

'No Person Shall Sell Goods at an Unjust Profit': A Review of Consumer Price Controls in Southern Rhodesia, 1939-1949

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Abstract

This article explores the regime of consumer price controls instituted in Southern Rhodesia during World War II and continued in the post-war period up to 1949. The 'war effort' required the colony to change rapidly and tackle emerging shortages, bottlenecks, and general wartime disruptions. Southern Rhodesia responded to rising consumer prices and the spiralling cost of living by assembling price control officials, institutions, legislation and policies. Besides evaluating the immediate outcome of consumer price controls, the article also examines their socioeconomic impact. It argues that while the first few years saw some success in stabilising prices and curtailing price hikes, controls incentivised contravention and other unscrupulous practices as businesses sought to realise profits. Furthermore, controls sacrificed industrial competitiveness because businesses had little incentive to improve their production methods. On consumer price controls extended to Africans in this colonial society, the article argues that the measures were socially retrogressive because they slowed down the emergence of African business enterprises in rural areas while also stifling African wages in urban areas. Thus, while deliberately protecting white consumers, consumer price controls simultaneously enforced African under-consumption to maintain the settler colonial model.

Keywords: Consumer price controls; consumers; contravention; Southern Rhodesia; shortages; war effort; Africans.

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Opsomming

Hierdie artikel stel ondersoek in na die verbruikersprysbeheermaatreëls wat tydens die Tweede Wêreldoorlog in Suid-Rhodesië ingestel is, en in die na-oorlogse tydperk tot 1949 voortgeduur het. Die ‘oorlogspoging’ het snelle optrede van die kolonie vereis om tekorte, bottelnekke en algemene oorlogsverwante ontwigting die hoof te bied. Suid-Rhodesië se antwoord op stygende verbruikerspryse en lewenskostes was om prysbeheeramptenare-, -instellings en -beleid daar te stel. Die artikel evalueer die onmiddellike uitkoms van verbruikersprysbeheer, sowel as die sosio-ekonomiese uitwerking daarvan. Die artikel voer verder aan dat terwyl daar aanvanklik daarin geslaag is om pryse te stabiliseer en prysverhogings hok te slaan, prysbeheer ook omseiling en gewetenlose praktyke aangemoedig het – danksy besighede se strewe na wins. Boonop het prysbeheer mededingendheid op die nywerheidsfront belemmer, aangesien besighede weinig belang daarby gehad het om hul vervaardigingsmetodes te verbeter. Wat betref die uitbreiding van verbruikersprysbeheer na Afrikane in dié koloniale samelewing, voer die artikel aan dat verbruikersprysbeheermaatreëls maatskaplike agteruitgang meegebring het deurdat dit die opkoms van swart besighede in die platteland vertraag het, en swart lone in die stede onderdruk het. Dus, terwyl verbruikersprysbeheer opsetlik daarop gemik was om wit verbruikers te beskerm, het die maatreëls terselfdertyd swart verbruikers aan bande gelê, ten einde die setlaar-koloniale model in stand te hou.

Sleutelwoorde: Verbruikersprysbeheer; verbruikers; oortreding; Suid-Rhodesië; tekorte; oorlogspoging; Afrikane.

Introduction

This article probes the impact of introducing consumer price controls in Southern Rhodesia from the outbreak of World War II in 1939, to 1949, when price controls were ‘lifted on all commodities [except for] certain foodstuffs, cigarettes, iron and steel, lubricating oils and unmanufactured wood’.¹ Consumer price controls are governmental restrictions on the prices charged for goods and services in the local market. Central governments are often criticised for dramatic rises in the cost of living because the general perception is that high costs of living are a direct culmination of the ineffectiveness or shortcomings of state policy. This remains the case even when government attempts to regulate the economy are perceived negatively. Most orthodox economists are sceptical about price controls, arguing that they distort the allocation of

1. National Archives of Zimbabwe (hereafter NAZ) S725, Price Control Regulations 1941 - 1950, Letter from the Price Controller to Finnermore’s Travelling Builders (Pty) Ltd, 6 March 1950.

resources (i.e., lead to shortages).² Moreover, many businesspeople dispute price controls as interventions that reduce profit margins artificially and thereby discourage investment. This article uses the Southern Rhodesian case to interrogate these viewpoints.

Historically, consumer price controls have been common policies across the world.³ They are imposed on wholesalers, retailers and service providers. Some of the methods used include setting up ceiling prices or imposing floor prices. When prices, especially those of basic commodities, continue to go up, the inevitable result will be a high cost of living, which will exert pressure on employers to adjust wages and salaries. For this reason, governments are often inclined towards the idea of suppressing prices to maintain certain living standards.

The World War II economic boom in Southern Rhodesia has received many reviews from historians.⁴ Most studies concur that the war advanced the fortunes of the colony's mining and secondary industry by stimulating demand.⁵ In the Zimbabwean literature, much focus has been on price controls for commodity exports or producer price controls.⁶ Our current study complements such studies by providing a case study

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2. See J.I. Bulow, and P. Klemperer, 'Price Controls and Consumer Surplus', Stanford Graduate School of Business Research Paper, No. 2086 (October 2011); R.Q. Grafton, and M.B. Ward, 'Prices versus Rationing: Marshallian Surplus and Mandatory Water Restrictions', *Economic Record*, 84 (September 2008), S57-S65; and J.R. Lott (Jr.), 'Nontransferable Rents and an Unrecognized Social Cost of Minimum Wage Laws', *Journal of Labor Research*, 11, 4 (Fall 1990), 453-460.
 3. H. Rockoff, *Price Controls in History* (New York: Macmillan Press, 1956), 34.
 4. I.R. Phimister, *An Economic and Social History of Zimbabwe, 1890-1948: Capital Accumulation and Class Struggle* (Longman Limited: Harlow, 1988), 219-282; S.C. Rubert, *A Most Promising Weed: A History of Tobacco Farming and Labor in Colonial Zimbabwe, 1890-1945* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1998), 69; P. Mosley, *The Settler Economies: Studies in the Economic History of Kenya and Southern Rhodesia, 1900-1963* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 170-233.
 5. For example, D. Johnson observes that the wartime conditions led to an expansion in mining and stimulated secondary industrialisation in the colony. He argues that the wartime economic growth led to a higher demand for African labour, which saw more Africans taking up wage employment. See D. Johnson, *World War II and the Scramble for African Labour in Colonial Zimbabwe* (Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications, 2000), 23 and 41.
 6. See E.G. Cross, 'Stability of Food Crop Production through Pricing Policies', *The Zimbabwe Science News*, 16, 1 (1982), 3-5; E. Osborn, 'The Financing of Rhodesia as a Siege Economy', *South African Journal of Economic History*, 2, 2 (1987), 26-34; I.R. Phimister, 'Secondary Industrialisation in Southern Africa: The 1948 Customs

of the implementation and impact of consumer price controls in the then Southern Rhodesia. Although it looks at the role of state regulation, it disentangles consumer price controls from the broader, elaborate control apparatus of World War II that also included producer price controls.

There is extensive theoretical and historical literature on the operation of consumer price controls and rationing in Britain, USA, and other large, industrial mainly closed economies.⁷ John Galbraith's instant classic, *A Theory of Price Control*, first published in 1952, supplies the underlying economic ideas on how particular controls affect the general operation of an economy.⁸ It shows why consumer price controls in the USA during the war worked well and analyses the criteria for effective price control, both under a fully mobilised economy and under limited mobilisation.⁹ Terence Witkowski provides a historical account of the US consumer experience during World War II.¹⁰ Witkowski describes the rationing and consumer price controls at the time.¹¹ These and other similar publications provide some brilliant analyses of the implications of this era of price controls on the history of consumer culture in developed countries. This article takes the same cue and investigates what a price control system could mean in Southern Rhodesia. The colony's economy supported a few thousand white settlers in managing nascent enterprises producing commodities for export.¹² The economy was

Agreement between Southern Rhodesia and South Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 17, 3 (1991), 430-442; P. Bennell, 'Market Power and Mark-Ups: Manufacturing Industry in Zimbabwe', *Eastern Africa Economic Review*, 8, 2 (1992), 135-141; E.K. Makombe, 'Agricultural Commodity Pricing Policy in Colonial Zimbabwe with Particular Reference to the Settler Maize Industry, 1950-1980' (MA dissertation, University of Zimbabwe, 2005).

7. See M. Harrison, 'Resource Mobilization for World War II: The USA, UK, USSR and Germany, 1938- 1945', *The Economic History Review*, 41, 2 (1988), 171-192; H. Rockoff, *Drastic Measures: A History of Wage and Price Controls in the United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); R.T. Naylor, 'Economic Warfare: Sanctions, Embargo Busting, and their Human Cost', *Ethics and International Affairs*, 16, 2 (2002), 171-181; R. L. Schuettinger and E.F. Butler, *Forty Centuries of Wage and Price Controls: How Not to Fight Inflation* (Washington DC: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 1979).
8. J.K. Galbraith, *A Theory of Price Control* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2013).
9. Galbraith, *A Theory of Price Control*.
10. T.H. Witkowski, 'The American Consumer Home Front during World War II', in *NA – Advances in Consumer Research*, eds J.W. Alba and J. Wesley Hutchinson (Provo, UT: Association for Consumer Research, 1998).
11. Witkowski, 'The American Consumer Home Front', 568-573.
12. We use the terms 'white(s)' and 'African(s)' as the quotidian usage of the terms during the period under study. White(s) denotes people of European descent and African(s) refers to indigenous people.

anchored on using ultra-cheap labour provided by a small portion of the far larger African indigenous population, most of whom were engaged in subsistence agriculture.¹³

State regulation of economies in general, has been the subject of intense debate among labour unions, employers' interest groups and governments. The disagreement revolves around the efficiency of planned economies where the government takes an active role in determining what and how the economy should produce and market goods and services. Several scholarly reviews scrutinise consumer price controls because they are an integral element of government regulation. Shinga Mupindu and Louis Masuko, for example, have used the case of post-colonial Zimbabwe to examine the effectiveness of price controls as a means of consumer protection.¹⁴ They found that consumer price controls inhibited employment creation, and because these controls were not accompanied by commensurate wage increases, they had a knock-on effect of increasing the cost of living. However, the wide range of experiences under price controls calls for distinction since it can be used in diverse circumstances from a populist expedient to prevail over a pending election, or to remedy an enduring inflationary movement propelled by persistent excess aggregate demand.¹⁵

This article is divided into three sections. The first outlines the goals of the price control regime and sketches the institutional infrastructure under the government of Southern Rhodesia that introduced consumer price controls in 1939. It also unpacks the legislative framework which operationalised consumer price controls in the colony. The second section discusses the implementation of consumer price controls in Southern Rhodesia. It details the logistical and operational shortcomings of the price control mechanisms highlighted in the first section. The third section assesses the impact of

13. For more see G. Arrighi, 'Labour Supplies in Historical Perspective: A Study of the Proletarianization of the African Peasantry in Rhodesia', *The Journal of Development Studies*, 6, 3 (1970), 197-234; C. van Onselen, *Chibaro: African Mine Labour in Southern Rhodesia, 1900-33* (London: Pluto, 1976); D.G. Clarke, *Contract Workers and Underdevelopment in Rhodesia* (Gwelo: Mambo Press, 1974).

14. S. Mupindu and L. Masuko, 'Price Control as a means of Consumer Protection in Zimbabwe: A Review of the Price Formation System' Unpublished Working Paper Number 16, ZIDS, Harare, 1991.

15. See J.L. Jones, "'Freeze!' Movement, Narrative and the Disciplining of Price in Hyperinflationary Zimbabwe', *Social Dynamics*, 36, 2 (2010), 338-351; T. Mufudza, M. Jengeta, and P. Hove, 'The Usefulness of Strategic Planning in a Turbulent Economic Environment: A Case of Zimbabwe during the Period 2007-2009', *Business Strategy Series* (2013), 24-29; H. Besada, and N. Moyo, 'Zimbabwe in Crisis: Mugabe's Policies and Failures', Unpublished Working Paper No. 38, CIGI, October 2008.

consumer price controls on the country's economy and society. It looks at how the measures affected both the white settler community and African consumers.

In addition to referencing published sources, this article draws on archival documents to make its case. These include parliamentary debates which provide deliberations of legislation on consumer price controls, while correspondence on consumer price controls involving government departments such as the Price Control Department are also utilised. In addition, newspapers, especially *The Rhodesian Herald* and *The Bulawayo Chronicle*, provide access to public notices such as official Government Notices and Gazettes, and gauge public opinion on the imposition of price regulations.

Price control institutions and legislation in Southern Rhodesia

Southern Rhodesia made the first attempts to control sales prices during World War I (WWI). The country was then under the administration of the British South Africa Company (BSAC) although the white settler community was already agitating for self-rule.¹⁶ Before 1923, prices prevailing in South Africa informed prices in Southern Rhodesia because Southern Rhodesia received most of its supplies from or through South Africa. So, merchants simply factored in their transport costs and expected profits.¹⁷ Due to the disruption of economic transactions during WWI, South Africa protected its consumers by controlling the selling prices of certain commodities while the BSAC sought to control the marketing of key commodities in the embryonic Southern Rhodesian agricultural sector.¹⁸ The system of responsible government, introduced in 1923, meant there was a more active role in the regulation of the colony through various commodity control boards.¹⁹ Although these controls did not affect the retail prices of commodities, they were the first attempt to control prices in the young colony.

16. M. Meredith, *The Past is Another Country: Rhodesia 1890-1979* (London: Andre Deutsch Ltd, 1979), 29.

17. J.W. Downie, 'Control Boards and their Functions', *The Rhodesian Agricultural Journal*, 38 (1931), 929-931.

18. Downie, 'Control Boards and their Functions', 920.

19. Downie notes that other parts of the British Empire like New Zealand and Australia used these boards to restrict production to balance supply with demand and influence prices for the immediate benefit of producers in what was termed 'orderly marketing' (p 920). The MCB and the CSC became key instruments in the regulatory economic policy in colonial Zimbabwe following these precedents. See Downie, 'Control Boards and their Functions', 919-926.

World War II fuelled price hikes in Southern Rhodesia. The government felt that it could not allow the economy to collapse because of wartime shortages. It believed that growing profit margins would burden consumers and might expose the citizens of the colony (i.e. the white settlers) to the full brunt of the war. Southern Rhodesia was particularly focused on ensuring that business people did not profit from the war because it wanted to preserve the demographic composition of the settler colony, which compared to most of its neighbouring colonies outside South Africa, had a significant white population. The government also wanted to lure more white immigrants to settle in the colony after the end of the war.

The creation of a Food Control Board (FCB) in July 1939 foreshadowed the introduction of consumer price controls in Southern Rhodesia. The FCB was set up hastily in anticipation of the outbreak of war. The chairman, Captain C.H. Harding, even stated in his first meeting on 27 July 1939 that ‘no terms of reference had been received, but ... the duties of the Board were to investigate the food position in the colony’.²⁰ As soon as the war broke out the FCB was replaced by a Supplies Advisory Board (SAB) on 1 September 1939. When the FCB was dissolved two members, a Mr Barbour and Major Tysoe, were seconded to serve on the SAB.²¹ The SAB’s mandate revolved around the provision of food supplies, listing essential foodstuffs from importers, earmarking commodities for the Defence Force, averaging prices of goods, and setting profit margins, while also sealing down profits.²² Service providers were asked to provide a cost structure to justify any price increases and these were then deliberated by the SAB.

The SAB was short-lived because by 27 May 1941 it was also dissolved to make way for the Price Control Board (PCB).²³ However, when the Minister of Finance appointed the new PCB members a few erstwhile members of the SAB, including Barbour and Tysoe, made their way back into office. Unlike the previous boards, the PCB had a fairly diverse make-up with ex-servicemen, industrialists, merchants and civil servants. The government statistician was an ex-officio member. He was tasked with compiling a (more) comprehensive list of all essential commodities excluding petroleum and its hydro-carbons. In turn, the Ministry of Finance issued price orders against each commodity on the statistician’s list. This list, over time, increased to comprise over 78 sets of goods and services including drapery, clothing, auto-spares, boarding fees, bread,

20. NAZ, S723 Supplies Advisory Board Minutes, 1939–1949, Minutes of a meeting of the (Food Control) Board, 27 July 1939.

21. NAZ, S723, Minutes of a meeting of the (Food Control) Board, 1 September 1939.

22. NAZ, S723, Minutes of the first meeting of the Supplies Advisory Board, 12 September 1939.

23. NAZ, S723, Minutes of the 9th meeting of the Supplies Advisory Board, 27 May 1941.

and blankets. The move to put more goods and services under price controls followed the PCB's realisation that partial controls would simply divert the productive resources in the economy to uncontrolled sectors.

The PCB was responsible for determining commodity costs. It considered proposals from both the public and the private sector in formulating the price systems. Industry and merchants organised themselves into smaller clusters that corresponded with the statistician's list of goods and services. For instance, Group 13 was known as the 'Kaffir Truck Wholesale Group' [sic],²⁴ and it was made up of retailers, distributors and wholesalers engaged in trade in African designated areas.²⁵ Group 19 comprised agent distributors, while the Gatooma (now Kadoma) Grocery Group was involved in the grocery trade.²⁶ These groupings, along with the larger common interest bodies such as the Rhodesia National Farmers Union (RNFU) and the Associated Chamber of Industries, consulted the PCB to ensure that they priced their commodities within the range stipulated by the government. They also appealed to the PCB whenever there was a price increase such as in the landed price of a certain product or as the result of an increase in the price of fuel. They had to convince the PCB that there was a 'genuine need' for an upward review of prices.²⁷

Consumer price controls were initially presented as part of interim measures to protect consumers from wartime overcharging. Until 1943, the government leaned heavily on the temporary powers conferred under the Emergency Powers Defence Act

24. 'Kaffir truck' was a term borrowed from South Africa that was initially applied to small miscellaneous general goods for barter or sale between the Cape Colony and Africans in the Eastern Cape. The settlers in the Cape used the derogative term 'kaffir' for an indigenous African. Over time, 'Kaffir Truck' became synonymous with African trade, involving retail, wholesale and distribution in African designated areas such as the reserves. The commodities earmarked for the African market were distinct, being cheap and of low quality. See E. Kramer, 'The Evolution of Policy: Trade and Production in the Reserve Economy of Colonial Zimbabwe' (PhD thesis, University of Zimbabwe, 2003), 57-95.

25. The Land Apportionment Act (LAA) of 1930 legalised land segregation. Under this Act, land was divided into European Areas, Native Areas (i.e. African reserves), Native Purchase Areas (APAs) and Forest Areas. Beginning in 1937, Africans who were no longer needed as labourers on white-owned estates were sent to the reserves, which grew progressively more crowded. See S.J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 'Re-thinking the Colonial Encounter in Zimbabwe', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 33, 1 (2007), 188-190.

26. We have used colonial place names for this article. Current names are in brackets at first citation but thereafter we resort to the colonial name only.

27. NAZ, S482/51/41, 'Co-ordination and Control of Price and Production, 1942'.

(EPDA) of 1939 to institute a raft of consumer price controls. For instance, the government fast-tracked the promulgation of the Profiteering Regulations in 1941 which declared that ‘no person shall sell goods at an unjust profit’.²⁸ Clause (F) of the EPDA gave the government control over all financial transactions in the country.²⁹ The Minister of Justice and Defence argued that this helped the ‘... government [to] prevent the financial exploitation of the situation by ill-disposed people in our own midst’.³⁰ Article 11 of the Defence Regulations Act of 1939 stated:

If any person sells any goods at any place at a price [above] the highest market price of like goods that prevailed at a place at any time during... August 1939, that excess shall... be presumed to be an unjust profit.³¹

This marked a shift from reliance on the Customs and Excise Management Act (CEMA) of 1937, which regulated the prices of imported goods.³² With these ‘profiteering regulations’, the Minister of Finance was empowered to fix the maximum price at which goods, especially those commonly classed as essentials, could be sold throughout the country. Some of the price orders issued included the ‘Second-Hand Bottles Prices Order of 1942’ and the ‘Amendment to the 1939 Grain Bags Order of 1942’.³³ Thus, the government could now even control the prices of precise packaging materials.³⁴ The EPDA also stipulated the penalties for failure to abide by these orders.³⁵

The spectre of a protracted war necessitated adopting the Price Control Regulations Act (PCRA) of 1943 as a long-term measure rather than relying on interim and emergency powers conferred by the EPDA.³⁶ The PCRA regularised consumer price

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28. NAZ, S725, Government Notice No. 406 of 1939, Profiteering Order, 1939. Profiteering refers to ‘the act or practice of seeking exorbitant profits, especially through the sale of scarce or rationed goods’. <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/profiteering> (Accessed 31 July 2021).
 29. NAZ, SRG2, Legislative Assembly Debates 1939, col. 1422.
 30. NAZ, SRG2, Legislative Assembly Debates 1939, col. 1422-3.
 31. NAZ, S725, Government Notice No. 406 of 1939, Profiteering Order 1939.
 32. NAZ, S1539/B192, Price Control Board: Comptroller and Auditor-General, 1942-1946: Profiteering Order, 1939. For more on CEMA, see A. Mlombo, *Southern Rhodesia–South Africa Relations, 1923–1953: Political, Social and Economic Ties* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 99-122.
 33. *The Rhodesian Herald*, 25 July 1942.
 34. NAZ, S3292/40/2/1, Price Control of bags, beef, boarding houses, second hand bottles and bread, 1942-1948.
 35. NAZ, S3292/40/2/1, Price Control, 1942-48.
 36. NAZ, S1539/B192, Price Control Board, Comptroller and Auditor-General, 1942-1946: The Price Control Regulations Act, 1943.

controls and effectively set up and empowered a new Price Control Office (PCO) to formulate and enforce the price limits. The PCRA empowered the Minister of Finance to appoint a ‘price controller’ who would, ‘fix a maximum, minimum, or specified price for the sale of any goods by persons generally, any specified person of a specified class or group’.³⁷ In effect this brought the entire price control under a specific authority (i.e. the Price Controller who headed the PCO), thereby making it more feasible for the government to implement and enforce consumer price controls strictly and swiftly. The person appointed as the price controller had vast powers at his command to check spiralling prices, unfair pricing or overcharging, since the PCRA gave him ‘absolute discretion in price-fixing factors’.³⁸ These powers were previously exercised by the Minister of Finance under the EPDA.

The Price Control Regulations also empowered the minister to appoint price control inspectors (PCIs) who worked in the PCO. PCIs ensured that retailers adhered to price orders and they investigated any contravention of the price orders before reporting the offender to the national police force. The price orders were very detailed and outlined the punishment for such contraventions. For example, an offender of the ‘Bread Price Order of 1947’ was liable to a fine not exceeding £500, imprisonment for a period not exceeding two years, or both a fine and imprisonment.³⁹ This marked a clear difference from the earlier PCB of 1941 in that the PCO was a statutory structure that went as far as enforcing price controls in the colony.

Unlike the EPDA, the PCRA extended to the post-war period. This implied that it no longer necessarily used pre-war prices as the benchmark. The Minister of Finance was empowered to appoint a Price Advisory Board (PAB) ‘consisting of such persons as he thought fit’ to ‘advise him on matters relating to price control’.⁴⁰ The PAB, like the PCB before it, deliberated on submissions before the PCO, but it did not have any powers of enforcement. These were now vested in the PCO. Once a re-evaluation was made the price controller issued a certificate pronouncing the new selling price of that particular product.

In terms of composition, the PAB had some notable changes. The price controller, in line with the PCRA, doubled as the chairman of the PAB. Furthermore, the PCRA stipulated that the price controller had to be the government statistician. The PAB was

37. NAZ, S1539/B192, The Price Control Regulations Act, 1943.

38. NAZ, S1539/B192, Price Control Board, 1943.

39. NAZ, S1539/B192, The Price Control Regulations Act, 1943.

40. NAZ, SRG2, Legislative Assembly Debates, 1943, col. 2380; and NAZ, S3292/40/6/1, Correspondences on Price Control, 1939-1951, Price Control Staff 1944-1946.

however more representative than the previous iterations of price control boards because more sectoral interests were incorporated. For instance, the Reverend Percy Ibbotson, a Methodist priest and member of the Federation of Native Welfare Societies in Southern Rhodesia, was a member of the PAB, purportedly to represent African interests.

John Shaul became the first price controller (to 1946) and the chairman of the Price Advisory Board (PAB).⁴¹ The ongoing restructuring and appointments following the PCRA were the first steps towards the intensification of consumer price controls in Southern Rhodesia from 1943. The protracted war prolonged price controls such that more functional structures had to be set up to implement them effectively. The price controller became an essential official in the administration of the colonial economy. Shaul described the post as one of the most responsible and important administrative posts in the colony, 'where the person had to be familiar with the particular circumstances affecting each type of trade ... and to advise the Minister of Finance and Supply on difficult points of policy'.⁴² Although Shaul's description could be self-serving, it does capture the significance of the office of the price controller to the regulation of the entire economy.

From 1943 up to 1949, the PCO issued several price orders fixing the prices of various goods and services such as bread, vegetables, and fertiliser. The price order was determined after factoring in a fixed margin of profit onto the landing cost of the various goods that were under price controls. Private sector representatives attended all price control meetings to ensure transparency in formulating fixed prices. For example, each of the towns like Salisbury (Harare), Bulawayo, Gwelo (Gweru), QueQue (Kwekwe), and Gatooma had a representation at every PAB meeting held to consider the permissible profits in the grocery trade.⁴³ Although the absolute discretion to prescribe the formula by which prices were determined ultimately lay with the price controller, the private sector was free to listen in on the deliberations, air its views, and seek clarification. This shows that the government did not want to upset white settler interests when effecting price controls.

41. F.A. Bennett succeeded Shaul as the Price Controller in 1947. *The Rhodesian Herald*, 5 February 1958.

42. NAZ, S3292/40/6/1, 'Appointment of a new Price Controller'.

43. NAZ, S482/51/41, Minutes of a PAB meeting, 21 March 1944.

On 6 November 1946, James McNeillie, the legislator for Bulawayo South, moved a motion that received wide support in parliament whereupon he implored the government to extend price controls.⁴⁴ McNeillie admitted that he had been opposed to price controls in the beginning because he felt that

We were suffering from controlitis [sic]... but nobody will [now] disagree with the fact that control in this matter is absolutely essential, and whatever measures the government will take in the future, I urge them to see that the strictest possible control is exercised.⁴⁵

The country's post-war conditions necessitated the continuation of consumer price controls. In 1946, H.C. Malone, the PCO secretary, revealed that the PCO 'has been instructed by the Minister of Finance to intensify price control [to reduce] the cost of living and several Price Orders are under consideration to this end'.⁴⁶ Early in 1947, the PCO became the Price Control Department (PCD). This was a further step in regularising and institutionalising price controls. However, the PCD was short-lived because by 1949 the country felt that it had surmounted the worst after effects of the war and that world trade was slowly returning to normal. As a result, price controls were removed from almost every commodity.⁴⁷ In October 1949, the PCD was closed. Duties in connection with the few remaining commodities were passed to the Ministry of Justice.⁴⁸

The foregoing has shown that Southern Rhodesia's post-WWI experiences of consumer price hikes guided the policymakers to take proactive steps and set up the FCB in anticipation of the outbreak of hostilities in July of 1939. However, even when World War II ground to a halt in 1945, the controls and mindsets engendered on the virtues of economic planning remained. Southern Rhodesia was motivated and preoccupied with making the colony a favourable destination for white immigrants. As such, consumer price controls became part of the government's policy to cushion the colony's consumers from post-war evils such as price hikes and the rising cost of living.

44. NAZ, SRG2, Legislative Assembly Debates, 1946, 26, 55 (1946) col. 2559.

45. NAZ, SRG2, Legislative Assembly Debates, 1946, 26, 55 (1946) col. 2559.

46. NAZ, S3292/40/6/1, Letter from the Price Controller, to Treasury, 12 April 1946.

47. See FN 1 for the goods and services that remained under controls.

48. With the outbreak of the Korean War it became necessary, in April 1951, to re-establish controls and another Price Control Office was created. Initially it was a function of the Treasury and later under the Department of Commerce and Industry. It then passed to the Federal Ministry of Commerce and Industry. With the Price Revocation Order, in 1954, price controls on commodities were abolished, along with the Price Control Office.

Implementing consumer price controls

Giovanni Arrighi's 1967 seminal essay, 'The Political Economy of Rhodesia' emphasised the 'national character' of the white settler class as a favourable condition for the successful implementation of price controls in colonial Zimbabwe.⁴⁹ Without dismissing the import of this 'national character', this section nonetheless demonstrates that price controls were acceptable to white Rhodesian society only to the extent that they were viewed as emergency measures, and even then, the PCO had great difficulty enforcing controls and on occasion the results were less than satisfactory. Implementing price controls was not an easy task because the business community devised cunning ways to circumvent the government-mandated prices on the market. This went beyond the simple fact that maintaining pre-war price levels was often very challenging and sometimes impossible. The war itself disrupted the production and movement of foodstuff and industrial and imported goods between countries.

In implementing consumer price controls, the various iterations of the bodies tasked with this concern often had to contend with vociferous lobbying from general interest groups representing white capital and their limited institutional capacity in executing these measures. Periodically, representatives of the business community approached the Minister of Finance and the price controller asking them to raise the price orders. For example, the Bulawayo Bakers Association lobbied successfully for an increase in the price of bread and this led to the 1947 Bread Prices Order.⁵⁰ In another case, E. Koffman & Sons convinced the PCB to increase the price of khaki drapes because of the challenges experienced in importing the material from India.⁵¹ The board served as an ideal forum for public/private sector dialogue. This demonstrates the government's efforts to insulate private enterprises from post-war stress while simultaneously ensuring that they did not generate excessive profit.

In many cases, however, the PCO was generally inclined not to grant requests for upward price reviews because of the domino effect this would have on prices. In such cases the PCO had to strike a difficult balance in satisfying both consumer and business interests simultaneously. In 1944, the PCO turned down an application by the Gatooma Merchant Group for an increase in the price of 'apricot and gooseberry jam' because '...the increase in the landed cost is so small that it is not proposed to pass it on to the

49. G. Arrighi, *The Political Economy of Rhodesia* (The Hague: Mouton, 1967), 36.

50. NAZ, S718, List of Commodities, 1940-1949: Minutes of a Bulawayo Bakers' Association Meeting, 14 October 1947.

51. NAZ, S3292/40/6/1, Letter from PCB Secretary to the Minister of Finance, 23 June 1941.

consumers'.⁵² In the same year, the PCO denied another request from Group 11, The Bulawayo Chamber of Commerce, for an upward review of a product labelled 'Helen McGregor Marmalade' because 'the supplies [of marmalade were] brought through Bulawayo to Salisbury and then sent back to Bulawayo for further distribution'.⁵³ Instead, the PCO advised Group 11 to take up the issue of distribution because it was evident that the circuitous supply chain was responsible for increasing the landed cost of the product.

Price control legislation prioritised the interests of white settlers. The colonial government made sure that the interests of the colonised African peasantry and workers remained peripheral to those of the white bourgeoisie and workers. However, the law did not protect white businesses when they over-charged African consumers. For example, the Magistrate's Court in Salisbury fined G.T. Thornicroft, owner of Ruwa Store in the Goromonzi District, £5 on 5 May 1948 after convicting him for selling, on separate occasions, 2lb loaves of National Bread at a price that infringed the Bread Prices Order of 1947 to two African customers, Sandifine and Jonas, on 22 December 1947.⁵⁴ The punishment of a fine was insufficient deterrent, however, because the retailers continued to contravene the price control orders. Joel Fischer of Fischer Store in Bulawayo, for example, despite a previous conviction in 1942 under the Maize Meal and Crushed Maize Prices Order, became a repeat offender when he violated the Price Control Regulations 1943 for torch batteries.⁵⁵ For the second offence, Fischer was fined £5 or a 7-day imprisonment.⁵⁶

Some manufacturers and suppliers opted to reduce the size or weight of their product to limit production costs and recoup what they lost in the way of price controls. The case of Helfer, a retailer who purchased bread from Osborne's Bakery in Bulawayo and sold it in Gwanda, illustrates this point. The court found Helfer guilty of selling a loaf of bread with a disclosed weight of 2lb to an African constable for 9d. However, the loaf was not fresh and it only weighed 1lb and 100oz.⁵⁷ Helfer sold another supposed 2lb loaf to an African woman and the loaf weighed just 1lb and 110oz.⁵⁸ In this case, Osborne's Bakery sacrificed the weight of the product for profit.

52. NAZ S719, Outgoing correspondence: Fixed Prices 1941-1947, H.C. Malone to the Secretary, Gatooma Merchant Group, 28 September 1944.

53. NAZ S719, H.C. Malone to the Secretary Group 11: Chamber of Commerce (Bulawayo), 22 December 1944.

54. NAZ, S725, Letter from British South Africa Police, 1948.

55. NAZ 725, Memorandum from Inspector, Bulawayo, to Controller of Prices, 23 June 1944.

56. NAZ 725, Memorandum from Inspector, Bulawayo to Controller of Prices, 23 June 1944.

57. NAZ, S3292/40/2/1, Letter from the Price Control Office to the BSA Police, 29 October 1943.

58. NAZ, S3292/40/2/1, Price Control 1943.

Some bakers shrewdly started making bread from rye as opposed to wheat since the price of rye bread was not regulated. Messrs Pockets Ltd, for example, made their rye loaf below the regulated weight of 2lb to realise more profit.⁵⁹ However, despite their clever ploy, the bakery was ‘informed that all rye bread must conform to the same standard weight as wheaten bread’.⁶⁰ Other bakers even stopped making bread altogether and instead started baking ‘fancy cakes and buns’ which were not under any price control. This did not stop one consumer, L.A. Lillicrap, from bringing this to the attention of the PCD.⁶¹ She even enclosed ‘a specimen buttered bun purchased [on 31 October 1947] from Messrs Barr’s Bakery Tea Room for which [she] was charged ... an outrageous four pence!’⁶² The PCD nonetheless took time to respond and reiterated that it was unable to take any action because of the sheer impossibility of defining and standardising ‘fancy cakes’.⁶³ In a last bid attempt to bring finality to the bread price bickering that had started as soon as price controls were put in place, the Minister of Finance agreed to reduce the price of flour by 5/- per bag starting in 1948.⁶⁴ This reduction served as a subsidy to bakers while also aiding consumers by keeping the price of bread within the stipulated bread price order. These subsidies also covered the cost of products made from pigs, wheat, sugar, maize, butter, and cheese ‘to keep prices as low as possible’.⁶⁵

Other forms of malpractice were rampant among homeowners and hoteliers who began subdividing their apartments to accommodate more people as a way of busting the ‘Hotel and Boarding House Control Regulations’, which imposed ceiling prices for rent and hotel rooms.⁶⁶ E. Fuchs, who booked in at Inyazura (Nyazura) Hotel in September 1946, complained that the hotel charged her £10 each for her two children, yet they were sharing a room.⁶⁷ These cases illustrate that at times, price controls led to the deterioration of the quality of goods and services on the market.

59. NAZ, S725, Superintendent of Assize, 25 March 1949.

60. NAZ, S725, Superintendent of Assize, 25 March 1949.

61. NAZ, S725, Letter from L.A. Lillicrap to PCD, 31 October 1947.

62. NAZ, S725, Letter from L.A. Lillicrap to PCD, 31 October 1947.

63. NAZ, S725, Letter from PCD to L.A. Lillicrap, 3 November 1947.

64. NAZ, S721 Circulars: Maximum Prices of Goods, 1947-1949, Circular from Secretary PCD, 18 February 1948.

65. NAZ, S48/133/41, Letter from Secretary, Price Controller to the Executive Chairman of the Railway Workers Union, 24 September 1944.

66. NAZ, S724, Reports: Inspection 1939-1949, Routine inspections, Inyazura, 3 October 1946.

67. NAZ, S3292/40/2/1, Letter from Mrs Fuchs to the Price Controller, 14 September 1946.

Another loophole that retailers exploited in price controls was to add interest on items taken on credit by consumers. One C. Olley of Olley's Stationers complained directly to the Minister of Finance that this was 'another form of racket' in which an auctioneer, W. Skea & Co., displayed a selling price of £12 for a bookcase but put on a hefty surcharge for customers who took the bookcase on credit.⁶⁸ Building contractors also 'loaded' the cost of materials over and above the prevailing retail prices each time they carried out repairs or alterations to a building. In such instances, the contractor charged his full labour charges but proceeded to add ten or twenty per cent over and above the stipulated retail prices which constituted his profit on the material used.⁶⁹

Agricultural dealers clamoured for high gross profits to provide additional services such as free after-sale service, discounts (to farmers' cooperative societies), free replacements and assembly costs, and repairs. These dealers made very high profits of up to 25 to 50 per cent on tractors and up to 56 per cent on ploughs.⁷⁰ However, the price controller, A.E. Cowie, argued that 'this policy causes the efficient farmer to subsidise the inefficient, and it might be in the interest of both dealers and consumers to fix lower initial profits and require the latter to pay directly for maintenance and repairs'.⁷¹ Cowie received support for his proposal from the RNFU and seventeen leading food producers in Mashonaland Province. The PCD proceeded to set the margin of profits on low-priced articles such as ploughs at 30 per cent and between twenty to 25 per cent on high-priced articles such as tractors.⁷² Cowie believed that demand would continue to outpace supply because of the rising need for mechanisation to address labour shortages in the agricultural sector.

In some cases, the PCD felt powerless because even after presenting a detailed case of price control violations, the state declined to prosecute. For instance, in July 1949, E.J. Lennox, an assistant superintendent with the British South Africa Police (BSAP) informed the PCD that 'the Attorney General has declined to prosecute in this case [against Avilion Brickfields]'.⁷³ No reasons were given. The Attorney General's reluctance to prosecute could have been informed by several reasons, including fatigue and frustration with a low rate of successful convictions. For example, R.W. Downing of Downing's Model Bakery was found not guilty by the Bulawayo Magistrate's Court for

68. NAZ, S725, Letter from C. Olley to Minister of Finance, 5 November 1944.

69. NAZ, S725, Letter from Joelson Brothers Ltd. to the Price Controller, 1 November 1949.

70. NAZ, S721, Price Advisory Board, Price Controller, 17 February 1949.

71. NAZ, S721, Price Advisory Board, Price Controller, 17 February 1949.

72. NAZ, S721, Price Advisory Board, Price Controller, 17 February 1949.

73. NAZ, S725, Letter from E.J. Lennox, assistant Superintendent British South Africa Police to H.C. Malone, PCD, 8 July 1949.

contravening the Bread Prices Order. Downing's legal team put up a sophisticated defence in which they argued that 'the white bread for which he [Downing] had charged a higher price was covered by the exemption section in the Order and could be classed as "fancy" bread'.⁷⁴

A routine inspection at Marula Trading Company in Plumtree exposed several price control breaches in which the store manager overpriced soap, salmon and other merchandise. The PCI reported that he was 'most dissatisfied with [how] this store was being run. The native manager [sic] did not have any documents relative to landed costs'.⁷⁵ The African manager defended himself saying he had been working on the instructions and selling prices set by the owner of the store, Seidle. In turn, Seidle apportioned blame on his manager whom he accused of being 'very dishonest' and of 'selling at prices higher than the permitted prices [to appropriate] the difference'.⁷⁶ While this presented a blatant case of price infringement the PCI decided not to escalate it to the police because Seidle would simply accuse his African manager of theft. Moreover, it would also be difficult to prove that a sale had taken place because no invoices were being issued at the store. Furthermore, the PCO felt that it was woefully understaffed to investigate price violations properly. In 1946, Malone emphasised the need for more PCIs, writing that

Unless the necessary Inspectorate is available to enforce the regulations, making orders is of little use, and as things stand at present, dealers know that unless a direct complaint is made to this office, there is little chance of overcharging being discovered.⁷⁷

The Ministry of Finance quickly acceded to Malone's plea for more inspectors, but did so only to some degree, when it increased PCIs from two to six for the entire colony.⁷⁸

In some cases, price controls interfered with business operations. There were cases where the ordered ceiling prices rendered some businesses unprofitable. A good example of this is the price of bread, which in some cases left bakers with little if any, chance of making profits. The chairman of the Master Bakers Association, who also represented Osborne's Bakery, told the Commission of Inquiry into the Marketing of Meat, Bread, and Vegetables that the price of bread in Bulawayo did not meet the cost

74. *The Bulawayo Chronicle*, 'Bread Price Prosecution: Bulawayo Baker Acquitted', 15 March 1944.

75. NAZ, S724, Routine Inspection Report, Marula Trading Co., Bulawayo Rural, 7 July 1945.

76. NAZ, S724, Routine Inspection Report, Marula Trading Co., Bulawayo Rural, 7 July 1945.

77. NAZ, S3292/40/6/1, Appointment of a new Price Controller.

78. NAZ, S3292/40/6/1, Inspection Report, Chakari, 2 September 1946.

of production.⁷⁹ A representative of another leading Bulawayo bakery also told the same commission that he was losing £1/8d on every bag of flour he turned into bread, while several other bakers corroborated the claim.⁸⁰ The bakers, therefore, had an incentive to evade the controls because they were not making profits at the prevailing controlled prices. These were just some of the distortions that rocked some sectors because of consumer price controls.

Some business owners fought desperately to maintain their competitiveness within the permitted profit margin, but the results were frequently detrimental to their bottom line. For example, J.W. Searcy Ltd of Bulawayo recorded ‘a loss of £460 odd’ in 1945 owing to a fateful decision to peg their prices below the stipulated permissible profit margin.⁸¹ N. Pincus, a ‘Kaffir Truck dealer’ [sic] in Bulawayo worked on a margin of profit of 25 per cent as opposed to the permitted 50 per cent because he argued that ‘all Kaffir Truck dealers in Bulawayo were so well stocked with native goods that competition was very keen’.⁸² Another ‘Kaffir Truck dealer’, Ramji & Co., opted to sell their stock of blankets at a little more above the cost because they were overstocked and they feared a sudden decline in the wholesale prices of blankets.⁸³ However, smaller ‘Kaffir Truck dealers’ were frequently put out of business entirely because they were unable to bear the losses the way that larger establishments like Ramji & Co. could. Another firm, Charter Cycle Supplies, Wholesale and Retail Merchants of Bulawayo while adhering to the ‘Cycle Tyre and Tube Prices Order’ which it displayed ‘prominently’ in the store, still faced operational challenges owing to supply bottlenecks.⁸⁴ As such, the company’s sales of cycles, tyres and tubes were on a very small scale that it resorted to repairing work.

Before 1943, price controls in rural areas had hardly any significant effect. This explains why the few stores operating in these areas sometimes eluded price controls by not issuing receipts to vulnerable African consumers. In 1944 a consulting accountant with the PCO completed an examination of the accounts of several wholesale ‘Kaffir Truck’ firms and found out that the net profits were on average about three times what they were in 1939.⁸⁵ The large majority of stores that served Africans turned over quite

79. NAZ, S432/40, Prices Commission: Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Marketing of Meat, Bread and Vegetables in Bulawayo, 8.

80. NAZ, S432/40, Prices Commission 1941, 8.

81. NAZ S724, Routine Inspection Report, J.W. Searcy Ltd, Bulawayo, 4 October 1945.

82. NAZ S724, Routine Inspection Report, N. Pincus, Bulawayo, 20 July 1945.

83. NAZ S724, Routine Inspection Report, Ramji and Co., Bulawayo, 20 July 1945.

84. NAZ S724, Routine Inspection Report, Charter Cycle Supplies, Wholesale and Retail Merchants, Bulawayo, 20 July 1945.

85. NAZ S719, H.C. Malone to Chairman Group 13 (Kaffir Truck), 4 November 1944.

a small business, with sales totalling £150, £200 and £250 a month.⁸⁶ Numerous small stores were operating at a sub-optimal level selling only £100 to £150 of goods monthly.⁸⁷

In the towns, the price schedules often specified the prices for ‘boys’-quality commodities’ while the ‘Kaffir Truck Prices Order (KTPO) of 1944’ determined the profit margins for an omnibus of goods sold in the rural areas to Africans in stores and makeshift grocers.⁸⁸ The KTPO and the requirement that ‘all goods exposed to sale to Africans should clearly show the price charged for the goods’,⁸⁹ removed the ability to bargain for lower prices. Owing to the sub-economic wages that many Africans received, the consumer behaviour of many Africans entailed bargaining over prices along with accompanying requests for a “present” (*mubhasera*) over and above what would have been purchased.⁹⁰ The larger traders benefited more from the KTPO because they had more stock and a wider variety of goods which they could afford to sell at prices that were slightly below the fixed profit margins. The other smaller shops, however, suffered from these developments to the point where they were unable to earn a profit and ultimately had to close. In his written testimony to the Native Trade and Production Commission, the native commissioner for Buhera District explained that Africans in the reserves did not buy from African-owned stores because these businesses were undercapitalised and without the right stock.⁹¹

Price controls thus had the unintended consequence of retarding the growth of African enterprises. Volker Wild notes that ‘African incomes dropped and markets shrank’ because of wartime restrictions on imported goods and price controls.⁹² In the Salisbury District, African enterprises underwent a serious decline because the number

86. NAZ S718/60, Commodities: Kaffir Truck, 1940-949. Controller of Prices re Price Fixing for Kaffir Truck Retail Trade, 17 September 1943.

87. NAZ S718/60, Controller of Prices: Price Fixing for Kaffir Truck Retail Trade, 17 September 1943.

88. NAZ, S3292/40/6/1, The Kaffir Truck Prices Order, 1944.

89. NAZ S718/60, Federation of Native Welfare Societies, Council meeting, 15 May 1943.

90. The practice of offering free gifts initially began as a ‘gimmick’ of sorts that early white traders used to get African consumers hooked to new consumer products. Over time, this practice developed to become part of the African consumer experience. See L. Bessant and E. Muringai, ‘Peasants, Businessmen, and Moral Economy in the Chiweshe Reserve, Colonial Zimbabwe: 1930-1968’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 19, 4 (December 1993), 560.

91. NAZ, ZBJ 1/2/1, Memorandum from the NC for Buhera District to the NTPC, 30 May 1944.

92. V. Wild, ‘An Outline of African Business History in Colonial Zimbabwe’, *Zambezia*, 29, 1 (1992), 33-34.

of business passes issued dropped from 545 in 1938 to a mere 244 in 1941.⁹³ While competition stiffened, African small businesses were, comparatively, less able to face the new restrictions. In some cases, they suffered more than other business groups from war measures such as petrol rationing. Tawanda Chambwe shows that ‘after the Second World War, the big trading firms such as the African Trading Stores and N. Richards started to consolidate their interests in the African reserves’.⁹⁴ Consequently, ‘African entrepreneurs found it difficult to break into the market against the established White and Indian traders’.⁹⁵

The foregoing has demonstrated that despite the widespread feeling of aiding the war effort and the national character of the white settler population, implementing consumer price restrictions in both wartime and post-war Southern Rhodesia was not without difficulty. The response of the business community was motivated by a sense of self-preservation as they attempted to survive in the face of challenging market conditions. The commercial sector reacted by pressuring the government, but they also came up with creative ways to avoid pricing limits. Consumer price controls had the negative effects of promoting cheating and causing deterioration in the quality and quantity of goods and services.

In addition, the government realised that a far larger programme than price regulation was necessary to manage rising prices effectively. As a result, it established a system that encompassed wage limits, rationing plans, labour and resource allocation, and distribution management for items that were in limited supply. To prevent the cost of living from skyrocketing, the government also subsidised the costs of some basic products sold on the open market.

Assessing the impact of consumer price controls

At first, price controls registered some relative stability in Southern Rhodesia by curbing the rising cost of living somewhat and in the process, this served to allay fears of a recurrence of depression conditions. By 1940, the cost of living in Southern Rhodesia had increased slightly, marked by a three per cent rise in the cost of food, fuel, rent, and lighting and a 23 per cent advance in retail prices.⁹⁶ In 1943, the Minister of Finance noted that the proactive imposition of consumer price controls at the outbreak of the war had

93. Wild, ‘African Business History’, 34.

94. T.V. Chambwe, ‘A History of African Entrepreneurship in Southern Rhodesia, 1944–1979’, (PhD thesis, University of the Free State, 2020), 77.

95. Chambwe, ‘African Entrepreneurship in Southern Rhodesia’, 79.

96. NAZ, S722, Memoranda: UK, 1940, Wholesale and Retail Prices of All Commodities, 1940.

probably sent a message to the ill-disposed businesspeople that any unjustified price hikes would result in stricter government control.⁹⁷ In this case, price controls were at first relatively effective in stabilising the economy by reducing the chances of unfair pricing.

The initial success of consumer price controls in truncating the rise of consumer prices is more apparent if one considers the pricing situation in other parts of the British Empire. By the end of 1939, the general level of wholesale prices in the UK had advanced by 23 per cent, while the overall advance in prices was more than 37 per cent. The price of food had risen by about 44 per cent and those of industrial goods by 34 per cent.⁹⁸

The 1941 Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Retail Prices of Meat, Bread, and Vegetables highlighted the ‘heavy increases of prices’ of these products in the Union of South Africa in 1940.⁹⁹ Writing in 1946, Malone declared that consumer price controls had ‘controlled [price] inflation right from the beginning of the war’.¹⁰⁰ Ultimately, price controls kept the prices of controlled goods and services in Southern Rhodesia at favourable levels for a small minority. The early high compliance levels to price controls kept prices within, or not far beyond the purchasing power of white consumers. Judging from the changes in the cost-of-living indices of the various countries with which Southern Rhodesia had important trade relations as shown in the table below, the colony managed to keep pace with those countries.

Table 1: Cost-of-living Indices for 1948 showing percentage increase over 1939

Country	Cost of living Index
United Kingdom	132
Union of South Africa	142
United States of America	161
Australia	130
Canada	138
Northern Rhodesia	140
Southern Rhodesia	139

Source: NAZ, S721 Circulars: ‘Maximum Prices of Goods, 1947-1949’; and F.A. Bennett, ‘Circular on Cattle Prices (1948)’, 14 January 1948.

97. NAZ, SRG2, Legislative Assembly Debates, 1943, col. 231.

98. NAZ, S722, Wholesale and Retail Prices, 1940.

99. Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Marketing of Meat, Bread and Vegetables in Bulawayo, 8.

100. NAZ, S3292/40/6/1, Letter from Price Controller to Treasury, 12 April 1946.

Southern Rhodesia could therefore not afford to allow her cost-of-living index to increase at a greater rate than the other countries shown in Table 1 above if she was to find a market for her products in a competitive market.

The consumer price controls endeared the government to the politically significant white workers, who were mostly urban dwellers. White workers viewed consumer price controls as a sign of state support that cushioned them from overcharging and protected their wages from erosion by rising prices. Price controls also had a hand in suppressing white labour unrest. Hence, these measures served a socio-economic and political purpose in colonial Zimbabwe. Murray Steele notes that this ‘steadily undermined the labour movement’s source of support’.¹⁰¹ The Godfrey Huggins administration (1933-1953) used consumer price controls to protect white, low-income earners from the adverse effects of rising prices. The government adhered obstinately to price controls rather than increasing salaries and wages. In 1951, John Young, the legislator for Avondale, articulated this view arguing that ‘at a time when [price] inflation was rampant, production was decreasing and economic growth was erratic, price controls and the control of certain commodities effectively protected the [white] working class’, whom he described as, ‘the cream of the country’.¹⁰²

Hence, rather than induce white organised labour to reduce their wage demands and narrow the income inequalities between white and African workers, instead Southern Rhodesia used price controls to maintain the status quo advanced by the Industrial Conciliation Act of 1934.¹⁰³ However, while this strategy was moderately successful it was not enough to reassure white families of their long-term financial security. Overall, as Nicola Ginsburgh points out, the wage policy ‘prevented the ability of the White race to reproduce and expand’.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, economic pragmatism – such as only having one or two children – permeated the decision-making processes of the average white family. In response, ‘...the 1944 Social Security report recognised the need for family allowances... to protect and raise the birth rate; men and women were less

101. M.C. Steele, ‘White Working-Class Disunity: The Southern Rhodesian Labour Party’, *Rhodesian History*, 1 (1970), 80.

102. NAZ, SRG2, Legislative Assembly Debates, 1951, col. 1817.

103. The Industrial Conciliation Act excluded blacks and most of its terms protected the white employees’ interests. The Act protected white employees from competition in the labour market by black employees. Africans could not benefit from this Act because it did not recognise them as workers. See A.E. Sibanda, ‘State and Industrial Relations in Developing Countries: Focus on Zimbabwe’, Unpublished paper prepared for the 8th World Congress of The International Industrial Relations Association, Brussels, 1989.

104. N. Ginsburgh, ‘White Workers and the Production of Race in Southern Rhodesia, 1910-1980’, (PhD thesis, University of Leeds, 2017), 136.

likely to reproduce if they feared being able to support their children'.¹⁰⁵ The settler colony could not have survived without the presence of whites. Therefore, to maintain political authority, immigration and biological and social reproduction were essential.

A survey carried out by *The Bulawayo Chronicle* in 1946 captures some of the financial apprehension among white families in Bulawayo. It observed that

[many] people [i.e. white settlers] have been forced to economise drastically to come out on their present salaries. In many cases, even with these economies they still failed to balance the monthly budget ... The shadow of financial doom has fallen on all sections of the population who are wage earners.¹⁰⁶

As a survival strategy, many in the white community resorted to pawning their household assets. People would pawn cameras, articles of furniture and even cars. The white community had to forgo certain items that they had hitherto considered to be necessities. According to *The Bulawayo Chronicle* in late 1946, 'A factor stated to upset the budgets of most [white] family men in Bulawayo was holidays'.¹⁰⁷ The report went on to quote a woman who complained that 'with stockings at over £1 a pair there is no chance of saving much these days'.¹⁰⁸ Other economising strategies that the white community of Bulawayo adopted entailed raising bonds on a property to meet contingencies, and cutting back on liquor. However, the older respondents who participated in the survey admitted that 'prices are not as high as they were after the last war [i.e. WWI]' but they still felt that 'things were generally ... much worse'.¹⁰⁹ In parliament, McNeillie disputed the data coming from the PCO, arguing that the real value of money was more revealing of declining living standards. As he put it:

Certainly it is no consolation to be told that the cost of living has increased 32 or 33 points when ... we know that today a £ will only purchase something in the vicinity of 10s worth of goods based on pre-war prices.¹¹⁰

The legislator provided statistics from the Ministry of Finance, captured in the table below, showing the percentage increase in the price of clothing and household requisites.

105. Ginsburgh, 'White Workers and the Production of Race in Southern Rhodesia', 136.

106. *The Bulawayo Chronicle*, 'Standard of Living Falling: Difficulties Caused by Rising Costs. Rhodesians Struggle with their Budgets', 19 October 1946.

107. *The Bulawayo Chronicle*, 19 October 1946.

108. *The Bulawayo Chronicle*, 19 October 1946.

109. *The Bulawayo Chronicle*, 19 October 1946.

110. NAZ, SRG2, Legislative Assembly Debates, 1946, 26, 55 (1946) col. 2554.

Table 2: The Percentage Increase in the Price of Clothing and Household Requisites since August 1939 in Bulawayo and Salisbury

ITEM	PERCENTAGE INCREASE (%)
Hats	78.1
Flannel Trousers	190.1
Tunic Shirts	138.5
Pyjamas	191
Sport Coats	172.7
Shoes, rubber soles	74.6
Boy's clothing, khaki shorts	98.1
Kiddies' khaki shirts	87.7
Kiddies' hats	83.3
Kiddies' shoes, rubber soles	82.5
Women's Clothing	187.2
Women's stockings	125.8
Girls' Clothing	141
Girls' socks, hats	145.5
Cotton prints	117.2
Household requisites > woollen blankets	158
Shoes	153.5
Cups and saucers	158
Knives	101

Source: compiled from NAZ, SRG2, Legislative Assembly Debates, 1946, 26, 55 (1946) col. 2556.

McNeillie used this alarming evidence to call for greater controls. Huggins, the prime minister, concurred, arguing that 'Price controls successfully kept the prices as low as possible [during WWII]'.¹¹¹ Therefore, it remained the government's preferred mechanism of controlling the cost of living even beyond the war. However, while controls may have provided some benefit in the short term, as time passed, the value of controls decreased as the basket of controlled commodities required to prevent any growth in prices was widening. Price controls, for the most part, stabilised prices at the lowest level possible even though they also created some distortions in the process. Some of these distortions included shortages. Nhamo Samasuwo points out that during WWII 'the civilian population in Rhodesia ... [had] had to endure commodity shortages, rationing, price controls, price increases, and profiteering by unscrupulous traders'.¹¹² Hence, while controls kept consumer prices in check this did not extend to commodity shortages.

111. NAZ, S3292/40/1, Memorandum, The Intensification of Price Control, 13 November 1946.

112. N. Samasuwo, 'Food Production for War Supplies: Rhodesia's Beef Industry during the Second World War', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 29, 2 (2003), 488.

Samasuwo makes another important observation that besides the deterioration of the quality of goods and services on the market, ‘the relative immobility of capital, price controls, and high input costs meant that production methods remained virtually unchanged throughout the war years’.¹¹³ Tighter economic conditions prevailing during the war coupled with price controls did little to change the production methods of the country’s under-capitalised producers. Thus, while tackling the twin evils of consumer price hikes and spiralling cost of living, price controls trapped many industries in stasis, as the production methods remained unchanged because there was little incentive to innovate.

While price controls registered a modicum of success in the early years of their implementation, they did not address the plight of Africans, especially those in rural areas. The KTPO, as shown in the previous section, was only operationalised five years after the first price controls. Even then, many rural retailers ignored the order. The general dealers had ample leeway to infringe the KTPO with little chance of detection because the PCIs scheduled their routine visits openly. This, in essence, served as a warning to the general dealers. James Lister,¹¹⁴ a moderate legislator representing the Southern Rhodesian Labour Party in Umtali (Mutare) South, observed that ‘profiteering among small traders was carried out at the expense of the Africans, and suggested that ‘it could be checked if these storekeepers were compelled to issue a receipt to all native purchasers’.¹¹⁵

Besides some white moderates speaking on their behalf, Africans were not silent sufferers of overcharging. African consumers also complained and brought cases of overcharging to the police and the attention of the price controller. We quote a letter from one disgruntled African customer writing under the pseudonym ‘Someone who knows’:

Please wake up and watch Makwiro Stores for profiteering [sic] reselling bread 6d for [half] a loaf ...to natives ...he charges more than he should [sic] why allow him to get blood money [sic] he gets enough from his profits ... wake up BSAP and trap this chap.¹¹⁶

113. Samasuwo, ‘Food Production for War Supplies’, 502.

114. J.B. Lister was a prominent member of the Rhodesian Railway Workers Union and Member of Parliament for the Southern Rhodesian Labour Party in Umtali South which advocated for multiracial solidarity among the working class between 1944 and 1946. Lister wanted to see Africans ‘incorporated into existing trade union structures’ which went against the tenets of the ICA. For more on this see Ginsburgh, ‘White Workers and the Production of Race in Southern Rhodesia’, 116-173.

115. NAZ, SRG2, Legislative Assembly Debates, 1946, col. 1346.

116. NAZ, S725, Letter from “Someone who Knows” to BSA Police, Hartley, 5 November 1946.

The BSAP forwarded the letter to the PCD but did not appear to take the complaint seriously saying ‘the store in question [i.e. Makwiro] is for native trade only and no invoice books are kept. The writer of the letter is not known but we are making enquiries in [sic] this’.¹¹⁷

While many rural retailers usually got away with overpricing by conveniently not issuing receipts, one African consumer, Joni from Buhera, was able to prove his case by enlisting a witness. The witness, Tajeivas, testified that Ratna Ratenge Gulab of Salisbury had sold Joni a blanket above the controlled price.¹¹⁸ Following this successful testimony, the price controller issued a certificate stating that R.R. Gulab had contravened the ‘Kaffir Truck Retail Prices Order’ when he sold Joni a blanket for £1 instead of 14/4¹/₂d.¹¹⁹

African urban workers remained subject to harsh working conditions and meagre salaries, prompting the 1945 Railway and the 1948 General Strikes.¹²⁰ An Urban African Survey conducted by Ibbotson in Bulawayo from 1942 to 1943 studied the African wage structure to identify inequalities in wages and the general relationship of wages to minimum consumption needs.¹²¹ The survey showed that approximately 85 per cent of workers were paid a cash wage of less than £3.0.0 monthly.¹²² This figure was below the 1944 urban Poverty Datum Line (PDL) for a single male between the age of sixteen and 64 which Edward Batson estimated at £3.1.0 (excluding any allowance for rents or transport).¹²³ Writing in 1946, Ibbotson lamented:

117. NAZ, S725, Letter from BSA Police, Hartley to the PCD, 7 December 1946.

118. NAZ, S725, Letter from H.C. Malone, Secretary PCO to Superintendent, Town Police, 8 August 1944.

119. NAZ, S725, Certificate issued by Price Controller, 22 September 1944.

120. For more on the 1945 Railway Strike and the 1948 General Strike see: K. Vickery, ‘Rhodesia Railways African Strike of 1945, Part II: Cause, Consequence and Significance’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 25, 1 (1999), 49-57; I. Phimister, and B. Raftopoulos (eds), *Keep on Knocking: A History of the Labour Movement in Zimbabwe, 1900-1997* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1997); and J. Lunn, ‘The Meaning of the 1948 General Strike in Colonial Zimbabwe’, in Raftopoulos and Yoshikuni, *Sites of Struggle*. See also: B. Raftopoulos, and I. Phimister, “Kana Sora Rikatsva Ngaritsve”: African Nationalist and Black Workers – The 1948 General Strike in Colonial Zimbabwe’, in *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 13, 3 (2000), 289-324.

121. P. Ibbotson, ‘Report on a Survey of Urban African Conditions in Southern Rhodesia’, Salisbury, August, 1943.

122. Ibbotson, ‘Survey of Urban African Conditions in Southern Rhodesia’.

123. E. Batson, ‘The Poverty Line in Salisbury’, University of Cape Town, School of Social Science and Social Administration Report, 1944, 9.

...[the] urban Africans have suffered very much during the rise in the cost of living due to war conditions, and there exists much real poverty. Wages generally, and particularly those of married Africans, are ... inadequate and do not allow for the maintenance of life on a basis removed from that of poverty.¹²⁴

In 1948, Shaul estimated that prices had increased by 140 per cent over the 1939 to 1947 period.¹²⁵ However, from 1939 to 1945 average cash wages for Africans in the secondary industry had only increased by a mere seven per cent.¹²⁶ All this was happening when the wartime expansion of the economy led to an increased workload for the growing African wage-earning population.¹²⁷

While some urban Africans decided to engage in strike action in protest against poor wages, Huggins and his government were unyielding in legitimating the concerns raised by African trade unions but more importantly undoing the settler colonial model anchored on ultra-cheap labour.¹²⁸ Huggins argued that approving any cost-of-living adjustments would work against the government's objectives and create 'a vicious spiral of rising costs and prices which ... would inflict great hardship on [White] wage earners and others on fixed incomes'.¹²⁹ Therefore, for the period under investigation and indeed the remainder of the colonial period, African under-consumption (i.e. consumption below the PDL) was strictly enforced including through the use of consumer price controls.

The above discussion has shown that price controls as they operated in the period from 1939 to 1949 were largely retrogressive mainly due to the inconsistent and racially prejudiced application of control measures. Price controls also generated stasis in production methods. This section has also shown the contrasting socio-economic experiences of colonising white and colonised African consumers under the same regime of price controls. While white consumers' experiences were inauspicious, the plight of Africans was brutal. The price control measures were designed to protect white consumers while simultaneously enforcing African under-consumption to maintain the settler colonial model.

124. P. Ibbotson, 'Urbanization in Southern Rhodesia.' *Africa* 16, 2 (1946), 77.

125. *The Bantu Mirror*, 17 January 1948.

126. J.W. Barber, 'Economy of British Central Africa', (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 227.

127. C.H. Thompson, and H.W. Woodruff, *Economic Development in Rhodesia and Nyasaland* (London: Heinemann, 1954), 20.

128. For example, African railway workers returned to work after the government gave them the assurance that it would appoint an independent Commission of Inquiry to investigate their grievances, but the commission's recommendations were never implemented.

129. NAZ, S482/133/41, Cost of Living Allowances, Letter from the Prime Minister's Office to the Executive Committee of the Rhodesian Railway Workers Association, 21 March 1945.

Conclusion

This article has probed the consumer price controls regime instituted in Southern Rhodesia between 1939 and 1949. It has shown that besides prices, controls proved to be moderately serviceable during the initial years of their implementation. However, over time price controls created distortions in the economy. Some unscrupulous producers and service providers ended up supplying sub-standard products at fixed prices in a bid to turn a profit. The main culprits were bakers, innkeepers, and hotel proprietors, largely because controls had negative effects along the value chain. Thus, as much as they protected consumers from unfair pricing, price controls also exposed the same consumers to sub-standard products in the market. The quest by some businesses to remain competitive within the stipulated profit margins also impacted their bottom line because some experienced operational losses or had to cut back drastically on their mainline activities.

The article has also highlighted that consumer price controls were implemented within the existing colonial designs. As such the main beneficiaries remained the colonising White consumers who experienced a favourably better standard of living. For the White community, the cost-of-living indices remained comparable to those of other settler colonies and dominions within the British Empire. However, this did not arrest the economic anxieties of these particular consumers as they experienced an appreciable dip in living standards that were enough to even influence some of the economic decisions they took. For the most part, the results of price controls for Africans were unhappy. The piecemeal and half-hearted enforcement of consumer price controls in African-designated spaces left Africans at the mercy of price control violators. As such, African consumption levels remained well within the margins of poverty.

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