

17. South Africa Undone – The Act of Union and the Seeds of Tragedy

THIS DRAFT TEXT RELATES ONLY TO JAMES MOLTENEO (will need reshaping as whole chapter written)

Revision still required:

1. **This text still needs largely to be written, albeit v. concisely.**
2. **Fill in date of James being knighted.**

James Molteno in the new political era

[I HAVE ALREADY TOLD STORY OF MILNER TRYING TO BLOCK JAMES GOING TO LONDON IN APRIL OR SO 1902 AT END OF BOER WAR CH. 15. -- The Cape Parliament reconvened for the first time since XXX. Now, however, the fight to protect full self-government resumed in a new context. And James threw himself enthusiastically into the fray. STORY OF HIS FIGHT FOR RESTORATION OF RESPONSIBLE GOVERNMENT 1902-3.]

James returned from overseas on a high. Not only had he played a prominent part in persuading the Colonial Secretary, Joseph Chamberlain, to reject the urgings of his man on the spot, Sir Alfred Milner the High Commissioner, and not suspend the Cape Constitution, but he had had a lovely time on the Continent with Percy.

Then came the 1904 general election. James played big role. Jamieson won. Because Cape Rebels disenfranchised. Merriman himself not re-elected. So James and Burton had for some months to carry on as Leaders of the Opposition until a new seat was found for Merriman in a by-election. James revelled in being a hornet in the face of the Jamieson government.¹

Dr Jamieson and attempted gerrymander.

Speaker of the Cape Parliament

TELL STORY BRIEFLY OF HOW HE BECAME SPEAKER

The great issue arising in process of forming the new Union of South Africa

HIS FAILURE TO STAND UP DURING THE 1908-1910 CONVENTION PROCESS (main story to be told in context of Percy Molteno and the House of Commons) James could not really since he was Speaker.

First Speaker of the new South African Parliament

¹ Obituary for James Molteno, *Cape Times*, 19 Sep 1936.

The new South African Parliament met for the first time in November 1910. The British Government, in a situation of escalating tensions between the European powers, was determined to make sure of the loyalty of the new South African state by calling on a Boer War general, Louis Botha, to form an administration and become Prime Minister. Merriman, the outgoing Prime Minister of the Cape and an elder statesman with nearly 40 years of parliamentary service, was greatly offended at being passed over. Botha then tried to get another Transvaler, General Beyers, elected as Speaker. Merriman put his foot down. He insisted that since the premiership had gone to someone from the Transvaal, the Speakership should go to the Cape – which was still the longest established and territorially by far the largest territory in South Africa. The Orange Free State Boer War leaders supported Merriman and the ruling South African Party went through a long internal fight over the issue. In the end Botha was compelled to concede the point and himself reluctantly proposed James, who of course had been Speaker of the Cape Parliament, for the post.²

This development transformed James's life for the next few years. As the holder of this prestigious, albeit politically powerless, office, he led South Africa's parliamentary delegation to the coronation of King George V the following year. He thoroughly enjoyed the round of official engagements and eminent personages he met in London. He was personally knighted by the new monarch on XXXXX June 1911 – which is how he came to be the second member of the Molteno family to be so honoured.

But his years as Speaker were not an entirely happy time. While he tried to adapt to the gravitas of the post, he wasn't always successful. There was one particularly hilarious incident that entered into parliamentary folklore. The House was sitting in Committee one day dealing with financial matters and the Chairman of Ways and Means presiding. James was therefore not in the Chair. When closeted in his rooms and to while away the tedium, he was in the habit of inviting a few friends for a round of bridge. On this occasion, they were unexpectedly interrupted by the arrival of a Messenger sent by the Clerk of the House summoning him urgently to the Chamber to give a decision on a ruling by the Chairman. The game was going well and doubtless the alcohol had been flowing pretty freely. James rose to leave, but his friends protested loudly that he should finish the hand before departing. One of them grabbed his wig and held him up by joyfully tossing it from one to another as he desperately lunged about trying to catch it. MPs in the Chamber were meanwhile kept waiting. As the minutes ticked by, they grew increasingly irritated and despatched a second Messenger to urge the immediate attendance of the Speaker. Eventually an out of breath and rather dishevelled James arrived to resume his duties. The story leaked out and did not do much to enhance James's standing as a personification of the dignity of Parliament!³

Dissatisfaction with him came to a head in 1914 when a wholly unprecedented motion to reduce the Speaker's salary by £1,000 was moved. This was, in effect, a motion of no confidence. MPs criticised him on various grounds.⁴ He had a tendency to fall asleep during debates! His command of Dutch

² F. V. Engelenburg, *General Louis Botha*, Harrap, 1929, p. 227.

³ J. Steinmeyer, 'Twee Speakers', *Huisgenoot*, 2 Apr 1948.

⁴ J. Steinmeyer, 'Twee Speakers', *Huisgenoot*, 2 Apr 1948.

was weak and his pronunciation worse. More seriously, he was accused of persistent bias against the handful of Labour Party MPs who had been elected by white working class voters for the first time in 1910. It is certainly true that he showed no sympathy for a socialist perspective in anything he wrote, despite social democratic parties becoming a major parliamentary force in many European and Commonwealth countries at the turn of the century. What's more, the Speaker was supposed to have a particular responsibility for protecting minority voices in Parliament, and this, it was argued, he was conspicuously failing to do. The motion was not carried, but in the general election the following year James lost his seat in Ceres and his Speakership came to an abrupt end. What then happened, we will see in a later chapter.