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The History of Race Relations in Rhodesia

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The modern history of Rhodesia dates from 1890, with the Occupation of Mashonaland, or 1887, when the train of events leading to the Occupation was set in motion. Contact between White and Black was already well established in the political, economic and social spheres, and attitudes formulated in the precolonial period were to have a strong influence on later developments. But important as the earlier period undoubtedly was, it lies outside the scope of this paper which is concerned with modern race relations in the post-1887 era.

Like ancient Gaul, the history of modern Rhodesia can be divided into three parts: Chartered Company rule, which was succeeded in 1923 by Responsible Government and the period after 1953 when Southern Rhodesia was absorbed into the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. Although continuity throughout these successive periods is at least as important as change, they do correspond to different phases of governmental policy towards the Africans. The Chartered era was a curious amalgam of integration and segregation, of control and *laissez-faire*. The following period, under responsible government, saw the introduction of a more rigid policy of segregation yet this was also a time of African development, especially in the fields of health and education. After 1953 integration became the watchword, and even though a

segregationalist government took over in 1962, the realities of the situation permitted the entrenchment of a significant degree of integration.

Chartered rule, during which many basic patterns were to form, began under the auspices of a concession to Rhodes from Lobengula, King of the Ndebele, who laid claim to almost the whole of modern Rhodesia. The interaction of the white imperialist and the black traditional ruler was to have an important bearing on the subsequent course of events. Lobengula had continued the policy of his father, Mzilikazi, in maintaining the independence of his people. The missionary, J. S. Moffat, once referred to this policy as 'Chinese isolation' but Whites were permitted in the Kingdom, if only as a means of reducing possible pressures that would follow total exclusion. Lobengula was well disposed to white people provided always that they remained subject to his authority. They enjoyed a privileged position and in some cases Whites became personal friends of the King, but woe betide any who flouted his sovereignty, as the arrogant negrophobe Frank Johnson discovered to his cost. Lobengula was still supreme in his own country.

In 1887 Lobengula made a treaty with the South African Republic, represented by the well-known Boer trader, Piet Grobler. The

King was strengthening his independence by securing an alliance with the neighbouring Transvaal but Rhodes, who had coveted Matabeleland for some years, persuaded the High Commissioner to take immediate counter-measures to safeguard British interests. The result was the Moffat Treaty, a treaty of friendship between the Ndebele and Britain under the terms of which the latter was able to keep out foreign powers. Lobengula was still plagued by a variety of concession-seekers amongst whom Rhodes' group represented the greatest threat to Ndebele independence. For Rhodes wanted more than mineral rights; he intended to create a British settlement in the area between the Limpopo and the Zambezi and to cut off the Boers from expansion northwards. To have disclosed his intentions to Lobengula would have been fatal and they were carefully disguised in the negotiations for a concession. Rhodes' chief emissary, Rudd, promised that only ten white men would be sent to organize mining and that they would be subject to the sovereignty of the Ndebele King. Such 'verbal clauses', however, were not included in the written text of the Rudd Concession (1888). Lobengula had chosen to accept Rhodes' group (which was aided and abetted by imperial officers) without being aware that he was being deceived. When he learned that he had been tricked, he cancelled the concession. Race relations in modern Rhodesia had opened on a sour note.

CHARTERED COMPANY PERIOD

Rhodes secured a royal charter for his British South Africa Company which in August-September 1890 occupied Mashonaland. If the Ndebele state was by far the most powerful polity in southern Zambezia, the congeries of Shona-speaking polities embraced the great majority of people in the area. The Pioneers occupying Mashonaland saw many villages perched high on kopjes as a defensive measure against Ndebele raids and they drew the conclusion that all the Shona were victims of the Ndebele. While some Shona polities did indeed suffer the scourge of Ndebele raids, others remained in harmonious relations with their warlike neighbours, though usually at a subordinate level. More distant Shona states had no contact with the Ndebele. (East of the Mtilikwe River the Gaza played a comparable role to their Ndebele cousins.) Shona defences against

Ndebele aggression had been improved through contact with the Portuguese. Having once been dominant in Shona country, the Portuguese were now returning in some force to substantiate their claims to Mashonaland. In exchange for treaties the Shona eagerly took guns for use against the Ndebele imperialists. When the British Pioneers arrived, the Shona imagined that like the Portuguese and traders and hunters like Selous, they would in due course go away again. But this time the Whites had come to stay.

The Pioneers were a very mixed body of men. Victor Morier, a corporal in the Police and son of a famous British diplomat, recorded the range: from an unusually high proportion of public school and university men to unemployed riff-raff from Johannesburg. Pioneer types are not the sort of people to be gentle in their dealings with 'niggers' as Morier referred to the Africans. Whether of British or South African birth they looked down on the Shona as cowardly, dirty *untermenschen*. In spite of these harsh attitudes and rough behaviour race relations did not strike the depths usual in frontier situations. With the Pioneers came a degree of law and order enforced by the Administration and the British South Africa Company Police.

Law and order were applied with a severity that was to become traditional in Rhodesia and in a number of incidents recalcitrant Shona were dealt with with undue harshness. Lobengula protested, not against the harshness, but against Company interference with his 'dogs'. When Lobengula himself took action against rebellious Shona subjects around Victoria, the tiny white community reacted hysterically and demanded war. The Company, which had no more been planning war than had Lobengula, changed its policy and drove out the hapless King from Bulawayo (1893).

The Ndebele had lost their prized independence; the conquerors had become the conquered. The Whites took over the Ndebele heartland, confiscated much cattle and treated even the *zansi* aristocrats with contempt. The Shona suffered less but felt particularly aggrieved since they had never been conquered. Forced labour was exacted from both Shona and Ndebele and the bad race relations that resulted from accumulated grievances led to the Risings of 1896-7. Although there was a limited degree of co-ordination, it seems likely

that the Ndebele Rebellion and the Shona Rising were distinct movements both aimed at the restoration of the 'good old days'. Indeed a number of Shona politics aligned themselves according to traditional inter-tribal rivalries. While some rose, others co-operated with the Whites and a third group remained neutral.

If the Whites had caused the Risings, the African dissidents hit back savagely, murdering women and children. This in turn provoked a savage reaction on the part of the Whites, who dynamited whole communities out of their places of refuge. The effect of the Risings was traumatic. For the Whites, who had lost no less than ten per cent of their number, a new era of fear had opened, while fear of the Whites forced the Africans to eschew violence for two generations.

The *sturm und drang* of the Occupation years was followed by a quarter century of peaceful Company rule. Sir Robert Tredgold has claimed that the reformed system (1898-1923) was the best form of government the Africans have never known in Rhodesia. In 1898 Rhodesia's first constitution allowed for a strong measure of imperial control as neither the Company nor the colonists could be trusted with unfettered authority over the Africans. Legislation was subject to veto and a Resident Commissioner was the 'imperial watchdog' in Salisbury. In theory the system was non-racial but in practice a degree of discrimination persisted. There was, however, no overall policy of segregation and Wilson Fox, the General Manager of the Chartered Company, explicitly propounded an integrated approach to the economy as a whole. Separate development was shunned but job reservation, land segregation and discrimination in everyday life were widespread.

Land, that vital element in tribal society, had been recklessly alienated. The Ndebele were gradually driven off their homelands and much Shona land was occupied by the Whites. The few African reserves were treated as a temporary cushion against the impact of westernization. Initially Africans derived considerable benefit from catering for the food requirements of the country while the Whites concentrated on mining. When it became clear, however, that the gold deposits were limited, the Company began to foster white agriculture. The African peasantry was deprived of many of its new-found sources of income in favour of the white

farmer.

Politically and socially the Whites entrenched their power, restrained only by imperial leading strings which were not always held taut. The constitution was colour-blind (from 1898 to 1969) in accordance with imperial practice and Rhodes' dictum of 'equal rights for all civilized men'. When asked to define a civilized man Rhodes had given a very wide definition: 'A man, whether white or black, who had sufficient education to write his name, has some property or works. In fact is not a loafer.' But since there were few Blacks with any education in Rhodesia at this stage, effective political power was shared by the Company and the Whites, especially the farming interest. Apart from the vote, educated Africans were treated little differently from other Africans. The small group of Mfengu, educated Africans from the Cape, were the chief sufferers, and they objected to practices like having to raise their hats to all Whites and not being allowed to walk on the pavements. The Mfengu were prime movers in African political groups such as the South African Natives Association. This was an elitist organization which requested that 'there should be differentiation between us and the raw native'. Another party desirous of participation in the political system was the eminently respectable Rhodesia Bantu Voters Association formed in 1923, with two members of the Legislative Council in attendance.

In everyday life white brutality continued, especially on farms and mines. The novelist Gertrude Page related in *Jill's Rhodesian Philosophy* (1910) her horror when the cook on the farm handed some cooked potatoes: 'I would have hit him over the head with a saucepan as I believe is quite the correct mode of procedure out here.' On the mines conditions were grim. Native Commissioner Archie Campbell in 1900 reported a particularly bad mine at which an African had been left to die in the veld after an accident; another had to crawl home with a serious wound, only to be accused of desertion; two others received three days' pay and £2 respectively as compensation for losing a leg. The Chief Native Commissioner supported Campbell's objections but it was several years before a system of compensation was established. The death rate, chiefly from pneumonia, reached appalling figures and strong action by the Colonial Office and Sir Drummond Chaplin, the Administrator, was

needed before improvements were implemented.

The Whites were motivated principally by fear. They formed a small community scattered amongst the black majority and in addition to physical fear of the Africans, they wished to preserve their separate and superior position. It is not difficult to appreciate the immense cultural disparity at that time but this was perverted into a prejudice that the gap had to be maintained. The *Rhodesia Herald*, for example, criticizing a mixed tea-party at the Methodist church in Gwelo early in the century stated: 'The kaffir is essentially inferior to the white and will for all time remain so'. The *Herald* was horrified in 1906 at the suggestion by Randall-MacIver, the archaeologist, that Zimbabwe had probably been built by Africans. What would happen to the tourist trade? And in what they hoped would be the last word on the Zimbabwe controversy added: 'For the alkaline touch of the kaffir kills'.

The most sensitive area of race relations was sex. There was more than one attempted lynching over 'black peril' issues but none succeeded thanks to the tradition of law and order established from the outset. The depth of feeling over this subject is evidenced by a fine of £20 imposed on an African found hiding under a white woman's bed compared to a mere £5 fine on a farmer who tied up an African and inflicted twenty lashes.

The Chartered Company was biased in favour of the Whites on whom it was becoming increasingly dependent. Nevertheless it retained a certain flexibility in policy and could on occasion serve as an arbiter between the races, as in the improvement of mining conditions. The Company's greatest achievement was the establishment of the *pax britannica*. Tribal warfare was outlawed and if the Africans had lost some of their initial economic gains, traditional agriculture began to benefit from peaceful conditions and the spread of such basic inventions as the plough. But the Company was a commercial concern and showed little initiative in such directions as education even for the Whites and still less for the Africans.

RESPONSIBLE GOVERNMENT

In the Company period many basic patterns were established which have been modified or extended by subsequent developments. Responsible Government, for example, led immedi-

tely to plans for rigid segregation. The informal segregation of the early years had to a large extent been a natural development but segregation became a vicious circle. The lack of contact between White and Black gave rise to a host of myths and legends which were in turn used as the rationale for the maintenance of segregation. It was a self-perpetuating system.

The cornerstone of Rhodesian segregation was the Land Apportionment Act of 1930. Land segregation was initiated to protect white interests but it was supported in principle by the Africans and their champions, Fr Cripps and Revd John White. White summed up the melancholy realities which had obliged him to deviate from his usual path of integration: 'The right of the native to purchase land anywhere means that he can purchase land nowhere.' The Land Apportionment Act did allow for areas where an African could purchase his own plot but the general division of the land was grossly unfair. In 1934 the other 'twin pillar of segregation' was added in the shape of the Industrial Conciliation Act which instituted a formal colour bar against African workers. The shutters were being put up to prevent African competition and further legislation protected the privileged position of the white elite, like the Maize Control Acts.

At the helm during the peak period of segregation was Sir Godfrey Huggins who had entered parliament an unrepentant racist. He saw the Whites as a permanent aristocracy: a carefully selected body of British colonists who would rule over the 'lesser breeds without the law'. Through his 'twin pyramid' approach Whites and Blacks would develop in separate spheres. One of Huggins's few redeeming features at this stage of his career was his concern for African health. A medical man himself he helped to develop in Southern Rhodesia what became the finest health service in Africa. His greatest achievement in this field was to be the Harare and Mpilo hospitals of the early fifties. In education the way was less clear, for competition with Whites was a constant fear. Huggins's Chief Native Commissioner, Colonel Carbutt, even suggested that all educated Africans should be sent north of the Zambezi. Nevertheless more was achieved in education than under Company rule.

Huggins himself was beginning to evolve. A true conservative, he was suspicious of change but willing to adapt to new circumstances in

order to preserve the essence of the old ways. In the forties he began to speak of giving the Africans 'a place in the sun'. For the first time Africans in the urban areas were coming to be recognized as permanent town-dwellers and in 1945 Huggins negotiated an honourable settlement of the African railway strike. After the Second World War African agriculture was encouraged and modern methods implemented, as in the much-maligned Land Husbandry Act of 1951. The War had swept Rhodesia into the industrial age. Immigrants poured in to serve the expanding economy and Whites and Blacks were thrown together in the radically different circumstances of urban life.

FEDERATION

In the Federal era great challenges emerged to the essentially rural outlook of Rhodesians. Urbanization produced African nationalism as a response to continued discrimination. The Nationalists linked urban and rural grievances to create mass protest movements which sought power rather than participation. While the new Prime Minister, Garfield Todd, was a tough administrator who more than once threatened the Nationalists, he achieved a good deal for the Africans. Similarly his successor, Edgar Whitehead, who introduced even harsher repressive legislation, extended the improved education system, one of the finest in Africa. African employment rose to record levels. Integration was the order of the day and in the political sphere the 1961 Constitution ensured that Africans would enter parliament for the first time. In Salisbury and Bulawayo theatres, cinemas and hotels integrated, as did leading national organizations.

The wave of integration affected the two main racial groups differently. The Africans, reacting after decades of discrimination, became more strident in their demands. When these were met only in part, violence erupted. A white backlash, against integration and against violence in both Rhodesia and the newly independent countries of Africa, swept the Rhodesian Front Party into power in 1962.

Significantly the most important single factor in their success was Whitehead's pledge to repeal the Land Apportionment Act. The Africans refused to save Whitehead arguing that an R.F. victory would precipitate a showdown in which Britain would hasten to their rescue.

AFTERMATH

Surprisingly much integration survived the onslaught of the R.F. Winston Field allowed the private schools to integrate in 1963, and the ratio of Whites to Blacks in employment has steadily declined due to the failure of R.F. immigration policies. But in 1965 Ian Smith seized independence, the logical conclusion of which was the racist 1969 Constitution which deprived Africans of any effective political power. A parallel measure, the Land Tenure Act, awarded half the land to the white minority (five per cent). Although African employment remained higher than in Black Africa, there was much unemployment and wages were one tenth of white wages. Political repression continued.

The paradox of modern Rhodesia is that while white attitudes towards Africans have improved markedly since 1890 and integration has come to be accepted in many spheres, race relations have reached their lowest ebb since the Risings. The explanation lies in the rising tide of expectation on the part of an increasingly educated and westernized African population. The tragedy of modern Rhodesia is that the races are so concerned with promoting their own sectional interests that they ignore the hopes and fears of the other group. The Whites, despite notable achievements, have created a society based on inequality and denial of human rights. The Africans, despite widespread discrimination, have derived considerable benefit from the presence of the Whites. But neither side is prepared to face up to the consequences of their interdependence. The story of race relations in Rhodesia is what Disraeli, in other circumstances, called a 'tale of two nations'.

