

**Smoke and mirrors:
another look at politics and ethnicity in Zimbabwe**

A SPEECH BY ROY BENNETT , RHODES HOUSE, OXFORD, 29 MAY 2012

Distinguished guests, Rhodes scholars, ladies and gentlemen—

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak at this venue tonight. I do so in the knowledge that some will wince—and others will rub their hands together—at the sight of a former white Rhodesian farmer addressing an audience that benefits from the largesse of Rhodesia’s founder and colonial overlord, Cecil John Rhodes. But these connotations and associations constitute the main reason why I accepted the kind invitation to speak to you. I intend to tackle these issues head-on. I do so in the expectation that some will disagree violently with what I have to say, while others—both black and white—will distort my words for their own ends. I also recognise that Zimbabwe’s history and politics are complex and that I have been a participant rather than a neutral observer. However, I will try to be honest and to speak the unvarnished truth as I see it.

The central thesis of my talk is that Robert Mugabe and Zanu-PF have, since independence in 1980, consistently used ethnicity and

other smokescreens to disguise brutal political and material objectives. But before I get started, I need to make clear that I am not denying the colonial wrongs upon which they hang many of their obfuscations. There can be no denying the arrogance, exploitation, violence and humiliations that accompanied much of white rule in Rhodesia. Land was stolen, people were brutalised, basic human rights were denied and the system was rigged to promote the interests of a minority. At the same time, I do refute deliberately simplistic interpretations and manipulations of that history, particularly where these are used to justify the unjust and defend the indefensible.

There are, I think, two misconceptions that need to be uncovered if we are to disentangle the twists and turns taken by Zanu-PF over the last 32 years. The first is the fallacy that Zanu is, in effect, a victim of history and of various invisible forces that seek to undermine the party's ongoing role as liberator. Certainly, every government faces various constraints, but Zanu-PF frequently presents itself as confronting only two options: that of capitulating to subversive, usually imperialist, forces or that of bravely fighting against them. Yet it must be remembered that when Mugabe was given the legal power to govern the country, he and his party quickly consolidated their control over the state apparatus. They

have retained that control ever since. They have been in a position to make a range of choices—and they have used this discretion to pursue an agenda that has nothing to do with national liberation or freedom. I will illustrate my point in a minute.

The second misconception, related to the first, is that Zanu-PF grapples sincerely with the legacies of colonialism and the realities of north–south inequality. In the views of some, they have done so wrong-headedly, but they have nonetheless done so with good intentions. This view is prevalent among Africa’s ruling classes and is shared, with a few reservations, by some in the West. But it is to buy into the stereotypes propagated by Rhodesian Prime Minister Ian Smith, who represented black people as simpletons, with the slightly more intelligent political types capable only of subjecting themselves to communist puppeteers. It is ironic that Zanu-PF should continue to broadcast a colonial view of themselves as sincere imbeciles. They are far from that. Mugabe and his lieutenants have deliberately, cynically and strategically acquired and defended power. They have deliberately, cynically and strategically used propaganda to disguise their purposes. When the history of Zimbabwe is more fully written and understood, this point will become even more clearly visible than it was at the time to those of us who have experienced the depredations of the

regime. Zanu-PF have been cunning and calculating—and to a degree and level of detail that would astonish many outsiders. I respect Mugabe for very little, but as an intellect from hell he is outstanding. And he is not alone.

In highlighting Zanu-PF's freedom to make choices and the cunning self-awareness with which they have done so, I am not suggesting that the colonial experience left Mugabe and his comrades without scars, nor am I saying that nothing has ever been done in Zimbabwe with the intention of reversing historical disparities. What I am asserting is that the primary agenda has always been the pursuit of wealth and power—and that basic human rights, let alone the national good, have always been thrown out the window when they impinge on that agenda. The Big Lie is found in the contradictions between rhetoric and reality: the 'liberators' enslave, the 'avengers' steal, the 'defenders' murder and rape.

Whites were not the first object of Mugabe's wrath. In the early years of independence, it was the Ndebele people who bore the brunt of Zanu-PF's ambitions while the world lauded Mugabe for a supposed policy of reconciliation and for a non-aligned foreign policy. The Ndebele stood solidly behind Joshua Nkomo's party,

Zapu—and they were relentlessly repressed, oppressed and bludgeoned until 1987. We were told that Zapu were plotting against the government. We were told the Ndebele had not accepted their minority status and sought to reverse the will of the majority. We were told they were a clear and present danger to democracy, that they were orchestrating bandits to make the country ungovernable. We were told lies. This was the first of the smokescreens blown at us after independence. The real reason was that Zapu was the main obstacle on the road to a one-party state. It stood in the way of Zanu's desire to rule in solitude and so it had to be knocked over. Zapu was attacked mercilessly, both directly and indirectly. Its officials were arrested, tortured and 'disappeared'—and its supporter base, civilians—were treated to a medieval-style pogrom in 1983 and 1984. Many thousands died in what was the crudest of crude attempts to force Zapu into capitulation through the screams of its supporters and families. There remains much to be said and much to be done about that period.

There were other events in this early period that show how the supposed objectives of national liberation were subordinated to political imperatives. One of the most striking is the handling of the land issue in Matabeleland while Zapu was being persecuted. Land was the centrepiece of Zanu's wartime platform. As in most

African countries, most of Zimbabwe's population lived in the rural areas and Zanu had tapped into resentments over the large tracts of land that had been occupied by white farmers, some of which had been seized in living memory. During the war, Zanu promised that this land would be taken back and redistributed among the black peasantry after independence. Therefore, in 1980, when Zanu-PF took power, there was a burden of expectation on the government and it sought donor aid to design, fund and implement land resettlement schemes. In Matabeleland, the United Nations Development Program funded World Bank personnel to conduct research and come up with a scheme appropriate for Matabeleland's climate and demography. After four years of extensive survey work and community consultation in both Matabeleland North and South, a resettlement plan dubbed 'Model D' was ready. Custom-designed for the region, it had been approved by the Zanu leadership, the chiefs and the people on the ground. All that remained was for government to give it the go-ahead. Instead, it was unceremoniously dumped in the bin. This had nothing to do with a lack of money, an excuse that the government rolled out repeatedly when questions were asked about the slow pace of land reform. At the time, Zanu-PF was more interested in murdering the Ndebele than developing them. Indeed, at the very moment Model D was tabled, the government was

using the military to block food aid reaching drought-stricken Matabeleland South. Thousands were starving as a result. So much for agrarian reform. So much for liberation promises. I repeat my point: in Mugabe's Zimbabwe, when politics and greed collide with the national good, it's politics and greed that win—and usually with more than a touch of brutality.

Fast forward to Zanu-PF's 'Fast-track land reform program'—the internationally famous land invasions that began in 2000. If the media version was to be believed, this was when Mugabe 'turned bad' and turned on the whites after 20 years of moderate government. (Of course, the Ndebele had long told a different story, but few had been listening.) At the other end of the spectrum, we now have a revisionist school in academia that seeks to correct what it sees as different media distortions—the notions that all the land was taken by Mugabe's cronies and that peasant agricultural production has collapsed. But this is to attack a straw man. It is to miss the point. Both the media and this revisionist school have a poor understanding of the primary colours of Zanu-PF's rule since 1980.

The key to understanding the land invasions is to look at motive. Why did Zanu-PF endorse and organise the land seizures? The

rhetoric of land reform and the constant harping about race and inequality was another smokescreen. The fundamental reason was political—Zanu’s grip on power had been threatened. The party had become deeply unpopular after trashing the economy and it was under immense pressure from a new opposition, the Movement for Democratic Change, or MDC. The land invasions were a way of hitting back and the thinking here was twofold. First, it was an electoral gimmick. Zanu-PF hoped that a free-for-all on white farms would help it recover some lost support. It was a deliberate attempt to appeal to base instincts—and to cash in on some cheap gratitude. The evidence is more than circumstantial. In private conversations, Zanu leaders made explicit reference to this rationale. In one document from a sensitive source, Eddison Zvobgo, a senior member of the party, says that he regretted the economic chaos that would result from the invasions but remarks that it had to be done for electoral reasons. Note the juxtaposition here. This was not mere populism. It was a last-ditch effort to pull back support in spite of the massive damage it would do to the country. Zvobgo was one of the few in Zanu-PF who had shown a flicker of genuine interest in development, especially in his own province. On this issue, he was as moderate as you would get in the ruling party, but the attitude was: we need to do this to stay in

the driving seat—and the consequences be damned. Again, politics and greed over the national good.

The second rationale was that some of the MDC's key support structures were on the white farms. Zanu-PF's propaganda machine made a hullabaloo over whites who had donated money to the MDC in an attempt to portray the party as a front for white interests. That was a lie, but away from the spin, the Zanu-PF security machinery did have a keen awareness of the importance of white farmers and their workers to the MDC. Many farmers had become involved with the new party and were putting finances, logistical support and their knowledge of the rural areas toward the building of MDC structures. Similarly, a very large proportion of the million-strong white farm workforce were anti-Zanu-PF and were working closely with their employers. This rural constituency threatened not only to make inroads into Zanu-PF's traditional rural support base but it was merging with the MDC's strong urban labour structures in what was looking to be a powerful and well-balanced opposition. Zanu decided that it had to break these linkages. The white farmers had to be disrupted or driven off the land and their workers scattered.

My own experience is a case in point. When it became clear to Zanu-PF that I was going to stand on an MDC ticket in the rural seat of Chimanimani, I was summoned to the local country club in May 2000, one month before the elections. There I was met by a member of Mugabe's intelligence organisation, Zanu-PF officials, the police and an assortment of thugs. It was not the colour of my skin that was the topic of conversation. Rather, I was told that my involvement with MDC was a problem. The message was that if I persisted, I would lose my farm and possibly my life. But if I desisted, everything would be ok. It was also at this time, when our collective determination was becoming evident, that my workers and party helpers began to be beaten and harassed. This was in every sense of the word a political operation. It was one that was repeated in thousands of locations across the country.

In 2012, there are but a handful of white farms left. The enemy has become less and less visible. The whipping boys are few and far between. And so the mirrors and smokescreens become more and more absurd. The latest is the drive toward 'indigenisation', a bastardisation of South Africa's Black Economic Empowerment program. Having freed the land from the British kith-and-kin, it is time, we are told, to free the remainder of the economy from the clutches of white capital and return it to real Zimbabweans. The

official definition of an indigenous Zimbabwean is overtly racist. ‘Vir gebruik deur nie-blankes’—‘for use by non-whites only’ as the Apartheid government would have put it. But I’m not going to dwell on this. It is another facade—another hall of mirrors. Again, the gap between rhetoric and reality shows the lie. Some of Zanu-PF’s most important partners, co-sponsors of the current economic anarchy, are whites. There is a relatively small but very significant network of whites that work closely with the ruling party. Behind closed doors, Zanu-PF is infinitely pragmatic. The message will come down from on high: ‘He is one of us; leave him alone’.

The relationships are hidden, but the reasons for them are simple. These men help push the gravy train and grease the wheels of the party machine. Greed was an important sub-theme of the land invasions, with many of the best farms going to Zanu-PF functionaries. But ‘Fast-track Land Reform’ was in the first place an election stunt, a desperate and particularly perverse form of pork barreling. Indigenisation has flipped the order of priorities. The propaganda is still populist in its presentation, but Zanu-PF knows that no-one is listening. There is no chance of pulling back electoral support. The talk now hides, very barely, sheer gluttony and rampant avarice. This is a disease, an addiction unhinged and uncontrollable. Many of Mugabe’s acolytes have become

unimaginably rich. But, now, in Zimbabwe, enough is never enough. Mining companies are squeezed for shares, backhanders and chunks of land. Others are bounced from their claims once they have paid upfront. These are the endless line of victims—gullible at best, but generally complicit, prepared to ‘play the game’ to survive. The perpetrators, the white and black mafia, Zimbabwe’s Cosa Nostra, connive, steal, smuggle and murder together, shifting the country’s resources out the back door and trampling the people underfoot.

The hypocrisy of Zanu-PF’s racial rhetoric is shown most clearly in the history of the individuals with whom it chooses to couple. Among those who became ‘one of us’ are people who used to bust sanctions for Ian Smith during the war, while others were closely connected to South African intelligence during Apartheid. Still others include former members of the Selous Scouts, the Rhodesian special forces unit that Zanu charges with more wartime atrocities than any other. Roy Bennett, too, could have been ‘one of us’ if he had helped milked the cow. Race and history are not barriers but screens to the good life in Zimbabwe.

These people some the most important comrades of Zanu-PF, men from the ranks of the Rhodesian enemy, a phantom, a Zimbabwean

version of the Jewish world conspiracy whose representatives are, in reality, often closer than brothers. Yet they are not alone. Sadly, this is not a show just for the scum of black and white Zimbabwe. Foreigners are welcome to join the fun, as long as they play by Zanu's rules, such as they are. Many of this hodge-podge of international brigands and profiteers also come from places and backgrounds denounced by Zanu-PF propaganda. White South Africans play a substantial role, collaborating with Zanu in ripping off our resources—a case in point being the exploitation of diamonds from claims that were acquired through theft and carnage. The Russians were given the cold shoulder in the 1980s because of their historical support for Zapu, but now they are more than acceptable because they have useful skills and a common disdain for human rights and the rule of law. Among other ventures, the Russians are now mining diamonds on my farm. These relationships are not limited to corrupt politicians and businessmen, but active members of Zimbabwe's security services are increasingly involved. The Central Intelligence Organisation, or CIO, cooperates closely with Russian intelligence in what is both an offshoot and buttress of mutual commercial interests. CIO also works with Sam Pa, a Hong Kong businessman whose company trades \$20 billion of oil with Angola each year. Pa and CIO run a joint venture in the diamond fields, among others.

What we have, then, is the exaltation and ruthless pursuit of mammon, a god whose worshippers come from all shades of life and who are supported by regional and international bandits and shoplifters. This criminal syndicate is laying waste to what remains of the nation's body and soul. But it's not just a problem for Zimbabwe. We are not just breeding and importing disease and destruction, we are exporting it as well. Most strikingly, the Zimbabwean cancer is spreading to South Africa. Bottom feeders from South Africa, many of them outwardly respectable companies like Old Mutual, have trampled on ethics and human beings in the stampede for the Zimbabwean carcass. Arrogant and hard-hearted, they have shown no hesitation in standing on the heads of the Zimbabwean poor as they cavort with the Zimbabwean rich. They believe they are untouchable, practicing, as they see it, their own cunning brand of worldly-wise expediency—and now practicing it, judiciously they think, at home in South Africa. 'TIA', they say—'This is Africa'; 'walk in with the bowler'. What they do not realise is that they are bringing with them the people and practices that will annihilate the very foundations upon which their comfortable lives are based. South Africa is ripe for the Zanu-PF variety of national liberation. Ethnic and racist propaganda will work a treat for those whose mouths have been fed by the same

corrupt corporates and whose appetites have been whetted yet further by the feeding frenzy across the border. Already there is a dialogue between the demagogues in Zimbabwe and South Africa. The president of the ANC Youth League, Julius Malema, visited Zimbabwe to learn some of the tricks of the trade from our Minister for Indigenisation, the ironically-named Saviour Kasukuwere. Malema probably thought he had to give them something back, so he taught them the song, ‘Kill the boer’, which was banned in South Africa—though they changed the lyrics to ‘Kill Roy Bennett’. Malema has since been expelled from the ANC, partly for his refusal to tone down racist and extremist rhetoric and partly for his overt challenge to the authority of President Jacob Zuma. Zanu-PF has apparently encouraged and funded both aspects of the Malema circus. I doubt very much whether South Africa has seen the last of Julius Malema—and I have no doubts at all that the Zanufication of South African politics is taking root.

I have digressed somewhat in making the point that Zanu-PF’s anti-white, anti-imperialist and pro-poor rantings obscure the deification of greed in Zimbabwe. The populist appeal of mob rule is now hardly worth the candle, so the smokescreen is now largely to conceal the activities of the new Cosa Nostra. But does this

mean that ‘Indigenisation’ and economic ‘liberation’ is not being used to hide the pursuit of political power? Has that other god of the Zanu pantheon slipped from view? Far from it. The mirage of electoral support may have disappeared, but strategic calculations remain. It is possible to get filthy rich and to stay in control. In fact, the one depends on the other. The syndicate have put aside a portion of the loot so as to thump the people at the next elections. People may not be persuaded to vote for the party but they can sure as hell be coerced into doing so. It’s a routine that Zanu-PF knows only too well. And it’s a routine that costs a bit of money; this is tithing, Zanu-style. The security services must be paid, the bullets must be bought, the militia must be dispatched. Already, the tried and tested methods are being dusted off for the next elections. Meanwhile, some of the lucre must be distributed to members of the opposition whose eyes have become bigger than their heads. This is the largely untold story of the last four years, since MDC has entered the so-called government of national unity. The mafia lives by the adage that every man has his price—and in Zimbabwe this has too often proven true. Some have effectively changed sides and joined the kleptocracy. Principle dissolves into a grey mass of voracity and covetousness. It is a problem that manifests itself from bottom to top, from councillors to leaders. It is now fashionable among Western diplomats to speak positively about a

post-Mugabe future based on an informal alliance between the MDC and supposed Zanu-PF moderates. What they are really talking about is an undeclared merger with kleptocracy. If the vision of the future has come to that, then God help us. There are some who stay strong, some who have kept their hands clean. I am thankful for them. Certainly, the people of Zimbabwe want something new. Yet they are less aware of these realities—and largely unable to do anything about them in the absence of democracy. I fear that we stand on the edge of a precipice.

This brings us to the nub of the problem—and to my dreams for the future. I could plead for the acceptance of whites and Ndebeles as full citizens. I could appeal for a multi-ethnic, non-racial nation in which whites are not whites and the Ndebele and not Ndebele, but are, first and foremost, Zimbabweans. Yet I would be entering a debate whose parameters have been set by Zanu-PF's propagandists. It is a debate some of my colleagues have been suckered into, feeling the need to make excuses for why they did not fight with Mugabe's guerrillas or why there are whites in MDC or why they oppose indigenisation. The real problems in our country are more basic than Zanu-PF's convoluted, deceptive and hypocritical sound bites would have us believe.

Looking back, I see a Zimbabwe destroyed by the worst instincts of human nature, by the extremes of ambition, power-lust and greed. The dividing lines here are not black and white but good and evil. Looking forward, I hope and pray that truth, justice and integrity will win the day. Their presence or absence, strength or weakness, signals life or death for the nation. We will never come to terms with our past or future without them. Painful they are, but utterly necessary. For those who lived it, our history will never be buried without truth, justice and integrity. Too often it has been used as a political tool or a personal excuse. If the past, back to 1980 and beyond, needs to be dug up and dealt with, so be it. I speak as one who participated in the war. And I speak as a victim of Mugabe's Zimbabwe. I have views, but I do not have all the answers. Let the truth come out. The truth is cleansing and it is good. We must shine the light and we must do it humbly. Perhaps I am a fantasist. We are far from truth and justice in Zimbabwe. Perhaps the past will only be buried with those who made it. Time will tell. But we will certainly fail if we do not try. And what of the present and its own tragedies? We need Zimbabweans to choose principle over expediency. We need them to know that values matter, morally and materially. We need them to choose those who stand on values and we need to fight against those who don't. If these choices are not made, if the fight is not fought, the nightmare

can and will get worse. I give the same message to outsiders—at least to the ones who are prone to listen. I appeal today to a group of people who will become influential global leaders in government and business. Will your country or company operate amorally and immorally? Will you cut corners for money and self-interest? When you die, you will take neither wealth nor prestige with you, but you can surely leave the world a worse place than it was. Or a better place. It is the daily, sometimes small, choices that make for a life and a legacy. What will yours be?

I thank you.