11. Prime Minister– Making Use of Power (1872-74)

One more hurdle before self-government

April 1872. And a week before the opening of Parliament. Summer's endless Southeasters were about to give way to winter's Northwesterly gales and rain, but John Molteno must have been filled with optimism. He was fully recovered from his serious attack of sciatica and refreshed by his European trip. He had witnessed the British Parliament, where Gladstone's Liberal Party was in power, signing off on full self-government for the Cape. The Governor, Sir Henry Barkly, approved of the idea. Whoever, therefore, he called upon to become the Colony's first Prime Minister and form a new administration would henceforth be responsible to Parliament. Ministers would be elected MPs. They would decide policy across the whole gambit of government responsibilities, except for foreign affairs and external defence. They would make the necessary tax and spend decisions, subject to parliamentary approval, in order to turn policy into reality. They would steer through Parliament whatever new laws might be needed. And the economy was booming, helped by the recent discovery of diamonds and the rising price of wool.

There was one last hurdle to be surmounted. The Cape Parliament had to pass the necessary legislation to introduce the new constitution. Sir Henry Barkly got the acting Attorney-General, Simeon Jacobs, to introduce the Responsible Government Bill. This had been drafted 'at Mr Molteno's request' by Henry de Villiers, who subsequently became a member of John's first Cabinet as Attorney General, and was framed in precisely the terms in which the House of Assembly had passed its resolution the year before.[1] The Bill was duly approved and then went to the upper house, the Legislative Council, where, however, its passage looked much more problematic. The time had come to mobilise public opinion. Two Council members, in particular, were still undecided. Deputations brought petitions from various districts in their constituency in support of full self-government, and these were presented at a huge public meeting in the Mutual Hall in Cape Town on 10 June. Speeches were made, including by Advocate Reitz as he presented the Swellendam petition (years later he became President of the Boer Republic of the Orange Free State). This popular pressure had its effect and the Bill scraped through the upper house by eleven votes to ten.[2] It was promulgated on 29 November 1872 and the new Ministry appointed from 1 December.

As for John's reaction, a Cape Town journalist described how, as MPs streamed out in order to return to their homes: 'Mr Molteno was there, as joyous and jaunty as if the weight of coming responsibilities were not on his shoulders at all.'

Becoming Prime Minister

[1] Sir Henry de Villiers's recollections, as conveyed to Percy Molteno when writing his biography of his father.

[2] For a full account, Percy Molteno, *The Life and Times of Sir John Molteno,* op.cit., Vol. 1, ch. VIII.

To understand how the choice of the Cape's first Prime Minister was settled on John Molteno, we must recall the circumstances. The Cape had not experienced the rise of an organized nationalist movement demanding independence and led by one dominant figure of the kind the mid 20th century witnessed in many of Britain's Asian and African colonies. Instead a quite small group of prominent Cape business people and farmers concluded that self-government was essential to the welfare of the population at large, and in their own interest if more vigorous economic development was to be achieved. Several of them had been leading figures in the first elected Parliament of 1854 (which of course had lacked any executive power), notably the journalist John Fairbairn and John's fathr in law, Hercules Jarvis, both of whom had earlier been at the forefront of the resistance to Britain turning the Cape into a penal colony. In the 1860s, the legislature came to be dominated by other men, including Saul Solomon from St Helena who owned the *Cape Argus* and a large printing works in Cape Town, and John who had made his name and fortune up-country as a Karoo farmer, and both of whom had also been elected to the original Parliament of 1854. They were joined in 1865 by another hugely able and popular figure, the Irishman, William Porter, who had been Attorney General for many years before his retirement.

John had come to be seen as that 'thoroughly representative colonist, familiar with the wants and resources of the country [and] trusted as few men are by large and important interests'.[3] He had taken the lead in excoriating the waste and mistakes of the Governor of the time, Sir Philip Wodehouse. He had opposed the consequent increases in taxation and argued relentlessly that the only solution was for Britain to concede self-government, as it had already done in several of its Canadian and Australian colonies. He was forthright, even over-bearing, in what he said, and had proved himself a courageous opponent of rule from London. What's more, not being a highly educated professional man like Porter meant ordinary people could perhaps identify more easily with him.

These were the three men whom Sir Henry Barkly considered most seriously for the post of Prime Minister.[4] But Porter turned down the offer, in large part because he was already suffering from serious ill-health. He recommended that John Molteno and Saul Solomon ought both to be in the new ministry, but that Solomon was unlikely to serve because he had his business to run and might see a conflict of interest between being a minister and having the government contract for all official printing. Porter concluded that John lacked some of Saul Solomon's great qualities, but 'possessed a remarkably clear judgement' and was 'likely to make a most successful leader'.[5]

John and Saul then met the Governor together. John recommended Saul, who was his long established friend and political mentor, to be Prime Minister.[6] But Saul refused. His son and biographer, W. E. Gladstone Solomon, says this was because his father's physical handicap made it

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[3] *The Cape Argus*, Aug. 1871.

[4] For rich detail about how the Governor decided on whom to ask to form a government, see Mona Macmillan, *Sir Henry Barkly: Mediator & Moderator, 1815-1898,* Cape Town, A. A. Balkema, 1970, ch. 10.

[5] Percy Molteno, *The Life and Times of Sir John C. Molteno,* op. cit., Vol. 1, p, 189.

[6] R. W. Murray, *South African Reminiscences,* op. cit., p. 79, is explicit that, in addition to the Governor, John asked Solomon to accept the post; and only accepted it himself after this refusal.

difficult for him to travel about the country.[7] Saul indicated that he might be prepared to serve in a Ministry led by John, should he continue to be pressed, but then proceeded to lay down conditions the Governor regarded as impossible. These included the right to choose his own portfolio, a joint right with the Prime Minister to decide who should be invited to be ministers, and a further requirement that one of his supporters, Gordon Sprigg, should be included in the ministry. My view is that a more fundamental reason why Saul refused even to serve as a minister was that he set great store by having the freedom to be independent on every issue, untrammelled by the compromises or need to maintain parliamentary support that holding ministerial office might require. This was a position he stuck to throughout his long years of parliamentary service.

Sir Henry Barkly now turned to John and asked him to form a government. This was despite his having been an outspoken, not to say unrestrained, critic of previous Governors. But he clearly commanded the confidence of the farming community, both Dutch and English-speaking, and was also a successful businessman who understood the realities of the Cape economy.

John accepted and easily mustered the necessary parliamentary support being Prime Minister required. His elevation to supreme executive authority over the Cape Colony was an extraordinary example of the extent of political transformation during the 19th century. Recall that his father had died before the 1829 Catholic Emancipation Act and the 1832 Reform Act and never had the right to vote in a British parliamentary election, let alone hold elected public office! Also Britain's colonies of settlement like Canada, Australia and now the Cape were becoming much more advanced in democratic terms than Britain itself. They had no legacy of anti-Catholic discrimination enshrined in law. The qualifications they laid down for the vote enfranchised much wider strata of their (male) populations. No hereditary aristocracies existed with a monopoly grip over their Parliaments' second chambers. And in both Canada and Australia, federal arrangements provided for serious decentralisation – something that Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland only got in Britain at the very end of the 20th century.

The reaction to John becoming Prime Minister was overwhelmingly favourable. Even *The Standard and Mail,* which had often bitterly criticised him, declared that:

> 'There is very much in the public character of our future Prime Minister which we can admire and respect. He is steadfast in pursuit of any object he sets before him; but he does not seek to obtain it by chicanery and double-dealing. At times rash in debate… he is fair and manly, and has more than once and upon important questions had the moral courage to retract a vote previously given, when he found that his conclusion had been based on false premises. An idea, however, once clearly fixed in his mind, and with it a conviction of its truth and justice, he will fight for it and repeat the attack again and again. [And] nothing passing round him in the world – still less anything in South Africa – escapes his notice. Strong, sound common sense serves him in the place of philosophic speculation, and good

[7] W. E. G. Solomon, *Saul Solomon 'the Member for Cape Town'*, Cape Town, Oxford University Press, 1948, p. 121. Saul had suffered from severe malnutrition and rickets as a child; his legs had been put in steel braces for some years; and the result was his diminutive stature and weakness from the waist downwards.

> vigorous sentences, wanting as they may be in ornament, express with force and fluency the ideas that are in him.'[8]

Years later Sir Henry Barkly recalled how: 'John Molteno had been called to office by the almost unanimous voice of the country. Of all the leading Englishmen he was the most popular with the Dutch farmers, who respected him, not only as a successful pastoralist, but also as one who kept a vigilant watch on extravagance and yet favoured a generous expenditure on railways and public works of a useful and remunerative character.' And he added: 'His straightforward character and unremitting devotion to the development of the resources of the country made it a great piece of good fortune that he was Prime Minister when it was necessary to reorganise the administration and carry out a new system.'[9]

Impact on the family

How did becoming Prime Minister affect the lives of John and his family? There was no question of his being offered an official residence; in any case, he was wanted to stay living in his beloved Claremont House. But he was awarded a salary of £800 a year – a very large sum in those days, and over 30 times what his starting wage had been on first arriving at the Cape 40 years before. However, it was not a patch on the £5,000 salary the Governor was paid.[10] On receiving his first payment, John reacted by coming home and placing it in Maria's lap saying: 'You must use this as you think best, but I will not take it.'[11] It was perhaps explained to him eventually that, while he might feel sufficiently well off not to need a Prime Ministerial salary, his successors might not be in the same position and he should not set a precedent whereby only wealthy men could afford to lead the Cape Government.

And what of all the paraphernalia of holding office – security guards and prime ministerial staff? The Cape in the 1870s was utterly different from today – much smaller scale, more informal, in a way more innocent. Political assassinations were unheard of, despite President Lincoln's murder a few years before in the United States. Security was simply not an issue. As for support staff, John drafted, or extemporised, his own speeches, which incidentally meant working out his own thoughts on every issue with no need – unlike today – of speech writers, let alone 'spin doctors' and other 'handlers'. And when he travelled on official business, for example to the Eastern Frontier in January 1878, he simply took with him his eldest son, Charlie, who was barely 18 and who acted as his secretary, and a personal servant called John. The latter he described to Betty as being 'not exactly

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[8] Percy Molteno, *The Life and Times of Sir John Charles Molteno,* Vol. 1, op. cit., p. 191.

[9] Cecil Lewis, *Founders and Builders,* cited in R. F. M. Immelman, *Sir John C. Molteno, 1814-1886, A Biographical Sketch,* unpublished, Ch. 6.

[10] Mona Macmillan, *Sir Henry Barkly: Mediator and Moderator, 1815-1898,* op. cit., p.176.

[11] Caroline Molteno's recollection in R. F. M. Immelman, Sir John C. Molteno, op. cit., Ch. 13, 'Recollections of Sir John Molteno written by his daughters'.

wanted for Coffee and Camp, but is most useful, and I do not know how we should have got along without him. He does his best quietly and willingly.'[12]

One display of his new position in society John did engage in. He had a rather splendid carriage built for him by a leading London establishment. It was shipped out to the Cape in early 1873, but only after a slight delay caused by the fact that it required 26 coats of paint and varnish, each of which needed at least a day to dry.[13]

Maria, as wife of the Prime Minister, had to get used to a stream of visitors to Claremont House. Local people as well as occasional visitors from overseas wanted to meet her husband, or at least see where he and his family lived. James recollected how 'My father kept open house. Politicians, civil servants, naval and military men frequented the old home under the oak trees of Van der Stel. We youngsters had to fag and be useful, and of course we were curious and listened.' The English novelist, Anthony Trollope, for example, was invited for a meal when he came out to the Cape as a senior Post Office official to advise on the development of the Colony's post and telegraph system. J. A. Froude, the historian who, it turned out, was acting as a political agent of the new Conservative Colonial Secretary Lord Carnarvon, 'was often at our house'. Lady Barkly, the Governor's wife, became a friend of the family, and was particularly kind to Betty. And occasionally up-country African chiefs and their retinues, when visiting Cape Town, 'would be shown over the place, dressed in skins and feathers and carrying assegais.'[14]

There were also official functions which John and Maria, and Betty and Caroline, were expected to attend, including balls given by the Governor and receptions for the officers of visiting Royal Navy ships. Betty recollected how 'Papa ... hated social functions, and yet did succeed in shining at them when he made sufficient effort.'[15]

All in all, the social standing of the family was transformed. For more than five years, John was not just one of several prominent figures in the Cape; he became *the* personification of its new status as a self-governing country. And his children, particularly the older ones, were known to be the sons and daughters of the Prime Minister, and with that gained self-confidence and social and political connections. Charlie and James Molteno found it easy to get elected as Members of the Cape Parliament in the 1890s. Betty and Caroline felt no compunction even 20 years later, on running into the then Prime Minister, Sir Gordon Sprigg, in Adderley Street one day, in roundly criticising him over his conduct during the Boer War. Percy Molteno, for his part, got into frequent correspondence from London in the 1890s and early 1900s with the presidents and prime ministers of the various South African states. And as late as 1936, Caroline felt able to write to General Smuts, the Deputy

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[12] John Molteno to Betty Molteno, 23 Jan. 1878.

[13] H. Penney (Lime St., London E.C.) to John Molteno, 21 April 1873. Reproduced in F. Hirst's biography of Percy Molteno, unpublished.

[14] Barkly Molteno's recollection.

[15] Betty Molteno's Journal, 10 July 1925.

South African Prime Minister, telling him to think again about acquiescing in the removal of African South Africans from the voters roll.[16]

'Our home a little republic'

This is how James described his experience of growing up at the height of his father's political pre-eminence. 'From the cradle until I was 20 years of age, I grew up in an atmosphere of politics.... Our home was a little republic, my father the President – a genial, humorous but withal a stern man.... [He] was not reticent in the home. He discussed political problems, both South African and worldwide, and welcomed our participation in the conversations. We were loyal partisans and subconsciously absorbed his constitutional and political views.' And 'for all his strong character and opinions, he was a tender and loving husband and father. He did not crush his children's ideas but encouraged them to form their own opinions and discuss with him questions of politics, business and world affairs with the utmost freedom.'[17]

It seems that John carried over this approach into the way in which he related to the Cabinet Ministers he appointed. One of these, John X. Merriman, who was still a young man when John appointed him, recalled: 'A better man to his Ministers there never was....In the Cabinet you can speak your opinion and Mr Molteno was the best fellow I ever met. You might fight with him for an hour and yet the next day he would be the best of friends. I don't suppose there was ever a Prime Minister who tolerated so much opposition by young ministers as he did. He was loyal to his colleagues, and he realized that to be a Prime Minister did not mean he was to say 'A' and all the rest were to stand around and [agree].'[18]

Caroline and Betty's younger sister, Maria, also described to Aunt Nancy about their brothers and the political arguments they got into with their father: 'Charley is the eldest. He is a dreadful tease, and very conceited. He is always arguing with Papa about the [Franco-Prussian] war. Charley takes the side of the French, Percy and Frank that of the Prussians. Jamesie and Victor are not very certain, but change to please the elder boys.'[19]

The girls also had opportunities to talk to their father seriously. Towards the end of her life, Betty recalled: 'Don't I remember long talks with Papa as he sat on the stoep far into the deepening night, and how many things he said did not then come clear to me. But they were infinitely precious seeds that he sowed in my soul, and at varying periods of my life different seeds he sowed have begun to

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[16] See Ch. 20 for details. CORRECT THIS CHAPTER NUMBER ONCE TOC FINALISED.

[17] James Molteno, 'The Molteno Family at Claremont House', typescript, n.d.

[18] Speech by John X. Merriman on the occasion of the unveiling of a portrait of Sir John Molteno in the South African Parliament Building, MS. Also *Cape Times,* 20 Feb. 1922.

[19] Maria Molteno to Nancy Bingle, 21 Feb. 1871. The War had broken out in 1870 and led to the defeat of France, the overthrow of Napoleon III, and the Paris Commune.

sprout and grow.'[20] If only, we could know what she and John talked about, and which of her father's ideas and values rubbed off on her!

But it wasn't all politics by any means. As young Maria once very wisely remarked of her father, 'All his joys and pleasures are so entirely dependent on his home life.'[21] Both before becoming Prime Minister and while he held office, John would take the older boys on his periodic trips to Nelspoort. There they came to love the Karoo, the joys of riding on the veld and learning to hunt. When staying with the Jacksons in the winter of 1878, Percy wrote to Caroline how he and Charlie 'went shooting on top of one of the Nell's Poort mountains; it is about 7,000 feet above the level of the sea.... We could see the Prince Albert mountains covered with snow.'[22] Percy developed a lifelong love of mountains and his brother Victor became a passionate hunter all his life. The boys also used to spend time in the mountains near Wellington with their Grandfather Hercules Jarvis who had a farm there.

The family would also go down to the sea and stay at Kalk Bay, often for weeks at a time. Later, after their mother's death, Caroline and Maria went on taking the three smallest boys – Victor, Wallace and Barkly – to stay there. All the children loved the fishing, bathing and long walks on the mountains that rose steeply behind the tiny settlement.

But it was Claremont House that was the centre day by day of the children's growing up. The big rambling house. The cool of the oak trees. Fruit to pick in the orchard almost the whole year round. Everyone learned to ride – Betty, Caroline and Maria and all their brothers after them – starting with a Shetland pony. There was a rough field where the boys played cricket. And beyond the estate stretched the sand dunes of the Cape Flats which Barkly described: 'When you left Claremont House grounds, the countryside was absolutely uninhabited – with the exception of four or five small farms – for 20 to 25 miles towards the Hottentot Holland Mountains. The only roads were sandy tracks.... There were numerous *vleis,* the homes of wild duck and all sorts of water fowl, as well as snipe and buck. During the holidays there were constant shooting expeditions.'[23] And 'jackals were hunted with fox-hounds in the winter months all over the Cape Flats and the foothills of the Hottentot Holland Mountains, and we Molteno boys rode with the hounds.'[24] 'Even [in the other direction] between Claremont and Table Mountain, there were very few houses and hardly any cultivation.'

The early education of the boys also took place at Claremont House. A Scottish dominie, the Rev. David Smith, came and taught them a rather idiosyncratic mix of Logic, Poetry and Algebra. Only when they got older did they go as day boys to the Diocesan College a couple of miles away which was the Church of England school founded by the Bishop of Cape Town in mid century.

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[20] Betty Molteno, *Journal,* 6 July 1925.

[21] Maria Molteno to Nancy Bingle, 2 June 1875.

[22] Percy Molteno to Caroline Molteno, 27 Aug. 1878. Percy was about 2,000 feet out in his calculation of the height of the Nieuwveld Mountains.

[23] Barkly Molteno's 'Life at Claremont House in the years 1880-1885', reproduced in F. Hirst's biography of Percy Molteno, op. cit.

[24] 'The Molteno Family at Claremont House', typescript, n.d., authorship unclear.

Understanding John Molteno as Prime Minister

To understand the policies John pursued, it is essential to recall the experiences he had been through. He had grown up in London the son of a half-Italian, Roman Catholic father whose early death had put an end to John's schooling and plunged the family into serious hardship. He had risen to the challenge and ventured overseas at the age of seventeen to make a new life for himself in the Cape Colony. He soon built himself up as an independent businessman there, and when changing economic circumstances meant either bankruptcy or a change of occupation, he moved hundreds of miles from Cape Town and learned to be a sheep farmer. In the harsh environment of the Karoo he learned to speak Dutch and understand the language(s) of his indigenous employees with whom he interacted in ways that his Dutch neighbours often didn't like. And when the 1846 Frontier War broke out, he volunteered to fight and experienced at first hand the arrogance and incompetence of the British forces.

His home life had also provided experiences that fundamentally shaped his outlook and the circles he moved in. His first wife, Maria Hewitson, had been of mixed British and local ancestry. His second wife, Maria Jarvis, was half-Dutch and a lifelong practising member of the Dutch Reformed Church. His father-in-law, Hercules Jarvis, had thrown himself into leading the Cape Town municipality in its early days, as well as being elected to Parliament at the same time as John. John must have learned a huge amount from him and, in particular, been inspired to get involved in Cape politics. Hercules, like him, had become aware of the downsides of British colonial rule, notably its attempt to turn the Cape into a penal settlement and its tardiness in developing the port and transport facilities Cape Town and the country needed. Being his parliamentary colleague, and seeing the electoral importance of Hercules' Malay supporters, John took in the importance of the Colony's non-racial franchise and legal institutions.

His political outlook was further influenced by other men he met in Parliament and who became his political allies and friends. Notable among these was Saul Solomon. Like John, Saul had known poverty as a boy. He, too, was an immigrant, but of Jewish origin rather than Italian. Intriguingly, John's mother had brought him up as an Anglican (not a Catholic) after his father's death, while Saul's parents had converted from Judaism to Christianity.[25] Both men became deeply sceptical of all religiously inspired denominationalism. And both rejected expressions of white racism towards their fellow South Africans of colour. Saul, in particular, was a radical; in his first election he promised to oppose 'all legislation tending to introduce distinctions either of class, colour or creed'.

In addition to John's personal experiences and what he learned from Hercules Jarvis and Saul Solomon, his approach was also shaped by the realities of the Cape in the 1870s and the issues requiring a policy response. Seen from our perspective a century and a half after his premiership, there were a number of these issues.

Eastern versus Western Districts -- Decentralization

[25] W.E.G. Solomon, *Saul Solomon,* op. cit.

An urgent, but in the end relatively minor, issue he faced right from the start of his premiership was the resentment felt by the 1820 settlers in the eastern districts. These were English, land hungry immigrants brought in by Britain to consolidate its hold on its newly acquired colony. They have been deposited several hundred miles east of Cape Town in a relatively inaccessible region inland from the emerging ports of Port Elizabeth and East London. They had long felt marginalized by the much longer established, economically more developed, and heavily Dutch western districts of the Colony centred on Cape Town. Several eastern Members of Parliament, led by John Paterson, had long opposed responsible government for fear of this western domination. Some demanded their region become a separate colony; others simply wanted the Cape to be decentralised into two Eastern and Western Provinces.

John decided that, as the Colony's Prime Minister, he should take the first steps in defusing the issue which he saw as a diversion from the much more strategic questions of social and economic development. He appointed an Easterner, Abercrombie Smith, who had actually opposed self-government, to his Cabinet of five ministers, and gave him the important economic portfolio of Commissioner of Crown Lands and Public Works. As his son Percy stressed, John 'never dealt upon old injuries…. He believed in using one's powers to the full in the present when talking about his father, and wasting no strength on a past which could no longer be altered.' And he often quoted the old Dutch proverb to this effect: 'Gedane zaken nemen geen keer.'[26]

At the end of the new Parliament's first session in July 1873, John set off, only seven months after assuming office, on a lengthy trip round the eastern districts. The measures he had introduced during the session had already been enthusiastically welcomed all over the Cape, and helped transform his visit into a triumphal tour.[27]

On reaching Port Elizabeth by sea, he travelled for the rest by coach, visiting 34 little settlements in all and being presented with 53 addresses. Caroline and Betty went with them. Betty described how:

> Papa was dreadfully tired out by the number of luncheons, dinners, banquets and dances we had to attend. We travelled post-haste with little time for either food or sleep. The drought was fearful and the heat, dust and flies, and blinding sun bring a dreary picture before me. Even the beautiful Zuurberg was baked and parched and dead oxen and horrible aas-vogels [vultures] made the massive flanks of the mountains hideous.'[28]

Caroline told her daughter Kathleen Murray years later of:

> The long exhausting drives over bumpy and dusty roads, being met miles before reaching a town by numerous horse-drawn vehicles and mounted escorts, which they would have well preferred to be without as it meant driving the last few miles in clouds of dust. No less than

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[26] Francis Hirst, *A Man of Principle – The Life of Percy Alport Molteno M.P.*., Ch 5. Unpublshed, but available on the Molteno Family website at https://www.moltenofamily.net/biographies/a-man-of-principle-the-life-of-percy-alport-molteno-m-p-by-francis-hirst-2/

[27] Kathleen Murray, 'A Tour of the Eastern Province and Kaffraria, 1873'.

[28] Ibid. Kathleen Murray cites a letter from Betty Molteno, dated 1895.

> 300 natives on horseback escorted them into King Williamstown as well as the usual crowd of Europeans. [And] once arrived, the welcome of the ladies of the district left the two sisters little time for a bath and change of clothing, much less for any rest. They surrounded them at once with eager interest and crowded into their bedroom, talking excitedly while the poor girls tried to get rid of the dust, and they were hardly ready before they were summoned to the banquet.

The food at these dinners, usually prepared a few days earlier because no one could know the precise date on which the Prime Minister would arrive, tended to consist of 'very dry and stale turkey and ham', after which the girls had to sit through endless very long speeches!

John made a thorough job of the tour. He not only visited the bigger towns, including Port Elizabeth and Grahamstown, but a host of much smaller places like Queenstown, Dordrecht, Aliwal North, Fort Beaufort, Cradock and Graaff Reinet. When he reached East London on 19 August, he was presented with a handsome carved mahogany wheelbarrow which he used to tip the first load of stones for the town's breakwater on the Buffalo River. And the next ceremony he performed in the same city involved a spade with a steel blade and long carved handle on which were inscribed 'This Spade was used to turn the first sod of the East London and King Williamstown Railway by the Hon. J. C. Molteno, Prime Minister of the Cape of Good Hope'.[29]

John and the two girls returned to Cape Town from there by sea. It is worth recording that getting on board ship at East London was still no easy affair. The East London roadstead was the most dangerous and disliked port of call on the whole coast. A sand bar blocked the Buffalo River. The wind blew continually. And the huge swell meant that passengers could not easily climb up the big ship's companion ladder from the tender they had been rowed out in. Whether John and his daughters were put in the 'Basket' is not known. This involved passengers being put in a nine foot high, cylindrical contraption made of wickerwork, which was then hauled up from the lurching deck of the little boat, its inmates then being released on to the deck of the waiting ship.

When he got back, John got Parliament to pass the Seven Circles Act. This re-drew the boundaries of the electoral divisions, created three regions instead of two, and put to rest the old East/West division. Interestingly, the underlying issue of the difficulties created by the huge distances that the size of the Cape Province involved and the very different linguistic and cultural make-up of its various regions eventually arose again. This happened over a century later when South Africa became a democracy and its new constitution in 1996 divided the Cape into three provinces – the Western, Eastern and Northern Cape – and introduced a greater degree of decentralisation.

Religion – Should the Cape be a secular administration?

[29] Both items were given to John Molteno as mementoes of his visitand came into the possession of his grandson, 'Long John' Charles Molteno, who lent them to the East London Museum for the city's Centenary celebrations in 1948. General Smuts, then Prime Minister of South Africa, took Long John's cousin Kathleen Murray with him on his plane, Kathleen bringing the spade with her as, in Smuts' words, 'East London's first centenary birthday present'.

That this issue arose during John Molteno's premiership will surprise some people. Was there ever any question of the Cape Government not being an entirely secular administration? We must remember, however, that Britain, the colonial overlord, had had an established Church ever since the Reformation. Indeed the Church of England had been made by law the established Church even in Wales and Ireland where only a tiny minority of the population were Anglican. Couldn't this denominational hegemony be reproduced in its colonies?

The man who felt most strongly about the issue of the total separation of church and state at the Cape was Saul Solomon. In the very first session of the Cape Parliament in 1854, he drew attention to several rather bizarre facts. First, that 'the British Government [had] for many years itself appointed ministers of religion to various congregations, and paid their salaries out of the [Cape] Colonial Treasury'[30] and indeed contributed to the cost of erecting church buildings. This had been prompted by the desire to co-opt the Dutch Reformed Church and make sure it never became a focus for anti-British sentiment. To this end, the then Governor, Lord Charles Somerset, had imported Calvinist ministers from Scotland in the very early 1800s, placed them in the Dutch Church, and paid their salaries. Ironically, these churchmen soon 'went native', marrying Dutch women who were their parishioners, and becoming members of the Afrikaner community.

The second anomaly was that around 1850 the Cape administration had quietly stopped giving financial support to newly established religious congregations. This was prompted by a worry that the original policy looked set to become much more expensive as the population grew. By the 1870s the peculiar situation existed where there were some 400 congregations in the Cape Colony ranging across a great variety of Christian denominations, but only 80 of them had their stipends still paid by the Cape government.

A further illogicality, given the heterogeneous population, was that non-Christian spiritual leaders, notably Muslim imams serving the Cape Malay community and Jewish rabbis, never got any state financial support.[31]

Solomon called the issue the Voluntary Principle – namely that there should be no government financial support for any religious congregation of whatever faith; instead, each should stand or fall on the basis of the voluntary contributions of its members. He deployed all sorts of arguments in support of the state staying clear of people's religious loyalties, and argued further that it was impious to maintain Christianity by force.[32] Year after year, he introduced his bill in the hope that the resulting debate would gradually persuade public opinion. It was only with the introduction of Responsible Government 20 years later that he finally got a bill passed in 1875 with the support of John Molteno's ministry. This established the principle that the state in South Africa should be completely secular, a position that has survived to this day.

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[30] J. Du Plessis, *The Life of Andrew Murray of South Africa,* Marshall Brothers, p. 263.

[31] For details, see Solomon, *Saul Solomon,* op. cit*.,* Ch. 4.

[32] A rather untenable position when one thinks of the various Catholic-Protestant wars in Europe and the persecution of each other's beliefs and communities.

John had come over to his friend's way of thinking on the issue back in the 1860s during their joint efforts to prevent Governor Wodehouse subverting the Cape constitution.[33] It was not surprising that he agreed with Solomon on the issue. As a young man he had reassured his mother that he had some kind of religious conviction, but put it in rather vague terms: 'Although I have not succeeded in pecuniary matters, I have gained what is of infinitely more value – sound views on religion and a firm conviction of the vain and transitory nature of the things of this life.'[34] His own experience had transcended the schisms of Christianity – baptised a Catholic, brought up as an Anglican, and married in the Calvinist Groote Kerk. Little wonder that the year before his death, as he was strolling with his son Percy in London and encountering its array of churches and chapels, he quoted Alexander Pope's biting lines: 'For forms of credo let faithless zealots fight, He cannot be wrong whose life is in the right.'[35]

The Social and Economic Development of the Cape

But the issue that was closest to John's heart was the social and economic development of rhe Cape. Still hugely energetic at the ageof 58, always interested in expanding his knowledge and understanding,[36] and intimately acquainted with both the agricultural backbone of the economy and the commercial and financial sector centred on Cape Town, he was determined his government should use its powers to really accelerate the development of the country. To make sure of this, he not only appointed to his Cabinet competent men[37] who commanded respect, but he decided to act as his own Minister of Finance.

In understanding any political leader, and making judgements about their performance in office, one must focus on what they *do*, rather than pay too much attention to what they *say* they will do. John had clear ideas about what the Cape needed in order to further its economic and social development. In particular, he prioritised two things – measures to improve the level of education of the next generation; and secondly, transport and communications.

Libraries

One of the early measures he put in place was a set of rules and financial commitments to encourage public libraries. He issued these in 1874 and they came to be known among South African librarians in the generations that followed as the Molteno Memorandum. They committed government funds to public libraries on a pound-for-pound basis up to a certain maximum, provided local communities raised matching funds. This system undoubtedly stimulated the establishment of libraries in towns and villages across the Cape and remained the basis of state support for public

[33] Solomon, *Saul Solomon,* op. cit.*,* p. 89.

[34] John Molteno to his mother, Caroline Molteno, 1842.

[35] Percy Molteno to his brother-in-law, Dr C. F. K. Murray, 28 Feb. 1885.

[36] He subscribed to various London journals, including *Nineteenth Century* and *Contemporary Review.*

[37] This was an age in which women were not yet allowed to vote or serve as elected representatives.

libraries until the 1940s. Dr R. F. M. Immelman, Head of the University of Cape Town Library in the 1950s, commented: 'In the annals of library history in South Africa, the name of Sir John will always be honoured as that of the library assistant who, when 40 years later he became Prime Minister, did all in his power to promote library development.'[38]

University of the Cape of Good Hope

John believed passionately in education. He gave his own children, his daughters as well as his sons, the full education he never had – employing tutors and then sending them to school. And beyond that, something neither he nor any of his brothers or sisters had – going to university and getting a professional training. Of his 10 sons, six went to Cambridge. The only ones not to were Charlie, the eldest, whose help John needed first as his Secretary and then to superintend the management of the farms at Nelspoort and the other businesses; Frank who trained as a land surveyor; Barkly who joined the Royal Navy at fourteen; and Wallace who was still in school at the time of his father's death. Betty also got to Cambridge, although only after a tussle with her father, while Caroline and Maria married and started having children.

In the first year of his administration he set up a new body, the University of the Cape of Good Hope. It was given sole authority to compile higher education course curricula, set examinations and grant degrees, for which the few colleges that existed in various parts of the Colony prepared their students. The following year, 1874, John's government also began to give financial assistance to these colleges; this being in addition to grants to schools in the rural areas.[39]

The initiative proved highly successful in preparing local people to enter the professions, old and new, that the Cape needed as it developed rapidly in the last part of the 19th century. While the University's first year saw only 70 candidates entered for its examinations, the numbers climbed to 786 in 1884 and 3,877 in 1895. John's sons, Percy and James, took their first degrees at the Cape University – which was a practical demonstration of something every political leader should do: show confidence in the policies and institutions they are responsible for by making use of them themselves.

Mental Health

Governments in the late Victorian age were only just beginning to see public health as something they ought to take responsibility for. It is interesting therefore to note that John in 1875 sent the doctor and botanist, William Atherstone, who campaigned for proper mental hospitals in the Cape, to England in order to investigate the latest treatments and provision. Whether anything came of this is not known.[40]

Social Justice

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[38] R. F. M. Immelman, 'Sir John C. Molteno, 1814-1886: A Biographical Sketch', unpublished, but accessible digitally at https://www.moltenofamily.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Biography-of-Sir-John-Charles-Molteno.pdf

[39] Francis Hirst, *A Man of Principle,* op. cit., Ch. 5.

[40] *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography,* OUP 2004-9, entry for William Guybon Atherstone.

Inequality and class divisions only became an issue in South African politics, and a secondary one at that, a generation after John Molteno, as the gold mines in the decades after 1886 began to employ large numbers of skilled immigrants from Britain and even larger numbers of Africans. Poverty alleviation was not really seen as a responsibility of government in John's time although he did take two steps of great importance for the poorer members of the Cape community immediately on taking office. First his administration abolished the so-called House Tax. This unpopular measure had been imposed by the then Governor, Sir Philip Wodehouse, in April 1870 shortly before his recall to London.[41] Being presumably a flat tax, it bore down particularly heavily on poorer people, regardless of ethnicity.

John's Ministry also made some minor amendments to the Masters and Servants Act, a statute which John himself had successfully got passed back in 1856. The fairness or otherwise of the Act is a matter of dispute among historians, but Percy Molteno argued that it was an important and progressive step in that, 'in place of allowing masters to take the law into their own hands in punishing their servants, thus at times leading to violence and outrage, relations were placed upon a legal footing and the authority of a magistrate interposed between the hasty violence of the master.'[42]

Economic Development

It was the bold measures John put in place to develop the country's transport and communications infrastructure that really set the Cape on the path to a modern economy. His business experience had made him acutely aware of how urgent and great was the need. And the 20 years he had already spent in Parliament how little successive Governors had done to bring it about.

He moved on a number of fronts. He brought in Anthony Trollope, as mentioned already, to advise on how the Colony's postal system should develop. Telegraph lines were built linking all the far-flung urban centres and making instant communication a reality for the very first time. A cable link between Cape Town and London was initiated; it took several years to lay and only became operational in 1880. And proper harbour facilities began to be constructed at the three main ports – Cape Town, Port Elizabeth and East London.

In doing all this, his government had to face questions that all underdeveloped countries in Africa and Asia had to confront generations later when they won their independence in the mid 20th century. What should the role of government be in the wake of a sleepy colonial administration which, to the extent it had done anything to promote economic development, often allowed policy mainly to reflect the interests of British business at home? The issues to be decided became somewhat different, but equally difficult, when rich mineral or oil deposits are found, as happened at the Cape following the discovery of diamonds just five years before John took office. Who should develop them? What taxation arrangements should be put in place? How should government spend the new revenues it collected? And indeed would one make sure these revenues did not leak away into the pockets of a corrupt clique of politicians?

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[41] P. A. Molteno, *The Life and Times,* Vol. 1, op.cit. p. 156-7.

[42] Ibid., p. 63.

John's administration faced precisely these questions. It was already clear that the Kimberley mines were not a nine days wonder, but would transform the economy for decades to come. They needed machinery and other heavy equipment to be imported from overseas and transported hundreds of miles up-country. And the whole Cape economy was growing fast and government revenues increasing rapidly. A wave of new immigrants from Europe had begun to arrive, as well as Africans wanting to earn a modern living. The region's agricultural-based economy might soon find itself playing second fiddle to the new mining sector with its huge demand for wage workers. How was government to respond to all these changes and new challenges?

Shipping links with England

John was very clear the country needed a vastly improved transport infrastructure. That meant, first of all, much better shipping services between the Cape and Britain which was still the world's pre-eminent manufacturing and financial power at the time. Ships from various companies already plied the route. But there was no regularity of service, nor a sense that it was important for ships to make speedier voyages.

A Scottish shipping entrepreneur, Donald Currie, was already established on the London-Calcutta run with sailing vessels round the Cape,[43] but with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 his business was threatened. He was now looking for new opportunities, including the London to Cape route. He formed the Castle Mail Packet Company for this purpose just months before John became Prime Minister, and entered into competition with the Union Line which already had a government contract to carry the mail.[44]

John wanted something much more – a regular scheduled, and faster, service – as well as competition.[45] He entered into negotiations with both companies. The key inducement he decided on was for the Cape Government to spend money on what was in effect a subsidy. In return for certain payments, the Castle and Union Lines committed themselves to two things – a weekly, 52 sailings a year mail, passenger and freight service, and the introduction of new steamships that would cut the number of days the voyage took to no more than 26 days. Both commitments cost the companies huge sums of money. But in return, they were given all the postage money of the mail their ships carried, as well as a speed premium of £100 a day for every voyage completed in less than 26 days (rising to £150 a day if the time taken was less than 23 days). Given the rapid advances in marine engine technology in the late 19th century, the cost of these payments became very significant; in 1882 for example, Donald Currie & Co. alone were paid by the Cape and Natal governments £102,000.[46]

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[43] *Clydeside Magazine,* article on Sir Donald Currie by B. Biddulph, 2005.

[44] Francis Hirst, *A Man of Principle*, op.cit., Ch. 10. See also Ch. 13a [PUT IN CORRECT CHAPTER NUMBER] for the story of Sir Donald Currie, his involvement in South Africa, and his close connections with the Molteno family.

[45] M. Murray, *Union-Castle Chronicle,* Longmans, Green and Co., 1953. p. 74-5.

[46] At least £5 million in today's money.

John Molteno was careful, however, to make sure the contract included conditions to prevent monopolistic collusion between the two companies.They were in continuous competition over which could earn most from the speed premiums and they were not allowed to amalgamate without the Cape Government's permission. Ironing out the details of an agreement took time and hard bargaining. Donald Currie was worried there was not sufficient trade to support a weekly steamer service, and Percy Molteno remembered how Currie marshalled many cogent arguments and figures based on the performance of his own ships. But John remained determined and eventually signed the contract jointly with both companies while on a visit to London in October 1876.[47] It was this contract nevertheless that led Francis Hirst to conclude of Donald Currie that: 'next to his own ability, enterprise and industry, he owed his fortune to John Charles Molteno who ... brought him into the South African trade'.[48]

The two lines were eventually allowed to merge during the Boer War a quarter of a century later in 1900, and the new Union-Castle Steamship Company, run by Donald Currie, was subsequently bought out by the Royal Mail Line in 1912.[49] But the basis of what John negotiated lasted for nearly a century and the Union-Castle's shipping operations only came to end in 1977.

Railways on to the African plateau

The second, and far more expensive and risky, decision John's administration took was to modernize transport links *within* the country. In the second half of the 19th century, and before the age of the motor car, modernization meant railways. Hitherto, only two or three very short lines existed in the Cape Colony, none of them crossing the mountain barriers on to the African plateau.[50] John realized the urgent necessity of building a line, 650 miles in length, all the way to the new town of Kimberley which was the centre of diamond mining. Ox-wagons simply could not cope with all the heavy mining equipment, and consumer and other goods on the scale and within the time-frame that the mushrooming mining sector required. Already on his European trip in 1871 John had seen how it was now technically possible to build railways through mountain ranges.

He knew the private sector in the Cape had neither the capital nor appetite to take the risk of this huge infrastructure development. He therefore took the existing short railways into public

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[47] Percy Molteno's recollections,'Percy Molteno's boyhood and family life at Claremont House', Francis Hirst, *A Man of Principle*, op.cit., Ch. 1.

[48] Francis Hirst, *A Man of Principle: The Life of Percy Alport Molteno, M.P.,* unpublished. Available on www.Moltenofamily.net. See also Ch. 10, 'SirDonald Currie and his family'.[CORRECT THIS CHAPTER NUMBER]

[49] For Percy Molteno's role in this, see Ch. 17. CORRECT THIS CHAPTER NUMBER].

[50] The longest line, Cape Town to Wellington, was only 45 miles. Financed by private capital, the Cape Town Railway and Dock Company had been floated in London in 1853, but construction had been very slow despite the easy countryside the railway passed through; it was only completed in 1863. Stephen A. Craven, 'Postojnska Jama in Slovenia, the Sudbahn and the visit of John Charles Molteno: Their Influence on the development of Railways in South Africa', *Acta Carsologica,* 35/1, Ljubljana, 2006.

ownership, and persuaded Parliament the Cape government should raise the necessary loans. The sums involved were very large – £4 million at a time when, at the start of his administration, the Cape's annual revenue was only £600,000.[51] The loans were successfully raised and construction began. It was a slow process; the line only reached Kimberley in 1885 by which time he had long since ceased to be Prime Minister.

There is a lovely story, possibly a little inaccurate, of how John himself determined the route the railway should follow. The story came out at a talk entitled 'The Railway System of South Africa' which Sir David Tennant, Agent-General in London for the Cape of Good Hope Government, gave on 2 November 1897 to the Royal Colonial Institute. In the discussion that followed, Sir David was asked how the decision had actually been made. A Mr B. W. Murray stood up in the audience and said:

> I think I can help him. We had in South Africa, when responsible government became a fait accompli, as our first Premier Mr – afterwards Sir John – Molteno, and he was faced by a powerful Opposition. Ministerialists as well as Oppositionists were loyal to the interests of this country. It is singular that in South Africa its public works have not been conceived or designed by professional men. When Mr Molteno formulated his railway scheme, he sent for his consulting engineer, who asked him what was the route he desired. Mr Molteno asked for a map of South Africa, which was brought to him. Taking a ruler he drew his pen along it in a direct line from Cape Town to Beaufort West. 'But,' said the engineer, 'that means you go slap bang at the Hex River Mountains.' 'Never mind,' said Mr. Molteno, 'that is the way I want to go.' And that is the way it did go. The Opposition was not in accord with the route, but seeing that it endangered railway construction by not agreeing to it, they accepted the Molteno line. With this result: after twenty minutes' discussion the Cape Parliament — that is, the House of Assembly — passed a vote of £4,000,000 for railway construction. Rather smart legislation that, I think.

In addition to the Kimberley line, John also initiated building railways inland from Port Elizabeth and East London. This was in pursuit of the commitment he had made during his tour of the eastern districts in 1873 when, in reply to his health being toasted in Grahamstown, he had stressed: 'The Ministry has sought to promote the interests of *all* parts of the Colony alike.'

A large part of the reason he was successful in winning people over to these huge investments, and the borrowing they necessitated, was that he had long built up a reputation for criticizing government waste and high taxation in the 1860s. Since becoming Prime Minister, he had continued to bear down on unwarranted expenditure and making sure of a growing surplus of revenue over spending, a process helped by his government's soaring tax receipts as a result of the rapid growth of the economy. To this end, he introduced an Audit Act in 1875. This was a technical measure, but very important because it made changes to the public accounts so that for the first time it was clear by what amount government expenditure in any financial year exceeded, or was less than, recurrent revenue.

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[51] Kathleen Murray, 'John Charles Molteno – Extracts from a Family Memoir', unpublished, n.d., p.5.

John also stressed his careful approach to the management of the Cape's economy. 'I am not one of those… who think we should rush madly into every kind of expenditure without considering what we are about. That is not my character and temperament, although no-one can say that I am averse to any reasonable measures for pushing on the progress of the country…. A cautious policy is best. I do not agree with those who cry, "Spend, spend, spend." I want to see that we shall get something for our money.'[52] This is why he opposed building a grand new Parliament to mark the self-governing status the Colony had won. But the legislature over-ruled him and the handsome building in which South Africa's democratic Parliament today still meets was built.

What is particularly relevant for our own times is that John's development policies involved abandoning the classic liberal view, as prevalent in 19th century Britain as it has again become in the early 21st century, that the private sector is the only effective vehicle for economic development. Instead John recognised the need on occasion to use public financial resources and the creditworthiness of a country to kickstart key infrastructural investments. In the case of the Cape's improved links with Britain by sea, his government continued to rely on the private sector to deliver the necessary investment and improved service, but agreed to subsidise it. With the bigger outlays needed to build a whole rail network, he recognised this could only be done by government. His successful persuasion of Parliament and the public to do this was the beginning of South Africa's public sector.

Agriculture

This was another area where John's administration took some of the first steps involving government in the active support of the agricultural sector which, so far as the great majority of the population was concerned, remained the bedrock of the Cape's economy. Years before, he had chaired a parliamentary committee on irrigation in 1862 which had considered the feasibility of constructing large dams. No action had resulted at the time. Now, as Prime Minister, he was in a position to begin moving things along. In 1875, the Cape's first Hydraulic Engineer was employed on the government payroll. Two years later, Parliament passed its first Irrigation Act (1877) which provided for joint action by farmers to construct larger dams and made available the first low interest public loans for this purpose.

Animal diseases were the other great problem confronting livestock farmers. John introduced the Scab Act of 1874. Scab was the disease sheep were most susceptible to and its spread was closely associated with the expansion of largescalel sheep farming. The Act tried to encourage farmers to limit the movement of stock and engage in dipping as a control. There were also next to no veterinary surgeons in the Colony; so the government appointed the first Colonial Veterinary Surgeon in 1876 who, among other duties, began to produce annual reports on the state of animal diseases in the Cape.

These were very modest steps which reflected John's personal interest in encouraging more modern farming methods. But they led eventually to the very extensive programmes of government support

[52] Ibid.

for agriculture – training of farmers, research, cheap loans as well as regulatory measures – that successive governments introduced from then on.[53]

The political question – Who should be members of the Cape community?

Far more difficult than the economic and development issues that John had to deal with as the Cape's first Prime Minister were the political ones. We touched on this in the previous chapter when explaining the legal and political provisions that were bedding down as the basis of Cape society in the mid 19th century. At the heart of the process was one fundamental issue – who were to be accepted as full members of the country's political community? It is a question every country, particularly a new state as the self-governing Cape Colony now was, must answer. It goes to the heart of what legal rights the people who live there will have, in particular the right to participate in the governing of their country. This question often boils down to how far dominant elements – be they a particular language group, ethnic community, religion's followers, or social class – accept the rest of the population as fellow citizens with all the rights and prospects of a better future that entails.

The Cape Colony in John's time was dominated by its wealthier, better educated and increasingly English- rather than Dutch-speaking sections of the white population. They owned much of the modern economy, and ran the Colony's governing and legal institutions. How far would this minority accept that all sections of the Cape's heterogeneous population (including poorer whites) were legitimate members of the political community? How far would the government of the new, self-governing Cape seek to rule in the interests of *all* the people, rather than one particular ethnic segment or class?

One dimension of this question was relations between the Dutch-speaking Boers and the growing number of more recent English-speaking immigrants. In John's time, this question had not yet become the predominant axis of conflict within the white community. But it was not something he could totally ignore. We have already seen how his appraoch to Dutch-English relations was shaped by his marriage to Maria Jarvis who was half Dutch/half English, his life as a farmer on the Karoo and the fact that his electorate in Beaufort West was predominantly Dutch. All his life he believed that members of the two communities should respect one another and work together for the good of the country. 'No one [ie no English-speaking South African]', John X. Merriman recalled, 'before or since has so completely obtained the confidence of the colonist of Dutch descent.'[54]

The second potentially much more contentious question not just in the Cape, but in all parts of Southern Africa, was the place people of indigenous and other non-European ancestry would have in the political communities that were emerging. This was also an issue John had to have a position on, and after his death, increasingly regressive answers to it came to dominate Cape politics – and elsewhere in South Africa – in the late 19th century. They came to blight the whole region's trajectory

[53] William Beinart, *The Rise of Conservation in South Africa: Settlers, Livestock and the Environment 1770-1950,* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003, pp. 21, 94, 130-33, 159.

[54] Quoted in Kathleen Murray, 'John Charles Molteno – Extracts from a Family Memoir', unpublished, p. 5.

throughout the next century. As the racism of white South Africans, English- and Afrikaans-speaking, became more and more extreme and enshrined in law, government policy and institutions, it took over the mind-sets, and even vocabulary, white people brought to bear in discussing it. White politicians began to frame the issue with terms like Native policy or Coloured policy – words which themselves were a subliminal denial that all South Africans were legitimate members of the country's community. The outcome was that the South Africa never achieved the relatively harmonious and legitimate democratic systems that Australia and Canada (also former British colonies) did, nor built an economy able to deliver to all South Africans the high standards of living Australians and Canadians came to enjoy.[55]

To understand the context in which John had to measure up to this challenge, we must understand first what were the boundaries of the Cape Colony. Its territory stretched 600 miles from Cape Town up the Atlantic seaboard to the Orange River which comprised the northern frontier. In an easterly direction, it stretched an even greater distance and included what was called British Kaffraria (annexed in 1865) between the Keiskamma and the Great Kei Rivers. The Cape government also had to administer, temporarily as it turned out, Basutoland[56] that Britain had annexed in 1868. And Britain had also recently annexed an area called Griqualand West around the newly discovered Kimberley diamond fields, although it was not yet formally part of the Cape Colony.

The population of this huge area comprised roughly three-quarters of a million people, half of whom regarded themselves as white or European. The other half were descended from the indigenous Khoisan and Nama peoples, freed African slaves who had been put ashore at Cape Town, Malays from Java and a very large number of people of mixed European and other ancestry – Basters, Griquas and so on – all of whom came to be called Coloured. In addition, as the Cape's Eastern Frontier moved towards the Transkei, a growing number of Xhosa-speaking Africans became part of the Colony's population. This transformed the demographic and cultural landscape, and brought into sharper focus the question whether all the Cape's inhabitants were to be accepted as members of the community.[57] It was this critically important political question that John Molteno had to be clear about in his own mind and give a lead on.

The Cape liberal tradition

To understand what was at stake, we must recall the Cape's now established legal and political arrangements – what subsequently came to be called the Cape liberal tradition. Everyone was subject to the same laws and the jurisdiction of the same courts.[58] There were no crimes that only people of some specified ethnicity could be regarded as committing. And in civil law, notably

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[55] This is not to overlook the discrimination, at times amounting to genocide, directed at indigenous peoples in North America and Australia, but this is not the place to go into detail on that dimension of history.

[56] Modern-day Lesotho.

[57] 'Government Publications relating to the Cape of Good Hope, to 1910', Introduction by Shula Marks, Microform Academic Publishers, 1980.

[58] As early as 1827 the Charter of Justice had established 'a jury system, to which neither ignorance of English nor colour were a bar to service.' Ibid.

property rights, there was also a formal legal equality, with no bar in law preventing any inhabitant from buying land. Poor people, of course, owned little or no land or other property, and most of them (but by no means all) were people of colour.

What's more, and very importantly, every person had a right to own firearms. In a country where most people lived in the rural areas, and where hunting for the pot was still widely resorted to, many (perhaps in some areas most) adults owned a gun of some kind. This applied to Africans living in the Frontier districts as much as to anyone else. And rather like Americans still believe today, this possession of a firearm somehow implied not only a kind of equality, but rightful membership of the community.

In terms of political rights, the franchise was open to everyone whose property or income met the defined minimum laid down in the 1853 Constitution Ordinance. No formal educational attainment was required. A person had merely to occupy property valued at £25 or earn an income of £50 a year. Many Mfengu refugees from Shaka's wars who had settled in the Cape, as well as ex-slaves and Khoisan, had got the vote as a result. The roots of this non-racial franchise went as far back as the 1836 Municipal Councils Ordinance which allowed anyone who occupied premises with 'an annual value of £10' to vote, while people who paid £1 a year in local taxes were eligible for election.[59] As for who could hold office, elected or otherwise, there were no *legal* restrictions by way of colour. There was one big exception, however – all women were still totally excluded from the vote. Indeed where legal discrimination existed at the Cape, it was in terms of gender, not ethnicity.

The long-term implication of these legal provisions, even if not always realized by whites who were the great majority of voters at the beginning, was that the proportion of voters and elected representatives who were not European in origin would rise as education, prosperity and the purchase of land increased the numbers who would qualify. In the Cape, this meant a growing proportion of electors coming from the original indigenous population, including Bantu-speaking Africans, as well people of mixed ancestry.

John was Prime Minister in a political system where these fundamentals had been in existence for some 40 years.[60] He believed in its principles and never veered from them. His government did not tamper with the franchise qualifications in order to reduce the number of Black voters, as happened after his premiership under Gordon Sprigg and Cecil Rhodes in the 1880s and 1890s. And when an opposition motion was put forward in 1874 to restrict voting qualifications, the majority of MPs whom he led voted it down.[61] What is more, one of his objections, as we will see, to the incorporation of the two Boer Republics in a British-sponsored South African confederation was the threat to the Cape franchise and colour-blind legal system that he foresaw this would involve.

John's position was precisely that of his political ally, William Porter, who when approached by white voters on the question of blacks voting responded: 'Why should you fear the exercise of franchise? I would rather meet the Hottentot at the hustings, voting for his representative, than in the wilds with

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[59] Ibid.

[60] Slavery had been abolished at the Cape in 1834.

[61] Wikipedia, Cape Qualified Franchise.

his gun upon his shoulder. Is it not better to disarm them by granting them the privileges of the constitution? If you now blast all their hopes and tell them they shall not fight their battles constitutionally, do you not yourselves apply to them the stimulus to fight their battles unconstitutionally?'[62]

Caroline remembered her father making this same point rather more graphically. Writing to General Smuts, the Deputy Prime Minister of South Africa, some 60 years later urging him not to acquiesce in removing African South Africans from the voters roll, she told him: 'I remember when my father used to speak to us of his experience in the Kafir Wars how he emphasized the good results that immediately followed the wise policy of giving the vote to use, instead of the assegai. He had a great admiration for the many fine qualities of our Natives and looked on them as a great asset to the country.'[63] On the same occasion, she told General Hertzog, the Prime Minister: 'The liberal constitution of the old Cape Parliament was always a source of satisfaction and pride to my father and the men associated with him'. She recalled 'the truth of my father's saying that no human beings were good enough to be trusted with the needs and interests of any set of their fellow men. These, he said, could only be successfully secured through the methods of self-government'.[64]

An interesting incident throws light on the steadfastness with which John and his parliamentary allies insisted on their non-racial principles. The Cape Parliament didn't have premises of its own and always used to meet in the hall of de Goede Hoop Masonic Lodge. In 1877, a South African International Exhibition was held in the grounds. But this resulted in the public entrance to the House of Assembly 'being interfered with by order of the agents of the Exhibition'. John got the Clerk of the House to write a stern note that this entrance must be free in order to allow the public to enter the House '*irrespective of class or colour*'.[65]

Some political cartoons of the time illustrate graphically how John's white critics saw him as pro-Black. 'Saul and his Pets' showed Saul Solomon, always the most outspoken 'Negrophile' Member of Parliament, with his two pets apparently ready to do his bidding – King Cetshwayo of the Zulus and John Molteno, 'the Lion of Beaufort'. [66] Another showed Thomas Upington, the Attorney General in Sprigg's Cabinet that took office following John's dismissal as Prime Minister, returning from the wilder parts of the Northern Cape. The murder of five San people at the hands of whites had taken place there, and Upington had allowed the trial of their murderers to take place in the vicinity. This had led to a jury comprising local whites who promptly found the accused not guilty. *The Lantern's* cartoon showed Saul Solomon determined to take Upington to task in the next session of Parliament. John Molteno – wearing his characteristic dark glasses and now pictured as

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[62] Cited in H. J. Simons and R. E. Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa 1850-1950,* Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1969, p. 23.

[63] Caroline Murray to the Rt. Hon. General Smuts, Deputy Prime Minister, 8 Feb. 1936.

[64] Caroline Murray to the Rt. Hon. General Hertzog, Prime Minister, 23 Feb. 1936.

[65] 'Lodge de Goede Hoop and the Cape House of Assembly, http://www.freemasonrysd.co.za/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=546%3Alodge-de-goede-hoop-and-the-cape-house-of-assembly&catid=46%3Aover-200-years-of-history&Itemid=66

[66] *The Lantern,* 22 Feb. 1879.

impoverished (a terrible Karoo drought had recently taken place) – is one of Saul's supporters and wearing a bandana which reads 'Time will reverse the judgement of the vulgar.'[67] These and other *Lantern* cartoons attacking Saul Solomon display an unashamed anti-black racism that illustrates how his and John Molteno's non-racialism was by no means shared by all white inhabitants of the Cape.

PUT IN THESE TWO CARTOONS

Frontiers – another issue that could not avoided

John's government did not have power over foreign policy. But circumstances forced him to pay some attention to the issue of what the frontiers of the Colony should be. This inevitably raised the question whether people suddenly finding themselves incorporated into the Cape's territory would also be regarded as legitimate members of its community and have equal legal and political rights. John refrained from adopting a rigid view in favour of, or against, expansion of the Cape's territory. Instead he looked at the issue afresh each time it forced itself on his attention. Where, however, he was always firm, was that all inhabitants, regardless of how recently the areas where they lived had been incorporated into the Cape, should be members of the Cape community with equal rights in law.

The first frontier question he faced was the future of Britain's new mini-colony of Griqualand West which he had opposed the annexation of in the year before he took office.[68] Having blocked the Boer republic of the Free State from controlling this diamond-rich but now unruly bit of territory – already some 10,000 whites and 15,000 blacks had rushed to the area, Britain had to decide whether it wanted to rule it directly or hand it over to the Cape Government. John was critical of the land grab because he could see that it would inflame Boer opinion in a neighbouring country, and undermine harmonious relations between Dutch- and English-speaking whites in the Cape. When he arrived in London in July 1876 to discuss various South African questions with the Colonial Secretary, Lord Carnarvon, he was presented to his intense annoyance with a fait accompli – Carnarvon had already agreed to pay the Free State £90,000 in compensation for the territory it had lost, and, without consulting John's government, had made the Cape responsible for paying the money.[69] Carnarvon now demanded that the Cape take over responsibility for administering the area, which John very reluctantly accepted. The Cape Parliament passed the necessary legislation the following year, although it was not implemented until October 1880, nearly three years after he had ceased to be Prime Minister.[70]

Further north, an even more strategic territorial issue was waiting to be resolved. Britain was the dominant European power in Southern Africa, and by the 1870s controlled the whole eastern seaboard except for the densely populated territory between the Great Kei River and its colony of

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[67] *The Lantern,* 24 Jan. 1880.

[68] *Biographical Encyclopedia of South Africa,* p. 483.

[69] Mona Macmillan, *Sir Henry Barkly,* op. cit., p. 251.

[70] *Biographical Encyclopedia of South Africa,* p. 484.

Natal. But to the north beyond the Orange River, a thousand miles of Atlantic coastline stretched up to the Portuguese colony of Angola situated beyond the Cunene River. The area, being mainly desert or at least very arid, was only lightly populated. John worried about this political vacuum and, three years into his premiership, persuaded the Cape Parliament in 1875 to pass a resolution urging Britain to annex the main natural harbour, Walvis Bay, and its hinterland, and attach it to the Cape Colony.[71] In an act of extraordinary political shortsightedness, Lord Carnarvon refused to do this (except for Walvis Bay itself) – which gave Imperial Germany the opportunity to step in and take over what became German South West Africa (today's Nambia). John responded to Carnarvon's decision by warning of the future difficulties that were likely to ensue. One may criticise him for his expansionist view in this case. But if Britain had acted on his advice, the appalling genocide of the Herero people by Imperial Germany at the turn of the century would never have taken place.[72] South Africa would not have had to fight its way into the territory in 1915 during the First World War. And the people of Namibia might have been spared a century-long occupation by apartheid South Africa and long and bloody war of liberation which eventually brought it to an end.

Much the most difficult territorial issue was always the Cape's Eastern Frontier. Here was a huge area of relatively fertile and well watered land. It was occupied by a large population of independent, Xhosa-speaking tribes. White immigration into the Colony's Eastern districts had been encouraged by Britain since 1820 and had resulted in a growing number of land-hungry settlers who saw farming as their main economic possibility. Throughout the 19th century a series of wars took place on this moving frontier, each with its own complicated dynamics and alliances as to who was on what side. But the outcomes were always to push the Cape's frontier further along the coast towards Natal. This threw up two issues for successive Cape governments. First, were periodic warfare and conquest the only way to manage tensions in this volatile region? And secondly, as larger and larger numbers of Xhosa-speaking Blacks were incorporated into the Cape Colony,[73] would they become members of the Cape community on the same basis as the existing population?

John developed clear views on both these questions. First, incorporation of additional territory in the Eastern Cape should be on a voluntary basis, not as a result of conquest, and should proceed slowly. He wanted Blacks beyond the Colony's borders to want to be part of the Cape community. He argued this would become more likely as they experienced the benefits of economic opportunity, access to Western education and skills, and the benefits of the order that prevailed in the Colony. And if violent conflict did break out along the Frontier between blacks, or between blacks and whites, the first response of the Cape Government should be, in his view, to treat it as a police matter. It should be handled by the Cape's own forces, and not as a war that required bringing in

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[71] R. F. M. Immelman states that this resolution wanted the annexation of Damaraland and the whole area between the Orange and Cunene Rivers. 'Sir John C. Molteno', op. cit., Ch. 8, 'The Carnarvon controversy'.

[72] Horst Drechsler, *Let us die fighting: The Struggle of the Herero and the Nama against German Imperialism (1884-1915),* London, Zed Press, 1980.

[73] By 1904, 30 years later, the population of the Cape had leapt from three-quarters of a million to some two and a half million; the great majority of this increase being the result of the incorporation of the remaining Xhosa-speaking tribes into the Cape. 'Government Publications relating to the Cape of Good Hope, to 1910', Introduction by Shula Marks, op. cit.

British imperial troops. It was his refusal to budge on these points that eventually brought about his dismissal by a new Governor, Sir Bartle Frere.

As for the second question – that posed by the growing number of Blacks living within the Cape Colony – John 'opposed any policy which would oust loyal Natives from the land occupied by them and their fathers before them.'[74] He rejected coercive measures (like a hut or poll tax) to pressure them into abandoning their communal way of life. At the same time, he wanted an extension of education, and did nothing to deny them equality before the law or eligibility for the franchise, just like anyone else in the Colony. EXPAND FROM PERCY'S BOOK. E.G. Vol 1, p. 286ff.

PROBABLY OMIT THE FOLLOWING SECTION ENTIRELY

Immigration policy

One other dimension of the Cape's policy towards ethnicity warrants mention. Frontiers by definition require a government to formulate policy about who can cross its borders and become members of the community. In this respect, we should look at what John's government did *not* do. Sometimes in politics, what a government refrains from doing is almost as important as what it does do. John's administration and its predecessors never contemplated putting a legal bar on people coming to live in the Cape who were not of European origin. Indeed, for several decades in the early part of the 19th century, freed slaves, usually of African origin, had often been put ashore at Cape Town and become absorbed into the so-called Coloured community. And when towards the end of the century Tsarist pogroms propelled Jewish emigration from Eastern Europe, the Cape Government in John's time and afterwards did not impose any kind of anti-Semitic barriers to Jews arriving at the Cape to build their lives anew. The absence of these kinds of barriers stands in stark contrast to the policies and practice of successive South African governments after 1910; it is seldom remembered by South Africans that more than one statute was passed to choke off Jewish immigration in the 1920s and 30s.

In the case of African immigrants from beyond South Africa's borders who were actively brought in to man the mines, these workers were not allowed by the post-1910 South African government to bring their families with them or settle in the country at the end of their contracts. This institutionalisation of migrant labour after 1886 is a dramatic example of the tragedy of South African history in the 20th century. Government policy not only perpetuated existing systems of racism from the previous century, but created extensive new systems of legal discrimination which were administered by specialised state bureaucracies and enforced by a brutal armed police force. These phenomena would simply have been unimaginable in John's time.

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[74] The words in 1899 of the Chief Justice, Sir Henry de Villiers, whom John had appointed as the first South African-born head of the judiciary in the Colony, quoted by Francis Hirst, *A Man of Principle,* op. cit., Ch 5, The Molteno Ministry.