

## South African Diplomats in Australia, 1949-1961

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Focusing on the High Commissioners to Australia from the time the South African High Commission was opened in 1949 until 1961, when South Africa left the Commonwealth, this article tries to say something about the sort of person who once represented the country abroad, what some of them did in a given historical context, and indirectly, something about their employer, the Department of External Affairs, as it was called during the period covered.<sup>1</sup> The article also touches on an early manifestation of the 1970s feud between the Departments of Foreign Affairs and Information, which ended only when the former absorbed the latter as an outcome of the so-called "Information Scandal" that so beguiled political and public opinion in South Africa in the latter part of that decade.

The first or white supremacist South African Department of External or Foreign Affairs lasted for almost seventy years, until the country's democratisation in 1994. Its founding in 1927, for domestic political reasons, was intended to demonstrate South Africa's political independence of the United Kingdom. Australia on the other hand, for its own domestic political reasons, believed in the diplomatic unity of the British Empire and, initially, the furthest it was prepared to go towards establishing a separate diplomatic presence was to appoint a representative to the staff of the British Ambassador in Washington. In London in the 1920s, independently of the country's High Commission there, an Australian representative reported directly to the Australian Prime Minister from the British Cabinet office.

The circumstances of its creation influenced the South African Department in its approach to its work. What counted was not so much the substance of the work as the symbolism of an independent country operating its own diplomatic missions. That was because "diplomatic representation abroad is a function of sovereign independence".<sup>2</sup> For that reason, much of what these early missions did, fully occupying their most junior diplomatic staff, was to administer themselves. That was still the position when, eventually succumbing to Australian blandishments,<sup>3</sup> South

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1 It was renamed the Department of Foreign Affairs when South Africa left the Commonwealth in May 1961.

2 J J J Scholtz, "Foreign Affairs", in D J Potgieter (ed), *Standard Encyclopaedia of South Africa IV* (Nasou Limited, Cape Town, 1971), p 618.

3 Governments hate the idea of non-reciprocity.

Africa established a high commission in Canberra in 1949, some three years after the Australians – in the face of Smuts’s reluctance to accept it, allegedly because of his government’s inability to reciprocate – had opened a high commission in South Africa.

Not all diplomatic relationships are justified by the facts of the bilateral relations they are set up to consolidate or extend. Objectively-speaking, neither Australia nor South Africa would have been worse off without representation in the other. From both sides, the missions lacked substance. On the Australian side, the lack of substance soon became apparent. On several occasions during the 1940s and 1950s, the High Commissioner’s post was left vacant<sup>4</sup> as perceptions of its value diminished. By 1960 the High Commissioner was seen as “hampered by the physical and political isolation of the Government to which he [was] accredited”.<sup>5</sup> By 1963, Australian officials were contemplating having to choose between South Africa and black Africa, to the former’s disadvantage: “In view of the voting power of the African states in New York and because of Australia’s sensitivity on such matters as New Guinea and aborigines, any such choice could hardly favour the Republic”.<sup>6</sup>

From their side, the South Africans were insufficiently interested to appoint their own high commissioner immediately. By the time the National Party government, then in the early stages of its long descent into isolation, came to appreciate the connection’s value for what might be called “cosmetic” or public relations reasons, South Africa had become controversial internationally and an embarrassment to its Western interlocutors. At the United Nations the latter found themselves having to balance the criticism that their voting support of South Africa drew from Afro-Asian countries with the need for South Africa’s vote in Cold War confrontations.

#### **Doctor P.R. Viljoen (1949-1951)**

The announcement in February 1949 of the appointment of Doctor P.R. Viljoen, South Africa’s High Commissioner to Canada, as High Commissioner to Australia was greeted with a sigh of relief in that country. Politicians and press were beginning to view the lack of a South African presence as a slight.<sup>7</sup> Then leader of the opposition, Robert Menzies, told the House of Representatives that Viljoen was highly regarded in Canada.<sup>8</sup> His Australian colleague in Ottawa, F.M. Forde, had earlier reported on him favourably, saying that he was “one of the outstanding personalities in diplomatic life in Ottawa”<sup>9</sup> and that he had the highest regard for him.

On paper, Viljoen was the ideal envoy to an agricultural and pastoral country. A qualified veterinarian, he obtained the MRCVS at the Royal Veterinary College in London in 1912 and his doctorate in veterinary medicine at Berne, Switzerland, in 1921. During the First World War he was awarded the Military Cross for his work

4 November 1947 to August 1948; August 1950 to July 1952; and July 1957 to April 1959

5 That was in the context of a lobbying effort in Africa to win support for Australian policies “on Trusteeship and related matters” National Archives of Australia (hereafter NAA): A1838/1, 201/10/6/1, part 1, O 8367, 22 May 1960, paragraph 4

6 NAA: A9421/1, 201/1, part 1, Departmental paper “Prospects for South Africa”, p 13 Attached to memorandum 213, Lee – Australian Embassy, Pretoria, 2 September 1963

7 See *House of Assembly Debates* (hereafter *HA Deb.*), 64, 30 August 1948, column 1142

8 *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 201, 15 February 1949, p 234

9 NAA: A1838/T17, 1500/1/30/1, Forde – Department of External Affairs (hereafter DEA), 8 January 1949

with the horses used in the 1915 German South-West Africa campaign – none died of disease. He was successively appointed as Professor of Veterinary Science at the Transvaal University College (1919), Deputy Director of Veterinary Services (1920), Chief of Veterinary Field Services (1926), Deputy Director of Onderstepoort, where veterinarians are trained (1927), Under Secretary for Agriculture (1931) and Secretary for Agriculture and Forestry (1933).

There may have been special reasons for his appointment to Canada in 1946. C.J. Burchell, the Canadian High Commissioner in South Africa, thought so. He believed Viljoen – the “father of the Control Board system”<sup>10</sup> – to be a scapegoat for the poor food distribution system in South Africa during the later stages of the Second World War. (“It appears that the sole reason for appointing this man to Canada is to get him out of the Civil Service ... and out of the country”).<sup>11</sup>

Sailing from Cape Town on 20 May 1949 on board the *Dominion Monarch*, Viljoen and his party<sup>12</sup> arrived in Sydney on 7 June 1949. For the first week it was not clear whether the High Commission would be established in Canberra or in Sydney, whereupon Viljoen came down in favour of the former, where a house awaited him (see below). The question arose because, unlike the South Africans in respect of Pretoria, the Australian authorities did not object to missions establishing themselves in centres other than Canberra, with only a few government departments having yet moved there from Melbourne, the temporary federal capital.<sup>13</sup> Diplomatic missions located in Sydney at the time were those of Belgium, Finland, Israel, Italy, Norway and Sweden. There were fourteen missions in Canberra.<sup>14</sup>

Canberra was to all intents and purposes a company town with one major employer, the federal government.<sup>15</sup> Just about all accommodation, office and residential, lay within the government’s gift. Properties were not for sale, only for rent. The city had to be built from scratch. In addition to erecting public buildings including office space, the federal government also built dwellings for officials. These took two forms: houses for married couples and hotels, boarding houses and hostels for single people.

Canberra’s isolation and small size – it had less than 20 000 inhabitants in 1949 – meant that the elite, including the handful of foreign diplomats, were thrown together to an extent unknown in larger and more established capitals. This had pluses and

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10 He was Chairman of the National Marketing Board from 1937 to 1945 and a member of the National Food Council from 1940 to 1945 C J Beyers (ed), *Dictionary of South African Biography* IV (Human Sciences Research Council, Pretoria, 1981), p 746

11 Canadian Archives: DEA Records, file 167(S), Burchell – Robertson, 6 November 1944 See also: B D Tennyson, *Canadian Relations with South Africa: A Diplomatic History* (University Press of America, Washington DC, 1982), p 105

12 Consisting of his wife, G C Nel, a second secretary, and his wife and children, P R Killen, a cadet, and typist Miss J M Richards Killen’s career took him to the Director-Generalship of the Department of Foreign Affairs in the mid-1980s

13 By 1957 only eleven of twenty-seven departments had their headquarters in Canberra National Archives of South Africa (hereafter NASA): BTS, S4/7/2/1/5, “Post Report - Canberra - 1957”, annexure “C”, p 3

14 Brazil, Canada, Ceylon, Chile, China, Denmark, France, India, Ireland, Netherlands, New Zealand, United Kingdom, United States and USSR

15 Viljoen observed in his first post report that 90 per cent of the population were civil servants NASA: BTS, S4/7/2/1/5, Viljoen – Secretary for External Affairs (hereafter SEA), 30 June 1950, “Post Report: Canberra”, p 13 He meant the working population

minuses. Always assuming that there was enough money for travel to relieve the boredom, the city's intimacy favoured diplomatic life. Especially as a result of Robert Menzies's policy, Canberra developed as a city during his second term as Prime Minister (1949-1966). He probably did more than anyone to turn the "garden without a city" and the "six suburbs" that had "lost their way", as Canberra was called in 1954, into a true national capital.<sup>16</sup>

For a politician, Menzies was perhaps unusual in that he liked, and felt comfortable in the company of diplomats. Being for a long time the only cabinet member to live in Canberra,<sup>17</sup> a relatively modest house, The Lodge, having been provided for the Prime Minister from 1926, he often came into contact with them. Some became personal friends.

Negotiations for a suitable house for the South African High Commissioner commenced six months before Viljoen left for Australia. Their successful conclusion allowed him to depart at that stage or at least to reside in Canberra. He could therefore move immediately into a nine-roomed house at 26 Balmain Crescent, Acton, on campus at the new Australian National University. Now belonging to the University, the house is still standing. Earlier, the Belgian minister, who was contemplating a move to Canberra, had found it unsuitable.<sup>18</sup> If he had taken it, there would (according to the Australian authorities) have been no possibility of a suitable house for Viljoen for a "considerable period" and he would have had to consider "remaining in Sydney".<sup>19</sup>

Viljoen did not like the house. He wanted a larger residence but it was "one of the largest owned by the Commonwealth". Besides, there was a "waiting list for houses of over 2 300 applicants including many senior and executive public servants".<sup>20</sup> In his memoirs, Alan Watt recalled his own difficulties in obtaining a house in 1950 on his appointment as Secretary for External Affairs.<sup>21</sup> At least Viljoen was accommodated. His staff were less fortunate, especially G.C. Nel (Second Secretary) who experienced five changes of residence during his first year in Australia. Nel was allocated a government house only after a year.<sup>22</sup> P.R. Killen (Cadet) and Miss J.M. Richards, the typist, were accommodated in a hostel.

The South Africans retained 26 Balmain Crescent as their High Commissioner's residence until the completion in mid-1957 of the double-storey Cape Dutch style house at 2 Perth Avenue, Yarralumla, known as "South Africa House", which has housed the head of mission ever since. As for office accommodation, the High Commission was allocated a set of four offices in East Block (the building which now houses the National Archives) for which no rent was charged.<sup>23</sup> Being

16 E Sparke, *Canberra 1954-1980* (Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1988), p 1  
Menzies gave a brief account of his role in *The Measure of the Years* (Cassell, London, 1970), pp 142-148

17 For example see: *The Canberra Times*, 16 September 1953 (Editorial)

18 NAA: A1838/T17, 1500/1/30/1, Verstraeten – Oldham, 17 March 1949

19 NAA: A1838/T17, 1500/1/30/1, O 3055, 7 March 1949

20 NAA: A1838/T17, 1500/1/30/1, Edwards – Viljoen, 30 June 1949

21 A S Watt, *Australian Diplomat: The Memoirs of Sir Alan Watt* (Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1972), pp 198-200

22 NASA: BTS, S4/7/2/1/5, Viljoen – SEA, 30 June 1950, "Post Report: Canberra", p 4

23 NASA: BTS, S4/7/2/1/5, Viljoen – SEA, 3 March 1950

required to give way to the Prime Minister's Department, the High Commission moved in February 1950 to five offices on the second floor of East Row, Sydney Building, Civic, which was privately owned but leased to the Australian government and sublet by it. The annual rental payable to the Australian government was £A210 (£SA168).<sup>24</sup>

Viljoen hoped that it would not be necessary to move again until the South African government built its own offices.<sup>25</sup> However, a fire in the early hours of the morning of 28 December 1950, gutted the South African premises. The South Africans then moved to the Old Community Hospital Building, Acton, owned by the Australian National University, about 150 yards from Viljoen's residence. Made of wood, the building had been used as a store for unwanted furniture.<sup>26</sup> The High Commission worked there rent-free for the next four years. It relocated in February 1955 to Industry House, Barton, where it spent six-and-a-half years.

Viljoen's best years were behind him when he came to Australia and he gave few signs of what his entry in the *Dictionary of South African Biography*<sup>27</sup> calls his "exceptional intellectual talents" and "extraordinary capacity for work". He was in indifferent health when he arrived and within six months he was hospitalised for more than three weeks with an abnormal heart rhythm. The condition was brought on by over-exertion when he had to change a car-tyre while returning to Canberra from a visit to Wagga Wagga in southern New South Wales.

In respect of what he was supposed to do, much of his time was expected to "be taken up in promoting a sympathetic understanding of the Union's problems"<sup>28</sup> In fact, as with the other South African missions of the day, a good deal of the mission's time, fully occupying the most junior diplomatic official (in this case P.R. Killen), was taken up by administering itself.

That core diplomatic activity, reporting on various aspects of the host country, was accorded a low priority. Unlike their Australian counterparts in South Africa, the South Africans in Canberra tended to view reporting not as information-gathering but as a ritual to which they were obliged to submit. That was well before the 1970s, when South African missions were instructed to discontinue the practice of general political and economic reporting and to report exclusively on the way South African issues, which one can lump together loosely as "apartheid", were "playing" in individual countries. In the result, South African researchers into aspects of modern Australian history will learn little from their diplomats' reporting from Canberra.

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24 NASA: BTS, S4/7/2/1/5, Nel – SEA, 3 March 1950

25 NASA: BTS, S4/7/2/1/5, Viljoen – SEA, 3 March 1950

26 BTS 4/2/32/2, volume 1, Viljoen – SEA, 29 June 1951 (translation)

27 C J Beyers (ed), *Dictionary of South African Biography IV* (Human Sciences Research Council, Pretoria, 1981), p 746

28 NASA: BTS, 1/25/1A, volume 1, Forsyth – Viljoen, 19 May 1949 An interesting commentary on this instruction, which applied to all South African missions, was provided by Miss E A Warren of Australian External Affairs who reported after a conversation with C A Smith, the South African Information Attaché in 1954, her impression "that much of his activity here will be to put the South African 'Colour line' across" NAA: A1838, 201/10/7, part 1, Record of conversation Warren/Smith, 9 July 1954

Within a month of his arrival, Viljoen was writing that government decentralisation in Australia made it necessary for him “to travel extensively”. His colleagues visited other parts of the country regularly and he would have to do the same.<sup>29</sup> He was to be disappointed. He was kept on a tight rein financially and, compared to his immediate successors, did little travelling. As time passed he complained frequently about how little there was to do in Canberra for a man such as himself who liked to be busy. Thus:

Canberra is a very isolated place with only a small population and, when Parliament is not sitting I would normally be visiting other parts of Australia but you have practically stopped all travelling, with the result that during the Parliamentary recess, which lasts several months, I have very little to do and this has given me this feeling of frustration<sup>30</sup>

A few weeks after writing this letter, he pleaded: “I hope you will try and let me do a little more travelling as it is deadly (for me!) to sit in a small place like Canberra with little work to do”. Complaining about “the curtailment of trips to Sydney and Melbourne”, he said that he had had to refuse important invitations, including a Melbourne dinner in honour of the Prime Minister.<sup>31</sup> He expanded on the rejected invitations a few months later, saying that they caused him embarrassment “as the real reason for these refusals cannot be divulged”.<sup>32</sup>

On the other hand, at a time when airfares to Sydney and Melbourne were cheap – £2 10.0d to Sydney and £5 to Melbourne<sup>33</sup> – and Viljoen himself told D.D. Forsyth, the Secretary for External Affairs, at their final interview before his retirement that his representation allowance was “on the over-generous side and could conveniently be reduced by £200 or £300 *per annum*”,<sup>34</sup> thus he could presumably have afforded to pay for short distance air-travel and short-term accommodation out of his own pocket.

Viljoen returned to South Africa in October 1951. Alan Watt, the Australian Secretary of External Affairs, recorded that he complained to him about the life of diplomatic inactivity in Canberra at their farewell interview. He referred to a head of mission’s difficulties there as opposed to Sydney or Melbourne and he wondered what “advice he should give to his government as to where South Africa should plan her long-term representation in Australia”. Watt thought that Viljoen was

far from well and that his view may be coloured a little either by a feeling that he has not been able to do as much as he would have wished for his Government or by some suggestion from South Africa that he has not done as much as he should<sup>35</sup>

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29 NASA: BCB, volume 19, 31/6 (Secret), Viljoen – Forsyth, 5 July 1949  
 30 Department of Foreign Affairs (hereafter DFA): Viljoen, volume 7, Viljoen – Forsyth, 8 February 1951  
 31 DFA: Viljoen, volume 7, Viljoen – Forsyth, 16 March 1951  
 32 DFA: Viljoen, volume 7, 18 May 1951  
 33 H J Gibbney, *Canberra 1913-1953* (Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1988), p 254  
 By late 1957 these had risen to £3 15 0d and £8 10 0d respectively. A visiting South African official, E J L Scholtz, thought they were “extraordinarily cheap” NASA: BTS, 4/6/36, volume 6, Scholtz – Secretary, December 1957, p 8  
 34 NASA: BTS, 4/2/32, volume 2, Forsyth – Under-Secretary, 6 December 1951  
 35 NAA: A1838/T17, 1500/1/30/1, “Record of Conversation with High Commissioner for South Africa”, 15 September 1951

Six months after his retirement Prime Minister D.F. Malan told the South African House of Assembly that Viljoen had done “excellent work”.<sup>36</sup> Even so, his term in Australia was one of the least successful.

#### G.C. Nel (1951-1954)

There ensued an *interregnum* of two years and five months after Viljoen’s departure, when the High Commission was in the charge of G.C. (Gert) Nel, who had thirteen years departmental experience and two posts behind him (Lourenço Marques and Cairo).

Having invested much time and money, not to mention emotional capital, in the careers of their senior officers, bringing them to a level where they are considered to be worthy of head of mission status, departments of foreign affairs are not unnaturally inclined to behave as if only the doings of their substantive heads of mission have significance. Junior officials who may temporarily head a mission tend to be viewed in the light of pre- and post-castaway “admirable Crichtons”<sup>37</sup> and waved aside as being of little importance. Normally that would be the case because *interregnums* between heads of mission tend to be short – a few weeks or months at most.

Diplomatic service is a hierarchical occupation – the higher the rank, the higher the pay and the more attention outsiders, especially the media, pay a diplomat, yet high rank and high salaries are not measures of achievement. What departments tend to overlook, is that foreigners regard whoever the head of mission is, as the personification of his government and country. When a *chargé d’affaires* serves in that capacity for years, in the process securing the confidence of the receiving government, the latter tends to view him as the equal of a substantive head of mission, irrespective of his position in the order of precedence.

So it was that Nel was accepted by the Australian authorities as a full representative of his government and country. In the absence of significant issues in bilateral relations requiring the attention of a more experienced and senior officer, the forty-year old Nel (when he took over as the head of mission) was a man for all seasons and what the situation required. Minister of Transport, Paul Sauer, wrote to Prime Minister Doctor D.F. Malan about him after visiting Australia in 1952:

the Prime Minister, Mr Menzies, and the Governor-General, Sir William McKell, both unsolicited, spoke particularly highly of him and gave me the impression that they would like him to stay on.<sup>38</sup>

Shortly after taking over as High Commissioner in 1954, J.K. Uys reported that “everywhere you go they speak of him [Nel] with the highest praise. Everybody knows Gerrie”.<sup>39</sup> A few months later he wrote that he “had scarcely set foot in Australia when, completely unsolicited, he heard the most positive remarks and words of praise about Mr Nel”. Before his departure from South Africa, he had “heard from

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36 *HA Deb*, 78, 24 April 1952, column 4325

37 After J M Barrie’s butler of that name

38 DFA: Viljoen, volume 7, Sauer – Malan, 24 September 1952 (original in Afrikaans)

39 One of the marks of an effective diplomat DFA: Uys, volume 3, extract from Uys – Scholtz, 9 April 1954 (original in Afrikaans)

at least two heads of department about the good work Mr Nel was doing” in Australia.<sup>40</sup>

Nel’s name also featured prominently (in his absence) at the customary lunch the Prime Minister and Cabinet gave Uys a few months after his arrival. Ministers told him that Nel “was always up with the job”.<sup>41</sup> Uys would not have known of the contemporary Australian report that Nel was among the “three closest friends” of the previous Indian High Commissioner, Kumar Shri Duleepsinhji, the one-time Cambridge University, Sussex and England cricketer,<sup>42</sup> and that at a time of tension between the Indian and South African governments.

Needless to say, the words of praise did not lead to accelerated promotion for Nel. Bruce Lockhart wrote of the British service that “promotion in any government service abroad is often accelerated by the favourable reports brought back to London by influential and important visitors”. He himself had profited from that phenomenon during his time in Moscow.<sup>43</sup> That did not apply to the South African service when Nel was in Canberra. In any case, the merit system which sorted the wheat from the chaff in the rest of the public service, was then thought to have no place in the Department of External Affairs. That was because “it was found impossible to assess with equity the merits of person[s] serving in various centres throughout the world *vis a vis* their colleagues in the same grade”.<sup>44</sup>

If Nel did not scale the heights in his career, that might have been due to a tendency to obsequiousness towards his superiors, for, while he lacked fellow-diplomat D.B. Sole’s intellectual penetration, he was a conscientious administrator and there was nothing wrong with his political *nous*. Sole has another explanation: “... he was an Afrikaner who did not support the Nationalist Party”<sup>45</sup> besides having “an American wife who made little attempt to speak Afrikaans”. Sole maintains that both of “these elements had in varying degrees their impact on the careers of other officials of the Department”.<sup>46</sup>

Introduced by Eric Louw when he took over the External Affairs portfolio in 1955, the proviso that South African foreign service wives should prove their fluency in both official languages, was aimed at the foreigners some of his officers married while serving abroad. He prohibited the practice in respect of those who were not yet married and required offenders to leave the service.<sup>47</sup> What it came down to was that the wives of foreign service officers abroad were expected to converse fluently in Afrikaans with visiting Afrikaners.<sup>48</sup> As far as Louw was concerned, that was more

40 DFA: Nel, volume 3, Uys – SEA, 17 June 1954 (original in Afrikaans)

41 DFA: Uys, volume 5, Uys – SEA, 8 July 1954 (original in Afrikaans)

42 NAA: A1838/2, 169/11/128, part 1, note by J E Oldham, 11 May 1954

43 R H Bruce Lockhart, *Retreat from Glory* (Putnam, London, 1935), p 103

44 NASA: BTS, 24/2, volume 3, undated paper “Diplomatic and Consular Service” attached to Taljaard – Kelly, 2 February 1953

45 He was the brother-in-law of Doctor E G Malherbe, Smuts’s Head of Military Intelligence during the Second World War and later Principal of the University of Natal

46 D B Sole, Letter to author, 26 December 1994

47 B G Fourie, *Brandpunte: Ager die Skerms met Suid-Afrika se Bekendste Diplomaat*, (Tafelberg, Cape Town, 1991), p 48

48 Louw made that clear in a message to South African diplomats within days of taking office See: *Die Burger*, 20 January 1955; *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), 20 January 1955; *Die Transvaler*, 21 January 1955 and *The Star* (Johannesburg), 20 January 1955 (Editorial)



important than the wife's or husband's ability to speak the language of the country in which they were stationed.

In keeping with the idiosyncratic management style manifest in a department which had only three ministers between January 1955 and April 1994<sup>49</sup> – the end of “the old” South Africa – and eight permanent heads since 1927,<sup>50</sup> the language requirement was applied selectively. Much seemed to depend on the husband's standing with the departmental hierarchy. If the hierarchy fancied you, a blind eye was turned on your wife's lack of fluency in Afrikaans, or even your own. Others who were less gifted, useful or likeable were less fortunate and for so long as the requirement remained in force, the quality of his wife's Afrikaans was a potential barrier to an officer's advancement. As will be seen below, A.M. Hamilton was a beneficiary of the blind eye.

Although Nel was not a substantive head of mission, his performance *en poste* was comparable to those who were. In effect, he succeeded Viljoen and, from a practical point of view, the Australians tended to regard him in his stint of two years and five months (a month longer than Viljoen's term) as Acting High Commissioner, as superior to Viljoen in all but rank. There was, however, the question of Australia's status as receiving country and they welcomed J.K. Uys's appointment in March 1954. External Affairs Minister R.G. Casey announced the appointment himself.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, at the cabinet lunch for Uys, gratification was expressed at his seniority.<sup>52</sup>

If, as Australian ministers said, Nel was “always up with the job”, it was, in fact, he who was indirectly responsible not only for Uys's appointment but also those of the latter's successors right up to the demise of white rule in South Africa. More than a year into his term as Acting High Commissioner, he wrote the Departmental Under-Secretary McDonald (Don) Spies a personal letter, giving his views of the importance to South Africa of its representation in Australia.

He assumed that because the High Commissioner's post had been vacant for fourteen months, the Department could then be considering an appointment.<sup>53</sup> Senior posts in the Australian public service, including External Affairs (whose Secretary, Arthur Tange, was younger than he was)<sup>54</sup> were held by relatively young officials. It would, therefore, be appropriate to appoint one of the departmental counsellors. If preference were to be given to someone from outside the service, his age should be equivalent to that of a counsellor<sup>55</sup> – between forty-five and fifty. Viljoen was sixty-two and infirm when he arrived in Canberra.

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49 E H Louw (1955-1963), H Muller (1964-1977) and R F Botha (1977-1994)

50 The first two (H D J Bodenstern and D D Forsyth) served for twenty-nine years and the next two (G P Jooste and B G Fourie) for twenty-six. They were followed by two (J van Dalsen and P R Killen) who had a total of five years between them, by one (N P van Heerden) who served for five years, and lastly by one (L H Evans) who was appointed to a term of five years in 1992

51 NASA: BTS, 4/2/32, volume 2, DEA, Canberra, PR 101, 10 November 1953; *The Canberra Times*, 11 November 1953

52 NAA: A1838/238, 201/10/1, part 1, “Draft speech of welcome to the High Commissioner for the Union of South Africa”, 1954

53 NASA: BTS, S4/5/45, volume 2, Nel – Spies, 28 February 1953 (original in Afrikaans)

54 NASA: BCB, volume 1, 2/1, Nel – Uys, 7 December 1953, p 2 (original in Afrikaans)

55 NASA: BTS, S4/5/45, volume 2, Nel – Spies, 28 February 1953

Spies passed Nel's letter to Forsyth who seized upon it gratefully: "Thank you! This letter will be brought to the attention of PM if the question of appointment again comes under discussion."<sup>56</sup> Nel's suggestion was probably decisive. The Department tended to follow the line of least resistance and when an appointment was made for the first time it followed almost automatically that all succeeding appointees would be officials of similar rank if not background. Uys had been a foreign service officer for twenty-five years.

### J.K. Uys (1954-1957)

J.K. Uys can be viewed in terms of Australian diplomat Walter Crocker's aphorism that the "best Ambassador is always more than a civil servant".<sup>57</sup> He was a supreme civil servant and for that reason an indifferent diplomat, at least in respect of his effectiveness in the diplomatic milieu. That was never a hindrance<sup>58</sup> in a career that took him to a deputy-secretaryship in the Department of External Affairs (1960-1965) and as head of mission twice to the Federal Republic of Germany (1957-1960; 1965-1969) and Australia (1954-1957; 1969-1971). Uys is, in fact, the only South African to have served as head of mission twice in the same posts.<sup>59</sup> He was valued for his head office accomplishments, spending more than eighteen years of his forty-four year foreign service career at head office, an unusually lengthy span for members of the early department.

Uys was also the epitome of the  *vurige*  (fiery) Afrikaner in the sense that he tended to see the world through Afrikaner eyes, weighing it against Afrikaner values. For him, only Afrikaners could be within the covenant, though English-speaking South Africans could achieve a degree of righteousness by virtue of their command of Afrikaans and by an attitude of homage towards what he regarded as South Africa's dominant culture. That was an ethnic rather than a political statement and it never harmed his career, at least not when perhaps it could – the years of Smuts's second prime ministership (1939-1948). Ironically, his daughter's marriage to an Australian made him an object of suspicion to similarly ethnocentric Afrikaners.<sup>60</sup>

Despite revelling in Afrikaner ethnicity (perhaps because of that), he did not especially endear himself to his Afrikaans-speaking subordinates. One, the future foreign minister, R.F. Botha, never a man to sit back and await guidance or direction from superiors, was inclined to reminisce about his experiences with Uys under whom he served in West Germany from January to October 1960. Finding Botha's raw enthusiasm hard to deal with, Uys would remonstrate ineffectually, apparently more in sorrow than in anger, "Remember, Botha, guidance comes from above!"<sup>61</sup>

56 NASA: BTS, S4/5/45, volume 2, Nel – Spies, 28 February 1953 Handwritten copy of Forsyth's comment, 9 March 1953 Spies conveyed Forsyth's thanks to Nel in BCB, volume 1, 2/1, Spies – Nel, 13 March 1953

57 W R Crocker, *Australian Ambassador: International Relations at First Hand* (Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1971), p 63

58 The measure of a diplomat is not what foreigners think of him but how he is perceived by his departmental superiors if a career official and by his head of government and foreign minister if a politician

59 So far as is known, Carel de Wet is the only other South African to have been head of mission twice at the same post, namely London (1964-1967; 1972-1976)

60 D B Sole, "This above all": *Reminiscences of a South African diplomat*, Unpublished manuscript, 1990, p 211

61 "Onthou, Botha, leiding kom van bo af!" Personal recollection

Botha wrote of him many years later:

He was not an example of what I considered to be a forward-looking Afrikaner. It did not matter who was in power. It did not matter whether you were English or Afrikaans speaking. What mattered was his obsession to stay within the rules and to give the most restrictive interpretation to the rules. Politics did not matter. The rules. The regulations. He found his security within the letter of the rules. Prescriptions. An Ambassador abroad could not buy at State expense an ashtray if the transaction was not fully motivated and prior approval obtained. It was as simple as that. He was a pipe smoker. I remember seeing a page on file with a hole burnt in the middle. He encircled the hole with his pen adding at the bottom of the page "Much to my regret a spark from my pipe fell on the paper. I accept responsibility." That epitomises Johann Kunz Uys.<sup>62</sup>

A hard-worker, a man of integrity, completely incorrupt and not unintelligent, Uys lacked subtlety and imagination not to mention political judgement. His reporting revealed him to be not infrequently out of his depth. Comments by his Australian interlocutors tended to confirm that.<sup>63</sup>

Not unnaturally, the foreign service reflected the mores operative in white South African society. In April 1956 Uys enquired what his attitude should be towards 'non-white' diplomats, mentioning that dancing sometimes took place at receptions and pointing out that "In the Union mixed dancing is frowned upon. Indeed, it is strongly disapproved."<sup>64</sup> After consulting *inter alia* with Eric Louw, Spies, the Under-Secretary, replied a month later by way of a personal letter: "You will ... realise what a sensation it would cause here if a photograph or report should be published of a member of the Uys family dancing with a non-white, and it is felt that you should tactfully ensure that something like that doesn't happen".<sup>65</sup>

Uys was the High Commissioner when the official residence was planned and built. He greatly enjoyed the work. It was typical of him that he was "on the site every morning before office hours to see for myself how the job is done without in any way interfering with operations". Excluding the furnishings, some of which survived at least until the 1990s,<sup>66</sup> his unique contribution was to choose the site and therefore, by extension, that of the later chancery. Uys handed his letter of introduction to Menzies on 11 March 1954. A month later he was reporting on a new site, Block 6, Section 58, Acton, which had become available.<sup>67</sup>

If Australian ministers were complimentary about Nel, a retrospective on Uys's first term suggests they were less likely to have been so about Uys himself. Quite likely they would have endorsed the opinion in the Australian High Commission's annual

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62 R F Botha, letter to author, 2 November 1994. It seems that the incident of the hole in the paper occurred when Uys was in Australia and Botha a cadet at Head Office.

63 For example see: NAA: A1838, 201/10/7, part 1, J E Oldham, "Record of conversation with the High Commissioner for South Africa on 1 April 1954"

64 NASA: BTS 1/25/6, volume 1, Uys – Acting SEA, 24 April 1956 (original in Afrikaans)

65 NASA: BTS 1/25/6, volume 1, Spies – Uys, 26 May 1956 (original in Afrikaans)

66 For an account of the building and furnishing of the residence, see author's article "Housing the South African High Commissioner", *Canberra Historical Journal*, New Series, 39, March 1997, pp 19-28

67 The site selected by Viljoen in 1950 was adjacent to the Prime Minister's residence

report of 1957 that his successor, A.M. Hamilton, “was of much higher calibre”.<sup>68</sup> As individuals and officials, Uys and Hamilton could hardly have been less alike – Uys the bald, dour, unimaginative Afrikaner public servant and the balding, prematurely white-haired, English-speaking, Oxford-educated Hamilton, a “cheerful and incessant conversationalist”<sup>69</sup> with a slight stammer. Hamilton was almost forty-eight and Uys almost forty-seven when they arrived in Canberra (for both their first head of mission post), but Hamilton’s white hair made him seem older.<sup>70</sup>

### A.M. Hamilton (1957-1961)

Hugh Gilchrist at the Australian High Commission in Pretoria predicted correctly that the Hamiltons would be “very popular in Australia”.<sup>71</sup> In fact, of all South African ambassadorial couples in Canberra in the history of the post, they may well have been the most successful. Perhaps Hamilton’s greatest asset was his wife, former Emily Cardross Grant, an Anglican clergyman’s daughter and a graduate of the University of Cape Town with a master’s degree in child psychology. She was always known as Jill and he had met her on board ship when returning to South Africa from England in the 1930s.<sup>72</sup>

Just about wherever he went, so did she and they spent almost as much time travelling as all of his predecessors combined, in the process visiting most parts of Australia, even Cairns in the far north of Queensland, a thousand miles from Brisbane and almost as distant from that city as it is from Adelaide. Viljoen would have been disconcerted if he had known of Hamilton’s mobility. As Hamilton himself puts it, they traversed the country “from Cairns to Hobart and from Sydney to Perth”.<sup>73</sup> Not altogether flatteringly did Wally Crouch, a young Australian journalist who had worked in South Africa, call him the “walkabout envoy”. Crouch disliked white South Africans and his use of the term in that context in a South African newspaper may have been a private joke.<sup>74</sup>

The travelling was pursuant to what Hamilton saw as his “chief task”, the “political and public relations side”, what could also be called the representational side.<sup>75</sup>

Anthony Albert Mordaunt Hamilton<sup>76</sup> was born in Paarl, Cape Colony, in December 1909 to an Anglicised Afrikaner mother and an Australian father. The

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- 68 NAA: A1838/1, 1348/1, part 1, Annual Report 1957, part B, p 8, paragraph 39 Shortly before Uys’s second term, an Australian official observed that he was “remembered in the Department as a pleasant but undistinguished Head of Mission” NAA: A1838/395, 1500/1/30/21, Davis – Minister, 17 August 1968
- 69 NAA: A1838/T54, 1500/1/30/8, memorandum 397, Gilchrist – DEA, 6 August 1957
- 70 The photograph accompanying Crouch’s article of 20 January 1959 in the *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg) – see below – taken when Hamilton had just turned forty-nine, gives the impression of a man some fifteen years older
- 71 NAA: A1838/T54, 1500/1/30/8, memorandum 397, Gilchrist-DEA, 6 August 1957
- 72 *Mainichi Daily News* (Tokyo), 22 January 1973
- 73 A M Hamilton, *Antipodean Days 1957- to ‘61*, Unpublished manuscript, August 1993, p 2 Mr Hamilton prepared this seven page memoir of his time in Canberra at the author’s request
- 74 See Gilchrist’s notes on his conversation with Crouch in Durban in July 1957 NAA: A1831, 201/2/5, part 6, annex to memorandum 367, 19 July 1957; *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), 20 January 1959, “The Walkabout Envoy – the name Australians give our ambassador” The term “walkabout”, derived from perceived Aboriginal behaviour, implying shiftlessness and unreliability, has pejorative connotations in Australia
- 75 DFA: Hamilton, volume III, Hamilton – Scholtz, 20 November 1959

Cape Civil Service had recruited his father in Victoria just after the Anglo-Boer War. Stationed at Paarl, Hamilton *père* married the daughter of an old Cape Dutch family.<sup>77</sup>

Hamilton had read History and English at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in Johannesburg, graduating in 1931 with first class honours in History. At Wits he had been among W.M. Macmillan's "best pupils"<sup>78</sup>. One of his teachers was Margaret Hodgson, later Margaret Ballinger, whom he was to host when she came to Canberra in September 1960 to deliver that year's Dyason lecture.<sup>79</sup> An Ainsworth Scholarship took him to New College, Oxford, where he read politics, philosophy and economics, going down with a second class degree in 1934. Thereafter he qualified for a diploma at the Geneva School of International Studies, later working in the League of Nations secretariat in Geneva for six months.

Hamilton joined the Department of External Affairs in October 1944 as a legation secretary, a rank converted later to Second Secretary, at the age of almost thirty-five. Ironically, his application to join the Department in the mid-1930s had been rejected. From 1939 he had been a locally-recruited press officer and political adviser at the British High Commission in South Africa.

Gregory Clark, a former Australian foreign service officer, stresses the importance to the sending country of a close relationship between its ambassador and the head of government of the receiving country.<sup>80</sup> That was how it was in early modern diplomacy. David Kelly tells of the British ambassador in Berlin on whom the Kaiser called during a walk, finding him in holed pyjamas. The Kaiser would bring this up, no doubt with amusement, at their subsequent meetings. That was the sort of relationship ambassadors were expected to cultivate.<sup>81</sup> These days, as perhaps it was in the 1950s, that is the counsel of perfection, but that is what Hamilton achieved and he deserves full marks for that aspect of his work in Australia.

Less than a year after his arrival he was writing to External Affairs Minister Louw:

my wife and I have been fortunate in developing a friendly and informal relationship with the Australian Prime Minister and Dame Pattie Menzies. Lately we have been exchanging visits on Sunday evenings at our houses and last Sunday Mr Menzies and Dame Pattie had an informal supper with us<sup>82</sup>

His personal letters to his Head of Department, G.P. Jooste,<sup>83</sup> give the impression of a relationship of some intimacy. It was conducted on a Bob and Tony basis from the

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76 He dropped the name Albert as an adult

77 A M Hamilton, letter to author, 2 October 1993

78 W M Macmillan, *My South African Years* (David Philip, Cape Town 1975), pp 163, 218

79 An annual event between 1949 and 1977, the Dyason Lectures provided a prestigious forum

80 G Clark, "The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs – What's wrong with our Diplomats", *The Australian Quarterly*, 47, 2, June 1975, especially pp 27-28

81 D Kelly, *The Ruling Few: or the Human Background to Diplomacy* (Hollis & Carter, London, 1952), pp 117-118

82 NASA: BTS, 4/2/32/1, volume 1, Hamilton – Louw, 31 July 1958

83 The letters to Jooste that came to my notice in the National Archives of South Africa were dated 10 March 1959 (BCB, 4/2/32/1, volume 1); 4 August 1959 (BCB, volume 12, 25/11); 22 April 1960 (BCB, volume 20, 32/13); 21 October 1960 (BCB, volume 5, 6/10 (S)) There was one letter to Louw dated 31 July 1958 (BTS, 4/2/32/1, volume 1) which Louw had passed to the Prime Minister (J G Strijdom) and a letter Hamilton addressed to the Department on 27 October 1960 (BCB, volume 6, 8/0, volume III)

beginning.<sup>84</sup> Robert Kennedy, a member of Menzies' staff until early 1961, adds perspective to it:

To be invited to the Lodge is an honor; to be invited to dinner is to walk with the mighty Few people receive the accolade, because the Prime Minister is not a gregarious soul

He dines out only when he has to, or on rare occasions because he wants to He holds a dinner party at the Lodge usually only when he has to ...<sup>85</sup>

The Hamiltons were included in intimate dinners at The Lodge such as, for example, when Menzies entertained the new Governor-General, Lord Dunrossil, on the day of his swearing-in. Only one other couple was present.<sup>86</sup>

Hamilton has told this writer that he "enjoyed the privilege of [Menzies's] friendship" from the day they met until his departure from Australia three-and-a-half years later, "indeed until his death".<sup>87</sup> Menzies was, Hamilton said, "anxious to save South Africa from isolation and to preserve its links with the Commonwealth. To the end he remained a generous and understanding friend".<sup>88</sup>

One of the ironies of the friendship was that whatever Hamilton told Menzies was actual and had impact, whereas the latter was not exposed to the detail of what his own diplomats were reporting from Pretoria. External Affairs' staff in Canberra was too small to process "the volume of paper coming in"<sup>89</sup> and reports from South Africa were not passed automatically to the top level of the Department, let alone to the political level of government.

Two years into his Canberra posting, Hamilton told E.J.L. Scholtz, South African External Affairs's Chief Administrative Officer, that he had made it his

special job to cultivate a close relationship with the Prime Minister and many members of the Cabinet In all modesty I am sure that I can say that I have established a closer relationship with these Ministers than any other member of the Diplomatic Corps; and I have done more than any other head of mission to entertain the members of Parliament and the press

And prophetically:

All this, I am sure, is of the greatest importance for the job; and, even if we don't see startling and dramatic results from it, it is obviously important in setting the

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84 There is Hamilton's own evidence in this regard: A M Hamilton, *Antipodean Days 1957- to '61*, Unpublished manuscript, August 1993, p 1 From Menzies's side, examples are brief acknowledgements of receipt he addressed to Hamilton on 27 January 1961 and 6 February 1961 in respect of material sent to him NASA: BCB, volume 20, 32/13 (secret)

85 Quoted in C Hazlehurst, *Menzies Observed* (Allen & Unwin, Hornsby, 1979), p 366

86 NASA: BTS, 1/25/1, volume 1, Hamilton - SEA, Cape Town, 9 February 1960 Hamilton singles this dinner out for special mention in: A M Hamilton, *Antipodean Days 1957- to '61*, Unpublished manuscript, August 1993

87 A M Hamilton, *Antipodean Days 1957- to '61*, Unpublished manuscript, August 1993, p 1

88 A M Hamilton, *Antipodean Days 1957- to '61*, Unpublished manuscript, August 1993, p 6

89 W R Crocker, *Australian Ambassador: International Relations at First Hand* (Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1971), pp 58-59

tone of our relations and inducing a sympathetic approach to our affairs, which at moments of crisis could still be of special value to us<sup>90</sup>

It was during the Sharpeville crisis the following year that he reported:

I have been immensely encouraged by the reactions of very many responsible people. Apart from the staunch friendship of the Prime Minister I have had messages or personal expressions of sympathy from the Deputy Prime Minister, Mr McEwen, most other members of the Cabinet, numerous Members of the Liberal and Country Parties in Parliament and a great number of friends all over Australia.

Even the leader of the opposition, Arthur Calwell, took "the unusual step" of telephoning to assure him that "he was not trying to make difficulties for us".<sup>91</sup>

Some weeks later, Hamilton told Jooste that Menzies had

shown a massive friendship for South Africa in these last anxious weeks. It has cost him a great deal in the way of bitter personal attacks from people who normally support him, widespread criticism in the press and, quite tangibly, as he said to me, at least 1,000 votes in the by-election in Mr Casey's former constituency near Melbourne. He has had floods of abusive letters, one correspondent charging him with "hypocrisy and cowardice"! He found some ironic amusement in this: as a politician, he thought it was going a bit far to be called a coward when he would have found it so much easier, and politically profitable, to have gone along with the violent of opinion. (Incidentally, his Cabinet colleagues, Mr Menzies told me, were quite divided on the subject, but he had been able to persuade the waverers!)<sup>92</sup>

Hamilton was fortunate to be able to move immediately on arrival into the newly-built residence which was strategically situated between the prime ministerial Lodge and the parliament building, within walking distance of both and not much more than five minutes from the first-mentioned. His predecessors had lived some distance away. Geography therefore contributed to his relationship of easy familiarity with Menzies who would often stop by on his way home from parliament, sometimes arriving unannounced. One time he did so was in March 1960 to discuss the day's debate in parliament on the Sharpeville shootings and to give Hamilton "moral support".<sup>93</sup>

Michael Landale, the son of the contemporary Chief of Protocol W.G.A. Landale, and decades later himself a senior officer in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, a friend of the younger of the two Hamilton daughters and then in his teens, recalls opening the door to the Prime Minister one afternoon.<sup>94</sup> From what Hamilton himself says, one deduces that it was a matter of personal chemistry,<sup>95</sup> besides which they shared a Scottish background. Not to be overlooked is that Jill Hamilton also struck a chord with Menzies and his wife, Dame Pattie.

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90 DFA: Hamilton, volume III, Hamilton – Scholtz, 20 November 1959

91 NASA: BTS, 136/3/10, volume 1, Cypher OTP telegram number P 8, High Commissioner, Canberra-SEA, 31 March 1960

92 NASA: BCB, 32/13, volume 20, Hamilton – Jooste, 22 April 1960. F D Tohill, "Menzies and the South Africans", in F Cain, (ed), *Menzies in War and Peace* (Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1997), p 31

93 NASA: BTS, 136/3/10, volume 1, Hamilton – SEA, 1 April 1960

94 M Landale, letter to author, 28 January 1994

95 See, for example, A M Hamilton, *Antipodean Days 1957- to '61*, Unpublished manuscript, August 1993

Not unnaturally, Menzies was loath to see his friend go and news of his impending departure for his next post, Stockholm, which Hamilton conveyed to him personally in January 1961, caused something of a stir in official Canberra. Menzies was upset and thought the timing was poor. He wanted to write to Jooste, but Hamilton persuaded him not to.<sup>96</sup> It is not unusual for influential people who have been close to a diplomatic envoy to regret his departure and to want to take the matter up with his government. Albeit unusual for a head of government-cum-foreign minister (as he was at the time), Menzies's attitude would have fallen into that category.

At this remove it is difficult to assess the value of the friendship to Menzies. He did not refer to it in either of his autobiographical works, *Afternoon Light* (1967)<sup>97</sup> and *The Measure of the Years* (1970), although there is mention of it in his unpublished papers.<sup>98</sup> Perhaps it was light relief from the cares of office, a manifestation of what Crocker called "a characteristic which became increasingly marked with the years – to get recreation from boon companions, most of whom, like himself, could hold their liquor if not their tongues".<sup>99</sup> There is no evidence that Hamilton was, as is sometimes the case with foreign diplomats, an *éminence grise* in respect of Australian domestic politics.

### The Rhodie allegations

To this day, Hamilton is seen by outsiders as one of apartheid South Africa's best career diplomats, a man who brought lustre to the occupation, yet a generation after they worked together in Canberra, his reputation was attacked by his information officer there, namely E.M. Rhodie, the later controversial Secretary for Information, who served in the High Commission between November 1957 and June 1960. Rhodie wrote in 1983, five years after his fall, that Hamilton was "a prime example of men at senior level in Foreign Affairs who did not want to promote South Africa's case, who deliberately kept the lowest possible profile, and who did not want to rock the boat".<sup>100</sup>

Not only could Hamilton and his wife barely speak Afrikaans – Mrs Hamilton would apparently have Mrs Rhodie give her a sentence in Afrikaans to "proudly throw at the visitors" during visits by South African politicians – but his "political hostility towards the government of Doctor Verwoerd could hardly be contained".<sup>101</sup> It was not that Hamilton could hardly contain his hostility towards the Verwoerd government. He did not contain it at all. According to Rhodie, Hamilton once told

96 NAA: A1838/265, 1500/1/30/11, Record of conversation Tange/Hamilton, 6 January 1961 See also file note E J Bunting, 10 January 1961; Bunting – Tange, 10 January 1961; Tange – Minister, 11 January 1961

97 In 1967 Hamilton wrote to the editor of *The Times* (London) about a misprint in an extract from *Afternoon Light*. Copies of the correspondence, including also a copy of a letter from Menzies to Hamilton can be found at NASA: BTS, 1/25/3, volume 2. Also see: *The Times*, 18 October 1967; *The Times*, 18 December 1967

98 Hamilton and Menzies corresponded after the former left Australia. The Menzies Papers held by the National Library of Australia, reference ANL, MS 4936/1/14/116, contain some of the correspondence

99 W R Crocker, *Travelling back: the memoirs of Sir Walter Crocker* (Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1981), p 185

100 E M Rhodie, *The Real Information Scandal* (Orbis, Pretoria, 1983), pp 43-44

101 E M Rhodie, *The Real Information Scandal* (Orbis, Pretoria, 1983), p 44



Menzies in his presence that it was “time these damned Nationalists realise that they are not going to get away with their stupidities”.<sup>102</sup>

Such an observation would not have come as a surprise to Australian External Affairs officials. They were familiar with Hamilton’s views even before his arrival. A file note made a week before he reached Sydney, claimed that he had “on a number of occasions made observations to members of our Embassy in Washington [Hamilton’s previous station] implying a lack of sympathy with the more extreme policies of his own government”.<sup>103</sup> That came from a report of June 1957 from the Australian Embassy in Washington. The Hamiltons, it was said, had “maintained close relations” with various members of the Embassy, were “very well disposed towards Australia” and were looking forward to their posting. Both were of British stock and apparently had “no facility in speaking or writing Afrikaans”.<sup>104</sup>

Neither his own, nor his wife’s lack of Afrikaans, nor his political views greatly hampered Hamilton’s career. He was too much the *beau ideal* of a foreign service officer – a man who had established a close relationship with the Australian Prime Minister – to be regarded with marked disfavour by his Minister and Department. For a government struggling to obtain international recognition and acceptance, here was one of its diplomats who had achieved that within his circle, to its benefit. Neither Louw nor Jooste was going to be heavy-handed with a man like that. Even so, his head of mission posts were relatively minor, out of the way ones “where he would have little contact with Afrikaners”<sup>105</sup> other than members of his staff – Canberra, Stockholm, Madrid and Tokyo (where he was Consul-General).

In allegedly maintaining a low profile Hamilton was, Rhoodie said, rarely “seen or heard to address any meetings to promote South Africa’s case, either on radio or television”. He also “spent so much of his time in the garden” that “his son Tim used to say to us: ‘My father is the highest paid gardener in Australia.’” Rhoodie reported Hamilton’s attitude to members of the South African delegation to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association’s meeting of 1959 in Canberra. He was nonplussed when the head of the State Information Service, his boss, wrote a few weeks later that Eric Louw was not concerned about Hamilton’s political beliefs nor that he “spent only three to four hours of his day at the office”.<sup>106</sup>

Of Rhoodie’s charges, the most serious one, that Hamilton was out of sympathy with the National Party government, had substance. It would have been more professional if he had kept his views to himself. Ideally, it should have been said of him as it was of J.P. Quinn as Australian *chargé d’affaires* in The Hague between 1948 and 1950: “While remaining completely loyal to his government’s policy, [he] was able to present it to the Dutch in a way that, whil[e] not making it any more acceptable, reduced the offensive impact; and his own high personal standing with the Dutch was never impaired”.<sup>107</sup>

102 E M Rhoodie, *The Real Information Scandal* (Orbis, Pretoria, 1983), p 43

103 NAA: A1838/T54, 1500/1/30/8, file note dated 30 August 1957 by J C G Kevin headed “South African High Commissioner – Australia: A M Hamilton”

104 NAA: A1838, 201/10/7, part 1, memorandum 744/57, M R Booker – DEA, 11 June 1957

105 D B Sole, letter to author, 6 January 1995

106 E M Rhoodie, *The Real Information Scandal* (Orbis, Pretoria, 1983), pp 43-44

107 R W Furlonger, in Furlonger *et al*, *John Paul Quinn - Recalled by some of his Friends for his Children* (Patria Print, Canberra, 1968), p 16

However, given the general opprobrium in which the South African government was held even then, Hamilton's attitude did not induce in his Australian interlocutors the contempt that would normally be the case in such circumstances. Instead, they seem to have considered his attitude to be commendable. Oldham, the Commonwealth Relations Adviser, called him "one of the ablest diplomats sent to Australia". He had "a difficult task to perform" but carried it out "with considerable skill". He was also sufficiently wide in outlook to see what was "ultimately the best for his country".<sup>108</sup> That was a measure of how the National Party government was viewed abroad.

Young Hamilton's remark about his father being the highest paid gardener in Australia was a joke, but Rhodie took it literally.<sup>109</sup> While the garden may, as Hamilton said later, have been his "chief recreation",<sup>110</sup> it was also very much part of his job. It could hardly have been otherwise in circumstances where the Australian Prime Minister "spoke enthusiastically about the new residence, which is very close to his own and which he passes frequently each day [and] had been watching its building with great interest".<sup>111</sup> In August 1959 Hamilton invited Menzies to plant a willow tree at the bottom of the garden, in the corner closest to State Circle. He had the bronze plaque marking the tree cast in Sweden, his next post.

In respect of the other charges, Hamilton's profile was probably higher than that of any other head of mission in Canberra at the time. The practice of diplomats taking to the airwaves to put their government's point of view was not then evident in Australia. Television reached Sydney and Melbourne, Australia's largest cities, only in 1956, in time for the Olympic Games. It had, however, long been the practice among political leaders to make use of commercial radio to convey their message.<sup>112</sup> Uys gave a farewell broadcast on the ABC network, it being non-commercial radio, and Hamilton delivered at least one radio address, introducing the ABC programme marking Union Day (31 May 1959). Rhodie could hardly have objected to the content of his message, which was expressed more elegantly than he himself could have done:

South Africa stands at the centre of the great problem of our times – the adjustment of race relationships between peoples of immensely different backgrounds and achievements. Such an adjustment will not be attained except by a long and complex process; but white South Africans understand perfectly well that their future, as a community and a nation, is bound up with their success in helping forward an adjustment which will be fair to all the races that inhabit our beautiful and exciting country. At no time has the discussion of policy been so earnest, or so wide-ranging in its examination of fundamental factors.

In the meanwhile great progress is being made in the welfare of our native peoples – in the housing schemes which are rapidly eliminating the slums of the

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108 NAA: A9421, 223/1/1, record of conversation Oldham/Hamilton, 17 September 1959, p 2  
 109 E M Rhodie, *The Real Information Scandal* (Orbis, Pretoria, 1983), p 44; A M Hamilton, letter to author, 2 October 1993  
 110 A M Hamilton, *Antipodean Days 1957- to '61*, Unpublished manuscript, August 1993, p 7  
 111 NASA: BTS, 4/2/32, volume 2, Hamilton – SEA, 20 September 1957  
 112 Joan Rydon, letter to author, 4 December 1994; NASA: BTS, 4/2/32/1, volume 1, Hamilton – Louw, 31 July 1958

great cities, in education and health services. Much of this is lost to sight in the controversy over policies.<sup>113</sup>

Nor could Rhoodie have objected to what Hamilton said in Cairns, Queensland, during a visit in June 1959:

The South African Government fully realised that the time must inevitably come when the native people there would demand a share in running their own affairs – the South African Government did believe – and had said so time and time again – that there was no limit to the development of the natives in their country. If that development was not controlled – remembering that outbreaks of nationalism tended to go to extremes – the white population in South Africa (numbering only three million people in the entire country) would be absolutely swamped.<sup>114</sup>

However, earlier during the same visit to Queensland, Hamilton was reported to have said – it is not clear whether he volunteered this – that he had two views on apartheid, personal and official. His personal view was that he did not know whether it would work or not. Officially, however, his government believed that it “will work, will enable the races to live together, and open the way for the native to develop to the extent of his capability”.<sup>115</sup>

Perhaps, as Rhoodie implied, Hamilton did not want to be associated in the public mind with the white supremacist policies of the National Party government, but that did not prevent him from expressing the white supremacist point of view in his public statements and more subtly so than Rhoodie could. His report on the Malayan Independence celebrations, at which he represented the South African government before taking up his post in Canberra, shows him to have been a captive of the prejudices of his day:

The test will come if, in Malay hands, the administrative machine runs down and the economy of the country begins to suffer. The Malays are a pleasant and easy-going people, and none of their leaders gives the impression of any great drive or determination. The deplorable condition of the airport at Djakarta, observed even at a superficial glance, was striking indication of what can happen when the firm hand of the European administrator is withdrawn. It would be an optimistic observer who could be sure that the Malays have an inherent quality which would preserve them from the Indonesian fate.<sup>116</sup>

Quite likely what he objected to was not the policies, but that they were the product of a rampant Afrikaner nationalism.

### Conclusion

Although the Australians were inclined to view the first South African High Commissioner, P.R. Viljoen, as inconsequential, his government and head office, the Department of External Affairs, thought highly of him. For them he was, as a political appointee (though, of course, he was not a politician), of greater stature and more significance than the career officials who succeeded him. Of those, though not

113 NAA: A1838, 201/10/7, part 1, “Radio address by the High Commissioner for South Africa, Mr A M Hamilton, Union Day, 1959”

114 *The Cairns Post*, 17 June 1959

115 *The Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), 9 June 1959

116 NASA: BTS, 91/8/1, volume 10, circular minute A46 of 1957, 18 October 1957, p 6

as esteemed as Uys in South African official circles, Hamilton and even the more junior Nel, were considered by the Australians to be greatly superior to their predecessors. This is a practical illustration of the fact that the measure of a diplomat is not what foreigners think of him, but how he is perceived by his employers back home.

Much of an age, and of similar rank when they went to Australia, their first head of mission post, Hamilton and Uys are a study in contrasts. More effective than Uys in the diplomatic milieu, Hamilton's subsequent career was less significant. Uys, the perfect bureaucrat, starred in the head office environment where he worked for many years, but was diplomatically mediocre, or even inept. Hamilton and Nel were effective diplomats, but spent little time at head office, in both cases two terms of short duration.

The lengthy absence of a substantive head of mission is a sure pointer to a lack of substance in a diplomatic relationship. At least after Nel, the South Africans took care to leave no lengthy gaps and, ever since, relatively senior career officials have generally been appointed to head the mission. In his time, Robert Menzies facilitated their work. From the beginning of his second term as Prime Minister, his actions showed Menzies to be sympathetic towards white South Africa. His liking for South Africans extended even to abrasive and republican Afrikaners such as the Minister of External Affairs, Eric Louw, as well as the racist Prime Ministers, Hans Strijdom and Hendrik Verwoerd. In that, he ran ahead of cabinet colleagues such as Richard Casey and an even greater distance ahead of some, but not all, of his officials, not to mention much of the Australian public opinion.<sup>117</sup>

As Prime Minister and Minister of External Affairs at the critical time for South Africa of international outrage over Sharpeville, followed by the 1961 Commonwealth prime ministers' conference, he steered his colleagues in the direction he desired. He handled the matter in Cabinet in such a way that South Africa's departure from the Commonwealth had a minimal effect on Australian-South African relations.<sup>118</sup>

If Hamilton was close to him, officially if not personally and privately, he was just as accessible to his predecessors. Viljoen reported a few months after Menzies became Prime Minister that he was "on very friendly terms" with him and had been so even before his election.<sup>119</sup> It was not difficult for Uys to obtain an audience when Pretoria wanted him to approach the Australian authorities to have the Russian defector Vladimir Petrov or his wife testify at the (now notorious) Treason Trial. Menzies instructed the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (better known by the

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117 To this day, evidence of a friendly disposition on the part of Australians, especially one so elevated as Robert Menzies, to what was then, as it still is, thought of as South Africa's "racist regime", is not well-received in Australian academic, media and political circles. Thus, if it had not been for my correspondence with him in the mid- to late 1990s, Menzies's most recent biographer, the late Professor A W Martin, could well have failed to include even the brief reference to Hamilton appearing on p 413 of the second volume of the biography: A W Martin, *Robert Menzies: A Life II - 1974-1978* (Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1999). However, anyone who has read Menzies's two autobiographical works *Afternoon Light* and *The Measure of the Years* will know that he liked white South Africans and had a soft spot for their country.

118 For example, see: NAA: A5818/2, volume 26, decision 1361, 10 May 1961

119 NASA: BCB, volume 2, 6/5 volume I, Viljoen – Forsyth, 3 March 1950

acronym ASIO) to render assistance.<sup>120</sup> The Petrovs were thought to have first-hand knowledge of communist activity in South Africa. They declined to testify personally or by deposition *inter alia* because they did not want to provoke the Soviet Union further.<sup>121</sup>

Apart from being there and administering themselves, the principal task of the South Africans was to put the best possible gloss on developments in their country to the Australian “establishment”. Informing Pretoria of Australian developments was of lesser concern. Where the South Africans reported in detail from Australia, particularly by way of the appendices which accompanied their reports, was on the speech-making tours they undertook periodically. The emphasis in such speeches was on points of similarity between the two countries and their historical connections, including the fact that the Australian wool industry was in a sense founded from the Cape. The white man’s determination to maintain his position in South Africa naturally also featured prominently.

The audiences were minute. Apart from ministers and officials in Canberra, they consisted *inter alia* of Rotary clubs in various parts of the country and the crowds at the agricultural and other shows they opened. If, therefore, as Hamilton said, the South African flag “appeared in places where it had never been seen before”,<sup>122</sup> that would have been in hamlets out in the Australian bush,<sup>123</sup> for the idea (and propriety) of diplomats communicating with a mass audience by means of radio or television had not yet taken hold.

The South Africa these men represented is as gone with the wind as ever was the Old South. In Australia their doings, comings and goings, are part of the early history of Canberra.<sup>124</sup> Their dealings with the long-time Prime Minister (1949-1966), Robert Menzies, reveal a side to him that is not generally known, even in Australia. In post-1994 South Africa, however, their activities may have greater significance from an anthropological or sociological perspective than from the political point of view.

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120 See various items on NASA: BCB, volume 12, 23/14 (S)

121 NASA: BCB, volume 12, 23/14 (S) Note handed to Uys by the Head of ASIO’s Canberra office

122 DFA: Hamilton, volume III, Hamilton – Scholtz, 20 November 1959

123 The Australian equivalent of the South African *platteland*

124 Canberra’s sole newspaper, *The Canberra Times*, took an interest in diplomats. Its contemporary “Canberra Diary” column is an excellent guide to what they were doing

### **Abstract**

Focusing on the South African High Commissioners to Australia from the time the High Commission was opened in 1949 until 1961, when South Africa left the Commonwealth, this article tries to say something about the sort of person who once represented the country abroad, what some of them did in a given historical context, and indirectly, something about their employer, the Department of External Affairs, as it was called during the period covered. The article also touches on an early manifestation of the 1970s feud between the Departments of Foreign Affairs and Information, which ended only when the former absorbed the latter as an outcome of the so-called "Information Scandal" that so beguiled political and public opinion in South Africa in the latter part of that decade.

### **Opsomming**

#### **Suid-Afrikaanse diplomate in Australië, 1949-1961**

Deur te fokus op die Suid-Afrikaanse Hoë Kommissaris in Australië vanaf die opening van die Hoë Kommissariaat in 1949 tot 1961, toe Suid-Afrika die Britse Statebond verlaat het, poog hierdie artikel om meer te onthul omtrent die tipe persoon wat die land eens in die buiteland verteenwoordig het, wat sommige van hulle in 'n gegewe historiese konteks bereik het, en op indirekte wyse ook meer omtrent hulle werkgever, die Departement van Eksterne Sake, soos dit gedurende die bespreekte periode bekend gestaan het. Die artikel maak ook melding van 'n vroeë uitbarsting van die vete wat in die 1970's tussen die Departemente van Buitelandse Sake en Inligting geheers het. Hierdie onenigheid het eers tot 'n einde gekom toe laasgenoemde Departement in eersgenoemde opgeneem is as 'n gevolg van die sogenaamde "Inligtingskandaal", wat die politieke en openbare mening in Suid-Afrika so intens gedurende die laaste gedeelte van dié dekade beïnvloed het.

### **Key words**

South Africa, Australia, diplomatic relations, SA High Commissioners, 1949-1961, Canberra, Robert Menzies, P.R. Viljoen, G.C. Nel, J.K. Uys, A.M. Hamilton, "Information Scandal".

### **Slutelwoorde**

Suid-Afrika, Australië, diplomatieke verhoudings, SA Hoë Kommissaris, 1949-1961, Canberra, P.R. Viljoen, G.C. Nel, J.K. Uys, A.M. Hamilton, "Inligtingskandaal".