

November 20, 2007 8:43 pm

# Obituary: Ian Smith, architect of white-minority rule in Rhodesia

By Michael Holman

Ian Smith, the former prime minister of Rhodesia – now Zimbabwe – has died at the age of 88, convinced that history had vindicated his decision to break with Britain to preserve white-minority rule.

His unilateral declaration of Rhodesia's independence from Britain, UDI, was made on November 11 1965. "We have struck a blow for the preservation of justice, civilisation and Christianity and in this belief we have assumed our sovereign independence," he proclaimed.

## **Ian Smith - a life in pictures**

The declaration, which Smith read live on state radio and television, brought a temporary halt to the surge of African nationalism sweeping the continent. Yet UDI did no more than postpone the inevitable collapse of white-minority rule in southern Africa. And the price was high: a bloody guerrilla war in which 30,000 died – all but 1,100 of them black – and which created half a million refugees in a population of 5m.

Nonetheless, if the scale of human suffering is the yardstick, the country that was renamed Zimbabwe at independence in 1980 is worse off today under Robert Mugabe than it was under Smith.

But UDI was not a well-intentioned attempt to find a middle way between South Africa's apartheid and the coups and mismanagement that marked much of early post-independence Africa. Rather it was an assertion of white supremacy.

At the time of UDI, 5,000 white farmers owned most of Rhodesia's best agricultural land. UDI sought to consolidate white-minority rule. Smith's first years in power saw tentative moves towards racial integration reversed: every feature of life, from school sports to hotel access, from restaurants to public lavatories, became dependent on skin colour.

Helped by high prices for its exports – tobacco and minerals – and with the initial support of South Africa and Portugal, the government easily circumvented international economic sanctions imposed over UDI.

Dour, tough as well as stubborn, Ian Douglas Smith was born in 1919 in Rhodesia, where his Scottish-born father was a butcher. Educated at Rhodes University in South Africa, he served as a Royal Air Force pilot in the second world war. He survived the crash of his Spitfire in Italy but injuries left one side of his face partially immobilised.

He returned home, became a farmer and in 1948 married Janet Watt, a school teacher. The couple had two sons and a daughter. At the age of 28 he became Rhodesia's youngest MP. Over the next decade Africa was racked by change. The spectacle of white refugees streaming out of the Belgian Congo, now Zaire, to escape the disintegration that followed independence symbolised the anarchy that Smith came to fear.

With Britain insisting there could be no independence without majority rule and his United Rhodesia party divided, Smith resigned and helped set up the Rhodesian Front to "preserve Rhodesia for the Rhodesians". He emerged as leader and, following a sweeping endorsement in 1965 from the almost exclusively white electorate, he prepared for UDI, turning Rhodesia into a de facto one-party state. Radio and television lost their independence, newspapers were censored, the army commander was forced to retire and civil servants were replaced.

Smith soon became an iconic figure: he was the first Rhodesian-born prime minister; he had an unchallengeable war record; and as a farmer he was attuned to the fears of land reform that would follow black-majority rule. But having achieved his immediate objective, he could offer no viable blueprint that took into account the hopes and aspirations of the country's black majority.

British efforts to negotiate an end to the rebellion, including talks with Harold Wilson, the prime minister, failed. "No majority rule in a thousand years," Smith declared in 1977, refusing to read the writing on the wall.

In 1978 Smith found an ally in Bishop Abel Muzorewa, a churchman-turned-politician. Again, Smith could not face the prospect of majority rule: the terms of the constitution that was supposed to end the guerrilla war kept power in white hands. The failure sealed the fate of both men: it destroyed the credibility of Muzorewa among black Zimbabweans and exposed Smith's reluctance to accept the inevitable. Eventually he was forced to surrender power after constitutional talks at Lancaster House in London in 1979. Independence elections in 1980 finally brought UDI to an end.

At best Smith was a paternalist rather than a racist, advocating "advancement on merit" but always envisaging a white hand on the tiller. By the end of his life he may have won a certain respect from his black countrymen for his sheer cussedness and fearless criticism of the man who succeeded him. Yet Mugabe was arguably a tyrant that Smith himself had helped create.

Smith remained an MP until 1988. When he retired, he and his wife, who died in 1994, were allowed to live on in Zimbabwe, unharmed and unharassed. It said as much about the

extraordinary tolerance of his black countrymen as it did about Smith.

**Printed from:** <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/3a911d08-97a8-11dc-9e08-0000779fd2ac.html>

Print a single copy of this article for personal use. Contact us if you wish to print more to distribute to others.

© **THE FINANCIAL TIMES LTD 2013** FT and 'Financial Times' are trademarks of The Financial Times Ltd.