
Zimbabwean politician, founder of the Rhodesian Front in 1962 and prime minister 1964–79 during white rule. In 1965 he made a unilateral declaration of independence (UDI) for Rhodesia (as Zimbabwe was then known) and, despite UN economic sanctions and international isolation, maintained his regime with tenacity. The armed guerrilla movement to overthrow white rule gradually gained ascendancy in the 1970s and Smith was forced to accept in 1978 a political settlement in which the country's black majority was given democratic rights and would have a role in power-sharing.

In 1979 he was succeeded by Bishop Abel Muzorewa, who became the country's first black prime minister, and the country was renamed Zimbabwe. Smith was minister without portfolio in the new coalition government, but after the 1979 Lancaster House Agreement, new elections were held which brought Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front (ZANU–PF) to power with a large majority. Smith became leader of the opposition in parliament as head of the whites-only Republican Front (RF), but its support fell. In 1986 the RF was replaced by the multi-racial Conservative Alliance of Zimbabwe which later merged into the Movement for Democratic Change, after Smith retired from active politics but remained a fierce critic of Mugabe.

Born in the small town of Selukwe, the son of a cattle rancher of Scottish descent, he studied commerce at Rhodes University in South Africa. After serving with the UK's Royal Air Force during World War II and being shot down behind enemy lines, he returned to run his family's large farm. He was elected to Rhodesia's Legislative Assembly in 1948 representing the Liberal Party, but in 1953 joined the United Federal Party (UFP) which supported federation of Southern Rhodesia, Northern Rhodesia, and Nyasaland. He broke away from the UFP in 1962, to form the Rhodesian Front and became treasury minister under Prime Minister Winston Field. In 1963 the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland was dissolved and Field's failure to secure independence from Britain led Smith to replace him as leader. Smith rejected British demands that majority rule be introduced and declared the UDI on 11 November 1965.

quotations

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