

J.C. COPE'S CONVERSATIONS WITH H.



Nov. 1946 (more or less)

I had raised all the points I had on my agenda one Saturday morning, during the weekly conference with JHH and was getting up to leave, when he said quietly: "Just a minute, if you don't mind. There's a question of a personal nature on which I would like your opinion. I propose also to consult Sen. Brookes, who will be up here next week. I have been giving a great deal of thought in recent weeks to my own position in relation to the Native question and the leadership of the UP. The Prime Minister is getting on in years, and the question of his successor is exercising the minds of various people in the Party. I have never sought the mantle of Gen. Smuts's successorship. I have never sought high office throughout my career, in fact almost every high office has been thrust upon me, sometimes against my own inclinations and personal wishes. I do not wish to become Prime Minister now. It would be a difficult, thankless task, which would almost certainly result in failure.

If I were concerned with my own political future, I would certainly take care not to be the next UP PM. Any political tyro can see that when Gen. Smuts leaves the political stage, the political situation as we have known it will be thrown into the melting pot. The UP might go on for a few years, but it would quickly disintegrate, and I can foresee a period of confusion, out of which almost anything might emerge. To be PM with a disintegrating following would be to commit political suicide.

That is the purely materialistic side of the question. But there are certain important principles to consider. The greatest question before S.A. and the one in which I am most interested and most deeply concerned is the Native question. I hold certain opinions in that regard, of which you are aware. They are not the views of the majority of the UP. In fact I am realist enough to know that if the UP were to embrace these views today, they would be so far in advance of public opinion, that the UP could not reasonably hope to win a general election upon them. I believe that these policies are just and Christian, and the only policies through which the Native question can ultimately be solved. I also believe that they should be enunciated today, so that, in time to come, they may come to be accepted by an increasing number of South Africans. That, I think, is my duty to SA - to say the unpopular thing that requires to be said. I can do this to some extent as a member of the UP, even as a Minister, but I could not do so as PM.

Let us imagine the situation were the PM to die unexpectedly or to retire tomorrow. The constitutional procedure is that the UP members of Parliament would meet to appoint a leader who would become his successor. I imagine that, while many UP members would have misgivings on the point, the choice of a successor to Gen Smuts would fall upon me,

Now here we come to the dilemma in which I find myself and the question upon which I wish to consult you. In the event of such a situation

arising, what would be the best for South Africa - that I should accept the Premiership, modify the principles I hold on the Native question, to suit the electoral prospects of the UP, and do my best to hold the Party together for a few years longer, or should I get up and say, 'Gentlemen, you know the views I hold on the Native question. I could not possibly carry the UP with me on these views, and since I am not prepared to modify them, I must decline the high honour you offer me'. Such action I believe, without appearing immodest, would hasten the collapse of the UP.

I know the bitter ~~sentiment~~ resentment, the Press jibes and adverse public reaction that would follow. I am aware also of the danger of letting the Nationalist Party in at this crucial stage in the history of SA. But, as a long-term gesture, intended to hasten the process of liberalism in Native affairs, would that not be the best thing to do? That is the question upon which I would appreciate your views."

To write that I was surprised yet at the same time excited by the question thus put to me is to describe my feeling crudely. I said I would like a few days to think the matter over. I asked a few questions to elucidate certain aspects of the matter and then left.

All the following week I turned Mr. H's words over in my mind, trying to assess the possible short and long term reactions to each of the courses suggested by H. Also whether there was not perhaps a third course open to him. Finally I decided that the best thing he could do for SA under the circumstances, would be to decline the Premiership, hasten whatever political crisis might follow, and above all stick to his principles on the Native question. I did not believe that the danger of a Nationalist assumption of power was so great as to justify compromise with principles on the NQ. In any event I felt that, the Nats were destined to get into power, the sooner the prospect were faced, the better.

I gave my opinions to H a week later. He smiled and said: "I am glad that you have come to that conclusion. I have more or less decided on that course". He said that Sen. Brookes had reached the opposite conclusion. Brookes took a much more serious view than we did of the possibility of a Nationalist assumption of power, and he felt that to keep them out of office for a few years longer was worth even the temporary sacrifice of some of the advanced principles on the Native question held by H.