

# Land as a racial issue and the lost opportunities to resolve the matter (Part of the Zimbabwe Land Series)

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## **Abstract**

*..1953-58 was a period of hope for those whites who recognised that, in the long term, safety and progress for all depended upon a sharing of political power theirs for the time being with an ever-increasing number of blacks... Garfield Todd, in foreword to book by Hardwick Holderness (1985). Lost Chance - Southern Rhodesia 1945-58, ZPH.*

## **1 Introduction**

In this article I take a 60 year historical perspective (2012-1952) of hindsight to discuss the lost opportunities to de-racialise and resolve the land issue. This article is the second of 12 instalments, concluding the introductory and historical context to the series.

## **2 The historical thesis**

In this article I offer additional insight beyond the popular theses as to how Zimbabwe eventually ended up with the fast-track land reform programme. By adding the contentious component of race to my thesis, I hope to persuade the reader on the need for Zimbabwean society to address this issue head-on and openly, if we are to improve prospects for stability and prosperity moving forward. On the land issue, race is by no means the whole story, yet race

accounts for the greater part of decades of tensions as well as cat-and-mouse games within the greater scheme of local and global politics.

This essentially is the premise of my historical treatise of Zimbabwe's land issue as elaborated in this article. Trying to base solutions to Zimbabwe's land issue solely on the recent fast-track land reform alone is not sufficient.

I have divided the article into 3 discussion periods:

1. The first lost opportunity (1950-1980)
2. The second lost opportunity (1980-2010)
3. The last (but not yet lost) opportunity (2010- 2040)

### **3 The First Lost Opportunity (1950-1980)**

When liberal white politics of the 1950s gave way to conservative white politics of the 1960s, this led to the political constant throughout the interim period, symbolized by black nationalists on one hand and white farmers on the other – as the political elites so to speak – and the two became mortal political enemies. This rivalry has been playing itself out since then and continues to do so today. Essentially, each has been poised to take the other out at any opportunity, be it the armed struggle for independence, or the evolving party-political dynamics of recent times.

Much has been written about this period, and my own favourite is the book by Holderness cited above. The period 1953 to 1958 experienced the most liberal white government during Garfield Todd's reign as Prime Minister of Southern Rhodesia. Holderness argues that Zimbabwe then had a firm ground for establishing a stable multi-racial society. The challenge of transformation was in managing the pace of change. Todd was perceived as too fast in embracing blacks and in unravelling the racial laws and infrastructure, and the white electorate un-seated him in 1958 ushering in Edgar Whitehead. Of the apartheid infrastructure that Todd and his supporters had started dismantling included: the Land Apportionment Act (LAA) of 1930 which segregated the races. He also targeted the racial labour, industrial, educational and electoral laws. The white electorate, by electing Whitehead, it seems, wished to slow down the pace. But there was a further white backlash as the Rhodesia Front (RF) party was established and won elections in 1962 on the promise to halt all these reforms. And the RF, in

the minds of black nationalists, was essentially the conservative white farmers and, regrettably, the Commercial Farmers Union (CFU) and its previous formulations were perceived as a proxy of the RF.

I am old enough to remember how my parents engaged these issues of the 1950s. I am also young enough to perceive the continuity of national events up to today into one trajectory. It has been one long attempt to transform from long periods of an apartheid society (1890-1950) to what initially in the 1950s was referred to as multi-racial society. Today we refer to an inclusive and caring democratic society which protects rights of minority groups.

The main tool used by Todd was the parliamentary Select Committees. In the mid-1950s, a Select Committee on Land was established in order to dismantle the racial land laws. The committee recommended that all unallocated European land be designated Special Areas and to be settled by people of any race. For the period leading up to the ushering in of the RF to power, blacks were settled in the Special Areas. The RF abolished the programme, restored the LAA, and removed all blacks settled in the Special Areas without compensation. The RF froze all other similar reforms. This is the point at which the Black Nationalist movement started gravitating towards radical action. After UDI in 1965 both ZANU and ZAPU started crafting the armed liberation struggle, taking a very pointed turn from the nationalist philosophy of one-man-one vote to a struggle to liberate the land.

While I don't imply that the transformation was going to be easier if the white liberals had succeeded in the 1950s, what I can point to is the great affinity and common ground of shared values between the black elites and the white liberals then. In other words a black/white united middle class was a real possibility. Whether or not that would have evolved to transcend major class conflicts I cannot say. One has to appreciate, however, that the black elites that were held in high regard by white liberals in the 1950s included Hebert Chitepo, Leopold Takawira, and many others who went on to lead the military armed struggle. This underscores the radical transformation of these nationalists in the wake of the RF agenda.

## **4 The Lost opportunity in 1980-2010**

With benefit of hindsight, one could argue that at independence in 1980, what was coined as reconciliation was really more of a truce between the two mortal enemies. The only change in that scene was the swap in power

positions with the black political elite assuming State power from the outgoing political elite of white farmers. This truce or accommodating each other ran out of steam as the two camps drifted further apart in the wake of more recent multi-party politics. The negotiated Lancaster House agreement was essentially to put the guns down and reconstruct society through dialogue and constructive engagement. With hindsight, I think Mugabe and his team expected white farmers to stay out of politics and confine themselves to farming and making money! The white farmers, on the other hand, expected the political freedom to resume opposition politics; moreover the two camps never shared a common vision of the future. The only brief period when black and white political elites shared such a vision was in the mid-1950s as I discussed earlier.

To explain the fast track land reform programme in terms of Mugabe looting land for his cronies is therefore a paradigm that misses a bigger point. I would say that once the political truce was thrown out on Mugabe's part, he immediately set to take out the white farmers before they took him out. In terms of cold-blooded political strategy, the fast track would quickly dilute the white farmers economic, social and political power base. Paying out cronies with land, in my opinion, was a collateral and secondary issue, and does not adequately explain the evolution of the land issue. Neither is that thesis fully collaborated by relative amounts of land allocated to cronies vis-à-vis ordinary and poor Zimbabweans. The white farmers, on their part and in response, built their strategy around opposition politics as well as support from a powerful and sympathetic international community. With the ascendance of the MDC into the GNU in 2009 on the back of the GPA, this brought in new black political elite, seated variously in between the old rivalries and adding to the definition of the current situation and prospects moving forward.

So the period 1980 to 2010 was another missed opportunity to resolve the race issue around land. By 1985, at least one important puzzle was answered being evidence that smallholder farming can contribute significantly to overall economic development as small farmers outstripped large farmers in maize and cotton production and marketing. This meant therefore that both smallholder black farmers and large scale white farmers had a major complementary role to play in national economic development as long as the economic policies were conducive and as long as appropriate public sector investments into agriculture were maintained. The second missed opportunity was in the slowing down of the land reform programme after 1985. I did

argue, as Chair of the Land Tenure Commission (1993/4), that it was more beneficial to have a slow but continuous land reform programme than a start-and-stop approach. Thirdly and as part of that Commission we invested time with all key governmental departments and the CFU levels at provincial and national levels. To my disappointment, neither the Government nor the CFU could articulate a long term vision and strategy for transforming an agrarian base of society and economy into a post agrarian industrial society.

Specifically the Commission engaged the CFU Council in 1994 requesting options for a land reform programme in the event that Government went ahead with its plan to acquire an additional 5 million hectares from them. The response was that the CFU farmers retain access to remaining productive land so as to feed the nation and preferably in contiguous lots to maintain social networks. I then made an observation and proposition. The observation was based on a study by a retired visiting German professor in my Department of Land Management at the University of Zimbabwe in the mid-1980s. The study noted poor racial integration and concluded that the social cohesion of 5,000 white farmers dotted all over the country was not sustainable and their social networks based on country clubs would crash if numbers continued to dwindle. My question to the CFU then was the possibility of a self-accelerated land redistribution creating small and medium sized farms most of which would be settled by commercial black farmers. And if we ended up with say 30,000 of these, surely the number of white farmers could actually be maintained at about 4-5,000 or even possibly increase to say 6-7000. Moreover, we would craft a broader and more viable integrated rural middle class, as opposed to a few thousand white landed-gentry with no real integration. The CFU response was that this was idealistic and not practical. I cannot assume that my idea was viable, but I still struggle to foresee the future ideal Zimbabwean society without a more serious level of racial integration.

The mortal enemies therefore kept the window open for further clashes in the period under discussion and history led us into the fast track land reform programme. I believe that the 2 missed opportunities are a form of history repeating itself. Life happens. History unfolds. It will be more rewarding moving forward, however, to create a new progressive history out of the old.

## 5 The Last (but not yet lost) Opportunity (2010-2040)

I will touch briefly on the next 30 years since I will cover this in a later article. The period 2010 to 2020 therefore, and based on my thesis, represents the last opportunity to resolve this rivalry once and for all, and for the nation to evolve from the 60 year period of land politics, to post-agrarian political dimensions. Essential dialogue between Zimbabwe's black political elite and white farmers has to start in earnest. That is the dialogue that represents real national leadership. The international community is an essential component of the discourse, of course, but they need to be guided by the national engagement. I dare say that the nature and quality of discourse between the Africa Union and the International Community on Zimbabwe's land issue can also be characterized by the same cat and mouse indirect engagement as each side avoids the real contentious issue of race and colonial legacy. I will delve into the current activities and possibilities for the future in subsequent articles.

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