



MAY 1980

"Euphoria" is a rare word. It has two definitions. Some dictionaries say "intense happiness"; others say "exaggerated happiness". Southern Africans use this word a lot. When solutions hover forth – the daddy of them was the two-year honeymoon after Mandela's election – columnists talk approvingly of euphoria. When the black-outs come and the crime climbs and the farms stop farming and the youth resume emigrating and the biggest thing in life is a reversed obsession with Race... well now it's said that the brief shining moment was "just euphoria". Re-reading **Patrick Lee's** May 1980 article on Zim is quite some jolt. History repeats itself. How did we forget, so soon?

Robert Mugabe's new gospel

*The Limpopo was not filled with fleeing Cambodian-style refugees, desperately swimming Southwards to safety, as many people had predicted would happen if Mugabe triumphed. Instead, various South Africans are talking of the possibility of emigrating to Zimbabwe. What happened? **Patrick Lee** examines the euphoria, and wonders whether the mood can last.*

The dreaded gook-zapper, the white Rhodesian kid-soldier, in the days immediately following Robert Mugabe's election victory, stalked the bars and clubs and hotel foyers of Salisbury like a ghoul. Conspicuous and defiant as ever, slipping rapidly out of focus as the hero-figure of his society.

You take up killing on a regular basis before you're 20 and it's going to shape you. Six months at the office, six months in the bush, the ethics of the two systems get inextricably tangled. These kids are immobilised in time; they know

ROBERT MUGABE'S NEW GOSPEL

no other role. In civilian clothes the gook-zapper best resembles a prizefighter in a petticoat. His tanned hands leap from the sleeves of his yellow sports-jacket which, when removed, reveals a short-sleeved shirt with racing stripes on the shoulders, and the rugby club tie.

The gook-zappers' masculine identity is rooted in something called a kill ratio.

But so what? Time streaks on without them. Gook-zappers are confused because they have lost without being defeated. And what's more nobody is saying hey-you-guys-did-a-great-job. Instead there's a rush of whites hurling themselves on to the television to say what a good man Robert Mugabe is and how fortunate it is that he has won such a clear majority!

What is this? There's – this is unbelievable – there's General Walls on the TV saying he will work for Mugabe. What is this? The gook-zappers cannot understand it. And anyone they might have asked has, you know, somehow, changed.

Nobody. Nobody predicted quite this mood to come out of the Rhodesia-Zimbabwe transitional elections.

Whites – within and beyond the borders – had hoped to keep Mugabe out at all costs – they even swallowed their hate for Viscount-slayer Joshua Nkomo at the prospect that he could lynchpin an all-comers anti-Mugabe coalition. Unbelievably, that hope persisted until counting day, when the unwieldy piles of Mugabe votes shown on the television brought home the truth to even the dullest eye.

But 57 seats ... Television crews were poised to swoop down to Beit Bridge to film the exodus. It never came. The whites were so stunned they forgot to run, and by the time it occurred to them again, the Great Change had happened. . .

It is impossible to put your finger on one quality of Robert Mugabe's speech or conduct which you could say specifically created the exotic atmosphere in the country directly after the elections.

His talk was reassuring, yes, but that is hardly unique or subtle in watershed politics.

Certainly he proved to be vastly more – shall we say civilised – than the whites had expected, but that in itself is not a magical trait; some of the most

THE BEST OF FRONTLINE

civilised people are the most menacing.

There is something more about him. The effect of his impact is greater than the sum of its various aspects.

He is an event whose time has come. He has the huge momentum of history behind him. He has such inevitable power that he is elegant in restraint.

Three hours after his victory was announced, Mugabe gave a press conference on the lawn of his suburban, Salisbury home. He uttered not one word of triumph, except to say that all Zimbabweans were winners, now that they were all free. He spoke not of the past but of the future.

That night he took the same practical, unhysterical approach on the televised address to the nation, and whites were paralysed with amazement. Is this the same man, they asked? Is this not some hired actor? The high-pressure propaganda of the war machine had conjured up a vastly different image of the guerilla leader ...

Over the next few days Mugabe made statements that would have been sell-out talk in the mouth of Muzorewa, which the country – and, increasingly, the world – took as the gospel of the new realpolitik of Africa.

Mugabe said he would continue economic links with South Africa and would not give active support to South African black liberation movements. And in Pretoria foreign policy corridors (where, up until very recently, it had been believed that Muzorewa could be installed by sheer force of helicopters) the only murmur heard was a relieved *jislaaik*.

When the hullabaloo dies down, said one election observer, the country will start to count the true cost of the war.

In a refugee camp at Epworth Mission outside Salisbury a Methodist organisation called Christian Care is feeding up to 1600 refugees who fled their homes in the war-zone bush.

At camps like this you can hear the stories that have made this war so infamous. What distinguishes the suffering here from most war situations is that these people did not even have the comfort of some moral backboard to the whole thing. Both sides in most wars have the ultimate salve that they were right all along, even if things didn't pan out their way. Churchill could still come on the radio when the bombs were hitting London every night and remind

ROBERT MUGABE'S NEW GOSPEL

people what they were suffering for. As did the Rhodesian media for the Rhodesian whites.

For the black people of rural Zimbabwe however, there was no such last-ditch *raison d'être*.

The Rhodesian Army and the guerillas drew equally from the villages, and they came back equally for support or retribution when the going got tough. Villagers found themselves fighting fellow-villagers, found themselves pressuring, torturing their previous neighbours, even relatives. This puts a particularly macabre slant on the official communique jargon for black civilians "killed in crossfire". Half the nation was caught in a crossfire it didn't ask for or understand. A coming and going of soldiers and guerillas and bullets and mortars which had no relation to winning or losing or standing up for a cause or against one. Just killing.

In the run-up to the election, the media reported with great satisfaction that Robert Mugabe "is a Marxist" and treated this a sufficient guide to an understanding of the man. He had, after all, said so himself. This cosy categorisation, however, did nothing to indicate in advance the dispositions that Mugabe has already taken up, and certainly even less to suggest how he might handle the various key issues to come.

The term "Marxist" is simply out of date and out of place in southern Africa 1980. As is socialist, capitalist, and so on.

Because his method does not fit with any of the established stencils, it is assumed now that he is playing things off the cuff.

Here again, the intangible charisma of Mugabe can be seen. With no real evidence in support, people from all ends of the political spectrum seem to believe that he will be a capable leader. He has no manifesto (indeed, some of his utterings from the Mozambique days have been completely reversed) and yet people seem confident about the action he will take. One sees a steady, wide perspective in his manner.

Perhaps this is partly because he is not (not yet, anyway) glancing over his shoulder to see which young blades within his party are marking his tactical strengths and weaknesses.

And it is certainly partly because goodwill is on Mugabe's side. The attrition

THE BEST OF FRONTLINE

of the war has achieved with all Zimbabweans what an army tries to achieve with new recruits – the grinding down to a basic homogenous unit which will grasp anything that is blessed with the calm, comforting feel of routine. Lifestyle. There has not been lifestyle in Zimbabwe for many a year, and almost any system will go down well.

“Let us trample on racism and tribalism and regionalism,” said Robert Mugabe on the day of his election, and promptly appointed Joshua Nkomo, three other Patriotic Front members, and two whites to his cabinet.

It seems too good to be true. Is he seriously going to attempt, let alone achieve, a society which truly, ah, mingles? Hell, leaders with far less problems than Mugabe have found that even apparently minor social fissures are entrenched to a depth beyond the drill of reason.

How is he going to explain to the white farmer, as he takes 5000 of the farmer's 7000 acres for nationalisation, that this is simply the adjustment of an error in the ledger of history? Nothing personal. A withdrawal of excess privileges, not an assault on rights. And how is he going to explain to some blacks that there will always be some whites living better than some blacks?

At the Epworth Mission refugee camp, only nine days after the election, before the independent government had even taken power, people were already asking where are these benefits we heard so much about? What's the delay? . . . and they say it's going to take five years just to rebuild the infrastructure of agriculture and commerce, to regain the standards of 1970.

With hindsight, it seems very obvious and appropriate that Robert Mugabe should win the election and lead the new Zimbabwe. It is so clearly the best – the only – solution. One wonders now how one ever gave thought to the other possibilities – the Muzorewa victory, the Nkomo-led coalition, the military coup. Yet right up until the result, these were discussed in earnest.

Considering that, one realises how useless it would be to try to predict the development pattern of the country. In fact, the most stimulating factor is that Zimbabwe is now truly path-breaking, these are not replays of known precedents, this is not the “same thing that's happened everywhere in Africa.”

What happens on Zimbabwean soil now could send seismic messages throughout Africa and even beyond, wherever race relations are at issue.