

THE CENTENARY OF UNION

It would not be right for this journal to ignore the fact that on 31 May 1910, a century ago, the Union of South Africa came into being. That date saw the birth of the country in which we live today. Before then there were, in what is now South Africa, four separate states: the Cape Colony, Natal, the Transvaal and the Orange River Colony and it was those four British colonies that were combined in 1910 to create one new country. When the term 'South Africa' was used before 31 May 1910, it described the geographical region, not a single country. That the name of the region then became the name of the country remains confusing and this has resulted in the use of the term 'southern Africa' for the region, in order to distinguish it from the country.

Some historians and others have played down the importance of the creation of Union because they were critical of the kind of state, based on racial criteria, that emerged in 1910. Ben Magubane, for example, entitled his book about the emergence of Union *The making of a racist state* (1996). The new Union constitution stipulated, *inter alia*, that only White males could become members of the Union Parliament. Union was a compromise between Boer and Brit, and part of that compromise was that the existing franchises in the four states were retained. That meant that the Cape franchise, which enabled small numbers of Black people to vote, remained in place after Union, but the fact that the very constitution of the new Union contained a colour bar laid the seeds for the development of racial segregation in more extreme forms. Britain had hoped that Union might see the Cape franchise extended to the whole of South Africa, but the reverse happened: the Cape franchise for Black Africans came under attack soon after the advent of the Hertzog government in 1924 and it was abolished in 1936, with only 11 MPs, led by Jan Hendrik Hofmeyr, voting against the legislation. Twenty years later Coloured voters were also deprived of their rights. Soon after Union, the Land Act of 1913 prevented Black Africans from buying land outside of the reserves. From 1976, the apartheid government proceeded to dismember the South African state, with nominal 'independence' being given to former reserve areas, then called homelands or *Bantustans* – first Transkei, followed by three others. But all the *Bantustans* were reintegrated into South Africa proper at the time of the first democratic election in April 1994, so that the new South Africa had essentially the same boundaries as the Union of 1910. (By April 1994, Walvis Bay, which, in 1910, was part of South Africa, had already been incorporated into Namibia).

In 2010, we can clearly see the importance of the events of 1910 in our history. Though a process of integration of the four pre-existing states had begun before that date, the creation of Union was followed by the establishment of many new institutions and organisations that took their names from that of the new state and worked within the framework of that new state. Britain had backed the creation of Union in order for South Africa to take a leading role in the British Empire, a role that South Africa did play after 1910, with Jan Smuts becoming a key imperial statesman, despite the Union's racial segregation policies.

It can safely be said that much of the scientific progress that took place after 1910 would not have taken place had Union not come into being. The united South Africa was able to draw upon much larger resources than any smaller state and the formation of a relatively strong and prosperous united country was an essential foundation for future economic and scientific endeavours. Some of the early implications of Union, especially in terms of science, were chronicled by Cornelis Plug in our first issue of the year (S Afr J Sci. 2010;106(1/2):6-7). Today, South Africa has the largest economy south of the Sahara and leads the continent not only in terms of scientific and technological progress, but also in tertiary education, despite its poor education system. So, in relation to what has been achieved since 1910, we must, at least in some respects, be grateful for the formation of a united country 100 years ago.

With the notable exception of *Business Day*, which has run an interesting series of articles reflecting on the Union, remarkably little attention has been paid to this important anniversary. The National Gallery, which forms part of the Iziko Museums of Cape Town, is celebrating it with an exhibition on South African art over the last century, which is reviewed on page 9 of this issue. Perhaps most importantly, this centenary is an opportunity to reflect upon our progress as a nation. For much of the past century, government in South Africa has focused on the separate identity of its different races, something which has sadly, but perhaps inevitably, continued since the advent of democracy in 1994 – albeit in a different form. University of the Witwatersrand philosopher Achille Mbembe made a different call in opening this exhibition in April – to concentrate instead on our 'sameness'. This would form a sound basis for our second century as a unified country, particularly if we wish to become a unified nation. ■