

Short talk by Professor H.B. Thom.

In 1902 the Peace Treaty of Vereeniging was signed. As a result of this treaty the Boer republics of the Orange Free State and the Transvaal lost their independence and became British colonies. During the six years intervening between 1902 and 1908, i.e. between the year of the Peace of Vereeniging and the year in which the National Convention met, several weighty reasons became apparent why the British colonies of South Africa should form a combined front. There were economic problems relating to railways and customs. There were political problems in connection with defence and native policy. And there were social problems in connection with the relationship between the Afrikaans-speaking and the English-speaking sections of the settled white population. These were the factors which accentuated the necessity for a National Convention, a convention which would pave the way for a united South Africa.

The representatives of the Colonies at the National Convention belonged to different language groups. They came from different walks of life. They held radically different views on many matters. Yet, in spite of all this, they succeeded in deliberating in a real and genuine spirit of friendliness and cooperation.

Lord De Villiers, Chief Justice of the Cape Colony, was the Chairman. In front of him sat men who has been bitter enemies six years earlier. In the Free State deputation there were men like M.T. Steyn, the respected and beloved ex-president of the former Free State Republic, C.R. de Wet and J.B.M. Hertzog, famous leaders of the Free State burghers. In the Transvaal deputation sat Louis Botha, popular ex-Commandant-General of the Transvaal forces, and Jan Smuts, who, like Botha, had been a brilliant war leader of the Transvaalers. With the

men from the Cape Colony sat well-known political figures of the time, such as John X. Merriman, J.W. Sauer and F.S. Malan. And among the representatives from the Garden Province of Natal men like F.R. Moore and Thomas Watt figured prominently.

From this it will be clear that the National Convention was by no means a collection of personal friends expressing mutual admiration, but it was, in fact, a distinguished gathering of the very cream of South African statesmanship and political leadership.

Many serious issues engaged the attention of the Convention. There were the grave economic, political and social matters to which I have referred. In addition, other spiny problems cropped up. How would the problem of the franchise for non-Whites in the prospective Union, be solved? What city would be proclaimed the national capital of the Union? How would the rights of the two languages, Dutch and English, be defined? These, and a variety of other questions, claimed the attention of the delegates for many weeks. But in the end the Convention came forward with a solution to every one of these problems.

It is one of the most remarkable facts of the history of the South African sub-continent that these men, although in many respects diametrically opposed, could on vital questions reach decisions which were in the end readily accepted by all of them. But this was possible, and this they actually did, because they were deeply conscious of the over-riding conviction that Union simply had to come. Fundamentally they knew that from the material as well as the spiritual points of view, Union was essential, and the delegates were prepared to negotiate in a spirit of give and take on important issues which, under other circumstances, might well have become frustrating, unsurmountable deadlocks.

Now looking back, after fifty years, what did the National Convention achieve? The answer is clear and simple: The Convention removed the obstacles of forbidding borders that divided people who, although from different extractions, have the same way of life, the same interests, the same homeland. The National Convention brought about Union. It made possible the union of territories, and it blazed the trail for understanding and cooperation between human beings, who, in a few years had become friends in the fields of enduring spiritual values.

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