basis of race, and experience had shown that they were best avoided.
The effect of the South African War: 1899–1902

The outbreak of the South African War in 1899 put a stop to further political reforms in the British colonies for the duration – which proved, to the embarrassment of the British Government, to be much longer than it had anticipated. British policy within South Africa was in the hands mainly of Sir Alfred Milner, sent out in 1897 as governor of the Cape and British high commissioner for South Africa. Milner tried to restore British prestige and power by threatening the Transvaal with war if it did not back down over British demands; but in October 1899 war is what resulted. The war put the two Boer republics, the Transvaal and Orange Free State, on one side, and the British Empire on the other.

The war was not fought about the rights of Indigenous South Africans, but its outcome was to have a very important effect on them. At the outset, both sides proclaimed that this was a ‘White man’s war’ – but both sides made heavy use of Africans for labour of all sorts, and for gathering information. The British even provided some African communities with guns for war-related purposes, and, in the later stages of the war, enlisted them in its armed forces. African and Coloured opinion overwhelmingly favoured the British over the Boers: if they had to be ruled by White men, they preferred the relatively liberal British policy of the Cape to the harsh rule of the Boer republics. Many Africans hoped that Britain would easily defeat the Boer republics, and would impose upon them a new political regime with a Cape-style colour-blind qualified franchise. Sol Plaatje was one African who believed this. Shortly before the outbreak of war, he had gone from Kimberley to Mafeking as a court interpreter, and he was caught up in the Siege of Mafeking. His diary of that siege – a rare account from the perspective of a Black man – shows him to have been a strong supporter of the British cause, expressing the hope that a British victory would mean political rights for the African peoples.

These hopes, of Plaatje and other Indigenous people, were to be sorely disappointed. The first few months of the war saw a series of Boer victories, culminating in ‘Black Week’ – British defeats on three fronts within seven days – in December 1899. Britain then poured men and resources into the war, and quickly turned the tide; by June 1900, the British had defeated the main Boer armies in the field, occupied the enemy capitals, and formally annexed both the Orange Free State and the Transvaal. But once the Boers moved to guerrilla warfare the British forces found their opponents’ hit-and-run tactics very difficult to counter. Eventually, as part of their counter-insurgency strategy, British forces took to burning down Boer farms, and putting the Boer
women and children in concentration camps, where many thousands of them died of disease. Thousands of Africans, uprooted from the burned farms, were also placed in separate camps – where they, too, died of disease in their thousands. The British Government insisted that the war was over – but it dragged on throughout 1900, all of 1901 and into 1902, without any clear result. By the end of 1901, British public opinion was starting to sicken of the British tactics, and the authorities were desperate for an end to the expensive and dirty war. When finally the Boer leaders were brought to the peace talks, in April 1902, Sir Alfred Milner, for Britain, expressed his impatience to end the war.

A major sticking-point in those negotiations was the issue of political rights for Africans in the former Boer republics, the new British colonies of the Transvaal and Orange River Colony. The Boer negotiators flatly refused to accept a Black franchise as part of the peace deal. To get a peace, Milner sacrificed African political rights. The war was ended by the Treaty of Vereeniging, in May 1902, Article 8 of which read: ‘The question of granting franchise to the natives will not be decided till after the introduction of self government.’ In an exchange of telegrams with Milner, Chamberlain queried the wording of the draft article: ‘Seems to be worded so that we should actually have to exclude natives from the Franchise in any constitution establishing a self-governing Colony. Would it not be enough to leave from after “until” to end, and insert “the introduction of representative government”?’ Milner replied, uncompromisingly: ‘Yes. That would be the object of the clause. Clause suggested by you would defeat that object . . . I think there is much to be said for leaving question of political rights of natives to be settled by Colonists themselves.’

Milner’s confirmation that this would leave the question of an African franchise in the two former Boer republics to be decided by the White colonists was a tacit acknowledgment of the reality spelled out by Article 8 – that, whatever African hopes Britain may have encouraged during the war, Milner had sold them out in order to get a peace. He had given the Whites of the former Boer republics an effective veto over the African vote; even with the Transvaal and the Orange River Colony (ORC) now under British rule, Africans would never be granted political rights in their territories. Politically organised Africans were immediately aware of this. In 1903, the South African Native Congress (SANC) sent to Chamberlain a long statement of ‘Questions Affecting the Native and Coloured People Resident in British South Africa’. In it, SANC expressed concern that Article 8 of the treaty placed in danger, in any proposed future federation of South Africa, ‘the principle of the “open door” under the formula of “equal rights for all civilised men”’
which was favoured by the sagacious stateman, the late Right Hon. CECIL RHODES'. In careful diplomatic language, SANC noted ‘the expressed utterances of the Premier of Natal on this subject which agrees with that of the Boer Leaders, viz., that there must be no political equality granted to the Natives’.  

Towards ‘a White Man’s Union’: 1902–10

As British colonies, the Transvaal and the ORC were governed by Milner until 1905 under his policy of ‘reconstruction’. In 1906, the new Liberal Government in Britain immediately restored self-government to the Transvaal and the ORC on the basis of their former adult White male franchises. At their first elections, both colonies elected governments led by former Boer generals and politicians – the Het Volk Party, led by Generals Louis Botha and Jan Smuts, for the Transvaal in 1907; the Orangia Unie Party, led by ex-president M. T. Steyn and General J. B. M. Hertzog, for the ORC in 1908.

For the first time, all four White-ruled states in South Africa were now self-governing British colonies. Almost immediately, they came under pressure – from Britain and from their own politicians – to unite politically into a single state. The obvious examples which they had before their eyes, and which were frequently cited (favourably or unfavourably) in the long debates of the South African Convention, were the federations of Canada in 1867 and Australia in 1901. The main argument in favour was that problems which were South Africa-wide required a single national government, rather than four separate colonial governments. These problems included such issues as conflicting colonial policies on railways and tariffs; but all the politicians agreed that the major national issue was what they called ‘the Native Question’.

Fear of the ‘Native Question’ certainly influenced the government of the colony most reluctant to join the Union – Natal. The two powerful colonies – in both population size and economic strength – were the Cape and the Transvaal; the two dominant politicians who coordinated the moves towards union were Jan Smuts, deputy-prime minister of the Transvaal, and John X. Merriman, prime minister of the Cape from February 1908. Of the two smaller colonies, the ORC, landlocked and in the centre of the country, had no rational choice but to join. But Natal, a coastal colony with the major port of Durban, did have an economic choice; the White, predominantly British, electorate was reluctant to join a Union certain to be dominated by the politicians of the Transvaal and the Cape. It was the only one of the four colonies to hold a referendum on whether or not to join the Union – held in June
1909 and carried in favour by a 3 to 1 majority. A few years earlier, the White politicians of Natal had been given an uncomfortable reminder of the potential military threat still posed by the Zulu people in the ‘Bambatha Rebellion’ of 1906, and fear of the ‘Native threat’ provided the strongest reason for White Natalians to accept the idea of entering the Union. The Reverend Frederick Mason, in a pamphlet called *Natal and Union*, stated that his strongest reason for supporting union was

Safety – Safety from native trouble... It won’t come to-day or to-morrow on a big scale, but it is well known that the natives are combining now – chief and chief, tribe and tribe – as has never been known in the history of the country. As far as Natal is concerned, if a native rebellion were to break out, where should we be if we were isolated and out of sympathy? 

The ‘Bambatha Rebellion’ and the Zulu threat made the Natal government the most alarmist on this issue; but the governments of the other three colonies feared the potential effects on their own African populations of an African rising or disturbance in any part of the country, and agreed that the ‘Native Question’ needed to be handled at the national level as a national issue.

White politicians representing the four colonies met, from October 1908 to February 1909, in a National Convention largely stage-managed by Smuts and Merriman. By February 1909, they had agreed on a draft Constitution, which was submitted to the parliaments of the four colonies (and a referendum in Natal), and somewhat amended. The Constitution was then passed by the British Parliament as the South Africa Act (1909); it came into force, as the Constitution of the new Union of South Africa, in May 1910. The new State was to comprise only the four White-ruled colonies; it excluded the three British protectorates (Basutoland, Bechuanaland and Swaziland), which remained under direct British rule and were eventually given independence as the countries of Lesotho, Botswana and Swaziland.

The Convention decided on a single unitary state, with the four colonies becoming provinces, rather than a looser federation, because it was thought that South Africa’s problems required a strong central government. Smuts frequently cited, as the example to avoid, the experience of the Australian federation since 1901; he portrayed it as exemplifying all the problems which a federation with a weak central government could bring. There was much talk at the Convention of ‘reconciling the two races’ – by which they meant the British and the Afrikaners, rather than White colonists and Indigenes. There were no Black representatives at the Convention, and little concern was expressed there by the White politicians about the need to reconcile Indigenous people to the new State and its Constitution.

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The APO – the Coloured political organisation – petitioned the Convention in October 1908, seeking a vote for everyone in South Africa who was ‘fully civilized’ – i.e. an extension to the whole of South Africa of the Cape franchise. A petition signed by a large number of ‘aboriginal natives of South Africa, resident in the Transvaal’, pointing out that they had ‘hitherto been totally unrepresented in the local Parliament’, asked the Convention to extend ‘the Cape franchise to our people throughout South Africa’. African political groups from all four colonies convened a ‘South African Native Convention’ in Bloemfontein, in March 1909, to respond to the draft Constitution published by the National Convention. The ‘Native Convention’ passed resolutions approving the idea of union, but it recorded

its strong and emphatic protest against the admission of a ‘colour bar’ in the Union Constitution as being a real vital basic wrong and injustice, and respectfully pleads that a clause be inserted in the ‘Charter’ providing that all persons within the Union shall be entitled to full and equal rights and privileges subject only to the conditions and limitations established by law and applicable alike to all citizens without distinction of class, colour or creed. The franchise has been enjoyed for more than 50 years by the native and coloured races of the Cape Colony, but is not extended to the native and coloured races of Orange River Colony, the Transvaal and the Colony of Natal, and this Convention seriously deprecates the absence, in the said Draft Act, of the principle of equal rights for all the races in the South African Colonies; a principle which was sustained by the leading statesmen of the Country and which was also the constant motto of the late Cecil John Rhodes [to whom an united South Africa was also an ideal], viz.:– ‘Equal rights for all civilized men from the Cape to the Zambezi’. However, the White politicians paid no attention to the views of the Indigenous representatives in framing their draft Constitution – even though the most divisive issue at the Convention proved to be that of Indigenous political rights. The Transvaal and ORC governments flatly refused to accept any form of Black vote; and the Natal government, which – as we have seen – had succeeded in keeping its ‘non–White’ voters down to less than 1 per cent of the electorate, was happy to support them on this point. Only the politicians of the Cape, with their fifty-six years’ experience of successfully operating a theoretically non-discriminatory qualified franchise, argued for its continuance. Merriman, the Cape prime minister, was far from being a supporter of African political rights, but he advocated the Cape franchise as the most pragmatic solution to the ‘Native Question’. He wrote frankly to Smuts:

Now taking myself as an example of those who are not negrophilists but at the same time believers in our Native policy, I do not like Natives at
all and I wish we had no black man in South Africa. But there they are, our lot is cast with them by an overruling Providence and the only question is how to shape our course so as to maintain the supremacy of our race and at the same time do our duty. Two courses are open. One is the Cape policy of recognizing the right to the franchise irrespective of colour [of] all who qualify . . . the drawbacks of our system are the fear that in some time the Natives, owing to their numbers, may swamp the white man . . .

I now come to the second method which is that adopted by the two Republics and Natal, viz. the total disfranchisement of the Native. What promise of permanence does this plan give? What hope for the future does it hold out? These people are numerous and increasing both in wealth and numbers. Education they will get, if not through us then by some much more objectionable means. They are the workers and history tells us that the future is to the workers . . .

Merriman and the other Cape politicians refused to abolish the Cape franchise; the governments of the other three colonies refused to accept the qualified Cape vote for their electorates. Eventually, a compromise was agreed. Membership of the new Union parliament was to be restricted to White men only; but, despite the adoption of a union rather than a looser federation, each province was to keep the same franchise laws it had enjoyed as a colony. So Coloureds and Africans in the Cape – but not in the other three provinces – could continue to qualify for a vote on the common voters’ roll.

The new South African Constitution was deliberately made easy to amend by simple majorities in parliament. For only two issues did the Convention decide to entrench the clauses, by requiring a two-thirds’ majority of both Houses sitting jointly to amend them. These were: the language clause (Section 137), entrenching two official languages for the country, English and Dutch (from 1925, Afrikaans); and the franchise clause (Section 35). This entrenchment was supposed to be sufficient protection for the limited political rights which qualified Coloured and African men would continue to enjoy in the Cape Province, and to prevent a future South African parliament removing them.

The draft Constitution went to the British Parliament in mid-1909, as the South Africa Bill. W. P. Schreiner, a former Cape prime minister who saw defence of the non-discriminatory Cape franchise as a moral duty, headed a deputation representing all the major African and Coloured organisations; it presented a petition asking the House of Commons to amend the Bill to remove all its racially discriminatory provisions. It made no impact on either the British Government or the Commons, and gained none of the proposed amendments. Sir Charles Lucas noted that
the Commons’ debates showed that members were alive to the fact that the Union of South Africa meant a White Man’s Union, that Britain was invited to sanction a colour bar which, in less democratic days, would as a matter of course have been swept away by British statesmen and the British people. But in giving responsible government to the Transvaal and the Orange River Colony the Imperial Government had already sanctioned an exclusive white franchise; it was well understood that to have insisted upon extending the Cape franchise to the rest of South Africa would have meant indefinite postponement of Union; that where responsible government has been conceded, there the Imperial Parliament cannot dictate to the White citizens; and with no substantial amendment, the Bill became law.

Liberal British politicians claimed that entrenchment of the franchise clause would give the Cape non-White vote permanent protection. Colonial Secretary Lord Crewe, moving the second reading of the Bill in the House of Lords, suggested that it was highly unlikely that the entrenched clause would ever be amended to remove the African and the Coloured vote:

Certainly it is not too much to say that the disfranchisement of a class who had held this power of voting so long would be viewed here with very deep disappointment. Disfranchisement is always an odious thing in itself, and if it were to be applied in this particular manner I am bound to say that it would assume a somewhat specially odious form. Consequently I myself refuse to believe that there is any probability that this particular provision will be carried into effect.

He was deluding himself by claiming that something so ‘specially odious’ would never be done by a future South African government. Prime Minister Asquith, in the debate in the Commons, rationalised the clearly racist nature of the franchise provision by saying:

In my judgment, you are more likely to have a satisfactory . . . development of the native question . . . when the problem is taken in hand, not by the several States individually and independently, but by a common body representing South Africa as a whole . . . I anticipate that, as one of the many incidental advantages which the Union of South Africa is going to bring about, it will prove to be a harbinger of a native policy more consistent, and, as some of us may think, more enlightened than that which has been pursued by some communities in the past.

At no point in the twentieth century was the White population of South Africa (Afrikaans- and English-speaking combined) to constitute more than about 21 per cent of the total population. This demographic fact imparted to the motivation of the White South African politicians an even sharper fear of the potential consequences of enfranchising Indigenous people than had been the case in Canada,
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Australia and New Zealand. In the latter countries, fears of Indigenes ‘swamping’ the White voters were expressed at particular times and for particular places; in South Africa the White politicians never lost the awareness, throughout the twentieth century, that the African people, if enfranchised on equal terms, would constitute the clear majority of the electorate. It was fear of such an outcome more than anything else that produced the franchise measure in 1910, and continued to drive the political measures on the franchise for the next eighty years.

Notes

5 Imvo Zabantsundu, 30 March 1887, quoted in Davenport, Afrikaner Bond, p. 121.
8 Editorial ‘Muzzling the Natives’, Imvo Zabantsundu, 23 March 1887; PRO, CO 48/514, No. 148, Petition to Queen Victoria from the Native Inhabitants of the Location of Oxkraal, July 1887, enclosed in Robinson to Holland, 24 August 1887.
11 BL, Cape Colony House of Assembly Debates (1892), 11 July, Rhodes, p. 151.
12 PRO, CO 48/521, No. 151, Grendon, Secretary of the Coloured Agitation Committee, to HM Queen Victoria, enclosed in Cameron to Ripon, 26 October 1892.
14 PRO, CO 48/521, Loch to Ripon, Secret and Confidential, 28 September 1892.
15 Editorial ‘The Future of the Bill’, Imvo Zabantsundu, 15 August 1894, quoted in Karis and Carter, From Protest to Challenge, vol. 1, p. 17; see also PRO, CO 48/524, No. 96, Jabavu to High Commissioner, 13 August 1894 and petitions from Kingwilliamstown and Natives of Port Elizabeth to HM the Queen in Council, enclosed in Cameron to Ripon, 29 August 1894.


PRO, DO 119/92, Ministers to Governor, 10 July 1894, enclosed in Governor Hely-Hutchinson to High Commissioner, Cape Town, Confidential, 16 September 1895.

PRO, DO 119/92, Natal Legislative Council, extracts of debate on 2nd Reading of the Franchise Law Amendment Bill, 20 June 1894, enclosed in Governor Hely-Hutchinson to High Commissioner, Cape Town, Confidential, 16 September 1895.

PRO, DO 119/92, Natal Legislative Council, extracts of debate on 2nd Reading of the Franchise Law Amendment Bill, 4 July 1894, enclosed in Governor Hely-Hutchinson to High Commissioner, Cape Town, Confidential, 16 September 1895.

Who’s Who of British Members of Parliament (Hassocks, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1976–81), vol. 2: 1886–1918. Both MPs were wealthy Indian Parsees: Dadabhai Naoroji, elected Liberal MP for the Central Division of Finsbury in 1892; and Sir Mancherjee Merwanjee Bhownaggree, a barrister elected Conservative MP for the North-East Division of Bethnal Green in 1895.

PRO, DO 119/92, Chamberlain to Governor Hely-Hutchinson, 12 September 1895, Enclosure No. 1 in Hely-Hutchinson to High Commissioner, Cape Town, Confidential, 10 October 1895.

PRO, DO 119/92, ‘Bill to Amend the Law Relating to the Franchise’, enclosed in Governor to High Commissioner, Confidential, 10 October 1895.

PRO, DO 119/92, Ministers’ minute [No. 15/1895] to Governor of Natal 18 October 1895, enclosed in Governor to High Commissioner, Confidential, 21 October 1895.

Thompson, Unification of South Africa, p. 111


BL, Cape Colony House of Assembly Debates (1892), July 25, pp. 252–3.

Ibid., pp. 253–4.

See, for example, BL, Cape Colony House of Assembly Debates (1908), 18 August, pp. 552–5.

The first reference to women’s suffrage at the national level was indeed framed in racially exclusive terms in 1908 when Prime Minister Moor of Natal [unsuccessfully] proposed enfranchising ‘women of European descent’ in the new Constitution of the Union of South Africa; see C. Walker, ‘The Women’s Suffrage Movement’, p. 325. White women would not be enfranchised until 1930.


J. L. Comaroff [ed.], The Boer War Diary of Sol T. Plaatje (Johannesburg: Macmillan, 1976). See also the strong expressions of ‘the loyalty of the Native people of South Africa’ to Britain, in the 1903 statement sent by the SANC to Chamberlain, quoted in Karis and Carter, From Protest to Challenge, vol. 1, pp. 18–29.


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42 On the issues and processes which led the South African colonies towards the Union, see Thompson, Unification of South Africa.

43 For the correspondence between Smuts and Merriman in the period leading up to Union, see Selections from the Smuts Papers, ed. J. van der Poel and W. K. Hancock, 7 vols [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965], vol. 2.

44 Thompson, Unification of South Africa, pp. 393–6.


47 Thompson, The Unification of South Africa, p. 214.


50 Merriman to Smuts, 4 March 1906, in Selections from the Smuts Papers, 2, pp. 239–40.


