Churchill's British atomic relations with Malan's government in South Africa, 1951-1954

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Abstract

In 1951 Churchill assumed office for the second time as Prime Minister of Britain and renewed the effort to sway once again a Commonwealth sentiment on a Nationalistic DF Malan in their atomic relations. The period marked the beginning of an increased quest for uranium residue for peaceful and military purposes by the principal state actors in the World Wars. It is suggested that Britain used its Commonwealth links with the Union of South Africa to gain an edge in the atomic field for the first decade after the Second World War, and became a gate-keeper through which the United States had to seek authorisation. After consulting multi-archival sources in Britain, Canada and South Africa, I argue against this assertion by Richie Ovendale. The British Commonwealth connection was not so imperative in the late 40s and between 1951 and 1954, It was not so much a Commonwealth instinct that saw to collaboration between Britain and South Africa, but rather Malan's decision to use its uranium as political leverage, particularly when global attention was shifting to Australia as an alternative uranium supply.

Keywords: Atomic relations; Britain; Churchill government; Commonwealth; DF Malan; Richie Ovendale; Union of South Africa; United States; Uranium.

Introduction

This article investigates Winston Churchill's government's atomic relations with South Africa under Daniel François Malan in a Commonwealth[1] perspective after the Second World War, and spans the period 1951-1954.[2] In 1951 Churchill assumed office for the second time as Prime Minister and

1 The Commonwealth of Nations, commonly known as the Commonwealth is an international organisation of 53 member states that had mostly been territories of the former British Empire.

2 Sir Winston Leonard Spencer-Churchill was the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1940 to 1945 and again from 1951 to 1955 (available at WinstonChurchill.org). The Churchill Centre and Museum at the Churchill War Rooms, London, 16 November 2010 (available at http://www.winstonchurchill.org/learn/biography, accessed 31 December 2014). Daniel François Malan, more commonly known as DF Malan, was the Prime Minister of South Africa from 1948 to 1954; S Weinberg, *A fish caught in time: The search for the Coelacanth* (New York, HarperCollins Publishers, 2006).

renewed the effort to sway the Commonwealth agenda on a Nationalistic DF Malan. Malan assumed office as Prime Minister with full awareness of the effects and triggers of the Cold War which started immediately after the Second World War, in 1945.[3] The currency of the Cold War era was the nuclear weapons technology. This marked the beginning of an increased quest for uranium residue for peaceful and military purposes by the principal state actors in the previous World Wars – and uranium was a resource South Africa had in abundance. With the advent of an international system driven by the nuclear weapons technology, Malan was very inclined to seek what political and economic advantages he could from South Africa's possession of uranium.[4]

This article is a historical outlook at the atomic relationship between the government of Churchill and that of Malan in the aftermath of the Second World War. South Africa was the supplier of uranium products required for the fuelling of the Western nuclear industry.[5] Britain hoped to act as the gate-keeper by using its supposed Commonwealth influence to determine outcomes; and the United States of America (US), using limitations set by an agreement signed with Britain to limit the latter's influence with the Union government.[6] Thus the focus of this article is to determine how Britain established atomic collaboration with South Africa, through the mechanisms of the Commonwealth connection, against the US, between 1951 and 1954.

A critical-descriptive methodology is employed to discuss and analyse evidence obtained in several archives in Britain, South Africa and Canada.[7] Historical evidence is presented here on the extent to which Churchill's government was able to use South Africa's uranium residue for political leverage. For historical correctness's sake, the conclusion of this article contrasts with Ritchie

3 AM van Wyk, "Apartheid's atomic bomb: Cold War perspectives", *South African Historical Journal*, 62(1), 2010, pp. 100-120; AM van Wyk, "South Africa's nuclear programme and the Cold War", *History Compass*, 8(7), 2010. pp. 562-572.

4 L Asuelime, "Uranium politics of gatekeeping: Revisiting the British government's policy vis-à-vis South Africa, 1945-1951", *Historia,* (58), 1 May 2013, pp. 33-50.

5 L Asuelime & S Francis, "Drivers of nuclear proliferation: South Africa's incentives and constraints", *Journal for Contemporary History*, 39(1), June 2014, pp. 55-68.

6 W Taya, *Progress or proliferation? South Africa's nuclear future* (Washington DC, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2008), pp. 139-153.

7 The archival documents referred to in the text consulted at the Seeley Historical Library in Cambridge. Sources from the National Archives (hereafter NA) in London include those of the Ministry of Supply, including the Department of Atomic Energy and the UK Atomic Energy Authority (hereafter AB); the Cabinet minutes and memoranda (hereafter CAB); the Dominions Office (hereafter DO), the Commonwealth Relations Office (hereafter CRO); and the Foreign Office (hereafter FO).

Ovendale's argument in 1983.[8] That the British Commonwealth connection helped to secure atomic collaboration with and influence on South Africa was incorrect and certainly not absolute during this period. Instead, it was rather a decision by the Malan administration to collaborate with Britain who was seen to be seeking an alternative source in Australia and for political leverage into the future. The article establishes a background to the British need and efforts to secure a uranium supply from South Africa in the early 1950s, in the following section.

Churchill and finding a secure source of uranium

In the post Second World War era occasioned by the manner in which the war ended through the detonation of two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, Britain saw the need to increase its nuclear power significantly. Also US power was on the rise and British power was seen to be in decline. Britain sought to balance this asymmetry with the US. A British Commonwealth relationship in the atomic field with South Africa was a good way to achieve this objective.

Atomic collaboration within the Commonwealth was advanced significantly by Churchill's Conservative government in the 1950s. Initially, any increased devotion to the empire at the ministerial level was more than offset in the atomic field by Churchill's conviction that the Anglo-American atomic partnership (the decline of which he blamed on the Labour government) could be revived through an exertion of his own personal influence in Washington. Projects based on the assumption that American assistance would not soon be forthcoming were held up by Churchill while awaiting personal contact, first with Truman, and then with Eisenhower.[9] It was well into 1953 before the British government agreed to proceed with its own full-scale atomic project both to produce the weapons called for by the Chiefs of Staff and to develop industrial power. The central problem became one of finding a long-term source of uranium that was not controlled by the United States. It was at that point that the British government's attention focused on the Commonwealth,

8 R Ovendale, "The South African policy of the British Labour Government, 1947–1951", *International Affairs*, 59, 1983, pp. 41-58.

9 Harry S Truman was the 33rd President of the United States. See C Clark & R Holbrooke, *Counsel to the President* (New York, Random House, 1991). Dwight David Eisenhower was the 34th President of the United States from 1953 until 1961. See DE Janiewski, "Eisenhower's paradoxical relationship with the military industrial complex", *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 41(4), December 2011.

and more particularly on Australia and South Africa.[10]

For South Africa on the other hand, Malan and his government sought what political and economic advantages they could from South Africa's possession of uranium. Advantages were certainly there to be had, with an apparently insatiable American demand. As the US government pressed forward to fulfil the raw materials requirements of its ever-expanding weapons programme, the British government was forced to take positive steps (often entailing an additional strain on an already weak financial position) in order to compete with American influence in South Africa.[11]

British representatives in Washington, D.C. learned, in the autumn of 1951, that the Americans were considering spending an additional $75-100m in order to double or even triple South African uranium output on American-invested mines in South Africa. Proportionately large sums would have to be put up by the British side if it were going to maintain its position as a full partner in the Combined Development Agency's (CDA) operations in South Africa.[12] In Whitehall, where Britain's external financial position was a pre-eminent concern, doubts were raised about taking on this additional expenditure. The British High Commissioner to the Union, Sir John le Rougetel, advised his government that the American plan should be supported. First, there was the general need to foster good Anglo-American atomic relations. Second, American goodwill was required in order for Britain to obtain its requirements of uranium through the CDA. Third, additional expenditure would be offset by increased dollar income from the sale of material purchased from South Africa with sterling, and then resold to the Americans for dollars. (This third reason was a persuasive one, especially with the British Treasury). Furthermore, it was thought to be unfortunate from the point of view of Anglo-South African relations if Britain abandoned the field to the United States.[13]

10 M Gowing, *Independence and deterrence: Britain and atomic energy, 1945-1952, 1, Policy making* (London, Macmillan, 1974), pp. 405-421; JA Seldon, *Churchill's Indian summer: The conservative government,1951-1955* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1981), p. 30.

11 JA Seldon, *Churchill's Indian summer…*, p. 30.

12 The Combined Development Agency (CDA) (formerly the Combined Development Trust) was established by the US and Britain in 1944 to procure uranium for British and American nuclear weapons programs. See also W Taya, *Progress or proliferation?* (Washington DC, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2008), pp. 139-153.

13 AB 16/517, Eaton to Davidson, 7 September, 1951; AB 16/262, note by Marten, 9 October 1951; Le Rougetel to CRO, 7 November 1951; M Gowing, *Independence and deterrence*, pp. 405-421.

Much British scepticism of the American plan remained. If it could not be opposed, then perhaps it could be scaled down. RA Butler, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and Lord Cherwell, the minister responsible for atomic energy, concluded that the plan should be confined to what was reasonable and economically practicable. The American proposal for a tripling of production was thought to be impracticable for the British. Moreover, the attempt to achieve this aim might have had an unfortunate unbalancing effect on the general economy of the Union. Le Rougetel was accordingly instructed that he should, as he himself had suggested, act to ensure that the South Africans were not persuaded, against their better judgment. The British High Commissioner was thus left with considerable leeway to defend what he considered to be the interests of both South Africa and Britain.[14]

The South African government was in fact concerned about shortages of technical personnel, European artisans, native labour, power, transport, and water. Assurances were sought from the British and American negotiators about the provision of the required capital funds and equipment, even since 1944 when Winston Churchill had asked the South African Prime Minister, Jan Smuts, to survey South Africa's uranium deposits.[15] By the end of November 1951, Malan's cabinet had agreed to expand production of uranium residue despite the expected serious impact on the economy. Output would rise from an expected 800-1000 tons per year by 1955, to 3000 tons per year by 1956 . A strong financial incentive for expansion had been provided by the Americans. A new formula involved a 30% increase in the average price. The required capital, amounting to $126m over the years 1952 to 1956, would be two-thirds supplied by the US and one-third by Britain. As before, one-third of the output would be paid for by Britain in sterling. As the British government was discovering, the commercial basis of a collaborative relationship could not be acquired cheaply, particularly when American dollars were pushing up the prices.[16]

Financial constraints impinged on almost every aspect of British external policy. They were a determining consideration in the review of the defence policy and the global strategy which took place during the first half of 1952.

14 AB 16/262, CRO to Le Rougetel, 13 November 1951; Le Rougetel to CRO, 7 November 1951.

15 F David, "South Africa as a nuclear supplier", WC Potter (ed.), *International nuclear trade and nonproliferation: The challenges of the emerging suppliers* (Toronto, Lexington Books, 1990), p. 273.

16 AB 16/262, note by FW Marten, 9 October 1951; Le Rougetel to CRO, 8 November 1951; Anon., "Makins to how" (British Archives, London), 29 November 1951; M Gowing, *Independence and deterrence* (London, Macmillan, 1974), pp. 383.

The rearmament programme initiated by the Labour government at the outbreak of the Korean War had, in the absence of sufficient United States assistance, imposed too heavy a burden on the British economy. The Chiefs of Staff (CoS) had undertaken to review strategy in the lightof both economic limitations as well as the growth of the American and Soviet nuclear weapons capabilities.[17]

The central conclusion was that Britain had had to place increased reliance on the deterrent effect of nuclear weapons. In the absence of an agreement to obtain the required weapons from the United States, Britain would have had to expand its own production capabilities. Production of fissile material should, thought the CoS, have been doubled within three years. An increase of this magnitude in plutonium output could have been achieved in Britain. U-235 might have been produced elsewhere in the Commonwealth where electrical power resources were more abundant. At relatively small cost, Britain could in this way have increased its atomic warfare capabilities.[18]

The gradual revival during 1952 of British interest in Commonwealth atomic collaboration was due in part to its desire to disperse production to strategically safer locations, as well as to draw upon the physical and economic resources of the countries linked through their association with the Crown. More significant, perhaps, was the feeling that American technical collaboration was as remote a possibility as ever.[19]Finance, as usual, was a major constraint. Cherwell ruled that on grounds of capital expense alone, the proposal to produce U-235 elsewhere in the Commonwealth should be abandoned. More promising had been the proposals for increasing plutonium production as part of an expanded civil power development programme. This, in turn, might have provided the basis for increased commonwealth collaboration.[20]

The major problem confronting long-term British plans for civil power development was (rather paradoxically considering the growth of uranium

17 L Asuelime, "Uranium politics of gatekeeping...", *Historia,* 58, 1 May 2013, pp. 33-50.

18 JA Seldon, *Churchill's Indian summer...*, pp. 30-32; M Gowing, *Independence and deterrence*, pp. 440, 441-443. Note that this was all part of an exposé towards Cold War armament.

19 Churchill's meeting with Truman in January 1952 failed to produce the dramatic revival in atomic relations which had been hoped for. M Gowing, *Independence and deterrence*, pp. 421; JA Seldon, *Churchill's Indian summer...,* p. 390; USA, *Foreign relations of the United States*, 1952-1954, II(2), pp. 1142-1151, 1221-1224, 1285-1292; (Hereafter cited simply as FRUS).

20 M Gowing, *Independence and deterrence*, pp. 418-419, 446. There was a growing feeling among senior British and Canadian officials that civil atomic power development and wider co-operation within the Commonwealth should not be held back in the expectation that a change in the American attitude might drastically alter the situation. AB 16/358, 6 November 1952.

production in the Commonwealth) one of finding a secure source of uranium. Britain did not have access to uranium other than through the CDA. Allocation was a matter for negotiation with the United States. The existing policy was that CDA raw materials could only be used for research or weapons production. Up until 1953, the Americans had regarded existing supplies as having been insufficient for their military requirements.[21]

Australian interest motivates South Africa

By the late summer[22] of 1953, the British government had pinned its hopes on the possibility that Australia might have made the output from her newly discovered deposits available to Britain alone. No one in Whitehall doubted that Britain would have to make a generous offer to satisfy the Australians. The US would have been competing for the same material and seemed prepared to pay almost any price in money or collaboration for uranium. Collaboration in an atomic power development programme was something which Australia had long been seeking. It might, moreover, have been an area where Britain had had more to offer than the US. Cherwell was sent on a special mission to Australia in the autumn of 1953. Any schemes for wider atomic collaboration with the Commonwealth had to await the outcome of his visit.[23]

The Union government itself had begun in 1953 to show an increased interest in the civil aspects of atomic power development. A memorandum prepared by Schonland and Naude (two senior South African atomic officials) proposed that as soon as the various nuclear power groups had taken shape, it would have been advisable to negotiate with one of them for membership. This may well have been the British Commonwealth group consisting of Britain, Canada, Australia and South Africa. This, however was a decision to be made by the South African Government.[24]

21 Nothing would have pleased the British government more than for uranium to have been found in the colonial empire. Northern Rhodesia had, for some time, been viewed as a promising potential source. British policy-makers differed over whether the US should, as an act of good faith, be invited to participate there. AB 16/982, Davidson to France, 29 September 1952; AB 16/980, Ward to Gautry, 4 September 1953.

22 The seasons here and in subsequent connotations refers to the Northern Hemisphere.

23 CAB 31/12, D 6(53)11, 22 July 1953; AS 16/1580, Pritchard to How, 15 August 1953. CAB 129/65, C (54)7.

24 Considerable British effort had gone into maintaining close ties with Schonland. He was scientific adviser to the South African Chiefs of Staff. The British Chiefs of Staff, although worried about South Africa's ability to protect atomic secrets, agreed that Schonland should make annual visits to British defence research establishments. South African authorities would not be told about these arrangements. DO 35/2562, Bendrett to Jacob, 25 July 1952.

The Union treasury initially refused to fund any further development of South Africa's small nuclear physics effort. Schonlond wrote a special memorandum to Malan and Havenga advocating that a research effort should be sustained and that a move should be made to associate the Union with the Commonwealth in the atomic field. This plan was, he informed the British government, almost certain to receive the blessing of the Union cabinet. Officials in Whitehall were not so sure. The strength of Schonland's affection for the Commonwealth had cast some doubt upon the value of his judgments.[25]

A further and more significant indication of the Union government's intentions emerged at the beginning of August 1953 from a talk between the British High Commissioner and Douglas Forsyth. The secretary to the Department of External Affairs indicated that the industrial use of atomic power was naturally of great direct interest to South Africa. His impression was that Britain had been on board so far as research in this field was concerned, and he hoped that as far as possible, future development should be on a Commonwealth basis. This, Forsyth said, was an expression of his private thinking. Le Rougetel thought that it was more than this:[26]

> I doubt very much whether Forsyth would have broached a subject of such importance to me in this way entirely on his own initiative, bearing in mind that the suggestion would be unpalatable to the more fanatical members of the Government, and that of course Forsyth himself is intensely Commonwealth minded.

Malan and Havenga, as well as Van Rhijn, the Minister of Mines, were in fact aware of Forsyth's views. Le Rougetel was sure that South Africans had always been apprehensive about the stranglehold which the Americans were likely to establish upon uranium production in their country. This, thought Le Rougetel, might well have prompted the Prime Minister to put out feelers through Forsyth.[27]

The British government had no desire to discourage South Africa's interest in atomic collaboration. The basis on which a bargain could have been struck was, however, unclear. If atomic collaboration had been offered to the Union without a substantial *quid pro quo*, Australia would have expected the same treatment. Britain's main bargaining counter in its efforts to secure Australian

25 AB 16/1580, Schonlond memorandum to Malan and Havenga, n.d.
26 AB 16/1580, Le Rougetel to Liesching, 5 August 1953.
27 AB 16/1580, Pritchard to How, undated.

uranium for its power programme would thus have been lost. The advice from the Commonwealth Relations Office (CRO) was that even if Britain had to be very cautious for the time being, it would have been in Britain's long-term interests to have taken advantage of the South African initiative. Pritchard also advised that Britain certainly needed to do its utmost to avoid appearing to brush them off.[28]

As the British government recognised, the existence of South Africans in positions of authority who were anxious to promote close Commonwealth relations, could have increased British influence in political and commercial affairs. Their existence was, nevertheless, no substitute for having a British representative on the spot advancing Britain's interests. In order to save Britain the cost of a senior official's salary, the office of the CDA in the Union had been left in the hands of an American. After suggestions from the British High Commissioner that there would have been a real advantage, both on political and trade promotion grounds in having a first-class United Kingdom assistant in the Agency, Whitehall conceded that a British subject should be found for the job. It was less than willing to admit that trade promotion should be one of his responsibilities. Warnings from sympathetic South African officials and businessmen were needed to convince the CRO and the Board of Trade of this. Professor Taverner, the director of the South African government metallurgical laboratory, insisted more than once in the autumn of 1953 that British trade had been suffering due to the lack of representation in the CDA office. AW Snelling, the acting High Commissioner, hoped that OB Soskice, the British appointee, would have been fully briefed by the Board of Trade and that he would have worked with their Trade Commissioner's Office in Johannesburg. Snelling's thought was that uranium production was the biggest thing happening in the Union which was at that moment the United Kingdom's second best customer. Snelling warned of the major interests that were at stake: the United Kingdom had been losing literally millions of pound worth of orders because they had no-one on the inside to push their interests. Whitehall was shaken into action. It was agreed that Soskice might take a discreet interest in trade promotion if, in fact, the American representatives had been found to be doing the same.[29]

Once Soskice had taken up his position in the Union, Whitehall learned that the warnings from sympathetic South Africans had been well-founded.

28 AB 161 1580, Pritchard to How, 15 August 1953.
29 DO 119/1161, Snelling to CRO, 18 March 1953, Kemp to Percival, Snelling to Pritchard, 9 December 1953.

Soskice reported that the CDA quite openly assisted all representatives of American manufacturers. Britain had been missing out despite the strong sentiment in favour of British manufacturers and a desire to help British exports. Some members of the mining industry had apparently been concerned and even perturbed at the hold which "vested interests" in the U.S.A. had established in connection with the supply of plant and equipment for the uranium programme. The absence of a British representative on the CDA (which had proved to be so advantageous to American interests) had been due to little more than the desire to save £3 - 4000 per year. Financial constraints had proved to be the weak link in Britain's efforts to maintain its international position.[30]

The Union government's interest in atomic collaboration led, in August 1953, to a decision to send VH Osborn, the secretary of mines, to Britain to raise the matter on an official level. Only Malan, Havenga and Van Rhijn were involved at this stage. Schonland reported that the matter was being kept secret, presumably for local nationalist political reasons. In London, Neil Pritchard, a senior official in the CRO, had been particularly struck by what Anthony Hamilton, of South Africa House, had told him. Hamilton's impression was that South African Ministers really believed that there was something in it for South Africa and that their imagination had been struck by the general idea of co-operation in the field with the United Kingdom.[31]

From the meeting with Osborn in London, it emerged that the South Africans had had only very vague ideas at that time about their future programme. They had been becoming anxious about the demand for uranium in the 1960s. Beyond a request for assistance in training key personnel in reactor work, Osborn had few specific proposals. The Union government might, he thought, have sought a higher price for uranium intended for industrial use. On the other hand, the South African cabinet was likely to attach more importance to a *quid pro quo* in terms of U.K. help, within the framework of a Commonwealth programme, in developing a power programme in South Africa. Osborn said that the Union had been approached by several other

30 DO 119/1161, Report by Soskice, 12 May 1954, Harrison to Bryant, 15 May 1954; AB 16/1501, Ward to Pritchard, 7 January 1954.

31 AB 16/1580, Schonland to Cockcroft, 10 August 1953, Pritchard to How, 16 November 1953, Pritchard to Liesching, 16 November 1953. The British Ambassador in Washington 'took a firm line' that any direct approach to the Americans on the question of releasing CDA uranium for power purposes was ruled out. The "big thing" so far as they were concerned was the need for assured supplies after 1964 (when Union commitments to the CDA expired). AB 16/1580, British ambassador in Washington to the foreign office, 2 November 1953, Pritchard to Liesching, 16 November 1953.

nations (most notably France) with offers to build plants in exchange for uranium. Co-operation with Commonwealth countries was preferred (The emphasis on the Commonwealth aspect of atomic development was, perhaps, an indication that the Union government wanted an arrangement made less vulnerable to criticism from Anglo-phobic Nationalists by the inclusion of Canada or Australia.) The South African policy-makers who favoured such co-operation wanted the British government to make an approach at a high level.[32]

Unconditional atomic relations

The whole issue of atomic collaboration with both South Africa and Australia came before the British Cabinet in January 1954. A memorandum presented by Lord alisbury (the minister responsible for the Department of Atomic Energy) recommended that Britain should agree to increased technical co-operation in atomic energy with Australia and South Africa, without seeking to impose bargaining conditions designed to give them an assured supply of uranium. Lord Cherwell's visit to Australia had revealed that the Australian government was, and would remain for some time to come, unwilling to commit itself to supply uranium exclusively to Britain. There were, nevertheless, good reasons for making an offer of technical collaboration.[33] First, a close association in the development of such a potentially important source of electrical power was bound to be advantageous from the broad economic, political and defence points of view. Second, the chances of obtaining uranium supplies in the future would have been much enhanced. Third, if technical information were withheld, the Americans may have stepped in instead. Finally, if power plants were constructed in the Commonwealth, they could have been used to produce plutonium also and would have become a valuable strategic source of supply.[34]

The cabinet was apparently satisfied with these arguments. South Africa and Australia would be given assistance in the hope that this would have

32 AB 16/1580, note of meeting with Osborn, 17 November 1953; note by CRO and ministry of supply, 16 December 1953; AB; 16/1795, 5 September 1953; AB 16/15.80, Cockcroft to Plowden, 1 December 1953.

33 These arguments were put forward in the memorandum in specific reference to Australia, but they applied with equal force in the case of South Africa.

34 An additional point that applied only to Australia was that her goodwill was needed in the provision of testing facilities. CAB 129/65, C(54)7, 9 January 1954; CAB 128/27, CC2(54)3, 12 January 1954.

marked the beginning of a great Commonwealth effort in atomic energy.[35] Previous proposals for Commonwealth atomic collaboration had foundered on fears of possible damage to Anglo-American atomic relations. Under the terms of the *modus vivendi*, American concurrence was needed before information could be passed on to a Commonwealth country, even if the information had not been of American origin. By the end of 1953, the British ambassador in Washington was confident that such concurrence could be secured. The softening of the American attitude on this subject was probably due less to a greater willingness on the part of the Americans to collaborate with Britain, than to an American recognition that a more open policy was an essential part of Eisenhower's proposals for the international exchange of information on the peaceful uses of atomic energy. The British government finally brought itself to embark on a programme of atomic collaboration with the Commonwealth in no small measure, because the US government was on the verge of adopting a similar policy itself – albeit in a much more grandiose and idealistic framework.[36]

With respect to South Africa, the specific recommendation endorsed by the British cabinet was that an offer should be made to receive Union technicians for training in Britain. By late April 1954, the way had been cleared with the United States and Canada. In Whitehall, there had been some debate about how full the offer should be, and whether specific reference should be made to Britain's interest in securing uranium for industrial purposes. On the first issue, the prevailing view was that the South Africans should only be offered what they could usefully take advantage of. When it was pointed out that this meant that South Africa would, in effect, be offered less than Australia, it was argued that the two dominions were at different stages in their atomic development programmes. Any differences arose only from South Africa and Australia policies, and not from any discrimination by Britain. On the second issue, there were worries that it would be unwise to disturb a very delicate situation by mentioning uranium supplies.[37]

35 CAB 129/65, C(54)7, 9 January 1954; CAB 128/27, CC2(54)3, 12 January 1954.

36 There were material reasons for the British government's increased interest in the Commonwealth in 1954. Tritium – a key item for the production of thermo-nuclear weapons - could be obtained from Canada. Heavy water could be produced in New Zealand. RG 2, A5a, Vol. 2654-2656, 30 June 1954; CAB 130/101. FRUS, 1952-1954, II(2), pp. 852-1292; R Bothwell, *Eldorado: Canada's national uranium company* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1984), pp. 379-381.

37 AB 16/980, How to Jenkins, 21 April 1954; AB 16/1580, Jenkins to How; AB 16/980, Ward to Jenkins, 3 April 1954 and How to Jenkins, 21 April 1954.

Le Rougetel apparently concluded that the offer of technical collaboration should be kept separate from the uranium procurement question. The letter which was eventually sent from the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations to Malan seems not to have gone much further than to offer to train scientists and engineers. Reference was made to South Africa's position as a uranium supplier, but no conclusions were drawn.[38] As a preliminary to discussion about a full programme of technical collaboration, the South African government proposed sending a small mission to Britain.[39]

Britain's hard-won technical achievements were apparently too valuable a commodity to be disposed of, all at once, in a fit of affection for the Commonwealth. With an eye both to strengthening Commonwealth ties and to ensuring long-term sources of supply, special care was given to the selection of countries from which uranium would have been purchased in 1954. (This same concern for the material basis of Commonwealth relations had been evident in 1952 when RA Butler, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, ruled that Britain should not participate in any further CDA projects unless they were within the Commonwealth.) In February 1954, Butler advanced the view that Britain should not get itself so far committed to obtaining uranium supplies from the CDA that they no longer had the need or the resources to buy from the Commonwealth. It had been a mistake to have allowed the Americans to monopolise Canadian supplies. The official committee on atomic energy decided that the largest proportion of Britain's 1954 CDA allocation should, despite the extra cost involved, be taken from South Africa. Purchasing the entire allocation from the Belgian Congo would have saved £730,000. Cost was considered less important than various political factors. First, Congo ore could not have been used without revealing to the Belgians and the Americans the embarrassingly low rate of British uranium metal production. Second, Commonwealth sources of supply were to have been developed as part of the effort to foster close relations in atomic energy matters. Third, South Africa was expected shortly to have become the largest producer of uranium in the world and could therefore become a valuable and reliable long-term source of supply. Fourth, particular aspects of Britain's collaborative relationship with the Union were thought to be involved: South African mining companies were dominated by men with pronounced British sympathies and there was

38 AB 16/1580 Garner to How, 7 May 1953; Havenga to Le Rougetel, 22 July 1953.

39 From the Union, Snelling reported the "murky story" that the South African cabinet had approved sending a "sensible mission", but then Louw had been to see Malan. It had come up again at another cabinet meeting when "four Ministers who, according to Osborn, have the right ideas, were away". Osborn then had another struggle to get matters "back to the right lines". AB 16/1580, Snelling to Garner, 15 September 1954.

little doubt that they, and probably the South African government too, would have been greatly disappointed if Britain had failed to take an appreciable part of the South African output. Moreover, if too little uranium were taken, the South Africans would have realised that the sterling paid to them was repaid to Britain in dollars by the CDA. British motives in supporting the project at all might have then become suspect. In the end, 400 tons were purchased from the Union and 100 tons from the Congo. The Churchill government had, in effect, instituted an informal system of imperial preference with the acknowledged aim of strengthening the Commonwealth.[40]

Despite the increasingly heavy financial burden involved, the British government saw no alternative to maintaining its stake in CDA operations in South Africa. Capital expenditure was expected, in December 1953, to rise as high as £51-53m for the period 1952 to 1956, and both the Americans and South Africans were interested in a further expansion. The British government had to provide one-third of this. The significance of such a sum can be seen if it is compared to the cost of Britain's reactor programme - £17m for the first reactor, and £8m spread over five years for the second; or the cost of producing hydrogen weapons - £10m in additional capital.[41]

Conclusion

Throughout 1954, the need to foster South African goodwill had been a major factor in British atomic policy. This was evident with regard to Britain's desire to obtain monazite/uranium from the Union.[42] In the formulation of British tactics for the negotiations over contractual details between the CDA and the Union government, Sir Edwin Plowden, chairman of the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority, took the view that:[43]

> On purely commercial grounds our negotiators would naturally take a tough line but this might not suit the tactics of our subsequent approach to the

40 M Gowing, *Independence and deterrence*, p. 391; CAB 128/27, CC9(54)5, 14 February 1954; AB 16/248, Draft paper for the atomic energy executive, 26 April 1954; DO 119/1169, Curson to Snelling, 17 June 1954. Capital expenditure was expected, in December 1953, to rise as high as £51-53m for the period 1952 to 1956, and both the Americans and South Africans were interested in a further expansion. The British government had to provide one-third of this.

41 CAB 131/12, CAB 128/27, CC48(54)2, 8 July 1954.

42 Monazite was a source of thorium which had become more valuable since the discovery that this element was needed in the department of atomic energy, and it was of concern that once informed, the Union government might be more reluctant to part with it, and might seek a higher price.

43 AB 16/319, Plowden to British embassy in Washington, 23 November 1954.

> South Africans on uranium for power purposes. Nor might it be advisable in view of our wider relations with South Africa and the fact that in the original negotiations she did not take full advantage of her strong bargaining position.

Despite this, it was not so much the Commonwealth links that brought the Union of South Africa to Britain, but rather, the inclusion of Australia as a possible alternative and competition for the Union government. Malan did not want his government to be left out and so without much ado agreed to the establishment of a Commonwealth atomic collaboration. Also, contrary to Ritchie Ovendale's view that the US relied on the British Commonwealth connection to obtain uranium from South Africa between 1945 and 1950, this was only partially correct in the second half of the 1940s.[44]

44 L Asuelime, "Uranium politics of gatekeeping...", *Historia,* 58, 1 May 2013, pp. 33-50.