“WE MUST ADAPT TO SURVIVE”


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ABSTRACT: Rhodesia’s unilateral declaration of independence from Britain in 1965 and the sanctions it triggered have generated much scholarship. While the international dimension of sanctions has received substantial scholarly attention, what has been little accounted for are the various initiatives adopted by local non-state actors in pursuit of their self-interests. Covering three distinct but related phases in the history of Rhodesian sanctions—the build-up to UDI, UDI and sanctions, and the 1970s war—this paper analyses measures adopted by internal economic actors as influenced by the need to survive the exigencies of sanctions. By examining the parallel sectoral lobbying that the colony’s tobacco sector embraced to entrench its interests, the paper provides an empirical glimpse into the practical local resistance to international sanctions, and the dynamic political and economic relations it spawned. This provides a nuanced portrayal of the complexities of Rhodesian sanctions beyond the scope of orthodox international relations literature dominating much of UDI scholarship.

Introduction

On 11 November 1965, Ian Smith, the Rhodesian Prime Minister, unilaterally declared the colony’s independence (hereafter UDI) from Britain. Except for

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Portugal, South Africa and a few other countries, the international community under the United Nations (UN) banner, and led by Britain, imposed sanctions on the colony to reverse the rebellion.1 Tobacco, a predominantly export commodity whose major destination was Britain, and the colony’s largest foreign currency earner and biggest employer of labour, became the most obvious target of these punitive measures. While generally the sanctions did not achieve their intended aim, Rhodesia’s tobacco sector suffered immense strain from them. This paper examines the political economy of the tobacco industry in the build-up to, as well as after, UDI, illuminating socio-economic and political dynamics of the industry in the face of an intensified nationalist war of liberation in the 1970s. While at the national level the rebellious colony was engaging in diplomatic initiatives with Britain and the international community at large, at the local level there were intense sectoral lobbying manoeuvres within the various economic interest groups. Yet, despite their importance in influencing the direction and pace of events in Rhodesia after UDI, they remain largely unaccounted for in the literature. It is against this background that this paper focuses on how Rhodesian tobacco growers, through their representatives, navigated and negotiated their survival beyond the imminent demise of white minority rule. In doing so, the study deepens our understanding of the different dimensions of the interplay between settler-colonial politics and economics in Rhodesia towards the end of colonial rule.

The Smith regime’s 1965 rebellious act attracted international attention. It brought the effectiveness or otherwise of the UN system in dealing with delinquent states under the spotlight. Unsurprisingly, there is a large corpus of literature on Rhodesia’s UDI and its aftermath. Although it addresses a wide array of themes, it is dominated by international relations perspectives with a bias towards state actor relations.2 Yet, parallel to the broader interstate diplomatic manoeuvres playing out, were some internal lobbying initiatives pitting specific economic interest groups against each other, as well as against the local regime. The Rhodesia Tobacco Association (RTA), the focus of this study, was one such group. Focusing on the RTA provides a new way of looking at Rhodesian sanctions, which those focusing on state actors could not adequately provide. Even those who have focused on the economic impact of sanctions have often done so with a view to shedding light on the effectiveness or otherwise of the sanctions at the national level.3 The few that have zeroed in on the tobacco industry have done so either with a view to illuminating the intricacies of sanctions-busting or within the broad spectrum of the deliberations and policy thrust of the agricultural leadership.4 One common thread running through this literature is the emphasis on the international dimension of sanctions both in
the build-up to, and after, 1965. Yet, internally and driven by the need to protect its economic interests beyond the fall of white minority rule, the RTA adopted compromise and accommodation initiatives which often saw it set on a collision course with the Smith regime. It is this dimension, underrepresented in international relations literature, which this article focuses on.

This article is divided into three broad sections, covering the build-up to UDI, the period after UDI and sanctions as well as the bloodiest phase of the nationalist war in the 1970s. The first section locates the position of the tobacco industry in the build-up to UDI. By tracing events leading to UDI, the section examines how the industry sought to strike a delicate balance between its economic interests and the broader political aspirations of the entire white community. From an economic perspective, the tobacco leadership opposed UDI, and this set it against not only the Rhodesia Front (RF) government, but also the ordinary tobacco growers who looked at UDI as the only way to stop a slide towards majority rule. The second section focuses on the industry under siege following UDI, casting new light on state-tobacco grower contestations and convergences over the protection of conflicting interests. The section puts the new power relations between the industry and the state under the spotlight. With sanctions-induced constraints, the tobacco industry negotiated its survival through embracing various strategies and tactics to cushion itself. These are discussed in the section. Covering the 1970s decade until the fall of minority rule in 1979, the last section focuses on the tobacco industry’s intensified and unconventional efforts to permanently entrench its interests in the context of an accelerating nationalist war of independence.

Towards UDI

Together with other non-state actors and business groups with diverse interests, the RTA did not support UDI. Contained in a Memorandum dated 22 January 1965 and addressed to all members of the association, the position of the RTA executive was that the “economic effects of UDI [would be] disastrous to the prosperity and prospects of the people of Southern Rhodesia.” This, the RTA reasoned, was because “all financial and trade relations between Britain and Southern Rhodesia would be jeopardised.” For instance, the withdrawal of imperial preference which a breakdown in Anglo-Rhodesian relations entailed, would “open Rhodesian tobacco to American competition on equal terms” at a time when American tobacco growers were receiving huge government subsidies which gave them a competitive edge over their Rhodesian counterparts. At the same time, Rhodesia would also face
more “unfair” competition from other Commonwealth producers such as Zambia, Canada, and India which would continue to enjoy the preference. In view of this, the RTA executive was convinced that the likely imposition of embargoes by Britain following UDI would substantially harm the local tobacco-growing industry.

However, the purely economic arguments advanced by the RTA executive against UDI did not find resonance across the tobacco-growing community. Other considerations took precedence. Michael Evans explains why sections of the white community, including tobacco growers, avidly supported UDI regardless of its economic implications. The formation of the RF in March 1962, and its subsequent electoral victory in December of the same year, Evans argues, was a culmination of the ideological realignment of white politics towards right wing extremism traceable to the late 1950s: the “winds of change” of the late 1950s to the 1960s triggered fear of majority rule, causing the hardening of racial attitudes and general despondency among Rhodesian white settlers.8 Sir Roy Welensky, the former Federal Prime Minister, shared Evans’ views. He believed that it was not internal events in Rhodesia which brought about the switch in political thinking that the general election of 1962 appeared to reflect.9 Instead, he argued that the resurgence of white right-wing extremism was a function of external events. According to him, events in the Belgian Congo in 1960 where decolonization had resulted in the evacuation of desperate Belgian refugees from Katanga, all in the eyes of Rhodesian white settlers, triggered the switch.10 This, Welensky further argued, was worsened by what he considered another decolonization boob characterized by “the complete betrayal of the white man in Kenya by the Tory Government.”11 The fear that the same could happen to them made white Rhodesians determined to attain independence on their terms, even if that meant cutting economic ties with Britain with all the economic and diplomatic repercussions associated with it.

While Evans and Welensky’s explanations are plausible, they underplay the influence of internal politics on the behavior of white Rhodesians. In addition to the influence of external events, the RF regime’s tight grip on the internal political landscape also explains why sections of the white community acquiesced to UDI. Ken Flower, the former Rhodesian intelligence supremo, identified two features introduced by the RF into settler politics: a “cowboy element” and blatant intimidation of political opponents.12 Confirming this, Ian Phimister and Victor Gwande described the build-up to UDI as a period “where opposition to the RF administration could be costly where it was not actually deemed treasonable.”13 “With African nationalist leaders in detention,” Phimister and Gwande note, “white opponents of [UDI] were either removed from office or cowed into submission.”14 The regime
complemented brute force with subtle manipulation of potentially powerful economic interest groups. Former RTA President Ted Jefferys blamed the weakness of his 1964 Council on the government which he accused of infiltrating all influential bodies and populating them with as many party members as possible.\(^\text{15}\)

Internal party-political considerations and broader “national” interests constrained the RTA’s capacity to push for its constituents’ best interest. For instance, the publication of findings of a technical investigative committee constituted to forecast the likely impact of UDI on the local industry was delayed.\(^\text{16}\) The delay was occasioned by fear that the findings—which were negative—would weaken Smith’s position during his negotiations with the British Government over the question of Rhodesian independence.\(^\text{17}\) In fact, the RTA had the unenviable task of seeking to strike a delicate balance between the conflicting political and economic interests of its constituents. White farmers constituted the backbone of the RF whose inaugural leader, Winston Field, was a renowned tobacco grower and former RTA president. What further compromised the RTA was that support for the Smith regime was not confined to the general membership. Sections of the RTA executive itself also gave precedence to political considerations over economic rationality. For instance, one RTA Councilor in opposition to the publication of the findings argued that such a move would expose the vulnerability of the local tobacco sector. By publishing the findings, he reasoned, “We were pulling the chestnuts out of the fire for Mr. Wilson [British Prime Minister],” adding that such a move would be tantamount to providing the British Premier “with the stick with which he could beat us.”\(^\text{18}\)

Tobacco growers, added another councilor, “had a great and grave responsibility towards [their] Prime Minister, in his struggle with another Prime Minister.”\(^\text{19}\) The general feeling was that Rhodesians had an obligation not to let their Prime Minister down, or do anything that could be of great advantage to the other Prime Minister.\(^\text{20}\) When the warning about the negative impact of sanctions on the tobacco industry was eventually sent out to growers, it was written in such language that no political construction could be placed on any section of it.\(^\text{21}\) Even then the Minister of Agriculture, Lord Graham, subjected the report to heavy criticism. “At this stage in the country’s history attempting to raise ‘bogeymen’ was a disservice to Rhodesia,” he argued, while dismissing the report as “another manoeuvre designed to create unease among the people, especially the farming community.”\(^\text{22}\) Given this backlash against any resistance to UDI, the RTA’s objections were muted and could not stop the regime from cutting ties with Britain. As it were, “the moment of madness was not long in coming.”\(^\text{23}\) On 11 November 1965 Smith unilaterally declared Rhodesian independence from Britain.
Under Siege: Tobacco Industry under Sanctions

Britain’s immediate response to UDI was to impose sanctions. Among the measures adopted was the punitive tobacco embargo which Britain immediately imposed, before the United Nations expanded the sanctions to be more comprehensive. As highlighted earlier, literature on Rhodesia’s UDI is voluminous. Surprisingly, despite the centrality of tobacco in both the Rhodesian economy and in Britain and the UN’s counter-rebellion interventions, only a few academic works focus on it. Among those who have written on tobacco is Peter Armstrong whose biography of one Ginger Freeman focuses essentially on the heroics of those who were charged with the task of sanctions-busting. On the other hand, David Rowe’s chapter on tobacco and sanctions discusses “market manipulation” and political capture of the industry by the state. Whereas the latter focuses on sanctions-busting activities in the foreign markets arena, the former looks at the state and how it manipulated international markets to capture the tobacco industry and “muzzle” its players. Missing in both accounts because of their scopes is how, under siege from sanctions, players in the industry negotiated survival at the local level, a gap which this paper seeks to fill.

The imposition of sanctions on Rhodesia, firstly by Britain and later by the UN, resulted in a major shift in the structure of the colony’s tobacco industry. It reconfigured the relationship between the state, the tobacco-growing industry, and global markets. In a clear departure from the traditional system of free and unfettered auctions in place since 1936, a new entity, the Tobacco Corporation, was formed to handle the production and marketing of tobacco. Apart from keeping growers on the land, the Corporation was “specifically charged to endeavour to maintain viability in all the industry.” This was designed to keep the “nucleus of skills and the operational facility necessary to form the basis of a return to full-scale tobacco production” in the event of sanctions being removed. With Government abandoning its long-held laissez-faire approach to the colony’s tobacco industry, the sanctions dispensation turned the colony’s tobacco sector, one of the “most unfettered industries into one of the most tightly controlled.” The new tobacco production and marketing regime triggered friction between the state and growers, mainly because, by replacing private buyers, the state inherited a long-standing buyer-grower feud which was as old as the industry itself.

One of the major effects of the sanctions-induced re-organization of the colony’s tobacco industry was the relative erosion of grower power through state control of the production and marketing aspects of the industry. Unlike in previous years when farmers wielded significant power in their relations with the state, during UDI tobacco growers’ “teeth” were blunted
by the diminution of their financial muscles due to narrow profit margins. Tobacco growers, Property and Finance opined, could no longer “represent the financial and organized heart of Right-Wing feeling in the country and of the Rhodesian Front.” Neither were “they in a position to pose any real threat to the new trends within the Party or outside it.” Instead, Property and Finance added, they had become “politically expendable.” This is the context within which Rowe describes them as “muzzled dogs” which could not bark. However, this over-statement of their declining political power masks the extent of influence that they still wielded within the corridors of power. The colony’s tobacco industry players—within the limits of their power—employed tact and subtlety in pursuit of their interests. What follows traces initiatives that the local tobacco-growing industry embraced to safeguard its self-interest under the constraints of sanctions.

Diplomacy, which is the art and practice of conducting negotiations between parties, is influenced by the amount of power that each party to the negotiations wields in relation to the other. In view of this, to appreciate the relative strength of the tobacco-growing industry beyond what is suggested by Rowe, there is a need to evaluate the source of the industry’s power, which determined the extent to which it was able to prevail over the Smith regime. The extent of tobacco growers’ power in relation to the state was dependent on the industry’s place in the colony’s national interest priority list. In order to ascertain this, and to inform its tobacco production and marketing future policy, the Smith regime commissioned an “objective” audit of the place of the tobacco industry in the colony’s socio-economic and political arena. This was in the form of a technocratic Working Party chaired by R. A. Griffith, the Secretary for Agriculture. Other members included his deputy C. D. Cox; Undersecretary for Treasury, P. Lamport-Stokes; and his assistant C. A. Hunter with M. G. B. Rooney as its secretary.

After wide consultations, the Working Party made some key findings that guided government policy towards the tobacco industry. One of its far-reaching conclusions was that there was no other product in the internal agricultural economy of Rhodesia which could effectively replace tobacco. Tobacco, the Committee further concluded, was still a major earner of foreign exchange; a large employer of labour; had a strategic significance through land occupation, especially in the northern areas; and had significant influences on commerce and industry generally. Based on these findings, it recommended that it was in the national interest to “continue to support the industry for at least another three years.” While it is true that by assuming control over production and marketing aspects of the industry, Government increased its bargaining power over the industry, that power was not absolute. Instead, its exercise was mediated by technocratic recommendations,
fundamental existential considerations, and contestations by growers and other economic players.

Economically, a complete abandonment of tobacco growing was unthinkable. According to this Working Party, this would trigger unacceptable costs. For instance, the Government would require funds for producer price support in other products, compensation for losses, expanded credit and financial assistance, restructured costs, increased capital imports for diversified production—for example, cotton gins, transport and storage facilities—as well as costly attempts at unfamiliar production with inadequate experience. Secondly, as a labor-intensive industry, tobacco employed a large number of Africans and whites whose stay in the colony was much a political as it was an economic necessity. The Agriculture Minister lamented that between 1965–1966 and 1966–1967 “more than 400 Europeans and about 20,000 Africans [mainly labourers and a few growers of Turkish and Burley tobaccos which fall outside the scope of this study] left tobacco farming.” Any further reduction in the annual target crop would not only push more out of production with dire economic consequences, but would also cause ripple effects in downstream industries, which also employed a significant number of people and had invested heavily in the industry.

In addition to the economic considerations highlighted above, the local tobacco-growing industry also derived its power from strategic and security considerations, which influenced government attitude. Both government and the industry were aware of the general strategic significance of farmers in the area of national security. Contributing to debate on an amendment to the Agricultural Assistance Act, one Member of Parliament (MP), made this point very clear. “In addition to fighting an economic war in the vanguard,” he noted, “the farmers . . . have an additional fight which they are waging,” adding that “the basis of that fight is their occupancy of their farms.” In addition, through their service in the Police Reserve, they were an essential part of Rhodesian defence. This, the MP continued, “should certainly predispose [Government] to preserve all the existing farmers on their farms.” Agriculture Minister David Smith shared the same view. On a different occasion, he described tobacco growers as Rhodesia’s “first line of defence,” and because of that they “were indispensable.” While economic logic as enunciated on several occasions by the Treasury questioned the wisdom of maintaining an industry that was a drain on the exchequer, strategic considerations overrode economic rationality and were compelling reasons for keeping it viable.

Deriving strength from their industry’s economic and strategic significance, Rhodesian tobacco growers took the state head-on in negotiating the protection of their interests. Contrary to the view that they were muzzled...
dogs in their relations with the state, they often were vocal in defence of their interests. A good example is how they responded to government’s producer price of 22d./lb. for the 1968 crop. Reports by the Rhodesia Herald are revealing. It reported that the Smith regime got “in serious trouble with the farmers of Rhodesia, the men who were the backbone of the Rhodesian Front when it came to power.”43 They “held stormy meetings to protest against the price offered for their next crop,” the report continued.44 In a series of District resolutions, growers totally rejected the Government’s offer, with suggestions to drive their tractors into Salisbury in protest.45 Describing Government’s decision as “unrealistic,” Sinoia District for instance, urged “the RTA to refuse to accept the decision on the grounds that [Government] ignored [its] advice.”46 The most vicious attack came from the Umvukwes Farmers and Tobacco Growers’ Association Chairman, Major P. J. M. Rous. “It was this present Government that got Rhodesia into the mess that we are in,” he reminded Deputy Minister of Agriculture Lance Smith straight to his face, defiantly adding, “it is this Government that must get us out of it or resign.”47

Mrewa/Mtoko District passed a similar resolution adding that a price of 22d./lb. represented a return to the grower which was less than his cost of production.48 Marandellas District was even more elaborate:

Government is aware that the Tobacco Industry has already borne the brunt of sanctions and now it is expected to carry a further burden which will prove impossible. At 22d. per lb. the average tobacco grower will suffer a loss which will inevitably lead to serious unemployment, jeopardize internal security, and will have widespread repercussions on commerce and industry.

In their protests growers were quick to highlight the connection between the fate of their industry and that of the colony in matters of both economic survival and national security. It was in this context that Norton/Salisbury South District demanded “that the Government reopen negotiations with the RTA in order to arrive at a true and realistic figure.”49

Armed with resolutions from its various districts, the RTA wrote a letter to the Minister of Agriculture. Dated 21 March 1968, the letter summarized the tobacco industry’s concerns and demands as follows: the figure of 22d. per lb. was imposed without any prior negotiation with the RTA, and as such Council did not know on what basis and from what information Government made its decision; in view of the “irresponsible” figure of 22d., it was felt that the minister and his Cabinet colleagues were wrongly advised; Council felt that its case for 26d. was not adequately represented; and the RTA was wondering if Government wanted to write off the tobacco industry. Copied to the Prime Minister, the letter demanded to have the price negotiations
reopened in Cabinet. Under force of the tobacco growers’ representations, the Government capitulated, and Cabinet reopened the debate. In a Cabinet Memorandum circulated to fellow ministers for the re-opened debate on tobacco prices, the Minister of Agriculture wrote in support of the tobacco industry:

I must stress that there is a considerable discontent and criticism in the tobacco industry, especially the growing sector, that it is carrying an undue part, if not the brunt, of the effect of sanctions. Sanctions were imposed because of a national action. It is argued that the burden must also be borne by the whole nation—not a part of it.50

What is clear from the above was that the RTA had managed to prevail over the minister of agriculture and win him to their side.

The tobacco price question divided Cabinet. Finance Minister John Wrathall complained that Government was allowing itself to be held at ransom by the tobacco industry. “We are simply agreeing to what farmers want,” wrote Wrathall, “and forgetting the overriding facts of the situation and the need to shape the future of the agricultural industry in the interests of the national economy.”51 He also accused his fellow Cabinet colleagues of forgetting that it was the function of Government to govern, and not to capitulate to sectorial interests.52 “I have conceded much in giving ground to the 132m lb. at 22d./lb. . . . and I cannot agree to anything beyond this figure,” Wrathall charged. Yet despite his strong protestations, Cabinet succumbed to growers’ demands. Under pressure from tobacco growers and their representatives, the 1968 tobacco producer price was raised from 22d./lb. to 25d./lb. From the foregoing it is clear that government was at the mercy of the growers. They successfully forced Cabinet to re-open the closed debate on that season’s producer price for their crop. During the re-opened debate, their proposal carried the day against the wishes of the Treasury.

Arguments about the tobacco industry’s strategic and economic significance in pursuit of grower interests were not limited to the district structures of the RTA. Instead, they also found expression in the Legislative Assembly through the parliamentary agriculture/tobacco lobby. For instance, when faced with opposition from the industry/commerce lobby during the debate on the Agricultural Assistance Amendment Bill, the tobacco lobby invoked the security argument once again. Farmers were waging “a magnificent but rather unrewarding struggle in the interest of Rhodesia,” one MP submitted.53 He went on to explain the role of farmers in the following terms:

we are not only fighting an economic war, we are fighting a physical war, and agriculture, through its farmers and employees, is indeed on the land
permanently in our frontier areas, and thus providing the ground coverage which is so essential for military intelligence purposes. If it were not for their presence and the exemplary service many of them give in our para-military reserves and in our military forces, I believe that many of these terrorists’ intrusions would not be found until the terrorists reached cities.54

These sentiments were expressed in 1967, well before the economic and physical war had reached its bloodiest phase from 1972 onwards. The importance of white farmers in general and tobacco growers in the northern territories increased with the increase in the intensity of the war. The subsequent section focuses on how the industry negotiated survival under a combination of sanctions, a global economic crisis—following the oil shock of 1973—and an intensified guerrilla war.

“We Must Adapt to Survive“:
Sanctions, War and Agriculture’s “New Deal”

Utterances by two Rhodesian individuals in different circumstances contextualize the Rhodesian white farmer’s attitude towards any threats to his interests, and the extent to which he was prepared to go to safeguard them. The first was by Welensky. In explaining farmers’ attitudes in the build-up to UDI he suggested that Rhodesian farmers’ determination to fight on emanated from the fact that their economic fate was tied to their farms, which was all they had in the world in terms of investment.55 Echoing the first, the second statement came from a tobacco grower, Henry Keen, during a meeting of the Ayrshire Farmers’ Association. Growers were tied to their farms, he said, and for that reason they “must fight for a living” there.56 “If it is the Government we must fight for that living,” Keen unapologetically added, “we would be sorry but we would do it.”57 Such were the lengths to which Rhodesian farmers were prepared to go in pursuit of their self-interest. What follows traces the strategies and tactics that Rhodesian tobacco growers employed to protect their agricultural investment in fast-changing socio-economic and political contexts.

The general impact of sanctions on the Rhodesian economy has received significant scholarly attention. “From 1972 onwards,” wrote Joseph Kurebwa, “the guerrilla war complemented sanctions in bringing pressure to bear on the Rhodesian economy.”58 As has been highlighted, more recently Phimister and Gwande have also looked at this period from the point of view of secondary industrialization. Tinashe Nyamunda and Lloyd Maposa have also focused on the financial and energy aspects of the sanctions respectively.59 What is little accounted for, however, Rory Pilossof notes, is “the impact of
these on the farming community." Not only are the impacts of the war and sanctions on farmers “generally absent in the literature,” but also farmers’ “changing relationship with the Rhodesian state during this period.” It is to this historiographical gap that this section seeks to contribute. Understanding how the war and sanctions dispensation redefined state-grower relations—particularly how this influenced the political outlook of tobacco growers as an economic interest group—expands our appreciation of the nature and extent of internal pressures that were brought to bear on the rebellious regime, leading to its capitulation in 1979. Concurrently, focusing on manoeuvres by the tobacco industry to navigate their way around the sanctions and war hurdles provides another way of looking at the efficacy or otherwise of sanctions, as well as laying the ground for understanding postcolonial state-grower relations.

One way of demonstrating the impact of sanctions and war on the Rhodesian tobacco industry is to look at the number of growers before and after UDI. From a high of over 3,000 growers, the number fell to just above 1,500 by 1979. The fall in the number of growers in the 1970s can be explained by the intensification of the war in the northeastern parts of the country which, coincidentally, were largely tobacco areas. Reports of abandoned or vacant farms were prevalent during this period. According to Pilossof “there were many articles [in The Farmer magazine] on the dangers that vacant and deserted farms posed to the country.” Farmers and their workers were subjected to massive intimidation and sabotage. This included the burning of tobacco barns, farm worker compounds, and sometimes the crop itself. In worst cases, farmers and their labourers lost their lives in brutal fashion. An analysis of the Roll of Honour, a list of war causalities carried in The Farmer at War, shows that casualties were concentrated in such areas as Karoi, Doma, Ayrshire, Headlands, and Shamva among others, which were predominantly tobacco-growing areas.

Faced with the debilitating effects of the war, tobacco growers had to devise survival strategies. Opening the 1975 Congress, RTA President George Pio made a revealing statement about the industry’s strategy and survival tactics. He said:

References have been made to the conservatism and unbending nature of the Rhodesian farmer. I believe that the Rhodesian farmer is more flexible, more pragmatic, more prepared to accept needed change than he is given credit for, provided his long-term future is permanently secured. If this cannot be secured, he will be unbending and will defend what is his by right, and by usage, even more vigorously than he has been doing so up to now.
The underlying question confronting the industry, Pio argued, was how to ensure that its long-term future was permanently secured. Given the apparent failure of the military option to solve Rhodesia’s political—and by extension, economic—problems, it is important to examine other measures that the colony’s tobacco growers adopted to achieve their goal.

A combination of intensified war, sanctions, and general global economic crisis in the 1970s brought pressure to bear on the colony’s tobacco growers, forcing them to review their approach to national politics. The reality of the inevitability of change confronting Rhodesian tobacco growers galvanised their consciousness of the inseparability of politics and economics. The words of Vec Hurley while addressing the RTA’s 1974 Annual Congress are instructive in this respect. He noted that on “a purely economic basis, the future of the Rhodesian tobacco industry was bright, but” he added, “economics could not be divorced from politics.” For him, the future of tobacco was as dependent on political events as it was on economic considerations.

Consequently, a political settlement “would bring expansion—even affluence to the industry.” Departing from the general apolitical stance of Rhodesia’s farming community, Hurley cautioned farmers against isolating themselves from the political future of Rhodesia. Instead, he called for adaptability in growers’ political thinking. In his view, growers had a duty not only to “participate” in politics, but also “even to lead” so as “to ensure that the future is one of political and therefore economic stability.”

A year later, Hurley’s successor, George Pio, also made similar utterances during the 1975 Congress. “The future of the industry is closely tied to the political future of Rhodesia,” he said. Whilst admitting that the RTA was “not a political organization,” he argued that because it represented growers whose lives were intimately affected by the action or non-action of politicians, it would have to take a stand. “To sum up,” he said:

Rhodesia requires a solution which would defuse the present strained position, do away with domination of one over the other, give a defendable moral base to our society and provide a secure future to all Rhodesians, without continued strife.

Demonstrating an unprecedented willingness to accommodate African nationalists, Pio called for both parties—black and white—“to sit and talk to each other,” suggesting that a “pleasant Rhodesian hotel at Inyanga, Kariba or the Falls would do.” Marking a departure from previous settler attitudes to black nationalists, this approach formed the ideological basis of the farming lobby’s initiatives of the 1970s. Suffice to say that this was meant to pacify African nationalist agitators and their supporters so as to
ensure that white farmers’ permanent long term interests in the land were firmly secured.

White agricultural leaders amplified the call for a shift in farmers’ ideological orientation towards the end of the 1970s. While presenting his “new deal for agriculture,” Chairman of the Rhodesian Promotion Council, C. C Tracey, made a passionate call for “race unity to map out the future for the agricultural industry regardless of the wrangling of politicians.” This, he argued, should be premised on farmers’ acceptance of the inevitability of change. RTA President Gyles Dorward added his voice by declaring openly that it was his “fundamental belief that [Rhodesia would] be ruled by a black majority government” in the not-too-distant future. With that in mind, the RTA was called upon to be receptive to the demands of African liberation movements. It was not surprising that the RTA chose Ian Hume as guest speaker at its 1977 Congress. Hume was head of Whitsun Foundation, “an organisation generally viewed as ultra-liberal and opposed to white supremacy.” The choice was a symbolic gesture to the African cause, marking a further softening of racial prejudices within the industry. In line with the new dispensation, Hume called for racial accommodation between blacks and whites in the colony:

No one can doubt that an incoming majority rule government will embark on a significant measure of social and economic restructuring. But I suggest that such restructuring will be helped, not hindered, if the economy remains stable in the transition period ... in our recent history we have tried to build barriers to change. Now that change is upon us, we should not assume that all is lost. We should convert our institutions to build real barriers, not against change, but against chaos. I believe if we move quickly enough and sensibly enough, we can do just that.

His views were clear. He believed that “there [was] scope in Rhodesia for reconciling the land demands of Africans with the production demands of the economy.” The only caveat according to him was that this was subject to the implementation of “a full programme of land and agrarian reform . . . in a systematic and controlled fashion, calling for a ‘combination of the best of socialism with the best of capitalism.’”

From the foregoing it is apparent that tobacco industry players were not only aware of the impending majority rule, but also of the need to adapt their political thinking accordingly, to make the best out of a “bad” situation. Broader white agriculture under the Rhodesia National Farmers Union (RNFU) umbrella shared similar views. RNFU Vice President John Strong expressed his delight at “the sensible and realistic attitude of people to the future” by “taking a positive line and accepting the inevitability of change.”
He advised that it was in the best interests of white agriculture to “plan and prepare . . . in advance.” Two alternatives existed:

On the one hand, they can take the view that the tide of events is of such magnitude they may stand aside and let them take their course, for better or for worse. Or alternatively, they can be actively involved, they can positively consult and plan—they can take advantage of the ground swell of change to help influence those changes for the future—not for the good but for the best.

White farmers took the second alternative. They planned and prepared themselves for majority rule. They did so by adopting a multi-pronged approach in their survival offensive. One way was by seeking to erase history and starting on a blank slate. By declaring that “the past must look after the past,” and that it was the white farmer’s “responsibility to help mould the future,” Tracey epitomised this thinking. The call was a deliberate and dishonest attempt to underplay the role of that past in entrenching a systemic and systematic exclusion of Africans from meaningful economic activity. Ironically, in the unfolding dispensation, African interests were placed at the centre of white discourse on the future of agriculture. White farmers projected protection of white agriculture as more in the interest of Africans. The messianic connotations in such arguments were unmistakable. According to this logic, white agriculture had to be retained in its present state to save Africans from hunger and unemployment, and generally from economic collapse and chaos.

The second strategy was the redefinition of white farmers’ identity with emphasis on their being African more than their cherished “Britishness” of earlier years. For instance, an editorial comment in the Rhodesian Tobacco Journal complained that the world was misjudging and misreading Rhodesian white farmers. “You have described us as settlers when many of us are in truth third-generation Africans,” the editorial argued. In similar vein, addressing the Congress of his association, Dorward also identified himself “as an African of three generations.” By identifying themselves as rooted Africans, white farmers sought to assert their belonging in order to legitimate their claims to land as a basis for justifying security of tenure in post-colonial Zimbabwe. This informed their third strategy: compromise and accommodation which, like others, they deployed to ensure white farmer security of tenure in the event of the impending majority rule.

While in the 1950s the prospect of black participation in the lucrative flue-cured tobacco industry was unpalatable to white farmers, their attitude changed during the period under review. For instance, in 1950 the RTA argued that “the native was completely ignorant of the methods of tobacco
production, which was a complex affair depending on intuition as to the correct procedure at certain times as on set rules.” The Memorandum went on to say that in addition to the inability to learn the many problems of production, it was doubted if Africans had the aptitude of concentration required, the necessary capital or desire to equip themselves with adequate barn accommodation, or the necessary sense of discipline to abide by the many rules and directions laid down for the grower. In marked departure from their 1950s position, white tobacco growers changed their attitude. For instance, the RTA spent R$377,000 on a training farm mainly for Africans; funded a non-racial intensive one-year Tobacco Culture Diploma course, and the RNFU organised a multi-racial seminar on the future of agriculture where black agricultural leaders attended and presented papers.

Hume’s words whilst opening the 1977 RTA Annual Congress consolidated compromise and accommodation as a strategy for white survival beyond minority rule. “We must adapt to survive,” he advised, “even if it means swallowing some of our prejudices.” He specifically called upon the white tobacco grower “to accept an increased sharing of the benefits of his skills, capital and land with his African workers and neighbours. The sooner we have African tobacco growers of consequence,” Dorward reinforced, “the sooner we will remove the barriers of envy and suspicion that we so often encounter in our dealings in many quarters today.” The same attitude extended to African labour. There was a slight loosening of white attitude towards African labour. Whereas previously African labour was perceived as nothing more than another aspect of production costs, there was a slight shift in attitudes during this period. For instance, a compulsory Agricultural Industry (Employees’ Pension Scheme) Act was passed in 1975 “to provide long-term security for agricultural labour among other things.” Quoting Department of Statistics figures, the Rhodesian Financial Gazette reported that “salaries and wages although still low on average, increased 36 per cent and the value of rations 21.5 per cent” during the period 1975 to 1978. This was in addition to “substantial amounts of money made available . . . for training farm workers—of all races” at Blackfordby Training College.

Another noticeable strategy was the emphasis placed on the importance of white commercial agriculture in the present and future economy of the country. Because white farmers dominated commercial agriculture, including flue-cured tobacco farming, the importance placed on commercial agriculture effectively translated to emphasis on the non-expendability of white farmers. The conflation of commercial agriculture with white interests meant that advancing the cause of commercial agriculture from a seemingly economic and neutral perspective was in fact in the interest of white farmers who
dominated the industry. Those aspiring for leadership of the country were reminded that:

The economic history of Rhodesia clearly shows how tobacco played a dominant role in the economic development of the country in terms of providing the incentives, capital and expertise which in turn was basically responsible for agricultural and infrastructural development within the country. Tobacco has done for Rhodesia in a sense what gold has done for SA or copper for Zambia.93

The RTA President was more elaborate in his advice to potential post-colonial political leaders. During the 1978 annual congress his advice “to all those who would aspire to [a] leadership position of Zimbabwe” was as follows:

If your task is to increase employment, stimulate tobacco growing; if your young nation needs foreign exchange earnings, tobacco exports will satisfy; if you have to develop infrastructure and small industries in rural areas, finance tobacco on the lines of tenant farming schemes and individual family units; if you want your country to count in Africa and the world, these measures will enable you to don the mantle of the ‘world’s most important producer of quality tobacco.’ And if you want to overcome these problems tomorrow, keep your tobacco men today by resolving your political differences now. Right now!94

With tobacco farmers being described as “the first line of defence today, the first line of economic offence tomorrow,” those aspiring for leadership of postcolonial Zimbabwe were also told that “unless there [was] a tobacco industry there [would be] no tomorrow.”95 The tobacco industry, it was further argued, could “do more for the country in the shortest period of time—with least expense than any other industry.”96 This, the argument went, was because a nucleus of expertise remained in the industry which under normal trading conditions could double current output in about three years, which would directly and indirectly increase total employment by more than 50 percent. The argument was spiced with compelling statistics. For instance, it was submitted that tobacco currently employed more people than mining, commercial, or industrial sectors of the economy together. Other advantages were highlighted. For instance, tobacco earned more foreign exchange than any single export; had a 1:13 scarce foreign currency inputs to earnings conversion ratio; had spending power of R$100 million annually, making it an important customer for industry and commerce; and had a high value-to-weight ratio which made it an efficient export commodity.97

In its blueprint for commercial development under a majority government dubbed “Stability through Agriculture” the RNFU further advanced the
white agriculture cause. The destruction of commercial farming would cause mass unemployment, catastrophic food shortages, loss of foreign currency earnings, and would lead to a loss of confidence of the people, they argued. Playing on the political ambitions of aspiring African leaders, a warning was given that “no government [could] long stay in power on the shoulders of a hungry people.” If agriculture “with its highly sophisticated and efficient infrastructure, was destroyed or allowed to decay,” the argument went, “then the country will collapse,” and “an economic void will be created and maintenance of law and order will become impossible.” The self-serving argument was that postcolonial political stability could only be achieved when the population was not hungry, and that hunger could only be averted by keeping white farmers on the land. Anything else, it was suggested, would trigger a breakdown in law and order and make the country ungovernable.

Apart from the “Stability through Agriculture” blueprint, white farming interests crafted another one in 1979 known as the “New Deal.” Like its predecessor, its major tenets were meant “to persuade Black politicians that the agricultural industry was a pillar of the economy which must not be tempered with after majority rule.” In pursuing this, both the RNFU and the Rhodesian Promotion Council met with key politicians whom they hammered with facts about the importance of commercial farming to the country’s economy. For instance, they highlighted that, of the country’s population of 6,800,000, almost 5,000,000 people depended on agriculture for their livelihood. It was also submitted that 38 percent of total African wage forces was employed in agriculture, while agricultural primary and secondary products earned on average nearly half the country’s foreign currency. In view of the above, the paper argued, any “theoretical socialist land apportionment policies” would be disastrous. Coupled with this was also the emphasis put on the regional significance of Rhodesian agriculture in general. Rhodesian agriculture contributed substantially to the food deficits of neighbouring countries, particularly Mozambique, Angola, Zaire, and Malawi, the blueprint further provided.

It was not only the private white agricultural lobby which portrayed white farmers as saviours for both the country and the region. The outgoing Deputy Prime Minister, David Smith, told the Annual Meeting of the Fertiliser Society in Cape Town, South Africa, that tampering with white farming spelt doom for the colony. If white farmers in Rhodesia “lose confidence in the future and leave their farms,” Smith argued, “there is no doubt that the industry will collapse and Zimbabwe-Rhodesia will become an importer of food and will have to pick up its begging bowl and join the clamour for international handouts.” Even the “liberal” Hume described white farmers as “a major capital asset.” He added that:
If majority rule led to a massive and hysterical land grab by Africans, the result would be disastrous for all concerned. But if land re-allocation was made on a controlled and systematic basis putting only good farmers on to good land, the result might be quite different.¹⁰³

There is no prize in guessing who “the good farmers” who needed to be put “on good land” to save the country from collapse were.

Intricately connected to the projection of white commercial agriculture as the saviour of Africans was the appropriation of the populist language of “the people.” The tobacco industry was conveniently referred to as “the people’s industry.”¹⁰⁴ In all white farmers’ public presentations, African people’s interests were placed at the centre. If it was not about the interests of the ordinary African who would lose employment, it was about the interests of the incoming majority rule leaders whose political security was said to be premised on the stability of commercial agriculture, which basically meant white agriculture. Appeals were even made to African moral sensibilities by harnessing the plight of young children. “We lose skilled growers at our peril,” the RTA President George Pio argued, “and to the detriment of young and yet unborn Africans.” He suggested that if there was economic ruin in Rhodesia, “the white Rhodesian tobacco farmer will be welcomed with open arms in some other producing countries.”¹⁰⁵ But, he asked, “what will happen to the 600,000 people who are directly or indirectly dependent on tobacco?”¹⁰⁶ Even in their “New Deal” blueprint, white farmers warned that in the event of the collapse of commercial agriculture “those who will then suffer the most will be the vast majority of the country’s millions of black people.”¹⁰⁷

Dennis Norman, the RFNU President who at independence became the first minister of agriculture, reiterated this point. Describing any policy that allowed the collapse of the farming sector as a “criminal and tragic policy,” he charged that “the onus for such an eventuality and its effects on the lives of millions of Black people ... would forever lie on the heads of politicians responsible.”¹⁰⁸ In this way they were able to hide behind the mask of “the people’s interests” to advance their permanent interest in security of land tenure. Rhodesian farmers premised the final dimension of their interest group lobby to secure the interests of white agriculture in the event of majority rule on appeals to rule of law, specifically to the need for law and order. “In any country or society every decent citizen expects the rights of protection of his home, life and property,” Dennis Norman posited, adding that as farmers they expected that in any changing scene, law and order would be enforced and the common human decencies would be maintained. “Without these assurances many people would look elsewhere for a stable, secure way of life,” he warned.¹⁰⁹ Norman took the fight to London where he met top British politicians and officials.¹¹⁰ His message to them was that
there was need “to ensure that Rhodesia’s 6,000 white farmers, who provided more than half the country’s foreign exchange, did not abandon their farms because of the insecurity and uncertainty currently prevailing.”

Farmers, Norman added, were not concerned with the political question of who would be in power but needed some indication of hope for a settled future. This was the same message he took to the Lancaster House constitutional negotiations in late 1979. Through the white agriculture lobby, the racialised distribution of land based on historically discriminatory pieces of land legislation was consolidated and found constitutional expression in section 16 of the transitional constitution’s Bill of Rights. It entrenched the protection of private property from arbitrary appropriation. With it, white agriculture won the long-term security it yearned for, at least from a legalistic point of view. But whether “the people” in whose name the lobbying was undertaken stood to benefit from this is a story that scholars of post-colonial Zimbabwe have dealt with. The controversy around the land question continues to haunt Zimbabwe to this day.

Conclusion

Rhodesia’s unilateral declaration of independence from British imperial control and the sanctions it triggered significantly impacted the latter’s socio-economic and political landscape. Different sectors of the economy were affected differently. While UDI was a boon for secondary industrialisation, the same was not the case with commercial agriculture whose flagship was the tobacco industry. The industry suffered immensely due to the contraction of international markets. By contrast to the period before UDI when tobacco growers were economically and politically dominant, state control of their industry in the post-UDI era eroded their financial and political power. Unsurprisingly, the resultant power asymmetries placed tobacco growers in a disadvantaged position in their interaction with Government, the market, and other stakeholders. This is the context within which scholars who have focused on internal power relation dynamics argue that the industry was captured and muzzled by the state. Against this background, this paper set about to examine the strategies and tactics that the Rhodesian tobacco-growing industry embraced to safeguard its economic interests under the strains of sanctions and war. Using the bargaining power they still wielded on account of their economic and strategic significance, the colony’s tobacco growers negotiated with both the white minority ruling elites and African nationalists to entrench their interests beyond the demise of white rule. Following the story of how they navigated their way, and examining the means they deployed to do so, allowed this
paper to provide another way of looking at the effectiveness or otherwise of Rhodesian sanctions beyond the parameters of orthodox international relations, with its bias on inter-state activities.

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Notes


6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.


10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.


14. Ibid.
17. Rhodesia Tobacco Association (RTA): Minutes of a Special Meeting held on Wednesday, 28 October 1964, National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ), RH 27/4/27.
19. Ibid.

Britain immediately imposed sanctions. On 30 January 1966 Rhodesia was subjected to a total British trade ban, the UN imposed limited mandatory sanctions in December of the same year before upgrading them to a more comprehensive embargo in May 1968.

25. For sanctions leakages see the story of Ginger Freeman, the Tobacco Corporation Managing Director, and later Chairman of the Tobacco Corporation, who was a key player in sanctions busting activities, in P. Armstrong, *Tobacco Spiced with Ginger*.
27. M. G. B. Rooney Papers, NAZ, (Unprocessed), Acc 3382, Box 72.
28. Ibid.
31. For instance, in 1949, the growers successfully refused to accept a new tobacco tax policy introduced by Government.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. The following groups and individuals submitted written and oral evidence: The Burley Tobacco Association, the Rhodesia National Farmers Union, Rhodesia Tobacco Association, Tobacco Corporation, Tobacco Export Promotion Corporation of Rhodesia, Tobacco Sales Floors Association, Tobacco Trade Association, Tobacco Marketing Board General Manager, Tobacco Research Board Director, Ministries of Defence and Law and Order, and the British South Africa Police’s Special Branch.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid.
43. The Star, 26 March 1968.
44. Ibid.
45. The Rhodesia Herald, 28 March 1968.
46. RTA District 1, Sinoia, Resolutions on the Subject of 1968/69 Grade Prices, Smith Papers, RUCL.
47. The Rhodesia Herald, 5 April 1968.
48. RTA District 22, Mrewa-Mtoko, Resolutions on the subject of 1968/69 Grade Prices, Smith Papers, RUCL.
49. RTA District 116, Norton-Salisbury South, Resolutions on the subject of 1968/69 Grade Prices, Smith Papers, RUCL.
50. Memorandum by the Minister of Agriculture on the re-opened cabinet debate on Grade Prices, April 1968, Smith Papers, RUCL.
51. Memorandum by the Minister of Finance in response to the Memorandum by the Minister of Agriculture, April 1968, Smith Papers, RUCL.
52. Ibid.
54. Rhodesia, Debates of the Legislative Assembly, November 1972, Motion on the Agricultural industry.
56. The Rhodesia Herald, 12 April 1969.
57. Ibid.
64. See The Rhodesian Tobacco Journal, July 1975, 12. These words were uttered by RTA President George Pio during 1975 RTA Congress.
66. Ibid.
67. Ibid.
68. Ibid.
70. Ibid.
72. Ibid.
74. Ibid.
76. Ibid., 4–5.
77. Ibid.
78. Ibid.
79. Ibid.
82. *The Rhodesian Tobacco Journal*, June 1977, 8. This ahistorical approach was later to prove problematic in postcolonial Zimbabwe as solutions reached on its basis later proved to be inadequate to address deep-seated historical imbalances in the racial distribution of farming land.
86. Ibid.
91. Ibid., 22 September 1978.
92. Ibid., 28 October 1977.
96. Ibid., January 1977, 6.
98. These were the words of RNFU President, Denis Norman. See *The Rhodesian Financial Gazette*, 2 February 1979.
101. Ibid.
103. Ibid., 31 May 1977.
104. Among other officials S. P Kelly, RTA Chief Executive Officer, used this term in describing the industry. See *The Rhodesia Financial Gazette*, 23 September 1977.
106. Ibid.
110. See *The Herald Bureau* (London), 16 March 1979. It is noteworthy that among the officials met by Dennis Norman was Lord Carrington, who was to play a key role at the Lancaster House Constitutional Talks later in the same year.
111. Ibid.
112. Ibid.