

Richard Seddon and Popular Opposition in New Zealand to the Introduction of Chinese Labour into the Transvaal, 1903–1904



ON THE AFTERNOON OF 6 FEBRUARY 1904, a large, open-air demonstration was held near the fire station at Wellington's Cuba Street Extension. Attended by some 500 citizens and addressed by several luminaries, including Premier Richard Seddon, the meeting resembled the many anti-Chinese protests that had been held across the colony in the 1890s. Speakers denounced Asian labour as a form of slavery; the importation of 'hordes of Chinamen' was condemned, as were those 'capitalists' and 'German Jews' who supported it and cared not what happened 'so long as they secured big dividends'. The audience applauded and cheered the speakers and unanimously carried the resolutions submitted to them.¹ Although anti-Asian racism was an all-too-familiar feature of political life at the turn of the twentieth century, what sets this meeting apart is the curious fact those present did not believe, or even suggest, that there was any imminent threat of increased Chinese immigration to New Zealand, nor were they concerned about an influx of Asian labourers to the wider Australasian region. Rather, the crowd's anger had been sparked by a scheme to import Chinese indentured mineworkers to the Transvaal, a recently acquired British colony in distant southern Africa, half a world away from the antipodes.

The speakers who addressed the Wellington crowd were united in their condemnation of the Transvaal scheme. Thomas Macdonald, a local MP, declared that the issue demanded a very serious protest. Although it might at first appear that New Zealanders had no right to interfere in the internal administration of another state, the interests of the British Empire were common to all of its children and whatever effected good government and true citizenship in the empire 'was as important to the people of New Zealand as to the people of England itself'. New Zealanders were deeply interested in colonial legislation that had an impact on citizenship in any part of the Empire, and an even greater interest in the 'organised attempt to dump half a million Chinamen into the Transvaal', given New Zealand's recent participation in the war fought for the 'political and municipal freedom of the British race in South Africa'. The citizens of Wellington had a right to speak on this issue because of the great sacrifices they had made in the conflict: 'The lonely graves of our New Zealand sons on the veldt and kopjes of Africa spoke trumpet-tongued as to the necessity for dealing with this question. They laid down their lives in defence of that freedom, and no man would have dreamt at the beginning of that war that the result would have been to shut down Africa for the purpose

of letting in hordes of Chinamen and men of alien races — (applause) — the scum of the Chinese seaports, the worst that China could produce.²

The premier was equally forthright in his denunciation of the scheme. Seddon reminded his audience that a few years before, on the very spot where they now stood, they had farewelled ‘the brightest, the noblest of our sons, and well they did their duty (Applause.)’. No one could have imagined then that, in a few short years, they would be protesting against ‘hordes of Asiatics being sent into South Africa, to work the mines there, to take the place of the men of our own race, of our own blood’. No one could have contemplated that ‘such a desecration of the graves of our braves would ever have taken place (Applause.)’. As the issue was an imperial question, and as a ‘great wrong’ was about to be perpetrated on ‘the people of South Africa and upon the Empire itself’, Seddon insisted that the citizens of Wellington, along with the government, were well within their rights to mount a protest.³

The Wellington gathering was not an isolated event. In fact, it came after months of behind-the-scenes diplomatic activity, spearheaded by Seddon, which aimed to pressure the British authorities to abandon the Transvaal labour scheme. Seddon recruited Australia’s Prime Minister, Alfred Deakin, to the cause. They telegraphed joint, formal protests to London and Pretoria. The New Zealand press and community at large vigorously supported these efforts, and lively demonstrations were held in centres large and small throughout the country.⁴ In South Africa itself, at massive anti-Chinese meetings, Seddon’s name was greeted with acclamation and votes of thanks for his support were passed. Grateful labour organizations and private citizens from New Zealand, Australia and South Africa sent scores of encouraging letters to Seddon’s office.⁵

To date, no historian has attempted to explain why the New Zealand government and public took such an active interest in a plan to import indentured workers to a territory thousands of miles from the Pacific. In fact, Seddon’s diplomatic effort and the agitation that accompanied it have attracted no more than a passing mention from scholars.⁶ While Seddon’s entreaties failed and tens of thousands of Chinese workers were shipped to the Transvaal between 1904 and 1906, this episode reveals much about New Zealand’s evolving status within the British Empire in the early twentieth century. The Transvaal agitation is illuminating because it occurred at a time when an assertive nationalism had begun to emerge in New Zealand but had not yet displaced imperial loyalties. In fact, the key to explaining the reaction to the Transvaal issue is that Seddon and the public at large approached the issue simultaneously as citizens of a nation and an empire. This commitment both to king and country anticipated the ‘Dominion idea’ that was to dominate imperial thinking in the 1920s and 1930s.⁷

The Seddon ministry understood that New Zealand’s participation and sacrifices in the South African War of 1899–1902 gave it the right to intervene in the internal affairs of the Transvaal. This intervention was an independent exercise in foreign policy, made without the sanction of imperial officials, and was cast as being in New Zealand’s interest. It is illustrative of the rising nationalist sentiment ignited by New Zealand’s participation in the war and

marks an important point in the country's twentieth century evolution as an independent nation within the British Commonwealth.⁸

Careful contextualization of Seddon's diplomacy demonstrates that this rising nationalism was intertwined with strong feelings of pan-imperial solidarity that transcended colonial and national boundaries. Although a close relationship between nationalism and imperialism might seem paradoxical, I endorse W. David McIntyre's view that imperialism played an instrumental role in the emergence of a New Zealand nationalism. By the turn of the twentieth century the colony's adherence to British imperial interests was seen to foster the 'national interest'; moreover, 'in the very act of demonstrating solidarity with Britain, New Zealand could be found asserting its individual identity in various ways'.⁹

Even so, this complex relationship was fraught with contradictions and tensions, for the requirements of the empire were potentially in conflict with those of the nation. The potential for conflict was particularly keen in the realm of external, or foreign, affairs. New Zealand was practically self-governing in its internal affairs by 1900; however, the British government retained firm control of foreign policy. Although it became a sub-imperial power in the Pacific in the early twentieth century, New Zealand's voice in foreign affairs was small and the colony remained subservient to the British government in the international arena.¹⁰ The controversy over Chinese labour in the Transvaal not only provided Seddon with a golden opportunity to intervene in international affairs but also allowed him to frame his well-publicized opposition to British imperial policy in terms of the 'national' interest of both New Zealand and the empire as a whole. Hostility to Asian labour was a central component of both imperialist and nationalist rhetoric in Britain and the settler colonies in the early twentieth century; anti-Asian racism therefore provided a useful means by which Seddon could link New Zealand's domestic and foreign interests.

Seddon's initiative highlights what Anthony Chennells, in a very different context, terms the 'demands of the opposing discourses of empire and nationalism'.¹¹ On the one hand, his diplomacy was emblematic of a newly forged national sentiment that encouraged New Zealand's citizens to think of themselves as a distinct people and its government to act as an independent entity with specific policies in relation to international affairs. On the other hand, Seddon's hostility to the British government's decision to allow Chinese immigration to the Transvaal stemmed from the belief that New Zealanders were members of a wider imperial British community with shared economic and cultural interests that needed to be safeguarded and consolidated. The potential for conflict that arose from this 'double consciousness of identities national and imperial'¹² was resolved by embracing the strident anti-Asian racism and exclusive white solidarity that were central to both identities.

The South African War of 1899–1902 arose out of British attempts to secure power and influence over both the Transvaal republic and the wider southern African region. Southern African federation had long been a goal of nineteenth-century imperial policy makers, and the Transvaal's increasing economic and political independence following the discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand in 1886 threatened these plans. It was initially hoped that

the significant number of British and colonial uitlanders (expatriates) living and working in the republic would form a 'bridgehead' to advance imperial interests, but British ambitions to replace President Paul Kruger's government with an uitlander administration were dashed with the spectacular failure of the Jameson raid in 1896.¹³ Even so, the imperial government continued to use uitlander grievances (in particular, the Transvaal's restrictive franchise laws) to pressure Kruger in the years following the raid. These grievances provided a useful pretext for the increasingly aggressive foreign policy that ultimately led to the outbreak of war with the Transvaal and neighbouring Orange Free State in late 1899.

It was widely believed in Britain and the empire that the war would be concluded swiftly. As it happened, the conflict dragged on for almost three years, resulting in the deployment of hundreds of thousands of imperial and colonial troops at a cost of over £200 million. Tens of thousands of lives were lost, including 28,000 Boer and 14,000 African civilians who perished in internment camps.¹⁴ By the time peace was declared in 1902 the Transvaal's economy was shattered. One of the most serious economic consequences of the war for the newly annexed colony was that it had ground the all-important mining industry to a halt. Between October 1899 and May 1901, very little mining took place on the Witwatersrand and by the end of 1901, gold production levels had plummeted to a 13-year low.¹⁵

British authorities, mine owners and investors agreed it was imperative that mining operations be restored as quickly as possible and were dismayed when the peace agreement signed at Vereeniging in 1902 failed to spark the anticipated mining boom. The success of pre-war gold operations had been dependent on a steady supply of cheap and reliable African migrant workers; these labourers had dispersed and returned to their rural homes at the beginning of the war. Attempts to lure sufficient numbers back to the Witwatersrand were only partially successful.¹⁶ As late as May 1904 there were only 70,608 African mineworkers, nearly 40,000 fewer than in 1899.¹⁷ The scarcity of labour, along with competition for workers from other industries, led to wage increases and higher overhead costs at a time when operators were mining low-grade ores and facing narrow profit margins.

As Peter Richardson pointed out, the prolonged inability to increase the number of African mineworkers, the rising costs of labour and the enforced adoption of a low-grade policy were the major factors which prompted the mining industry to lobby for the introduction of Chinese indentured labour. It did not take long to obtain the support of the Transvaal's British administration. Alfred Milner had for some time recognized that the importation of Chinese labour would effectively overcome the labour shortage, and he expended considerable effort convincing the imperial authorities to consent to the plan. Milner understood that the mining industry was the mainstay of the Transvaal economy and, as such, the colony's administration was bound to meet its demands for cheap, unskilled workers. His administration drafted a Labour Importation Ordinance in 1903 and the Unionist government in London endorsed the scheme early the following year. In May 1904, the first labourers arrived on the Witwatersrand, shortly after the Chinese government had approved the plan. By November

1906, over 60,000 Chinese workers had travelled to the Transvaal to work in the mines.¹⁸

The political and economic fallout from the Boer War was not confined to southern Africa. The conflict had a transformative effect throughout the British settler colonies. In 1905, reviewing the war's impact on colonial nationalism in Canada and Australasia, Richard Jebb wrote that, on the whole, 'probably no partner-State gained more than New Zealand in national sentiment from the experience of the war which revealed the splendid quality of the new island race'.¹⁹ Keith Sinclair also argued that the war in South Africa was a major stimulus to nationalism, concluding that '[w]e may occasionally hear an individual New Zealand voice from before 1899, but the first unmistakable New Zealand voices which we can hear as a group come to us from the soldiers in South Africa'.²⁰

Some of the first expressions of militarist nationalism accompanied the departure of the first New Zealand troops to South Africa in October 1899. It was reported that 40,000 people, up until then the largest crowd in New Zealand's history, crowded Wellington's streets to farewell the contingent. Approximately the same number sent off the next contingent in January 1900, and in March 'fully 70 000 turned out in the streets of Christchurch'.²¹ The local press characterized these massive gatherings as 'national' demonstrations and 'great national' events and closely reported the progress of the New Zealand contingents overseas. While the term 'national' was synonymous with 'British' and, outside the colony, New Zealanders were not thought of as a separate people, the war nevertheless 'built up feelings of solidarity, of unity, which contributed to national sentiment'. Working towards a common goal required collective action and sacrifices, and fostered the establishment of a unique New Zealand tradition. By the end of the conflict, New Zealanders were beginning to assert that they were a distinct group.²²

While military service in South Africa stirred New Zealanders' national consciousness, it is important to note that this rising nationalism did not, in the short term, displace imperialist sensibilities. The embarkation of the New Zealand contingents was widely celebrated as a young colony's contribution to a great and worthy imperial cause. Sinclair claims that, to most New Zealanders, 'criticism of the war seemed close to treachery or sedition'.²³ Premier Seddon was an enthusiastic supporter of Britain's designs for southern Africa and offered to send a mounted unit to the subcontinent two weeks before war broke out; after his offer was endorsed by the House of Representatives, the members stood up and sang 'God Save the Queen' and gave three cheers for Queen Victoria.²⁴

While this level of jingoism was not universally embraced, it was hardly unusual for New Zealanders to situate their expressions of national pride within a broader imperial consciousness. The novelist Edith Searle Grossman wrote in 1905 of the gradual but great change that had come over 'the national sentiment of colonials', whose 'most close and intimate love' was kept, as it should be, for their own country. Even so, this love for one's country did not necessarily replace loyalty to the empire; it only meant that the 'true colonial, however staunch an imperialist he may be, feels that he has now a character, a status, and a country of his own'.²⁵

No New Zealander understood the complex and mutually reinforcing relationship between imperialism and nationalism better than the colony's premier, Richard Seddon. Seddon headed a Liberal–Labour alliance that worked hard to balance the needs of New Zealand's farmers and workers. One of the Liberals' most successful strategies was to cement class unity through a programme of radical social and industrial legislation that favoured workers.²⁶ A populist and a democrat, Seddon worked tirelessly to forge links between his government and 'common people'. His central political message was simple: 'It is the rich and the poor; it is the wealthy people and the landowners against the middle classes and the labouring classes. That is the real position in New Zealand. Wealth has power, and wealth asserts its sway.'²⁷ Seddon personified the Liberals' revolt against the evils of the 'Old World'. In a typical parliamentary tirade after a visit 'Home', he asserted that the 'object-lessons taught in the Mother-country have made me firmer and stronger in my determination to help those who are struggling in adversity against the power of wealth and the power of those who hold vast areas of land and are keeping the people from their just rights'.²⁸

If Seddon's political sympathies lay with those struggling in adversity against wealth and power, he was nevertheless a loyal and ardent British Empire patriot. W.H. Oliver described him as 'an enthusiastic and even a rabid imperialist, particularly once he had discovered that imperial sentiment attracted New Zealand votes'.²⁹ He saw the colony as a youthful and active member of the empire and lobbied hard for a sub-imperial role for New Zealand in the Pacific. Seddon's fervour was fortified by the storm clouds gathering in South Africa in the late 1890s and, according to his contemporary biographer, James Drummond, once war was imminent he 'infected the whole colony with his enthusiasm'. The troops he offered to the British government 'were to him a living representation of the imperialist principle, of the solidarity of the Empire, and of the readiness of the colony to spring ready armed to the side of the Mother Country'.³⁰ These sentiments were shared by many of his compatriots. Just before he left New Zealand, en route to London for Edward VII's coronation, he was presented with a national address in Christchurch, which expressed 'appreciation and approval of the prompt and practical proof you have given of the sympathy of your fellow colonists with their Motherland in her South African struggle. Loyalty is but kinship written large, and every man and woman of this colony is proud of the crimson thread which makes the people of New Zealand loyal sons and daughters of the British Empire'.³¹

Although he was a British-born 'bombastic imperialist', Seddon was nevertheless instrumental in fanning the flames of colonial nationalism.³² Drummond claimed that Seddon 'looked at everything through New Zealand's spectacles'. He saw himself as guardian of the country's interests and 'all who tried to depreciate the colony could rely upon meeting in him an unrelenting opponent. With him it was New Zealand against the whole world'.³³ Throughout his premiership he insisted, both at home and abroad, that New Zealanders were quite distinct from their Australian cousins and refused to lend his support to those in New Zealand who wished to join the Australian federation. He also rejected suggestions at the start of the South African War

that Australia and New Zealand should form a joint contingent, boasting that New Zealand's troops 'were civilising agents, and he was confident that the only way to beat the Boers was to put the New Zealanders in the front'.³⁴ His insistence that New Zealanders were a distinct group could at times lead to confusion. At the colonial premiers' conference held in London in 1897, Seddon missed a crucial discussion on immigration restriction because Joseph Chamberlain, secretary of state for the colonies, had invited the 'Australian Premiers' to attend. Chamberlain clearly included Seddon in his invitation, and even delayed the start of the meeting in the expectation that he would arrive. Seddon complained later that the meeting had been called 'for the Australian Premiers. I received no notice, and I am not an Australian Premier'.³⁵

In 1900 Seddon embarked upon what Drummond termed his 'foreign policy', the renewal of long-held aspirations for New Zealand to annex and administer islands in the Pacific.³⁶ The subsequent incorporation of the Cook Islands and Niue in 1901 was a manifestation of the Seddon ministry's vigorous sub-imperialism, but it was also a significant moment in the elaboration of colonial nationalism. For Seddon, the expansion of the colony's boundaries into the Pacific was the fulfilment of a national destiny: 'We are commencing a new century, and with its dawn let us commence a new life — one of expansion, and on the forward path of our ultimate destiny. This is a time of great events; the Australians have banded together and formed a Commonwealth, which will be one of power and greatness. I say there is as great a future for New Zealand and its energetic inhabitants, both for them and their descendants, in every way.'³⁷ Clearly concerned about being overshadowed by the newly minted Commonwealth across the Tasman, he believed that Australians 'will think more of us as a nation in years to come, with islands of our own, than as we exist now'.³⁸ Seddon also rejected any notion that New Zealand's status was below that of the Australian federation; after 1901 he adopted the title 'prime minister', instead of 'premier', in order to assert his equal standing with the Australian head of government.³⁹

Although Seddon was adept at combining imperialism and colonial nationalism, it needs to be stressed that the imperatives of these opposing ideologies were always potentially in conflict with one another. The 'double consciousness of identities national and imperial' required the harmonization of both identities to ensure that the loyalties of New Zealanders were never divided between their country and the empire to which it belonged.⁴⁰ In order to resolve these contradictions and tensions, Seddon and his Liberal allies had to devise a coherent political message. Anti-Chinese racism was one thread that ran through both imperialism and colonial nationalism and proved to be an extremely useful and durable binding agent.

The importance of xenophobia in New Zealand's political life at the turn of the century has been identified by a number of historians.⁴¹ In a highly suggestive analysis, Brian Moloughney and John Stenhouse situated anti-Asian racism squarely within the context of the colony's evolving nationalism. Colonial nationalism, they argued, 'constitutes the crucial context' within which to make sense of sinophobia and other forms of discrimination. Nation builders aimed to exclude all those who were deemed to threaten the unity of

the prosperous and egalitarian society they wished to build; the construction of communal enemies helped colonial society to cohere.⁴² While Moloughney and Stenhouse were correct to stress the importance of colonial nationalism, it is important also to situate sinophobia within a wider imperial context.

Jonathan Hyslop argued persuasively that the white working classes throughout the British Empire before 1914 were not composed of nationally discrete entities, but were 'bound together into an imperial working class, by flows of population which traversed the world'. Furthermore, he suggested that this imperial working class, and the labour movements based upon it, espoused a shared ideology of white labourism that combined a critique of exploitation with virulent racism. In particular, ideological hostility to capitalism was fused with the notion that employers were trying 'to sap the organised power of white workers internationally by subjecting them to the competition of cheap Asian labour'. This synthesis of militant labourism and racism was 'a major cultural source' of rising working-class racial sentiment in Britain, southern Africa and Australasia at the turn of the twentieth century.⁴³ It is important to emphasize that while white labourism championed the interests and wellbeing of the imperial working class, and condemned the capitalist exploitation perpetrated by the imperial ruling class, it was not explicitly an anti-imperial ideology. Rather, the empire was seen as a vehicle that would facilitate the creation of a powerful, global, racially exclusive, white working-class movement capable of challenging the dominance of international capital.

Seddon's politics and hostility towards Asian labour were heavily influenced by the tenets of white labourism. He was a consistent and vociferous opponent of Chinese immigration throughout his career and seamlessly combined xenophobia with his populist concern for the 'common people', his colonial nationalism and his wider imperialist agenda. He claimed that Chinese immigrants had 'overrun our alluvial goldfields' and were doing 'a serious injury' to European miners. Furthermore, they impoverished New Zealand by taking out wealth without contributing anything in return. He 'did not want them, because they would be an injury to our country, and would be a permanent injury to our race'. It was necessary 'to preserve and improve our race' so that New Zealanders remained 'the first people in the southern seas'. In addition, Chinese immigrants were undesirable as colonists because of their 'unsanitary character', because they threatened to contaminate 'our race' and because they might marry 'New Zealand girls'. Since the colony protected its cattle, it had the same right, indeed a 'Divine right', to protect 'our women and children and girls of tender years'. Consequently, Chinese immigrants should be prevented from becoming naturalized.⁴⁴

By the 1890s, Seddon had invigorated his xenophobia with notions of imperial destiny and racial solidarity. Shortly before the outbreak of the South African War he told members of Parliament that they 'should be pleased at coming from a race which at the present time dominates the world' and claimed that Chinese immigration would result in 'intermixture' and 'the decadence of your own race'.⁴⁵ Seddon's expressions of support for the South African War also demonstrate that conceptions of blood and race underpinned his sense of imperial responsibility. He condemned the 'harsh, unmerited, and

unprecedented treatment of the Outlanders' in Kruger's republic and reminded Parliament that '[o]ur kindred to the number of 150,000 in the Transvaal have been deprived of these civil rights and civil freedom'. New Zealanders had a duty 'as Englishmen' to support the war effort; no matter where in the world Englishmen were, they were bound together and united by a 'feeling of affection' and the 'crimson tie'.⁴⁶

Seddon's sense of obligation did not diminish with the conclusion of the war. If anything, his responsibility to his 'kindred' was heightened both by the nationalism sparked by New Zealand's participation in the conflict and the continued loyalty towards the empire and its interests. For Seddon, the plan to employ Chinese workers on the Witwatersrand gold mines grossly offended his patriotic feelings towards both New Zealand and the empire. As a New Zealander and a populist, he was incensed that the sacrifices made by his countrymen were being rewarded with a policy that advanced the interests of the wealthy and powerful at the expense of European workers. As an imperialist, he was outraged that British racial solidarity and dominance were to be undermined so flagrantly by the introduction of thousands of Asian workers into a recently acquired colony that was earmarked to be an integral part of a newly federated and loyal 'white man's country'.

Seddon's response to the Transvaal Chinese question reflected New Zealand's embryonic but evolving status as an independent nation within the British Empire. On the one hand, his efforts to thwart the plan were based upon the conviction that New Zealand had the right, as a nation that had made great sacrifices to help conquer the Transvaal, to take an independent diplomatic position in relation to its internal affairs, even if this position was at odds with that of the British government. On the other hand, his commitment to the empire and the interests of the imperial white working class undergirded his belief that the British administrators of the Transvaal had a duty to abort the Chinese labour plan and instead ensure that the colony's gold mines were worked by white labour.

Seddon first became aware of plans to introduce Chinese mineworkers to the Transvaal in early 1903, less than eight months after the war's end. The local press reported that Transvaal mine owners had approached Joseph Chamberlain, secretary of state for the colonies, with a request for Chinese workers in an effort to overcome the severe labour shortage that continued to cripple gold production.⁴⁷ On hearing the disturbing news, Seddon cabled his Australian counterpart, Edmund Barton, with the suggestion that they submit a joint protest against the plan. Considering what Australia and New Zealand had done in the late war, Seddon did not believe that a remonstrance to Chamberlain was out of place. He also assured Barton that 'white men can work these mines as easily as they can work mines in Australia and New Zealand'. Furthermore, Australians, New Zealanders and South Africa's white population 'would suffer injustice' if Asians were introduced.⁴⁸ Such views were not confined to the halls of power. The Canterbury Trades Council sent a letter to Seddon urging the New Zealand government to protest against the proposal 'now being forcibly pressed upon the Hon. Mr Chamberlain' as it 'would be detrimental to the interests of all concerned to allow such a thing to take place'.⁴⁹

Seddon wasted little time in telegraphing Chamberlain, informing him that the proposal to introduce Asians to work the Johannesburg mines was 'repugnant to people of this colony' and had evoked strong feeling. It was also unnecessary, for lower-grade quartz lodes were already profitably worked in both Australia and New Zealand by white labour. The fact that the Transvaal was a Crown colony under imperial authority emboldened Seddon to assure Chamberlain that 'it would be a grave mistake to countenance the introduction of Asiatics'. As an experienced gold miner himself, he saw no necessity 'for the undesirable innovation between the Kaffir and white labour now in South Africa'; furthermore, as the 'British white population from Australia, New Zealand, and elsewhere' was bound to increase, mine owners did not need to feel anxious. To acquiesce in the proposal or countenance Chinese labour would 'dim the lustre of a great achievement and cause heartburnings' in New Zealand. He suggested that Chamberlain postpone his decision pending the result of the joint inquiry sent by Australia and New Zealand.⁵⁰

As it happened, in early 1903 Chamberlain was not prepared to sanction the importation of Chinese labour to the Rand. In a speech made in Johannesburg, he declared that the question of Chinese immigration lay absolutely in the hands of the people of South Africa, and that, in any case, admission of Asian workers would be regarded by self-governing colonies and the motherland as a 'retrograde step'. Consequently, both Seddon and Barton decided to abandon their joint protest and instead informed Chamberlain that all Australasians 'will trust that the decision by the colonies concerned may await their autonomy, and that we think you have closely gauged the public opinion of Australasia as to Chinese labour. Accept congratulations.'⁵¹ Whether Chamberlain found these congratulations presumptuous is not clear from his brief reply, which nevertheless confirmed that 'no authorised proposal' had been made to import Asian labour.⁵²

Chamberlain's reassurance ensured that the issue receded from the headlines in New Zealand for most of the rest of the year, although in the South African colonies the popular agitation continued to fester. In spite of popular white opposition, mine owners continued to push the Transvaal administration to import indentured labour from China. These efforts galvanized white labour leaders in South Africa, who worked to consolidate opposition. Seddon's outspoken conduct, as well as his status among the significant number of Australasians who had migrated to the Transvaal after the war, made him a natural and prominent ally. In July 1903 a group calling itself 'Australians in Johannesburg' telegraphed the prime minister with a message of appreciation for his 'sympathetic attitude against Introducing Chinese here; the masses are careful of its consequences'.⁵³

By December 1903 it was apparent that the British government had shifted its position and was preparing to sanction the recruitment and importation of Chinese mineworkers. This realization prompted renewed agitation from white South African labour organizers. Seddon was again enlisted in the efforts to force the authorities to abandon the scheme. Cape Town's Anti-Asiatic League telegraphed Seddon to 'earnestly beg' for his assistance 'to defeat [the] attempt to flood Transvaal with cheap Asiatic labour, destroying every prospect of

creating this a free community'.⁵⁴ Seddon replied immediately, declaring that he hoped, in the interests of South Africa, that the labour scheme would not succeed: 'if such were to be [the] result of [the] great sacrifice made it would cause heartburnings and ... widespread disappointment'.⁵⁵ This message was met with loud cheers and 'a voice: "Good old Dick"' when it was read out to thousands of protestors gathered at Cape Town's Good Hope Hall on 19 December 1903. Similar messages of support from Alfred Deakin (who replied in an unofficial capacity) and Charles Kingston, Australia's first commissioner of customs, were also received with acclamation at this meeting.⁵⁶

In the new year, Seddon renewed his diplomatic initiative. He wrote to Deakin, who had replaced Barton as Australian prime minister, with the suggestion that Australia, Canada, the Cape Colony, Natal and New Zealand should jointly protest against the introduction of Chinese migrants to work in the Rand mines and strongly urge the imperial government to use its prerogative to prevent something that would be a 'standing blot and disgrace to Empire, and which was entirely unnecessary'. Seddon hoped that Deakin would agree that this intervention in the internal affairs of a Crown colony was appropriate. If leaders of self-governing dominions with a direct interest remained silent 'a wrong construction may be placed on inaction'.⁵⁷ Seddon himself believed that the matter was very serious and possessed 'great potentialities to Australia and New Zealand' that outweighed 'any little constitutional objection to advising [the] Mother-country respecting the administration of a Crown Colony'. Furthermore, such a protest would be consistent with the White Australia policy and the poll-tax legislation in force in both countries.⁵⁸

Deakin was receptive to Seddon's suggestion but Sir Wilfred Laurier, the Canadian prime minister, was not, believing that 'interfering in such a question would not be advisable'.⁵⁹ The Natal government also declined to join the protest, as the colony's governor believed that additional unskilled labour was urgently required for the Transvaal's development and a recent motion deprecating the introduction of Chinese labour had been lost in the Natal Legislative Assembly by 30 votes to two.⁶⁰ Only the Cape's government was supportive; it had already submitted formal protests to the authorities, one in mid-1903 and another in early 1904.⁶¹

Seddon did not confine his efforts to the diplomatic arena. On 7 January 1904, at Kokatahi on the West Coast of the South Island, he gave a forceful public speech outlining his position. He declared that if, as a result of bringing the Transvaal under the British flag, 'hordes of Chinese were to be introduced to work the Rand mines, it would be a standing blot and a grave reflection on the administration, and would be bitterly resented by the self-governing colonies, who had made great sacrifices'. He sincerely hoped that the influence of mine owners and speculators would not prevail. All the self-governing colonies had laws prohibiting the introduction of Chinese workers; for the Transvaal to flout these colonies by 'aiding, abetting, and agreeing to their introduction ... would be regrettable, and cause heartburnings and revulsion of feeling'.⁶²

The *Evening Post* heartily congratulated Seddon for speaking 'plain words that voice plain truths' and for his manful determination to 'make the voice of New Zealand heard in the councils of the nation'. The newspaper condemned

the Transvaal Legislative Council's passage of an ordinance sanctioning Chinese mine labour; all that now remained was for the Colonial Office to 'make complete surrender to the millionaires in London, when the royal assent will paint the Transvaal yellow instead of red'. These horrible events would come to pass unless 'the self-governing colonies of the Empire unite in protesting against the outrage'. It therefore gave the *Post* 'the greatest satisfaction' to report that Seddon had invited other premiers to join New Zealand in a combined protest. Even though Canada and Natal were unlikely to join, New Zealand and Australia together 'may have sufficient voice in the councils of the Empire to turn the scale against millionaires and preserve the Transvaal as a "white man's country"'.⁶³

Seddon's intervention was greeted with less enthusiasm by the London-based Imperial South African Association, which wrote to the prime minister asserting that his speech was 'ill-timed' and would damage the interests of British Progressives in the Cape. Furthermore, the association claimed that the 'hopeless deficiency' of African labour was hampering economic growth and therefore the flow of white immigrants; it estimated that 'every thousand Chinamen settled in Transvaal makes room for [an] increase [in the] white population, including women and children, of eight hundred'.⁶⁴ F.R. Macdonald, an Australian expatriate living in the Transvaal, also criticized Seddon's speech, asserting in a telegraph that one-third of the mines remained idle, repudiation of debt was being seriously considered and the overall economic condition was grave. Limited numbers of Chinese would be used during a tide-over period until Africans could be recruited in sufficient numbers, at which point the former would be repatriated. In any case, the cost of unskilled white workers was 'economically impossible, and bitterly opposed by [the] Miners' Association'.⁶⁵

Such criticisms did little to sway Seddon's resolve, especially after Deakin confirmed that the Australian government would join New Zealand in protesting formally against a policy that was 'unwise in every respect'. Deakin confessed that his government had 'hitherto refrained from making representation' because of the danger of setting a precedent of appeal to the imperial government for the defeat of a proposed law in another colony. While the exercise of the Crown's prerogative with respect to legislation for self governing and Crown colonies differed, and the precedent would therefore be of limited application, nevertheless the protest would initiate a 'new and grave departure' and Deakin considered it best to proceed 'with special caution'. He suggested that it might be prudent to communicate with the Transvaal directly, rather than address the protest to the secretary of state for the colonies. Then, in the event 'of proposed legislation of yours or ours being attacked by any colonies with responsive Government, their representations would be made to [the] Commonwealth or New Zealand, as case may be, instead of to Imperial Government independently of us'. Furthermore, any effective protest by self-governing colonies 'against legislation of national importance in another colony' would have to be unanimous and the veto of the sovereign ought not to be asked for, except as a last resort.⁶⁶

Seddon and Deakin agreed to draft a joint protest, but to send it separately. Seddon wired the Transvaal administrator, Sir Arthur Lawley, and the South

African high commissioner, Lord Milner. Against Deakin's initial advice, he also decided to telegraph the secretary of state directly after he found out that the Cape had addressed a similar protest to London. The New Zealand protest is significant in that it combined the rhetoric of colonial nationalism with calls for pan-imperial racial solidarity; it was also a forthright foreign policy statement by the leader of a young nation exercising its prerogative to act independently of the imperial authorities. It is worth quoting at length:

Re Chinese labour in Rand [The] New Zealand Government is convinced that practical prohibition of Chinese immigration [is] imperatively required in [the] best interests of people of British communities, especially those who enjoy or expect to enjoy powers of responsible self-government. Though most reluctant to travel beyond their own boundaries ... the New Zealand Government, in discharge of their duty to the nation, feel compelled to express deep apprehension of [the] results which will follow introduction of Chinese to [the] Transvaal. [The] New Zealand Government foresees grave perils, racial, social, political, and sanitary, inevitably induced by alien influx, injurious to yourselves and neighbouring territories with whom your future is linked indissolubly and finally to [the] Empire of which South Africa is [a] great and vital part. [The] New Zealand Government is aware of safeguards you propose, but our experience with Chinese shows that however stringent conditions of their introduction and employment may be made, yet it is practically impossible to prevent the many and serious evils from arising. Moreover, such introduction creates vested interests on [the] part of employers, which render it extremely difficult to terminate [the] practice once it has been sanctioned. [The] New Zealand Government earnestly commends these considerations to [the] Transvaal Government, as far outweighing any immediate pecuniary gain. Momentary material advantage will be dearly purchased by influx of foreign element, dangerous while unassimilated, and not to be assimilated without detriment to our progress, institutions, and patriotic ideals.⁶⁷

The swift replies from the Colonial Office and Transvaal government were unequivocal. The secretary of state for the colonies fully recognized the right of all the self-governing colonies to express their opinion on such an important question, and 'especially of those who, like New Zealand, rendered memorable service in the war in South Africa'. Nevertheless, the British government's declared policy was to treat the Transvaal as if it was a self-governing colony, unless direct imperial interests were at stake, and 'to interfere as little as possible with local opinion and local wishes'. This policy was based on the conviction that each state within the empire, by reason of direct interest, had special knowledge of conditions affecting it and was best able to deal with its own problems; moreover, it was this conviction that guided the British government's action regarding the question of 'alien races' in Australia and New Zealand. Bearing in mind the abnormal economic conditions in the Transvaal 'which might call for abnormal measures', and in keeping with its stated policy, the British government 'could not refuse to accede to the wishes of one part of the Empire on a matter which it regarded as of paramount importance to its well being in deference to representations from another part of the Empire not directly interested'.⁶⁸

The Transvaal Executive Council's reply to Seddon and Deakin was even more forthright. Unskilled labour in southern Africa had always been furnished

by 'native races not enjoying a position of equality with the white population' and this labour was insufficient to meet the requirements in the Transvaal. No effective means of increasing the supply had been left untried and white labour was either not available in sufficient numbers or was unwilling to work for the wages the mines could afford to pay. The only alternative was the importation of 'coloured labour' under strict conditions that included repatriation after the expiration of indentures and safeguards to prevent competition with white workers. Under the circumstances, the Transvaal government felt fully justified in pursuing this course of action and regarded 'the considerations put forward in your telegram as deriving their weight in great measure from conditions existing in Australia, but very different from those prevailing in South Africa'.⁶⁹

Undeterred, Seddon wired copies of both replies to the Anti-Chinese League in Cape Town with the message that they had been published in New Zealand and should also be publicized in South Africa. He assured the league that the protest was 'supported almost unanimously' by the people of New Zealand.⁷⁰ He also directed William Pember Reeves, the agent-general for New Zealand in London, to publish details of protest meetings and correspondence from notable supporters. One of the most direct letters came from veteran Australian politician Charles Kingston, who was 'delighted to read your fearless, forceful, and patriotic denunciation of the suggested Transvaal slavery iniquity'. He was glad that Australia and New Zealand were co-operating to prevent this iniquity:

as they co-operated in the war ardently undertaken in the interests of fair play to white outlanders. Is it consistent with this fair play that cheap coloured labour should be imported, and on specially servile conditions, to wrest from [the] white worker his employment [and] means of existence, or to make him submit under Imperial sway [to] lower wages and more degraded conditions than under Boer rule? Have Australia's and New Zealand's blood and treasure been spent with this in view? It was freely given and gladly accepted. Surely these facts cannot yet be forgotten, and they speak eloquently in support of the right to yourself and Mr. Deakin to speak as you are speaking in protest against the practical expulsion of New-Zealanders [and] Australians favour of this introduction of Chinese.⁷¹

Seddon's numerous supporters included members of trade unions and councils from across Australasia and South Africa who, in scores of letters, thanked him for the position he had taken. Many of these correspondents also employed the rhetoric of colonial nationalism and white labourism when expressing their support, demonstrating that Seddon's views were widely held in the general community. A letter from the Dunedin section of the Australasian Federated Seamen's Industrial Association was typical in declaring that the Transvaal policy was unnecessary and 'indirectly inimical to the interests of white labour in all self-governing colonies': 'the assistance rendered in men + money during the Boer war by New Zealand + Australia to ostensibly maintain the status of the Anglo-Saxon race entitles those colonies to vigorously oppose the intended undesirable innovation, which is obviously intended to benefit only the mine proprietors + capitalists of South Africa, in whose interests it is

becoming alarmingly evident that the recent war was waged'. The association trusted that Seddon would not relax his efforts against 'what, if accomplished, will be a shame + disgrace to those who are engineering the movement, and a deliberate insult to those whose good red blood was shed in conquering the country'.⁷²

The Trades Hall Council in Carlton, Melbourne, wrote that the introduction of Chinese workers to the Transvaal was 'a menace to the British race, and a disgrace to the flag under which we live'; it would provoke industrial strife, promote racial animosity, retard the Transvaal's economic expansion and 'prevent the influx of white races, who alone have the right to be considered'.⁷³ The Wellington Trades and Labour Council declared the policy to be a 'deliberate attempt by the Rand Mine Owners to deprive British White Labour of its undoubted rights', while the Cook County Liberal Association in Gisborne hoped that Seddon's efforts would be successful, 'especially so after the ... recent expenditure of British blood and treasure'.⁷⁴ Ballarat's Trades and Labour Council hoped that Seddon would continue to 'urge the claims of the White Race' and to help secure the franchise 'seeing that so many of the manhood of your country + the flowers of our race, are sleeping under the [earth] having fought and died in the upholding of these claims to manhood's rights'.⁷⁵

The Napier branch of the Liberal and Labour Federation unanimously endorsed Seddon's protest, declaring that the introduction of Chinese workers would be detrimental to the 'moral, physical and social well-being of the White races as a whole, and therefore not in the best interests of the Empire'.⁷⁶ Dunedin's Workers' Political Committee protested strenuously 'against a conquered country having thrust upon them by greedy capitalists the indignity of countenancing slave labour while those who assisted with blood and money to subdue the country are left to starve in idleness to gratify the cupidity of the all-powerful governing classes'. Furthermore, it sincerely trusted that Seddon's 'democratic representations will ultimately succeed in conserving South Africa as a field for the energies of the English-speaking race'.⁷⁷ A New Zealand Contingent officer from Auckland wrote that if 'we had been assured that the Transvaal mines would be worked by Asiatic labour, not a contingent would have been sent from these colonies'.⁷⁸

Seddon's replies to his correspondents expanded upon the themes of wartime sacrifice, pan-imperial racial solidarity and the national interest. In a letter to W. Hutchinson of the New Zealand Association in Johannesburg, Seddon wrote that criticism by sections of the southern African press would 'not deter me in the slightest from doing my duty and in using my best efforts in preventing the yellow agony from spreading in South Africa'. The introduction of Asian labourers was not only a debasement of labour, it was:

a desecration of the graves of the sons of New Zealand who fought so nobly for freedom, justice, and the flag of our country. To have as a result, the country which cost us a quarter of a million lives and one hundred and fifty millions in money flooded by a horde of Asiatics is too awful to contemplate. It means the implantation of the Chinese Dragon on the Union Jack to its disfigurement and dishonour. In one respect it would almost serve the money grabbers right were we to leave them to their fate — leave

them to the Boers, the Chinese and the Kaffirs; their position and destiny would then be worse than it was under Kruger. Never again would their outcry for freedom, justice and representation be heard by those who came so nobly to their rescue four years ago.

Seddon condemned the power of wealth and its 'baneful influence' on the press and on mineworkers, adding that the mine owners were 'starving the people into submission'. Nevertheless, the 'cause of empire freedom, and justice' was worth struggling for against all odds; to have the Transvaal 'peopled by the British[,] to give them self government and to have ultimately a federated British South Africa should be the aim and object of all who are well wishers of our country'.⁷⁹

In a letter to Major F.R. McDonald, an Australian expatriate living in Johannesburg, Seddon reiterated his belief that there was sufficient white labour in the Transvaal to build railways and work the mines at a profit because the 'white man can and does do double the work of the black'. In any case, it would be better to have fewer mines operating than have 'the country cursed by the introduction of hordes of Asiatics' who were little better than slaves. If these men were not allowed 'to have their women', the 'terrible evils of the Chinese camp in Australia, of little Bourke St. in Melbourne, and of Chinatown in San Francisco' would be replicated and the Transvaal would be brought to 'a state of immorality which is horrible to contemplate'. In addition, eventually some Chinese would leave the compounds and 'roam at large, and go into business. Believe me, the menace to the moral well-being of the community is such that, giving to the rand mine owners their bent and allowing them to introduce to their heart's delight these Asiatic hordes, those who remain in the Transvaal will live to regret the evil done.'⁸⁰ This state of affairs would not concern capitalists and shareholders living in other countries, but a golden opportunity would have been lost for formulating a splendid scheme of immigration. In the agricultural districts of England, Scotland and Ireland were 'men of our own kindred, to whom this would be as I say, a golden opportunity'. They could easily take up goldmining, would do double the work of 'the Asiatic' and would colonize the Transvaal with Britons. 'They would bring their wives with them: they would increase in number, and the troubles of the past would never arise again in South Africa'. On the other hand, the consequences of admitting Chinese labour into the colony were dire:

Take the converse, — the Boers would assuredly increase in large numbers. They are not a race that easily forgets, and the population of your country will be composed largely of Boers, largely of Chinese, together with a number of Rand mine owners who are not of British origin. Is this what we anticipated when jointly the self-governing colonies took a responsibility on themselves, and made the greatest sacrifices possible for Empire and justice? Something far deeper than profit and pelf should be remembered, when the best interests of our country and the cohesion of its inhabitants are essential to the solidarity of the Empire.⁸¹

The efforts of Seddon and his outraged supporters ultimately failed to sway the resolve of imperial policy makers; the first Chinese mineworkers arrived on Transvaal soil in May 1904. However, the approval of the scheme was to

have serious political repercussions, even if these effects were not generally felt in New Zealand. In South Africa, the agitation radicalized white workers, who successfully consolidated their political influence in the decades that followed. In the United Kingdom, widespread opposition to the Transvaal plan became an important issue in the 1906 general election campaign and played a significant role in the Liberal Party's electoral victory.⁸²

Ken Inglis noted that it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to identify precisely when the colonies of white settlement became independent nation states.⁸³ It is clear that the 1931 Statute of Westminster, with its renunciation of the imperial Parliament's right to legislate for the dominions, marked a crucial constitutional break with Britain, and that between the wars New Zealand and Australia were evolving as independent nations.⁸⁴ However, in the sphere of international relations, Robert Patman argued that the emergence of a distinctive and independent New Zealand foreign policy is a relatively recent development; it was only after 1945 that the pattern of following Britain's lead in external relations changed.⁸⁵

Yet the first, albeit tentative, steps towards a distinctive foreign policy were being taken in New Zealand at the beginning of the twentieth century. Seddon's diplomatic intervention to scrap the Transvaal labour scheme was made independently, without the sanction of the authorities in London, and was portrayed as being in New Zealand's national interest. Seddon also communicated directly with the governments of other self-governing states, thereby circumventing the conventional practice whereby matters concerning external or imperial relations were addressed to the governor, who then corresponded with the secretary of state for the colonies. The effort to prevent the importation of Chinese labour to South Africa was a manifestation of the emerging sense of nationhood sparked by New Zealand's participation in the South African War, but also reflected a continuing loyalty and connection to the British Empire. This commitment to both nation and empire can be characterized as an early incarnation of the 'Dominion idea', which, at its height in the 1930s, embodied 'a distinctive blend of national status and Imperial identity'.⁸⁶

The 'demands of the opposing discourses of empire and nationalism' and the potential for divided loyalties could not be ignored.⁸⁷ The racism that underpinned New Zealanders' opposition to the Transvaal scheme was a central component of both imperial and national identities and thus helped to bind these competing ideologies together. Sinophobia was a familiar feature of New Zealand's national and political life in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and helped colonial society to cohere.⁸⁸ Hostility towards Asian labour also stemmed from the belief that New Zealanders were citizens of the empire and members of the British race; they therefore had an obligation to protect and safeguard the interests of their white imperial cousins, even if they lived many thousands of miles away from the antipodes.

JEREMY MARTENS

University of Western Australia

NOTES

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- 5 These letters form part of the collection of Richard Seddon's miscellaneous correspondence held at Archives New Zealand in Wellington. All archival material cited in this article is located in 'South African War – Papers re protest at introduction of Chinese labour into the Transvaal, 1904', ACHW 8634, SEDDON 2, Box 17, Archives New Zealand, Wellington (ANZ).
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- 7 John Darwin, 'A Third British Empire? The Dominion Idea in Imperial Politics', in J.M. Brown and W.R. Louis, eds, *The Oxford History of the British Empire Volume IV: The Twentieth Century*, Oxford, 1999, pp.64–87. For a recent discussion of dominion status in New Zealand see W. David McIntyre, 'The Development and Significance of Dominion Status', Speech for Dominion Status Symposium, Legislative Council Chamber, Parliament Buildings, Wellington, 26 September 2007. Published online at <http://www.mch.govt.nz/dominion/mcintyre.html> (accessed 13 June 2008).
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- 22 *ibid.*, p.127.
- 23 Sinclair, *Destiny Apart*, p.126.
- 24 Ian McGibbon, 'The Origins of New Zealand's South African War Contribution', in John Crawford and Ian McGibbon, eds, *One Flag, One Queen, One Tongue: New Zealand, the British Empire and the South African War 1899–1902*, Auckland, 2003, p.1.
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- 33 Drummond, p.302.
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- 47 EP, 16 January 1903, p.4.
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- 79 Seddon to Hutchinson, 9 March 1904, ACHW 8634, SEDDON 2, 17, ANZ.
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