SOME ASPECTS OF THE END OF BRITAIN'S "SPLENDID ISOLATION"

1898–1904

J. M. GOUDSWAARD

W. L. & J. BRUSSE'S UITGEVERSMAATSCHAPPIJ N.V. ROTTERDAM

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PROEFSCHRIFT

TER VERKRIJGING VAN DE GRAAD VAN DOCTOR IN DE ECONOMISCHE WETENSCHAPPEN AAN DE NEDERLANDSCHE ECONOMISCHE HOOGESCHOOL TE ROTTERDAM, OP GEZAG VAN DE RECTOR MAGNIFICUS Dr H. J. WITTEVEEN HOOGLERAAR IN DE STAATHUISHOUDKUNDE, IN HET OPENBAAR TE VERDEDIGEN IN HET GEBOUW DER HOOGESCHOOL, OP DONDERDAG 8 MEI 1952, DES NAMIDDAGS TE DRIE UUR

DOOR

JOHAN MARIUS GOUDSWAARD

GEBOREN TE SOERABAJA

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PREFACE

The aim of this study is to focus attention on the personal opinions held by various members of the Salisbury Government (1895–1902) and the Balfour Government (1902–1905) and on the influence these opinions had on certain decisions affecting British foreign policy in the years 1898 to 1904. It does not try to deal with the origins or causes of "splendid isolation", because an attempt to do so would have involved the author in far-reaching historical researches requiring far more time than was at his disposal. The conflicting opinions of various Cabinet Ministers about the foreign policy to be pursued, their reasons for holding these opinions, and the conclusions reached after private discussions and public debates have been the sole guide in writing this paper, which must be judged accordingly.

The nature of the study has limited the sources from which useful material could be obtained. Within the framework of the official documents, an attempt has been made to build up the story, as far as possible, from private papers, both published and unpublished. Unfortunately it has not always been possible to consult all the papers which might have been of interest in this study.

The private papers of the 3rd Marquess of Salisbury, although available at Hatfield, are still unsorted and therefore not open for examination; neither are those of the 5th Marquess of Lansdowne. The Balfour Papers, in custody of the British Museum, will not be made available for inspection for a considerable time to come and the Chamberlain papers, now in the hands of Mr. Julian Amery M.P., cannot be used until the latter has completed the Chamberlain biography.

On the other hand, it has been possible to consult the reports of the Dutch Ministers in London and Paris, of the Belgian Minister in London and of the American Ambassador in London. Access to the Royal Archives at Windsor Castle and the papers of the 8th Duke of Devonshire at Chatsworth was also obtained.

The main results of the examination of these reports and papers have formed the basis for this study.

J. M. G.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It would have been impossible to undertake the work, the results of which are presented here, without the help and assistance of many.

The Dutch Ministry for Foreign Affairs permitted me to see the reports of the Dutch Ministers in London and Paris, and I was able to make good use of the "Service des Archives" of the Belgian Ministry for Foreign Affairs where the reports of the Belgian Minister in London were to be found.

I have to acknowledge the gracious permission of His Majesty the King to make use of material from the Royal Archives at Windsor Castle, where Miss M. Mackenzie, the Registrar, gave me her invaluable help.

The Trustees of the Chatsworth Settlement have kindly permitted me to have access to the papers of the 8th Duke of Devonshire at Chatsworth.

The papers of Mr. Joseph H. Choate, American Ambassador in London from 1899 to 1905, were very kindly put at my disposal by his daughter, Miss Mabel Choate of New-York.

I also wish to record my gratitude to Mrs. J. J. van Gent-de Ridder, Miss J. J. de Groot and Miss E. Apon for typing and correcting my notes and the manuscript.

Mr. and Mrs. A. M. Fischl gave me their invaluable help in revising the English text.

J. M. G.

INTRODUCTION

On Friday-evening, the 21st of June 1895, the Roseberry Government was defeated in a division in the House of Commons and after a Cabinet meeting on the next day, Lord Roseberry departed for Windsor to tender his resignation as Prime Minister to his Sovereign. Immediately after his audience, the Queen sent for the Leader of the Opposition, Lord Salisbury, to invite him to form a Government. As we see from the following letter, he consulted his principal colleagues in the Conservative and Liberal-Unionist Party, even before setting off for Windsor.

> "Dear Duke, June 23rd 1895.
>
> I have just come from Hatfield by Lord Salisbury's desire in order to see you, but find you will not be in London till later this evening, and so write to say that the Queen has sent to say that Lord Roseberry has resigned and has invited Lord Salisbury to form a Government. Accordingly he will go to Windsor at 3 o'clock to-morrow. He is anxious to know if it would be convenient to you to see him at 12 o'clock at Arlington Street to-morrow, Monday, and has asked Mr. Chamberlain and Mr. Balfour to be there at the same time." [1])

Lord Salisbury spent the next few days on the arduous task of forming his new administration and by the beginning of July the following list of appointments had been drawn up:

Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary	Marquis of Salisbury
Lord President of the Council	Duke of Devonshire
Lord Chancellor	Earl of Halsbury
First Lord of the Treasury	Mr. A. J. Balfour
Colonial Secretary	Mr. J. Chamberlain
War Secretary	Marquis of Lansdowne
First Lord of the Admiralty	Mr. G. J. Goschen
Chancellor of the Exchequer	Sir M. Hicks Beach
Lord Privy Seal	Lord Cross
Home Secretary	Sir M. White Ridley
Indian Secretary	Lord George Hamilton
President of the Local Government Board	Mr. Henry Chaplin
Under-Secretary of the Colonies	Lord Selborne

There seems to have been a possibility of the Duke of Devonshire taking the Foreign Office, but he preferred the Presidency of the Council, assuming responsibility for the Ministry of Education whilst also presiding over the Committee of Defence. Chamberlain, who could have had any post he wanted

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[1]) Devonshire Papers 1895 no. 2618. McDonnel (Private Secretary to Lord Salisbury) to the Duke of Devonshire.

for the asking, chose the Secretaryship for the Colonies, hoping to further closer union between the Colonies and the United Kingdom. [1])

In the elections of July 1895, the Salisbury Government established itself with a majority of 152 and when it settled down to work, it found the Continent divided into two opposing camps, namely, the Dual Alliance and the Triple Alliance. The latter consisted of Germany, Austria and Italy of whom Germany had, until 1890, been linked with Russia by the secret Treaty of Reinsurance, concluded by Bismarck in 1887. The German Emperor, Wilhelm II, however, by not renewing this treaty after Bismarck's dismissal, was to a great extent responsible for laying the foundations for a growing Russian-French understanding which had blossomed into the Dual Alliance. Of these two groups of nations, the Triple Alliance was certainly the stronger, but it was by no means supreme.

To a British Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary, this was an interesting, but not a new or alarming situation. The Continent was known usually to be divided, but as long as there was not one European state or group of states "so strong and so potentially hostile" [2]) as to be a menace to the safety of Great Britain, British Governments were quite willing to let matters rest. As an extra safeguard, however, the Government had in 1889 proclaimed the "Two Power Standard", which ensured that the British fleet would be stronger than the two greatest Continental fleets combined. And thus, the British people, guarded by their Navy and carefully watching the European "balance of power" were content to enjoy their "splendid isolation".

The decisive role that could be played by England if she chose was very clearly understood in most European countries, especially in Berlin, where the necessity for British friendship should have been more strongly felt than anywhere else; the French dream of revenge for 1870, which the Germans felt to be a constant danger, should have made this necessity even more obvious. Any responsible German statesman should have realised, that as long as Great Britain remained friendly, neither the Dual Alliance, nor either of its partners could reasonably be expected to attack Germany.

The available evidence shows that this aspect of the international situation was very clearly seen by those in charge of German foreign policy, but they never seem to have realised that the proverb "All 's fair in love or politics" was not an absolute truth. The records also show that within the sphere of the German "Weltpolitik", British susceptibilities were discounted and the Wilhelmstrasse never fully understood the antagonism stirred up in Britain by incidents like the Krüger-telegram in 1896 and the policies laid down in the Naval Laws of 1898 and 1900. Time and again we find in the private letters and official correspondence of the high officials of the Wilhelmstrasse the thought, either openly expressed or merely implied, that by shrewd and hard bargaining almost any price could be extracted from Great Britain. It was

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1) Garvin III p. 5; Times June 25th 1895. 2) Gooch p. 62.

assumed that, in her isolation, she needed German friendship, as a closer understanding with France or Russia was under the circumstances then prevailing an impossibility for her. Von Bülow always held that "the threatened approchement [of Great Britain] with the Dual Alliance is only a nightmare invented to frighten us [Germany]." [1]) It must, therefore, have been quite a shock to the German Chancellor when in the spring of 1904 he found his nightmare becoming a most unpleasant reality in the form of the Anglo-French Entente Cordiale!

Meanwhile, some members of the Salisbury Cabinet and notably its Colonial Secretary, taking a look at the world situation, had their doubts whether "isolation" was really such a "splendid" policy. The colonies and possessions of the Empire were spread all over the globe and their position was therefore extremely vulnerable. At the same time, France in Africa, and Russia in the Far East, were forever stirring up trouble and threatening British interests. The situation in South Africa was one of Mr. Chamberlain's daily worries and the Krüger-telegram in 1896 had shown that not everybody held the same opinion about the righteousness of the issues at stake!

The South-African war brought home to the British public the bitter truth that, whatever the advantages of "splendid isolation", they now had not only no allies but also very few friends – and those of rather doubtful loyalty.

The division of the spheres of interest in Africa and especially around the Upper Nile, brought France and Great Britain to the Fashoda crisis in the autumn of 1898 and the two countries were for a short time on the brink of war.

Some months earlier, moreover, the situation in the Far East and Russia's occupation of Port Arthur in March 1898, had made a stirring appeal to the Colonial Secretary's instincts, both as a Cabinet Minister and as a business man. His country had enormous trade interests at stake in China and the possibility of losing them through growing Russian influence at Peking, was something that a man of Mr. Chamberlain's character could not take lying down.

In this conviction, helped by his popularity with the electorate and his position in the party, by his weight with the Cabinet, and by international circumstances which tended to favour his ideas, Mr. Chamberlain used all the powers of persuasion at his command to initiate and slowly build up the weight of opinion necessary to bring about that shift in British foreign policy which is commonly referred to as the end of England's "splendid isolation".

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[1]) Gooch p. 65; G. P. XVII no. 4983.