

# *Lines of Power*

## *The High Commissioner, the Telegraph and the War of 1879*

The Anglo-Zulu war of 1879 was precipitated by an ultimatum presented to the Zulu on December 11, 1878, in the name of the British High Commissioner in South Africa. Yet the British government had no desire for war. On the same day as the ultimatum was delivered, the Secretary of State for the Colonies wrote that he and his cabinet colleagues 'entirely deprecate the idea of entering on a Zulu war.'<sup>1</sup> This was not hypocrisy. The British government knew that the High Commissioner, Sir Bartle Frere, intended making 'demands' on the Zulu in order to achieve what he euphemistically called 'a final settlement'. But they were without precise information about the nature of those demands; and in the absence of a direct telegraph link between Britain and South Africa, they had no immediate means of finding out.

In 1874 a trans-Atlantic cable had been laid from Brazil to Europe via Madeira.<sup>2</sup> Messages from London to South Africa could thus be telegraphed to await the next weekly mail steamer calling at Madeira *en route* to Cape Town. A message timed to arrive on the island just before the ship's departure might reach its destination in South Africa some sixteen days after despatch. But if it missed the ship, the delay might be extended by anything up to a further seven days—more if the sailing was bad. Allowing for a similar time-lag for messages passing from Cape Town to London, a request by the British government for information from South Africa was unlikely to yield a reply in anything less than five weeks; and instructions in response to that reply could not be expected to reach South Africa for another two or three weeks after that. Policy formulations in London and the situations to which those policy formulations were intended to apply could, thus, be badly out of alignment.

This fact of empire — the slow-moving communications system — obliged the British government to allow its senior officials in South Africa wide discretionary powers. Over the decades, several of the bolder proconsuls had taken advantage of this to implement decisions which they knew would be vetoed if submitted to London. It is doubtful, however, whether any did so with more devastating effects than Sir Bartle Frere.

When he arrived at the Cape at the end of March 1877, the great task to which Frere was committed was the construction of a federation of the South African states and colonies. That was the 'object and end' towards which Lord Carnarvon, as Secretary of State for the Colonies, had been 'steadily labouring' for the preceding two years; and, as Frere was told in a private letter offering him the South African post, Carnarvon was now look-

ing for 'the statesman who seems . . . most capable of carrying my scheme for confederation into effect, and whose long administrative experience and personal character give me the best chances of success.'<sup>3</sup>

In its every paragraph, Carnarvon's letter spoke of his impatience. After two years of endeavour, he was seeking results. He intended to press his policy by all means in his power. The 'work of confederating and of consolidating the confederated states' was, if possible, to be accomplished within two years. And to get affairs moving as quickly as possible, the new High Commissioner was to agree to 'a very early departure for the Cape.' The personal rewards at the end would be considerable. With the 'great task' accomplished, Frere, nearing the end of a distinguished career of imperial service, could look forward to a glittering final appointment as 'the first Governor-General of the South African Dominion', and to a much higher salary — perhaps twice that of the Governor of the Cape.<sup>4</sup>

The date of the letter was October 13, 1876. Two years later, the high hopes and firm intentions which it expressed had come to nothing. Federation was as far from achievement as it had ever been; and Frere, instead of having the Governor-Generalship of the new South African dominion within his grasp, was set on a course — war with the Zulu — that was to lead first to his censure and the curtailment of his powers, and then to his recall.

The fact that the two-year time-table had not been kept was not Frere's fault; nor was the drift towards war his sole responsibility. Though it was he who decided 'to put a final end to Zulu pretensions',<sup>5</sup> the decision was taken in response to circumstances that were not of his making. South African affairs were far more intractable and explosively unpredictable than Carnarvon had anticipated; and the Secretary of State himself was responsible for decisions that impeded Frere's assignment in South Africa.<sup>6</sup>

Of these, none was more disastrous than the annexation of the Transvaal in April 1877. Intended to ease the way forward to federation by extinguishing the independence of a troublesome Afrikaner republic, the annexation had almost exactly the opposite effects: it offended white opinion, particularly Afrikaner opinion, over much of South Africa; it saddled Britain with the administration of a territory settled by discontented, potentially rebellious subjects; and it converted a long-standing border dispute between the Transvalers and their Zulu neighbours into a direct British responsibility.

A poisonous potion had been mixed! If its effects were to be neutralised — if the Transvalers were to be reconciled to the loss of their independence, and if anti-British sentiment in the rest of South Africa was to be mollified — the benefits of British rule north of the Vaal had to be demonstrated. But there was little chance of doing that if Boer land claims against the Zulu in the disputed Blood river area were not firmly upheld.

So far as Frere was concerned, a blight had been placed on his South African mission from the very outset. Though the annexation occurred within a fortnight of his arrival, he was not fully consulted. Confronted by a *fait accompli*, he gave the annexation his loyal support; but he was under no illusions about its implications. Shortly after the news from Pretoria reached him in Cape Town, he wrote warning Carnarvon that it would 'require great tact to prevent the whole Dutch section of the population feeling very deeply on the subject', and in a letter of May 21, 1877, he added:<sup>7</sup>

There can be no doubt that the annexation of the Transvaal has materially altered the position of all parties . . . with regard to federation. It has immensely strengthened the position of all who desire confederation, by making it more of an absolute certainty and necessity than it was before. But it has at the same time startled and alarmed both classes of the Dutch, the Africanders, and the Neologians who sympathized with Burgers in his dreams of a great anti-English South Africa . . . It has had a similar effect . . . on the old orthodox Dutch party . . . They have a vague kind of sympathetic regret for the extinction of anything that calls itself Dutch . . .

A year later, Frere's difficulties had multiplied. In January 1878, Carnarvon, after falling out with his cabinet colleagues over the handling of the Eastern Question, had been replaced at the Colonial Office by Sir Michael Hicks Beach.<sup>8</sup> To Frere it was a bitter blow. Hicks Beach, by his own confession, knew little about South African affairs;<sup>9</sup> and in a note to Carnarvon, Frere wrote:<sup>10</sup>

Reuter's telegram, saying that you have left the Ministry, has, without any figure of speech, utterly taken the heart out of me. I try to frame all kinds of theories by which you are again at the helm in the Colonial Office till South African confederation is carried, or at soonest till my share in the work is finished, for I feel my interest in the work, and my hopes of carrying it through, sadly diminished by . . . your leaving the post which has so identified your name with the fortunes of South Africa. It is peculiarly trying to us just now, when there seems at last a prospect of a break in the clouds . . .

Where that break was it is difficult now to see. The horizon was darkening. Perhaps Frere had in mind the special commission, arranged by the Lieutenant-Governor of Natal at the end of 1877, which was to investigate, and then report to the High Commissioner on the Transvaal-Zulu border dispute. When the report was drawn up, however, it brought cold comfort to the man who had committed the final years of his career to constructing a great new British Dominion in South Africa. Instead of verifying Transvaal land claims in the disputed territory, the commissioners declared in favour of Zulu rights to the east of the Blood river; and it was left to Frere to implement a boundary settlement that could only offend still further the colonist opinion that he was seeking to woo.<sup>11</sup>

To add to his discomfiture, the timing could hardly have been worse. The report of the commission was delivered to him in Cape Town on July 15, 1878. At that very moment, a delegation, consisting of S. J. P. Kruger and P. J. Joubert, was in London to request the restoration of the Transvaal's independence. In a letter to Frere on 11 July, Hicks Beach described the outlook as 'stormy': the mood in the Transvaal was rebellious, and when the delegation returned, with its request refused, there would, he feared, be an outbreak. Frere was accordingly advised to 'strengthen to the utmost' the British forces in the Transvaal, and to call for reinforcements should they be needed to maintain order amongst the Boers and to uphold the boundary settlement.<sup>12</sup>

The advice was well-intended; but it is doubtful whether it was equally well received. Frere's mind was turning in a different direction. If force was to be used, it was to be used against the Zulu, not the Boers. The unwelcome boundary recommendations were to be rendered irrelevant by holding back the award until a pretext existed to extinguish the independence of the Zulu kingdom. For another five months, therefore, the report of the boundary commissioners remained in Frere's files, unpublicised and unimplemented, while he prepared a way out of the impasse into which it had forced him.

What was needed was a case against the Zulu — a portmanteau of grievances that would justify war — or, if not war, a threat of war so severe as to force the Zulu to surrender their independence. Such grievances were not difficult to find. Every South African frontier yielded its annual crop of 'incidents'; and with tension running high over the still unresolved Blood river dispute, the Zulu frontiers could be counted on to yield a richer crop than usual.<sup>13</sup>

Far less certain was the response of the British government. Though Hicks Beach had talked of providing reinforcements, he had done so for the purpose of quenching a Boer rebellion and enforcing the boundary award. Frere's purposes were different, and the British government had to be persuaded to accept them. He therefore bombarded the Colonial Office with despatches in which the Zulu were represented as 'quite out of hand' and an imminent menace to the security of their white neighbours.<sup>14</sup>

It was a redoubtable campaign, but it failed, in the end, to achieve its purpose. The Secretary of State faithfully laid Frere's views before the cabinet; but South African affairs ranked low in the scale of priorities of a great world Power, and ministers remained unconvinced by the High Commissioner's arguments.

By 10th November, Frere knew this. From Hicks Beach had come a number of telegraphic despatches telling of the British government's unwillingness to countenance war with the Zulu, including one which read:<sup>15</sup>

Her Majesty's Government are . . . not prepared to comply with the request for a reinforcement of troops. All the information that has hitherto reached them, with respect to the position of affairs in Zululand, appears to them to justify a confident hope that by the exercise of prudence, and by meeting the Zulus in a spirit of forbearance and reasonable compromise, it will be possible to avert the very serious evil of a war with Cetewayo . . .

Had there, at that moment, been a telegraph cable linking South Africa directly to London, the wishes of the British government must have prevailed over those of Frere. As it was, however, Frere had a long head-start, and by careful timing of his despatches he was able to keep it.

The first intimation of his intention to make 'demands' on the Zulu was in a private letter to Hicks Beach, written on October 14, 1878.<sup>16</sup> But that letter only arrived in London on November 16, and by then messengers had already been despatched from Natal to the Zulu kingdom to request the presence of a delegation at the Lower Tugela on December 11 for the purpose of receiving the High Commissioner's decisions. A prompt telegraphic response by Hicks Beach on November 16, explicitly forbidding anything

beyond the announcement of the boundary award, might have arrived in South Africa just in time to prevent the ultimatum being presented — but only just! It didn't come, and could hardly be expected to, for Hicks Beach had no means of knowing the last-minute urgency of the events that were already in train. Nowhere in Frere's letter was there anything to indicate how soon he intended to act; nor was there anything to suggest how stringent his demands would be.

In the weeks that followed, despatches, telegrams and private letters from the High Commissioner continued to flood in on Hicks Beach, inching his mind forward to the point where he would be prepared for the news that 'would eventually break in London — that Britain was at war with the Zulu. Much of the correspondence was designed to justify the coming conflict and to strengthen the case for reinforcements. Occasionally also there were missives that gave some indication of the moves which Frere himself was making. Amongst these was a despatch written in mid-November, stating that the relevant documentation was being forwarded, and proposing that 'the award in the matter of the boundary dispute be at once communicated to Cetywayo and the Chiefs and Council of the Zulu nation, together with a statement of the demands of the British government for reparation for the past and security for the future.'<sup>17</sup>

It was the most crucial despatch in the series, but it did not give the British government a sporting chance. Though it was written three weeks before the date appointed for the meeting on the Lower Tugela, by the time it arrived in London (December 19th), the ultimatum had been presented and was running its course. Moreover, by an oversight that was never adequately explained, the promised enclosures (including a memorandum on Frere's critically important 'demands') were not sent, and had to be forwarded by a later mail. When these documents eventually arrived in London it was 2nd January 1879. There remained only nine days until the ultimatum expired and hostilities commenced.

Perhaps the best commentary on Frere's conduct of affairs is a letter written to him by Hicks Beach on December 25, 1878. That Christmas day must have been a troubled and unhappy one for the Secretary of State. He wrote:<sup>18</sup>

I have already, both publicly and privately, impressed upon you to such an extent my views as to the necessity, if possible, of avoiding a Zulu war, that I do not wish to repeat myself. There is, however, one reason in favour of keeping the peace to which I do not think I have much adverted: and that is the question of cost . . . In your present position, you can, perhaps, hardly appreciate the difficulties in which, on this ground alone, a Zulu war might involve us.

The revenue returns are bad: trade is at a standstill: distress is considerable: it is difficult to see how next year is to be met without additional taxation: and in the present state of feeling in the country, which is scarcely likely to improve by next spring, any proposal for additional taxation is by no means unlikely to involve the defeat of the Government . . .

Your despatch, No. 295 (of Nov. 16), was received at C.O. on 19th December, but I only saw it yesterday. It is rather difficult to deal

with it, as the promised enclosures have not arrived . . . . You may have (and doubtless you have) excellent reasons . . . for demanding 'reparation for the past and security for the future' . . . But you have not given me those reasons . . . . Nor even now do I know what particular 'reparation' and 'security' you have included in those demands.

When I first came to the Colonial Office I told you you might rely on my support: and so you may. But (bearing in mind all that I have written to you against a Zulu war, at the instance, remember, of the Cabinet) I think you will see how awkward a position you may have placed me in by making demands of this nature without my previous knowledge and sanction. You may satisfy me that they were necessary, and I am quite willing to be satisfied; but I do not see it at present. Being once made they cannot be withdrawn: yet Cetewayo may very possibly prefer fighting to accepting them: and then, if the Cabinet should not be satisfied that you were right in making them, it will be too late to draw back, and we shall find ourselves involved in this war against our will.

Spelt out in that plaintive, worried letter of Christmas day 1878 was the underlying tragedy of the Anglo-Zulu war. Frere had set a course on which there could be no return. Within a matter of weeks, Great Britain and the Zulu kingdom would be locked in a conflict which neither wanted, but which, once it had begun, would cost thousands of lives, and would carry the Zulu people into a long, dark time of troubles.<sup>19</sup>

Soon after assuming control at the Colonial Office, Hicks Beach had indicated that he hoped to get something done about direct telegraphic communication with South Africa. It was, in his opinion, a point 'of great practical importance.'<sup>20</sup> But he had failed to move quickly enough. The catastrophe of Isandhlwana was needed before action was taken. Then it followed fast! Already available was a cable from London to Bombay via Aden. Now, in 1879, a new link was established, from Aden down the east coast of Africa to Zanzibar, Mocambique, Delagoa Bay, Durban, and thence, via the internal South African network, to Cape Town.<sup>21</sup> The link-up was completed by the end of the year; and with its completion, the days of the independent imperial proconsul in South Africa were brought to a sudden end. That was the irony: the Anglo-Zulu war of 1879 extended to South Africa an instrument of direct imperial supervision, which, if it had been available a year earlier, would have made the war avoidable. In that sense, the fate of the Zulu nation and the lives of thousands of human beings were, in 1878-9, twined into the cable coils that were the power-lines of late Victorian empire.

C. de B. WEBB

#### NOTES

1. Hicks Beach to Frere, 11.12.78, in Lady Victoria Hicks Beach, *Life of Sir Michael Hicks Beach*, vol. I (London 1932), p. 116.
2. *The Telecon Story, 1850-1950* (London 1950), p. 174.
3. Carnarvon to Frere, 13.10.76, in John Martineau, *Life of Sir Bartle Frere*, vol. II (London 1895), pp. 161-2.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Frere to Hicks Beach, 30.9.78, in Martineau, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

6. See Clement Francis Goodfellow, *Great Britain and South African Confederation* (Cape Town 1966), chs. 7 & 8.
7. Frere to Carnarvon, 21.5.77, in Martineau, *op. cit.*, p. 186. See also pp. 183-4.
8. Hicks Beach, *op. cit.*, pp. 61-2.
9. Hicks Beach to Frere, 7.3.78, in Hicks Beach, *op. cit.*, p. 83.
10. Frere to Carnarvon, 7.2.78, in Martineau, *op. cit.* p. 219.
11. For details of the boundary commission and its report see C-2220, *Further Correspondence re the Affairs of South Africa* (London 1879), Appendix II.
12. Hicks Beach to Frere, 11.7.78, in Hicks Beach, *op. cit.*, pp. 86-7.
13. For a discussion of the incidents on which Frere based his ultimatum see E. H. Brookes and C. de B. Webb, *A History of Natal* (Pietermaritzburg 1965), pp. 132-4.
14. See C-2220 and C-2222, *Further Correspondence re the Affairs of South Africa* (London 1879), *passim*.
15. Hicks Beach to Frere, 17.10.78, in C-2220, p. 273. See also Hicks Beach, *op. cit.*, pp. 101 & 107.
16. Hicks Beach, *op. cit.*, p. 107. See also C-2222, p. 17, Frere to Hicks Beach, 11.11.78.
17. Frere to Hicks Beach, 16.11.78, in C-2222, pp. 23 *et seq.*
18. Hicks Beach to Frere, 25.12.78, in Hicks Beach, *op. cit.*, pp. 117-8.
19. See C. de B. Webb, 'Great Britain and the Zulu People' in L. M. Thompson ed., *African Societies in Southern Africa* (London 1969), ch. 14.
20. Hicks Beach to Frere, 11.7.78, in Hicks Beach, *op. cit.*, p. 88. On 3rd November, 1878, Hicks Beach wrote to the Prime Minister, Lord Beaconsfield: 'I am by no means satisfied that a Zulu war is necessary . . . I have impressed this view on Sir B. Frere, both officially and privately, to the best of my power. But I cannot really control him without a telegraph.' (*Ibid.*, p. 103.)
21. R. Bennett, *Reminiscences of the Cape Government Telegraphs* (Cape Town n.d.), pp. 7 & 17.