



OUT-OF-POWER: Joshua Nkomo (right) – sacked by Prime Minister Robert Mugabe – and Lord Carrington, architect of the Lancaster House Agreement, who has resigned as Britain's Foreign Minister over the the Falklands crisis.

Zimbabwe crisis should spur Nkomo's land tax plan

ZIMBABWE'S political crisis could encourage a constructive change in the ideological evolution of this former British colony.

The political drama began when guns and ammunition were discovered on farms owned by leading members of Joshua Nkomo's Patriotic Front (Zapu).

Prime Minister Robert Mugabe immediately sacked Nkomo and other top Zapu politicians from the Cabinet. This created the most serious political crisis since independence in 1980, and ended the mounting campaign to turn Zimbabwe into a one-party state – which would accelerate the exodus of whites.

HUMILIATED, Nkomo immediately charged that his former ally had created the conditions which could "set off a fire in the country." Much now depends on whether Nkomo decides to restore his fortunes via the ballot box or the gun.

His base is in Matabeleland, where many of his supporters immediately acknowledged the possibility of a civil war.

Nkomo, however, appears to be determined to exploit the breakup of the coalition between Zapu and Mugabe's African National Union through strictly political action. And political observers have already pinpointed Mugabe's critical weakness – the failure to develop an effective land policy.

One of them, Michael Holman, notes that Nkomo might latch onto "the slow progress in the resettlement of former white-owned land by peasant farmers – a highly sensitive issue, calculated to raise the temperature of national debate."¹

By Paul Knight

ON THE land issue, Mugabe is locked between two conflicting policies.

On the one hand, as a socialist, he is ideologically disposed to nationalisation and the establishment of collective farms.

But he is legally bound by the Lancaster House agreement, which commits him to compensating white farmers for any land that is transferred to Zimbabwe's landless peasants.

This has created a tension in government policy which an intelligent political opposition could exploit to electoral advantage.

On Feb. 29 Mugabe, in an intemperate speech, warned that his government would consider seizing white-owned farmland if the owners refused to sell or if funds for the purchases ran out.²

Nkomo has a markedly different approach. His view on how the rich agricultural resources could be exploited centres around the capture of rents from people who monopolise land. In an interview before independence, he explained:

"We don't believe in trading land or selling land – no. And in any government that I lead, you can be certain those practices must go. That does not mean we will be taking people's land. It means that other people who haven't got money will have a chance to use land, which is the common property of everybody. And if they have to pay some rates or rents, that will go to a general fund of the people. In this way citizens can use as much land as they want. Our system is this: once you use land, that land belongs to you. But you have not bought it. You cannot sell it to someone. The land belongs to the people, but everything on that land is yours."³

This amounts to a fiscal strategy for change. A tax on the economic rent of land would have enormous influence:

- Land would be redistributed away from white farmers who currently monopolise large tracts that are not used: they could not afford to pay the tax for land that was not earning them an income;
- Farmers could acquire family farms without having to buy land: they would acquire use rights and not be liable for payments to the exchequer until the first crops were in;
- The government would not have to divert scarce funds to achieve what is perceived as the single most important and socially just objective among the black population – an equitable distribution of the benefits arising from land.

This fiscal-based land reform would appeal to the Zimbabwe electorate, uniting tribal and racial factions. As such, it would strengthen Nkomo, the "Mdala" – the old man – and coalesce the forces against Mugabe.

And the battle would then be restricted to the ballot box rather than a return to the guerrilla warfare of the jungle.

REFERENCES

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