

White Farmer Heads To Zimbabwe's Agriculture Ministry

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After three years in self-imposed exile, former lawmaker Roy Bennett is set to become Zimbabwe's deputy minister for agriculture – six years after his own farm was seized in controversial land reforms.

Bennett was one of only a handful of white parliamentarians when he was elected in 2000 on the ticket of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), the party of Zimbabwe's new Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai.

His entry into the new unity government marks one of the stranger twists in Zimbabwe's decade-long drama between the MDC and President Robert Mugabe.

Bennett was born to a farm family in 1957 in the town of Rusape. He eventually started his own coffee plantation in Chimanimani, a lush region near the border with Mozambique, where he grew into one of Zimbabwe's top exporters of the crop.

A fluent speaker of the majority Shona language, Bennett endeared himself to people in the region, who nicknamed him "Pachedu", meaning "We are one."

When Tsvangirai formed the MDC a decade ago, Bennett was one of the few white farmers to openly declare his support for the party that set out to defeat Mugabe at the ballot box.

He remained outspoken even in the face of great personal challenges.

His Charleswood farm was expropriated under Mugabe's land reforms in 2003, and the following year he was jailed for eight months for assault after he punched the justice minister during a heated debate in parliament on the land programme.

The sentence was imposed by the parliament then dominated by Mugabe's ZANU-PF, and following his conviction he lost his parliamentary seat.

In 2006, he fled to neighbouring South Africa to escape arrest after being implicated in an alleged plot to assassinate Mugabe.

Police claimed Bennett was the mastermind in the alleged conspiracy, which also implicated MDC lawmaker Giles Mutsekwa, who is set to become co-minister for home affairs on Friday.

The agriculture ministry does not deal directly with the land reform scheme. A separate resettlement ministry oversees the programme, which sought to redress colonial injustices by resettling white-owned farms with black farmers.

The new farmers often lacked experience and were given little government support or a formal title to the land, which prevented them from seeking bank finance for their new farms.

Bennett will be tasked with helping farmers succeed after years of disastrous crops that have left seven million people -- more than half the population -- dependent on food aid.