

Independence: Taking back our Zimbabwe

As Zimbabwe celebrates its 31st birthday, it's now almost fifteen years since Claire Short wrote that infamous letter that saw Britain refuse to fulfill a commitment to pay for the land redistribution from white farmers to black indigenous Zimbabweans. In the letter to Zimbabwe's Agriculture and Land Minister, Kumbirai Kangai, in late 1997, she wrote, 'I should make it clear that we do not accept that Britain has a special responsibility to meet the costs of land purchase in Zimbabwe. We are a new government from diverse backgrounds without links to former colonial interests. My own origins are Irish and, as you know, we were colonized, not colonizers,' she wrote.

In essence what the British were saying was that the past is the past, that the past was done with and Britain was no longer an imperial power and that Zimbabwe's Liberation war was history. And as Zimbabweans we should get on with sorting out ourselves with no expectation of assistance from the British.

Land redistribution was the pillar of the Lancaster house agreement that brought an end to Ian Smith's unilateral declaration of Rhodesian independence and the birth of a free nation, Zimbabwe in 1980. Our reason for celebration today. In essence, contrary to Clare Short's letter, Britain did have a special responsibility, not only as a former colonizer but also mainly because it had failed to act against Ian Smith's Illegal regime – making necessary a liberation war that cost thousands of lives many of whom have been exhumed from the deep mine shafts of Chobondo in Mount Darwin. All these people died because the British government refused to act against its own "kith and kin" in Rhodesia.

Given how things have turned out, I am sure if the British Government had a premonition of a future Zimbabwe in which Zimbabweans took their destiny in their hands and proceeded to redistribute land, Clare Short would have facilitated that the Zimbabwe government receive the money to buy back the land which was in the hands of white commercial farmers. The refusal by Britain to fund the land redistribution exercise gave Zimbabweans an impetus to fulfill their own aspirations.

It is at this point in Zimbabwe's history that we saw the birth of the MDC.

The MDC is a product of the aspirations of the white farmers that were directly affected by the land reform exercise. This political party was put together in order to reverse the gains Zimbabweans have made thus far by the former white farmers. Those farmers that had fled to Britain lobbied the British government through the Westminster foundation to fund the MDC party. In Zimbabwe, although white farmers accounted for only a small proportion of the party, they were highly visible as they were the ones with money and cars. They could be seen delivering propaganda material and running MDC offices. White farmers appeared on Zimbabwe television with Tsvangirai handing over fat cheques to party coffers.

The MDC and its white activists regarded all this as everyday politics in a normal society; Zimbabweans saw this as an affront to the legacy of the liberation war and this concern was not entirely unfounded as evidenced by the role played by the likes of former Rhodesian Selous Scout Roy Bennett and in particular a man nicknamed 'Monty'

Montgomery.

'Monty' Montgomery headed the MDC campaign in the Hurungwe and Kariba regions in the 2000 election. His family lineage in Zimbabwe went back to the 1890s. His parents were teachers in Bulawayo, at a school once attended by Hendrik Verwoerd, the architect of South Africa's apartheid. Montgomery was conscripted into the Rhodesian police and rose to become an officer in the notorious special branch responsible for the interrogation of political prisoners and 'terrorists' - men like Mugabe, Nkomo, Dabengwa and nationalists.

Montgomery was running an agricultural supply business that had fallen on hard times. He had not taken much interest in politics until his pocket was hit by the land reform exercise. There are many men and women within the ranks of the MDC with a similar history.

As we celebrate the 31st birthday of our Zimbabwe, we need to be mindful of the challenges we face as Zimbabweans from people like him. These are the real enemies of Zimbabwe within our midst and we should jealously guard our independence, legacy and heritage. Some of these enemies are savagely calling for international corporations to disinvest from Zimbabwe, some are calling for sanctions to be 'lifted' by day and calling for their tightening at night and at the same time claim to have the people of Zimbabwe's interests at heart.

We live in a world where our very own Zimbabwean brothers and sisters have turned against their own kith and kin. Those of us that have refused to be colonized mentally have been targeted for persecution wherever we maybe in the world. We must however diligently begin preparing to accept the baton stick as its passed on to us, uphold it and protect the legacy of the war of Liberation of Zimbabwe that it embodies. As Zimbabweans we must make sure that our country never descends into a neo-colonial state. We will be assured of this if in the upcoming elections, we refuse to vote into power any political party that does not have nationalistic credentials. Happy Birthday Zimbabwe.