

THE TRANSVAAL QUESTION.

Some Views of Mr. Frank Watkins,

Late Member of the Transvaal Second Volksraad.

MR. FRANK WATKINS is an Englishman, who has resided for many years in the Transvaal. He was one of the first diggers on the Leydenburg gold-fields and became a naturalised citizen of the Transvaal and was the first Englishman admitted to the Second Volksraad. He sat in that body from 1890 to 1896 as the member for Barberton. Mr. Watkins has been able to carry some very important legislation in the Transvaal. He was the author of the law regarding the liquidation of Public Companies, and as a member of Committee he assisted in framing and carrying through the important liquor law. He was one of a small party of progressive Boers who opposed President Kruger's policy and brought in measures and moved resolutions extending the powers of the Second Volksraad with the object of placing that body in the same position as the House of Commons. Had Mr. Watkins's efforts in this direction been successful, the new population would have had full control both of legislation and administration, as the Outlanders could have a vote in the Second Volksraad after two years residence in the country. The proposal to give Uitlanders a more liberal franchise, as well as the right to vote for the election of President, which was supported by General Joubert and the progressive Boers, was proposed by Mr. Watkins and others eight years ago. It was unfortunately not carried by the First Raad, but a very respectable minority was in favour of such a measure before the unfortunate Jameson Raid, and in a letter to the *Times* the day before the Bloemfontein Conference he says:—

“As one who while a member of the Transvaal Volksraad strongly urged the granting of reforms and redressing of grievances, more especially with regard to the franchise and the concession policy of the Government, may I urge upon the English press the necessity of taking a more liberal view of the Transvaal side of the question than they are at present disposed to do. All appear to write as if the Transvaal Government alone is to blame for the present unfortunate state of affairs in South Africa. This

is not the case. The present difficulties in the Transvaal are not a mere matter of redressing of grievances and nothing else. It is no longer a question of simple injustice on the one side or the other. It is much more than this. It is a question of Government of dominant Government and affects the very existence of the Transvaal as an independent State. It is the outcome of the policy of Imperialism so rampant in England just now, on the one side, and the ultra-conservatism of the Boers on the other. The majority of the Uitlanders are not now in opposition to the Pretoria Government simply for a remedying of their grievances. It is a want of respect for a small and weak Government and they are using their best energies and utmost zeal in concocting measures to overthrow its rule from a conviction that it is necessary for the peace, welfare and prosperity of South Africa that the British ægis should rule all over it from Capetown to the Zambesi. Upon what system that rule should be established they do not even stop to consider, all they desire is that the reins of Government should pass from the hands of the Boers to their own and to that end agitate and petition for a redress of grievances calling upon the British Government to stand by no longer and permit the continuation of a state of things which they claim leaves the way invitingly open to anarchy, is disturbing the peace of South Africa, and inflicting heavy loss upon those who have invested money in the country. The Boers, on the other hand, are fully convinced that the agitation is not one for a *bonâ fide* redressing of grievances and obtaining of the Franchise merely, but that the ulterior object is to undermine the independence of the country, for which they have suffered so much, and ultimately subvert Republicanism and bring about in this way a Confederated South Africa under the British flag. While this feeling exists no confederation on a mutually satisfactory and friendly basis seems possible. Although it is essential in the interests of all the States and Colonies of South Africa that they should be linked together; without a proper settlement of the relationship between Great Britain and the two Free States there can be no permanent Union, but only dissatisfaction and distrust.

“To-morrow, therefore, is a day fraught with the greatest consequences for the future of Africa, and much depends upon the patience and tact both of Sir Alfred Milner and President Kruger. If, however, there be those who expect an immediate result from the conference—and in their impatience indulge in thinly-veiled threats against the Transvaal should all their demands not be

acceded to—I fear they will be doomed to disappointment. There is a limit to concessions which even a weak State which desires to maintain its independence can grant. Let patience be exercised and conciliation shown and all will come right in South Africa. Force the position and the consequences will be disastrous and far-reaching. Let Englishmen remember that there is a Transvaal side as well as a Uitlander, and let England uphold her tradition for equity and justice and show some reasonable consideration for a weak State struggling to maintain its liberty.

“Yours, &c.

“(Signed) FRANK WATKINS.

“Ex-Member Transvaal Volksraad.

“London, May 30, 1899.”

Some months ago Mr. Watkins was interviewed by the *Daily Chronicle* and the *Westminster Gazette*, and his views regarding the position of affairs in the Transvaal before the outbreak of hostilities are well worth considering as the opinion of one fully acquainted with all the facts of the case.

When Mr. Watkins first entered the Transvaal in 1873-74, the Uitlanders had the full franchise after one year's residence and in 1875 the Lydenburg gold-fields sent Mr. Cameron, an American, and Mr. Piper to the First Volksraad and in the following year the members were Mr. Herbert Rhodes, a brother of Cecil Rhodes, and an Irishman named Armstrong. A Scotchman, Captain Macaulay, also represented the fields, so that in the early days there was no difficulty about representation, and in the two Boer Republics equal rights for men of all nationalities obtained much more than in the Cape Colony and Natal. Asked by a *Westminster Gazette* representative, at the time when the new law had been passed, if he thought the proposal then before the Raad would be satisfactory, he said: “Yes, if the English people will exercise a little patience, and give Mr. Kruger credit for the concessions which he has made.” The proposals which, as a result of the Bloemfontein Conference, were about to be, or had actually been, made to the Raad, were better than he had ventured to expect, and if the English people would really examine them in a moderate spirit they would see that they were a substantial advance upon the proposals made before the Conference. “Indeed,” added Mr. Watkins, “if you ask me I am surprised that President Kruger has been able to propose so much. You must remember that he has to carry with him a number of

old and extremely conservative Boers, who regard any concessions whatever as fatal to the independence for which they have fought, and for which, believe me, they are quite prepared to fight again. All the talk about the Boers being cowards is a libel. They are by no means anxious to fight, but if they do fight they will fight to the last gasp for anything they consider vital."

"However," said the interviewer, "there is no reason to talk about fighting."

"Most certainly not," replied Mr. Watkins. "But patience is needed and some consideration for Mr. Kruger's position. I entirely agree that there is a great deal that wants reforming in the Transvaal, and it is my opinion that progressive legislation would have strengthened the cause of the Republic, united its people and disarmed its enemies. At the same time you must remember that there has been a great deal of unfair and unjust criticism of the Transvaal Government which has goaded some of the members of the Raad into passing laws which are stringent and oppressive. There is a class of capitalists in South Africa which has sprung into existence since the discovery of the Witwatersrand Gold-Fields, and which never tires of painting the Transvaal Government in the blackest hue, and denouncing its laws to all Europe. They have no gratitude, and do not appear to remember that it has been the liberality of the gold laws which has enabled them to accumulate the wealth they are using to such a base purpose. Unfortunately, in some instances, the Volksraad have been led into the trap laid for them and have passed some laws which cannot commend themselves to friends of the country. These should be amended."

Again, at a later period, when interviewed by the *Daily Chronicle*, he said regarding the law that had been passed granting the seven years' retrospective franchise,

"I fully believe that if there were a poll in the Transvaal at the present moment, the majority of the Uitlanders would vote for President Kruger's proposals."

"Then you believe the account of the *Daily Telegraph* that many Englishmen are going to fight on the Boer side?"

"I can quite believe it. The miners cannot speak out. They are entirely under the thumb of the big companies. Candour means loss of work. But when the mines shut down there is nothing to prevent them fighting with the Boers; for they do not love the capitalists, and one of the certainties in the future in the

Transvaal is a conflict between Capital and Labour. The capitalists expect it and fear that the methods they have adopted in working up the miners against the Transvaal may recoil on themselves."

"Does your experience on the Volksraad lead you to suppose that Boers and Englishmen cannot work together? Do you regard the present race hostility as inevitable?"

"Not at all. I was always treated excellently on the Volksraad, though I was a strong progressive member, and had on my programme nearly all the proposals since adopted by Mr. Chamberlain, and taken up with so much zeal—the five years' franchise, increased power to the Second Volksraad, improved administration for the gold-fields. Indeed, I carried a resolution in the Second Volksraad by eighteen votes to four, giving that body increased powers; but of course the First Volksraad would not hear of it any more than the House of Lords will reform itself in England. The two cases are very similar."

"But what of the franchise?"

"We progressives brought forward a resolution every year, and the Boers were growing more and more friendly to the idea up to the time of the Jameson Raid, when they became frightened of the use that might be made of the new suffrage and stiffened their backs. So though I do not sympathise with the resistance that they have carried on since, I quite understand its cause."

"And what of your position inside the Volksraad? Were you treated well?"

"I was treated precisely on a level with every other member. I was placed on the Gold-Fields' Committee and was largely responsible for the Gold Laws, which are a great deal better in the Transvaal than in any other mining country. There is no income tax on gold. The direct taxation is limited to a tax of 18s. 9d. per head, which is by no means strictly levied. The concessions are bad, but otherwise the burdens are slight."

"And what of the Government? Is it so corrupt as they say? Is it corrupt at all?"

"No Government is absolutely pure. There are Parliamentary directors and shareholders at home who are not entirely above reproach. There may be something of the same thing in Pretoria. Some few members of the Government may have profited, among many Uitlanders, by the immense enrichment of the country through shares and concessions. But there is no proof of direct corruption. Mr. Kruger is called corrupt; but what are the facts?"

He receives a salary of £7,000 a year and saves most of it; he sold one of his farms for £100,000, and it is now capitalised at a million and a-half. Had he not a perfect right to do that? Are your ministers corrupt because they receive big salaries? Is Sir Michael Hicks-Beach corrupt because he sold his estate on Salisbury Plain?"

"But the Raads—are they not corrupt? Mr. Ellis Griffith, in the House of Commons, said that twenty-two members of the Raad had been proved to be corrupt."

"That was the accusation; but what again are the facts? I caused a Commission to be appointed to inquire into the allegation, and the result was that all the members accused were exonerated. He forgot to mention that."

"Then, why these accusations?"

"The accusations are made by the very people who tried to corrupt the Boers and failed. A fund of £25,000 was subscribed by a certain group of men to pass certain legislation—and it was not passed. Hence the mortification."

"That sounds bad."

"Ah, but nothing is too bad to say against the Transvaal Government. They complain of the Liquor Laws; but what did we do? I was on the Liquor Committee and we passed the most stringent laws to limit the sale of liquor on the Rand among the blacks. They virtually amounted to prohibition. But then we were inundated with petitions from Johannesburg—petitions in which lists of names were written in the same handwriting, and the same name was impudently repeated down the length of a whole sheet—and every obstacle was put in the way of passing the laws. And now the same Government is accused of laxity in liquor legislation!"

"Not only that but of harshness to the British Indians and many other things."

"Yes, the British Indians form another case in point. The laws we passed in regard to the British Indians were passed on the request of the Rand itself, and on the pressure of the mining companies. They were supported by Mr. Loveday who thoroughly represented the views of the Uitlanders on this question. And now the Colonial Office and the *Times* promote a campaign against us on this account, entirely ignoring the fact that the British Indians are far worse treated in Natal, which is a British Colony. There they are not only treated as pariahs, but quite recently there was a

demonstration against their landing, and there is an agitation to keep them out of the Colony. Why not look at home?"

"But what of your judges being removed? The Chief Justice Kotze case?"

"I do not agree with the President on that matter but the Press here has entirely misrepresented the facts. What really took place is this: the Chief Justice, Kotze, took the extraordinary course of reversing a decision which he had given in a famous case some years before and afterwards repeated as to the effects of a Volksraad Besluit or resolution. The Volksraad immediately passed a resolution to the effect that a Besluit should have the same effect as an ordinary act and they empowered the President by this law to dismiss any judge who would not carry out their laws and resolutions. Kotze refused to do so and was dismissed. Your Parliament can obtain the dismissal of a judge by an Address to the Queen and if any judge refused to carry out the decisions of your Parliament he would very soon be dismissed."

Mr. Watkins ended by stating that a large number of Afrianders, prominent Dutch, had married English wives, that two of President Steyn's sisters were married to Englishmen, that Mr. Reitz, Mr. Smuts and many other leading Boers had been trained in England and were members of the English and Scotch Bars. He also said that there were grievances of the Boers as well as of the Outlanders, that the Free State remembered that Basutoland had been taken from them and how their diamond-fields had been annexed and that the £90,000 paid as compensation had only added insult to injury, and that the Keate award and the Western border difficulties were also remembered. There was, besides, the question of the damages for the Jameson Raid, still unpaid, and the farcical termination of the South African Committee's report, as well as the non-fulfilment of the pledges given regarding Swaziland. The Boers had often been friendly to the British Government when the latter had been in trouble. They had not embarrassed the Government during the Zulu War but had sent a very useful contingent to assist the British forces. President Kruger had himself restrained the Boers from trekking north. In conclusion, Mr. Watkins insisted again that, in criticising President Kruger, we ought to be conscious of the difficulties with which he has had to contend and of the rough and often impracticable nature of the materials he has had at his command. "The illusion that he himself is intractable is quite a mistaken one. I venture, on the contrary, to say, that

when all due allowance is made for his difficulties, the verdict of an impartial critic must be that it is surprising he has accomplished so much."

Before the outbreak of hostilities, Mr. Watkins repeatedly warned the public, both in the Press and elsewhere, that the Boers would fight desperately, if forced into a corner, and he urged the Government to settle the differences that had arisen by arbitration, or at any rate by conciliatory measures. He stated that he believed that by such measures alone a permanent and peaceful settlement could be arranged. To have retained the loyalty of the Cape Dutch and the friendship of the Free State, and, by patience and conciliation, to have won the opinion of the non-progressive element in the Transvaal was, Mr. Watkins considered, the best means to settle the difficulties between Great Britain and the Transvaal, and would have ensured lasting peace and a good understanding between the two races in South Africa. But his warnings and advice were unheeded. The Government preferred to follow the opinion of Mr. Rhodes, who said that he would feel anxious if the Czar sent to Peking, or the French quarrelled over Fashoda, but when he was told that president Kruger would cause trouble, it was too ridiculous. They would tell him next that a native chief in Samoa would cause trouble to Her Majesty's Government. "We forget," he continued, "that we govern one-fifth of the world," and he added that Mr. Kruger would give what Her Majesty's Government demanded. Mr. J. B. Robinson also, in an interview with Reuter last June, had scouted the idea that the Dutch of the Free State would join the Transvaal, and concluded, "In the event of war, the burgher force of the Transvaal would number about 15,000 to 20,000 men, and if war were to take place, the battles would be fought on Transvaal territory."

The result of the policy followed has already been disastrous, and unless a reasonable and just settlement is soon concluded, South Africa will be torn asunder, and many decades must pass before the racial hatred which has been stirred up will subside.

THE TRANSVAAL COMMITTEE.

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