

TOWARDS NATIONAL UNITY

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Chapter 1 — Background

The political warfare against British liberalism which started at Vereeniging was carried into the National Convention in 1909 by Boer Generals. The National Convention which sat in secret at Cape Town, Bloemfontein and Durban, was a body set up to discuss and consider the desirability and the possibility of unifying the four British Colonies of the Cape, the Free State, the Transvaal and Natal. It was a convention of White men only, a fact which clearly shows that the Boer spirit of no equality between White and Black had already smashed the defences around British liberalism.

The convention unanimously agreed to include in the Bill they were drafting a clause stating that no person except of European descent would become a member of the Union Parliament. Having secured this, the protagonists of the policy of "White baasskap," directed their energies against the franchise rights of Africans in the Cape. The struggle which raged around this question and which resulted in the insertion in the Bill a clause stating that the Cape African franchise rights could only be taken away by a two-thirds majority of members of both Houses of Parliament sitting together, is well-known to every student of the political history of South Africa. But its significance lies in the fact that in it the Boer spirit is established beyond all doubt. The Bill as drafted by the Convention was passed by the British Parliament with clauses which were designed to sweep away British ideas of human freedom, justice and fairplay as far as the Black man was concerned.

For the first time since the days of William Pitt, Edmund Burke, William Wilberforce and T. B. Macaulay, the British Parliament, the home of freedom, liberty and justice, passed an act "discriminating between Her Majesty's subjects based mainly on race, colour and creed." For the first time the protagonists of the policy of "White baasskap" were thrilled by their victory and felt that the spirit of the Grond Wet had been firmly established in South Africa.

Now the question which every intelligent African will ask is: "While all this was taking place, what were Africans doing? Did they fold their hands and await the results of these events?" Africans certainly did not fold their hands. Their hopes having been shattered by the Treaty of Vereeniging, African leaders in the Transvaal and the Free State started organising their people

politically. In the Transvaal they established several political organisations such as the Transvaal Native Congress, the Transvaal Native Organisation, the Basuto Committee and the Vigilance Association; some of the leaders of these organisations, to mention a few, were S. M. Makgatho, William Letseleba, J. M. Makhothi, Kayiyana, L. T. Mvabaza, Simon M. Phamotse and L. Kgomo.

In the Free State, they established an organisation known as the Orange Free State Native Association under the leadership of J. B. Twayi, T. M. Mapikela, the Rev. Khumalo, John Mocher and Peter Phahlane. In Natal an organisation was formed by John L. Dube, Mark S. Radebe, Snr., Chief S. Mini, J. T. Gumede, Chief Ntombela and W. W. Ndlovu. The organisation was known as the Natal Native Congress.

THIS IS THE SECOND IN A SERIES OF ARTICLES GIVING THE HISTORY OF THE AFRICAN NATIONAL CONGRESS FROM ITS EARLY DAYS.

In the Cape where the African enjoyed franchise rights and where he was eligible for membership of the Legislative Assembly, two political organisations were in existence, and were merely appendages to European political parties. These organisations were led by J. Tengo Jabavu and W. B. Rubusana respectively. Unlike those of the Free State, the Transvaal and Natal, their objects were not to unite Africans against the menace of White domination, but to send to Parliament Europeans of liberal outlook and vision. Their leaders never used the franchise rights racially, and there was no need for them to do so since all civilised men irrespective of race and colour were governed and treated alike in the Cape.

This was the state of affairs when the unification of the four Colonies was discussed and considered in 1909 by Europeans in secret conventions. As I have already pointed out no black man knew what was taking place in the secret meetings until a Bill declaring South Africa a united country was formulated. It was this Bill which awakened the Cape African leaders from their cosy beds of British liberalism. In it they discovered the Clauses to which I have already referred, and this discovery made them realise that the spirit of the Transvaal Grond Wet was slowly but surely creeping into the Cape—the land of British freedom.