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## **“Commonwealth Games”:** **Fraser’s Vision and Zimbabwe’s Road to Majority Rule**<sup>1</sup>

Zimbabwe has been an area of interest in Australia’s foreign policy for over twenty years. Both countries were former British colonies, they have both been members of the Commonwealth, and more recently the policies and actions of President Robert Mugabe have drawn considerable attention and concern, both internationally and from Australia. While the recent events in Zimbabwe have caused a great deal of focus on contemporary Zimbabwe, this paper instead revisits Rhodesia-Zimbabwe’s road to independence and majority rule, paying particular attention to the involvement of the Australian Prime Minister of the time, Mr Malcolm Fraser.<sup>2</sup> Fraser’s recollections offer valuable insight into his determination to secure Zimbabwean independence, at a time when issues in Africa were not of considerable concern to the international community, let alone Australia. Therefore, Fraser’s vision for Zimbabwe is both interesting and intriguing, and the role he played in securing independence and majority rule in Zimbabwe should be regarded as one of his greatest achievements during his time as Australia’s Prime Minister.

### **The Establishment of Relations**

The historical ties of Australia and Zimbabwe mentioned above helped forge the relationship between the nations in 1979, which ultimately saw Australia playing a key role in securing majority rule in Zimbabwean independence. At the time, Australia was concerned about the ‘legitimacy’ of governance in Zimbabwe, and how continued problems there would impact the Commonwealth organisation of which they were both a part. Australia’s concern was provoked when the Southern Rhodesian white minority government of Ian Smith announced

a Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) in 1965 from Britain, which was not recognised by the sovereign state or the black majority population. The UDI was not recognised because the government did not represent the majority black population of Zimbabwe, but instead represented the minority white population.<sup>3</sup>

Australia was one of many international critics that condemned the illegality of the Smith government and placed pressure upon the government to reconsider its position on majority rule. Australia also openly supported the United Nations (UN) sanctions that were placed upon Rhodesia on the platform of racism.<sup>4</sup> Gough Whitlam, the Australian Prime Minister at the time, used his Prime Ministerial position to directly attack Rhodesia as a statement that Australia would not tolerate racism in any form and that the 'world of imperialism' had changed.<sup>5</sup> It was this rejection of racism that led to Australia and other nations ultimately becoming involved in Zimbabwe's road to majority rule.

### **Fraser's Vision**

When Malcolm Fraser became the Australian Prime Minister in 1975, he continued on the path set by his predecessor and intensified Australia's interests in seeing majority rule being restored to Rhodesia. Fraser was opposed to racism and essentially was against the racist governments of Southern Africa. Weller states that Fraser refused to accept 'race as an indication of superiority or as the reason for political rights. Racism to Malcolm Fraser was abhorrent'.<sup>6</sup> In addition, Fraser also believed that Western interests would be best served if the economies of the developing nations were able to flourish, and that such economic growth could only occur when they were headed by majority rule, rather than minority rule as this would see them forever opposed to the West.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Fraser believed that should the African states continue to be under white minority rule, this paved the way for Soviet or

Cuban intervention, which in the Cold War climate of the time, would further ensure that the majority population of such states would be oppositional to the West.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, Australia, under the guidance of Fraser, became increasingly involved in the road towards majority rule and independence in Rhodesia.

The amount of diplomatic pressure placed upon the Smith government by Australia and the international community, caused Smith to make a proposal of a handover to Bishop Abel Muzorewa of the African National Council, and an internal settlement was negotiated in March 1978. However, Australia, along with other states in Africa such as Nigeria and Tanzania, refused to see the new Muzorewa government as legitimate because it would ultimately lead to the preservation of white rule, rather than a genuine move toward majority rule.<sup>9</sup> In fact, in an interview with the authors, Fraser claimed that Bishop Muzorewa ‘was really a puppet of Ian Smith’. Therefore, the Australian policy on Rhodesia did not change when Muzorewa became leader. Fraser was primarily concerned that Muzorewa’s government was not representative of the majority and especially rejected the idea of the new constitution that gave whites 28 out of the 100 seats in government, even though they constituted only 4 per cent of the vote.<sup>10</sup> He viewed the proposal with suspicion and also questioned the nature of the proposed election stating ‘how [can] an election ... be free if 90 per cent of the country was under martial law’.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, Australia rejected the idea of Zimbabwe reaching a just and fair agreement between the Smith government and Muzorewa, and became an active mediator in the process.

### **Australia’s Role as Mediator**

Australia’s role as mediator was reinforced after Fraser received a phone call from Kenneth Kaunda, the President of Zambia, who was concerned that Nyerere was just hours away from

condemning the election and exposing the questionable actions of Smith and the British.<sup>12</sup> In an interview with the authors, Fraser recalled that Nyerere had informed Kaunda of the actions of the British in Rhodesia, and how they were trying to 'weight the election' in favour of Bishop Muzorewa and Ian Smith. Kaunda had reported that 'all sorts of dirty pool [is] going on, designed to see that the Bishop wins and that Nkomo and Mugabe get no-where'. Fraser responded by calling Nyerere and managed to assuage him, by assuring that Australia would not allow such tactics to 'weight the election' to continue. Fraser immediately sent Andrew Peacock, the then Foreign Affairs minister, to London to inform the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher that such activities were known and 'had to stop'. Fraser conveyed a similar message to the British High Commissioner in Canberra, and he assured Nyerere that should the election be found to have been unfair that he would issue a joint statement with him officially condemning the actions of Smith and the British.

Fraser also offered Nyerere intelligence information that was quite reassuring. Fraser recalled that Keith ('Mick') Shann, who was an experienced foreign affairs officer and had been Australia's ambassador to Indonesia during the 'Confrontation' years, was reporting back to him from the ground in Zimbabwe that the Zimbabwean people were overwhelmingly proclaiming support for Mugabe, not Muzorewa, because Mugabe was the one who was offering them the most assistance. Fraser stated that when Shann asked the local people who they turned to for assistance they replied 'we could always go to the local Mugabe man; he'd always help us'. Therefore, Shann's own conclusion, and the one which Fraser conveyed to Nyerere, was that even in light of the 'dirty pool' that was occurring, 'Mugabe was going to win the election and he had no doubt about it'.

As a result, Fraser argued strongly for pressure to be placed on the new government in Zimbabwe to recognise majority rule and change the constitution, and more importantly, he set out to change the opinion of Margaret Thatcher. Thatcher was seriously considering recognising the new government in Rhodesia and Zimbabwean independence, on the basis that elections were free and fair.<sup>13</sup> Hence, it was vitally important that Australia needed to play the intermediary role in the situation between the African members, the rebel forces in Rhodesia, and Britain, because the African members planned to throw Britain out of the Commonwealth if it approved of the Muzorewa government.<sup>14</sup>

This highlights another important motivation as to why Fraser did act on Zimbabwe and that was his fear that the Commonwealth would suffer as a result of this incident. Fraser saw Zimbabwe's battle for independence as a division maker in the Commonwealth, and when interviewed he stated 'there was a real danger that the Commonwealth would blow apart on the issue and [this] [w]ould not be acceptable'. Fraser valued the Commonwealth of Nations as a 'worthwhile' institution. He truly believed that it not only allowed 'heads of government [to] really g[e]t to know each other, but that this 'personal knowledge of up to say forty-five, fifty other heads of government, often made it possible to solve problems or stop problems emerging'. In fact, Fraser attributed the previous mentioned phone call he received from Kaunda regarding Nyerere as a direct result of the personal connection he had established with Kaunda due to their participation in such Commonwealth meetings and retreats. Referring to the open and candid discussion he had with Kaunda about Nyerere, Fraser stated 'you would never have done it to somebody you didn't know'. In addition, Fraser also valued the Commonwealth because he felt it provided network for minor states to engage and dialogue with major states, thereby providing 'a voice to smaller states, which the wider

world didn't, and the United Nations didn't, because it was just too big and you get lost in the crowd'.

Therefore, it was Fraser's belief in the Commonwealth as an institution, and his fear that a breach was occurring within the Commonwealth,<sup>15</sup> that ensuring majority rule in Zimbabwe and thereby placating the African Front Line States was held with utmost importance by Fraser. Thus, in addition to his belief in the importance of majority rule and his opposition to racism, Fraser's involvement in Zimbabwe was not motivated by any specific interest in Zimbabwe *per se*, but rather preservation of the Commonwealth, which resulted in what he recalls was 'an accident of time and circumstance that it was Zimbabwe. It could have been another African country, but it wasn't, it was Zimbabwe'.

Nonetheless, Australia's involvement in resolving the Zimbabwean incident was important. The pressure being applied on Thatcher by Fraser was evident during Thatcher's visit to Australia in June of 1979, and culminated in Thatcher consenting that a new constitution was needed in Zimbabwe, just ahead of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in August 1979 at Lusaka.<sup>16</sup> In fact, the former Commonwealth Secretary General Sir Shridath Ramphal has stated that when it came to securing majority rule in Zimbabwe, 'The British had to be pushed all the way – *every inch of the way* – and then all the way after it. Malcolm's [Fraser] role was crucial'.<sup>17</sup> Thatcher's eventual consent was described by Fraser as a 'breakthrough' because in essence it meant that Thatcher was agreeing to a settlement that would ultimately lead to majority rule, and the timing of the agreement was vitally important as it occurred just prior to the Lusaka CHOGM.

## **Lusaka and Lancaster House (1979)**

The 1979 CHOGM meeting in Lusaka, was dominated by discussion of Zimbabwe's future, and demonstrated Australia's important role as a mediator between the British and African states. The meeting also ensured that Thatcher did not reverse her position on Zimbabwe, negotiated during her Australian visit, and Fraser asserted that at Lusaka, 'there was a question of getting Mrs Thatcher to agree and stick to it'. Therefore, Australia, along with the Presidents from Zambia, Jamaica and Tanzania pressured Britain to agree to a strategy that would bring about majority rule in Zimbabwe.<sup>18</sup> This pressure culminated in Britain agreeing to 'fresh elections, a constitutional conference incorporating all the internal parties, and acknowledgement of a monitoring role for the Commonwealth in the transition to self-government'.<sup>19</sup> Fraser and the African members, including the leaders Thatcher, Kaunda, Nyerere, Manly and the Nigerian Minister for Foreign Affairs, set up a Communiqué whereby nine principles were agreed upon to guide the process for change in Zimbabwe.<sup>20</sup>

This Communiqué stated that the Commonwealth recognised that there needed to be 'independence on the basis of majority rule' and that this 'requires the adoption of a democratic constitution'.<sup>21</sup> Importantly, this particular document was leaked by Malcolm Fraser to the Australian press, which Weller claims was to 'ensure that Thatcher was not able to back out' of the agreements made.<sup>22</sup> As a result, Britain was forced to adhere to the principles of the Communiqué. This again reflects the crucial role both Fraser and Australia played in enforcing change to occur at this Communiqué. After the Communiqué, a Conference was held at Lancaster House (1979), which would see Zimbabwe take one step closer to majority rule and independence.



Australia, Zambia, Jamaica, Britain and Tanzania organised the Lancaster House talks that began on the 10<sup>th</sup> of September in 1979.<sup>23</sup> The talks, which were ultimately aimed at bringing Zimbabwe to full majority rule, were plagued by problems associated with the distribution of land within Zimbabwe. Throughout the independence campaign Mugabe had stated that he would restore land to its rightful owners when the war was won.<sup>24</sup> However, the British proposals contained safeguards for the white population such as the distribution of land and for those who were Rhodesian public servants within a Bill of Rights in the new constitution.<sup>25</sup> Mugabe was forced to compromise, which meant that for the next ten years the Zimbabwe government was only allowed to purchase land that was under-utilised or was required for public purpose.<sup>26</sup> The Bill of Rights specified that the owner must be compensated for land acquisition, and land transactions were to only take place on a “willing seller-willing buyer” basis.<sup>27</sup> As well as the land issue, other concessions were made, such as white seats were to be ‘reserved for a period in the new parliament’<sup>28</sup> and new elections were to be supervised by the Commonwealth members, such as Australia.

Australia’s role in the Lancaster House talks was primarily focused on altering the position of the British government at Lusaka and by contributing the services of a force to supervise the elections. Ayres claims that Fraser had conceived the idea of a Commonwealth ceasefire-monitoring force as early as October 1979, and that he still played a mediating role when needed in the negotiations.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, he offered Australian forces on the 30<sup>th</sup> of October, well before a monitoring force was announced in November.<sup>30</sup> This offer was testament to Fraser’s commitment to majority rule and independence in Zimbabwe, and resulted in Australia contributing forces totalling 350 personnel including, infantry forces, artillery and engineers to Zimbabwe on the 25<sup>th</sup> of December 1979.<sup>31</sup> Chan states that their mission as observers was to ensure ‘that the elections [we]re genuinely free and fair’ when they began

on the 27<sup>th</sup> of February 1980.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, Australia contributed and played a major role in ensuring the election process in Zimbabwe was conducted fairly.

## **Majority Rule**

Despite the violence by both sides that surrounded the election, the election process ran smoothly.<sup>33</sup> As predicted by Keith Shann, Robert Mugabe and his party the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) were declared the election winners and the process was declared just and fair by the Commonwealth.<sup>34</sup> The Zimbabwe African National Union (Patriotic Front), (ZANU (PF) won fifty-seven seats in parliament and Zimbabwe gained a new Prime Minister and independence on the 14<sup>th</sup> of April 1980.<sup>35</sup> Fraser welcomed the election win of Mugabe and a week later established a high commission in Zimbabwe, the first to be established, before the normal protocol of a ten-day waiting period.<sup>36</sup> Australia also offered five million Australian dollars to Zimbabwe for 'reconstruction and development assistance', and following independence it was increased to twenty million for three years.<sup>37</sup>

Due to Fraser's commitment to Zimbabwe's road to majority rule and his role as a mediator, Australia was greatly involved in persuading the British Prime Minister to change her position on the legality of the Muzorewa government, and this persuasion ultimately led to the concessions made in Lusaka and the new constitution that was completed at Lancaster House. While it was a combination of Australia and the Commonwealth's commitment that led to majority rule and Zimbabwean independence, the keen interest of Fraser in the incident, as his personal dedication to strike a peaceful resolution of the issue are both testament to not only his abhorrence of racism and recognition of the importance of majority rule, but also his belief in the importance of the Commonwealth institution and that Western interests could be best served if the African states were freed from white minority rule.

Considering the era of these events and the concern demonstrated by Fraser for the African states, his involvement in ensuring majority rule and Zimbabwean independence should be recognised as one of his great achievements during his time in office.

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<sup>2</sup> Malcolm Fraser was interviewed by the authors via teleconference, on August 9 2007, at the University of Southern Queensland.

<sup>3</sup> McWilliam M (2003) 'Zimbabwe and the Commonwealth', *The Round Table*, Vol. 92, no. 368, p. 93.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, G, Cox, D & Burchill, S (1997) *Australia in the World: An introduction to Australian Foreign Policy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, p. 106.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p. 107.

<sup>6</sup> Weller, P (1989) *Malcolm Fraser PM: A Study in Ministerial Power*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, p. 316.

<sup>7</sup> Ayres, P (1987) *Malcolm Fraser: A Biography*, Heinemann, Richmond, p. 345.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* p. 351.

<sup>9</sup> Martin, D & Johnson, P (1981) *The Struggle for Zimbabwe: The Chimurenga War*, Faber and Faber, London, p. 300.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in Weller, *Ibid.* p. 323.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Ayres states that Fraser had received intelligence reports showed that Selous Scouts, a special forces regiment of the Rhodesian Army, were violently attacking 'soft' targets such as churches, and were blaming such attacks on ZANU (PF) in an attempt to subvert support for Mugabe.

<sup>13</sup> Martin & Johnson *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Weller *Ibid.* p. 326.

<sup>15</sup> Ayers *Ibid.* pp. 381-82.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* p. 387.

<sup>18</sup> Arnold, G (1989) *The Third World Handbook*, Cassel Education LTD, London, p. 133.

<sup>19</sup> O'Neill, M (1984) 'Continuity without Consensus: the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings, 1971-81', in A Groom & P Taylor (eds), *The Commonwealth in the 1980s: Challenges and Opportunities*, Macmillan Press, London, p. 214.

<sup>20</sup> Weller *Ibid.* pp. 328-29.

<sup>21</sup> Commonwealth Heads of Government (1979), 'The Lusaka Communique, Commonwealth Heads of Government, August 1979 on Rhodesia', *African Affairs*, Vol. 79, no. 314.

<sup>22</sup> Weller *Ibid.* p. 329.

<sup>23</sup> Soames, L (1980) 'From Rhodesia to Zimbabwe', *International Affairs*, Vol. 56, no. 3, p. 409.

<sup>24</sup> Meredith, M (2002) *Our Votes, Our Guns: Robert Mugabe and the Tragedy of Zimbabwe*, Public Affairs, New York, p. 118.

<sup>25</sup> Cyrus Reed, W (1993) 'International Politics and National Liberation: ZANU and the Politics of Contested Sovereignty in Zimbabwe', *African Studies Review*, Vol. 36, no. 2, p. 51.

<sup>26</sup> Meredith *Ibid.* p. 119.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Hawker, G (2004) 'Zimbabwe – A report from the field', *AQ: Journal of Contemporary Analysis*, Vol. 76, no. 3, p. 22.

<sup>29</sup> Ayers *Ibid.* p. 390.

<sup>30</sup> Weller *Ibid.* pp. 331-32.

<sup>31</sup> Londey, P (2004) *Other People's Wars: A History of Australian Peacekeeping*, Allen and Unwin, Crows Nest, p. 128.

<sup>32</sup> Chan, S (2003) *Robert Mugabe: A Life of Power and Violence*, University of Michigan Press, Michigan, p. 60.

<sup>33</sup> Londey *Ibid.* p. 132.

<sup>34</sup> Griffin, S (2001) 'Peacekeeping, the United Nations, and the Future Role of the Commonwealth', *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, Vol. 39, no. 3, p. 159.

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<sup>35</sup> Martin & Johnson *Ibid.* p. 330.

<sup>36</sup> Weller *Ibid.* p. 333.

<sup>37</sup> Ayers *Ibid.* p. 392.