

Ian Smith

Rhodesian prime minister and advocate of the white minority who unilaterally declared independence but could not hold out against majority rule

IAN SMITH, who died yesterday aged 88, was the Prime Minister of Rhodesia and an ardent advocate of white rule. In 1965 he unilaterally declared independence from Britain, and over the next 15 turbulent years fought an increasingly bitter war against African nationalist guerrillas, a war that cost between 30,000 and 80,000, mainly black, lives, but it was a struggle he eventually lost, paving the way for the country's independence as Zimbabwe.

To his supporters – white Rhodesians and many in Britain – he was a political visionary, the simple farmer who had stepped forward reluctantly to defend his country against Communism. To the Left he was an abhorrence as the leader of apartheid South Africa. The context of Smith's declaration of UDI was the deep distrust among Rhodesia's 200,000-strong white minority of Britain's motives in Africa following Harold Macmillan's 1960 "Winds of Change" speech which presaged Britain's withdrawal from the continent.

Smith, and his supporters, it seemed the West was only too willing to overlook military misadventure, violence and corruption in black Africa while condemning Rhodesian society which, whatever its shortcomings, offered relative security for its citizens. The West, Smith argued, no longer had the will to stand up to Communism; Rhodesia was the front line, and the whites were not engaged merely in a battle for their existence but for civilised values.

To begin with, despite UN-imposed economic sanctions, Rhodesia's economy actually strengthened under UDI, and Ian Smith appeared to relish his position as an international pariah. Many international companies merely broke the sanctions and Rhodesian businesses and farmers diversified to fill the gaps.

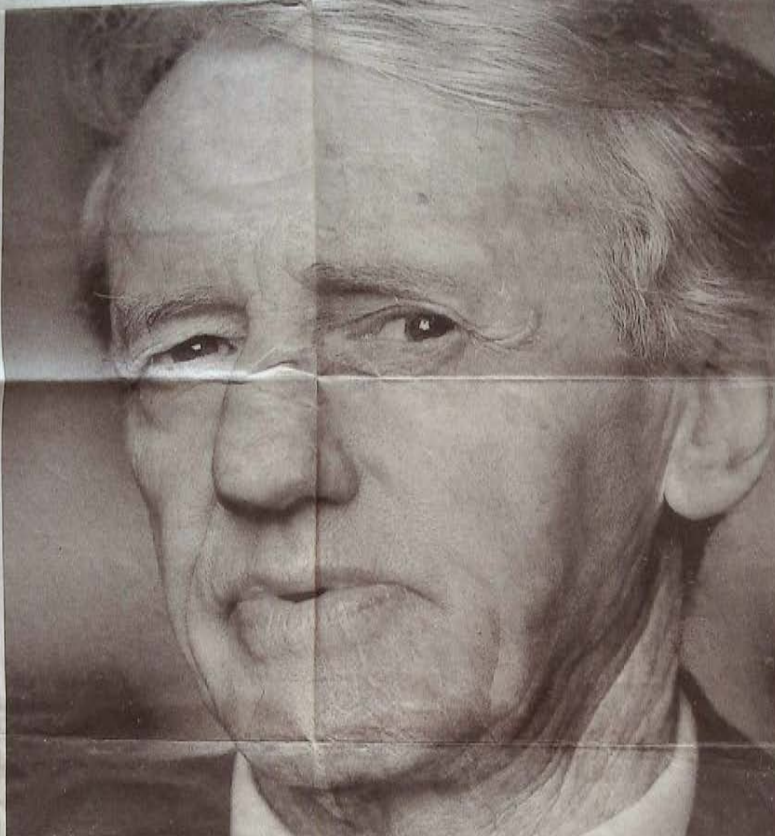
Smith managed to convince white Rhodesians that they could continue to defy world opinion indefinitely: "I don't believe in black majority rule over Rhodesia," he proclaimed, "not in a thousand years." The tide of white emigration from Rhodesia was reversed as thousands of whites, mainly from Britain and South Africa, came to enjoy the advantages of white supremacy.

Smith, the first native-born Rhodesian to lead his country, seemed a simple man, blunt, unemotional and lacking a sense of humour. He was awkward socially, disliked publicity, and his taste in clothes was drab. But his craggy, rough-hewn image concealed an acute tactical mind and a talent for political infighting which his opponents tended to underestimate. Sir Roy Welensky once remarked that "dealing with Smith is like trying to nail jelly to a wall. Make no mistake, Rhodesia is a ruthless man."

British negotiators found that Smith constantly changed the goal posts of negotiation. He denied being a racist, yet almost in the same breath would insist that separate development and racial discrimination were essential ingredients of Rhodesian society.

But in the end it was not diplomacy which wore him down, but armed black opposition and, decisively, South Africa's decision to withdraw support. UDI galvanised black nationalist feeling, and by 1972, guerrilla armies led by Robert Mugabe and Joshua Nkomo were waging regular attacks on white border farms. From then on they conducted their activities from bases in Mozambique, and Smith imposed rigorous retaliatory measures by the Rhodesian armed forces. By 1977 the war was costing Rhodesia around £500,000 a day, and all able-bodied men between 16 and 60 were spending up to a third of the year on active service.

Smith took part in the talks at Lancaster House in London which were to set a new path for what would become Zimbabwe. The final result of UDI was that the white Rhodesians were awarded a deal that removed all traces of their political influence and, after the 1980 general election, the man they most admired, Mugabe, Ian Douglas Smith was born on April 8 1919 at Selukwe, Southern Rhodesia, the son of a Scottish-born butcher and cattle dealer who had emigrated in 1898, and attended local schools at Selukwe and nearby Gwelo, then near Commerce at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, South Africa. There he met and married Janet Watt, the widow of a South African rugby player, whose views on race were if anything more hard-line than her husband's. Smith interrupted his studies in 1939 to join the RAF, joining 237 (Rhodesian) Squadron. During the North Africa campaign he was stationed at Idku, an airfield 20 miles from Alexandria, where, in 1943, his Hurricane crashed on take-off, smashing his head against the instrument panel. Smith's face had to be surgically rebuilt, an operation which left him with a somewhat menacing stare. In 1944, after his Spitfire was shot down over



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the Languar Alps, he spent five months with the Italian partisans before escaping over the Alps into France, where the Allies had just landed. He finished the war in Germany with 130 Squadron. His war experiences left an indelible impression on Smith, and the fact that Rhodesia had done more than any other colony to help the mother country would become central to his sense of betrayal by post-war British governments. After completing his studies, Smith was elected to the Southern Rhodesian Assembly in 1948. He joined the right-wing opposition Liberal Party and stood as a candidate for Selukwe. Initially he opposed the plan for federation between Southern Rhodesia and the territories of Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) and Nyasaland (Malawi). But later he came to realise the potential economic advantages for Rhodesia, and joined the governing Federal Party when the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland was formed in 1953.

By 1958 Smith had become chief government whip under the premiership of Sir Roy Welensky; but when, in 1961, the federalists supported a new constitution, allowing limited representation for black Africans in Parliament, Smith was instrumental in founding the Rhodesian Front (RF), committed to negotiating independence from Britain with a government based upon the white minority.

In December 1962, shortly before the break-up of the Federation, the ruling United Federal Party was defeated by the RF, and Winston Field became prime minister with Smith as deputy prime minister and Treasury minister. At the end of 1963 the Federation was dissolved, and Southern Rhodesia reverted to its former status as a colony.

After the 1964 election, Smith moved quickly to show he meant business. His first official act was to authorise the arrest and banishment of four black African nationalist leaders. The disorder that followed was suppressed vigorously by the police. To keep moderate white opinion on side Smith was careful to emphasise that he wanted a settlement with the British. To his supporters on the Right, however, he asserted he would never compromise on the fundamental issue of white supremacy. The Rhodesian regime, it was exposed when, in September 1964, he set off for London for talks with the Conservative prime minister Alec Douglas-Home.

During the talks Home outlined the British terms for independence which became known as the five

principles. These included: unimpeded progress to majority rule; immediate improvement in the political status of the black population and progress towards ending discrimination. Smith responded by demanding independence under the 1961 constitution (which he had opposed at the time) which he claimed Britain had promised. Home denied that Britain had made any such promise, said that the final step to independence would depend on the consent of all Rhodesians.

Smith seized on this last point when he returned home: "I can prove to the British government I have the support of the majority. They will grant me independence on this one condition and this is true," not was the impression he conveyed that Home and he agreed on how African opinion might be tested.

In October some 600 chiefs and headmen were summoned to give their views and dutifully voted in favour of independence based on the 1961 constitution a view endorsed by the country's whites in a November referendum. When the British government predictably refused to accept that result as valid, Smith accused the British of reneging on their undertakings. Most whites believed him and blamed Britain for a shameful act of treachery. In the Rhodesian General Election of May 1965 all 50 seats in the assembly went to Smith's RF.

The new British prime minister, Harold Wilson, underestimated the gathering momentum towards UDI, while making it more likely by insisting that force would never be used should the blacks decide to go it alone. After months of fruitless talks, in November 1965 Smith declared UDI. A state of emergency was proclaimed, and the British government's right to suspend representation was obtained and 980 years for parity to be reached.

In June 1969 the constitution was endorsed in a referendum by 78 per cent of the (white) electorate, and on March 1 1970 Rhodesia became a republic. A month later there was a general election; the RF swept the board, winning all 50 white seats. After Harold Wilson's departure from office in 1970, Alec Douglas-Home, now Foreign Secretary, returned to the quest for a settlement. Sympathetic to the contention that whites should be able to retain control of the crucial defence, law and order and finance portfolios, Kissinger, meanwhile, found that the deal was totally unacceptable to black nationalist leaders and the Front-line African presidents, but suppressed this information. Smith duly went on Rhodesian television to announce

capital funds needed to sustain development. On the British side, the failure of sanctions obliged Wilson to return to negotiation.

In December 1966 Smith and Wilson met on board the British cruiser *Tiger* off Gibraltar, and worked out a set of constitutional principles in line with the original British terms for a settlement. To begin with, Smith made several concessions. In exchange, Wilson agreed that majority rule should be postponed beyond the end of the century. But the talks broke down over the issue of how Rhodesia could return to legality. Wilson's demand that interim powers be handed over to the loyalist

Governor of Rhodesia, Sir Humphrey Gibbs, proved unacceptable to Smith, and the RF proposals were rejected.

In October 1968, Smith again met Wilson, this time aboard the assault ship *Peacock*. Again the negotiations ended in failure, and Smith told his people "It was clear to us throughout the talks that the British were obsessed with the question of African majority rule. There will be no majority rule in my lifetime – or in my children's."

Smith now felt the way was open to install a new constitution that would "entrench government in the hands of civilised Rhodesians for all time". The draft constitution embodied the concept of "parity" under which the black population would achieve equal representation with the whites in the distant future. Blacks were allocated 16 seats to the white's 50, a proportion which would remain fixed until the black population paid at least 24 per cent of income tax. As they then controlled just half of one per cent, and the average increase in payment was 0.05 per cent per year, it would take 400 years before any significant change in the situation had been reached.

Increasingly desperate as the war spread into the countryside from the border area. In September the American Secretary of State Henry Kissinger presented Smith with a deal settlement providing for "black majority rule within two years".

Playing for time, Smith agreed to the deal, although he insisted that he would not accept the deletion from the term "majority rule", thus leaving the meaning ambiguous, and ensuring that whites should be able to retain control of the crucial defence, law and order and finance portfolios. Kissinger, meanwhile, found that the deal was totally unacceptable to black nationalist leaders and the Front-line African presidents, but suppressed this information. Smith duly went on Rhodesian television to announce

while this did not exclude the possibility of African rule, it postponed it for long enough for the deal to be acceptable to Smith. On November 24 1971 Smith and Home announced their agreement on the proposed settlement. All that remained was to test its acceptability.

Nationalists decided to fight the agreement, and established a new constitution to the parties. Smith, under the figurehead leadership of the moderate Methodist Bishop Abel Muzorewa. The success of their campaign surpassed their wildest dreams.

When, in early 1972, seven teams of commissioners led by Lord Pearce arrived to find the "true voice of Rhodesia", the response was a "hate shock". Riots broke out in Gwelo, Salisbury and Umtali, and elsewhere the commissioners were greeted by rowdy and angry crowds. On his return to Britain, Lord Pearce's verdict was unequivocal: "In our opinion the people of Rhodesia as a whole do not regard the proposals as acceptable as the basis for independence."

On December 21 1972 guerrilla forces operating from neighbouring Mozambique attacked an isolated white homestead in Centenary district, ushering in a period of escalating guerrilla activity, with frequent murders and terrorist attacks. Smith responded initially by lengthening the period of compulsory military service, and by sanctioning reprisals against any Africans suspected of helping the guerrillas, brushing aside the charge that this would drive villagers into the hands of the extremists. In 1975 Joshua Nkomo and Robert Mugabe joined together as the Patriotic Front and prosecuted a punishing guerrilla war.

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the agreement. The white population reacted with stunned disbelief.

Although many assumed it must be yet another of Smith's ruses, the fact that he had been prepared to contemplate majority rule within two years had an enormous psychological impact. In 1976 Rhodesia saw a net loss of more than 7,000 whites, the largest exodus in more than 13 years.

Agreement with the nationalists, however, could not be reached, and by mid-1977 the war had spread across the whole country. By now Smith believed that his only hope of holding on to power lay in coming to an internal settlement with some of the more moderate black leaders. In November 1977 he announced he was prepared to accept the principle of one-man-one-vote as a basis for discussions, and invited Muzorewa, Adamhanga Sibhelo and Chief Chirau (president of the council of chiefs) to meet him for talks.

A series of meetings culminated on March 3 1978 in an agreement which provided for a legislature of 100 members, of which 28 would be white and 72 black. Crucially, though, the whites could veto any legislation affecting their privileges and would retain control of the administration, the security forces, the economy and, for the interim period, parliament. In a referendum among the country's whites held at the end of January 1979, 85 per cent voted in favour of the new constitution; and on April 20, in a general election, Muzorewa's ANC emerged with 51 of the 72 black seats in the new Parliament. Smith's RF took all 28 of the white seats.

Although Smith resigned as prime minister, staying on as minister without portfolio under Muzorewa, there was little doubt where power really lay. Four days after Muzorewa took office, Rhodesian forces raided Mozambique. The raid began at 3 am and Muzorewa was not informed about it until three hours later.

In the meantime it had become abundantly clear that the black moderate leaders would be unable to bring an end to the guerrilla campaign. By mid-1978 the number of PF guerrillas inside Rhodesia had reached 10,000 and there were thousands of whites in hiding in Salisbury. Smith's gamble that the elections might persuade other countries to recognise the new government also proved mislaid.

When Margaret Thatcher came to power in May 1979, her natural inclination was to recognise Muzorewa's government and lift sanctions. But black African states warned her of a trade boycott costing billions of pounds, and there was a risk of a clash with the Carter administration in America.

By now the Rhodesian armed forces were seriously short of manpower, and in September Smith was forced to accept Mrs Thatcher's invitation to a peace conference at Lancaster House in London.

The British foreign secretary, Lord Carrington, presented a draft constitution to the parties. Smith denounced it as "madness", but Muzorewa supported the proposals, and on December 1 the Rhodesian Parliament voted to dissolve itself in favour of an interim British administration under Lord Soames, with the elections scheduled for February 1980. In its only concession to Smith, the Lancaster House agreement guaranteed 20 white seats in the 100-seat Parliament, but only until 1987.

In the elections Mugabe's Zanu-cho won victory, winning most of the seats in the new parliament. Nkomo's Zapu held on to its Ndebele strongholds, and formed the opposition South-West Africa Front claimed all 20 reserved seats in a reflex vote by the white electorate.

At first it seemed that Smith's dire predictions about the future might prove to be ill-founded. Despite Mugabe's inflammatory rhetoric, whites kept their land and foreign investment was encouraged. Smith continued to exorcise Mugabe as a Marxist dictator, but during the 1980s was seen as an increasingly irrelevant figure.

In 1987 he was expelled from parliament for 12 months for criticising sanctions imposed on neighbouring South Africa; by the time his suspension was lifted, the whites had lost their seats in parliament.

During the 1980s, as Mugabe's regime became increasingly corrupt and violent, Smith took a grim delight in seeing his predictions come true: "It helps lift my depression that the majority of black people are saying it is time to get rid of this bunch of corrupt ghouls," he said.

Smith continued to nurse a deep sense of grievance about the way he had been "betrayed" by those countries, principally Britain and South Africa, which he felt should have seen his historical role in their memoirs. The *Great Betrayal* (1997) he put the blame for Rhodesia's collapse on almost everybody except himself: "During UDI we had the greatest national spirit in the world, a fantastic country, great race relations, the happiest black faces in the world... if our friends hadn't betrayed us, we'd have won." Ian Smith's wife Janet died in 1994. They had two sons and a daughter.