

Willowgate Scandal

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The **Willowgate Scandal** was a 1988 scandal in Zimbabwe that rocked the country following the exposure by [The Chronicle](#) of government officials who were given preference in buying vehicles at the [Willowvale Motor Industries](#) at discounted prices and re-selling them at very inflated prices.



Maurice Nyagumbo, one of the implicated politicians in the Willowgate Scandal. After his implication and resignation, Nyagumbo ended his own life by taking poison

It was the Chronicle under the editorship of [Geoffrey Nyarota](#) that unearthed the scandal. One of the major investigative stories in the history of the media in [Zimbabwe](#), the scandal came to the attention of Nyarota in October 1989 when a member of parliament [Obert Mpofu](#) surrendered a check he had accidentally received from Willowvale Motor Industries to the Chronicle for investigations. The investigation unearthed that the check which was signed by the then Industry minister [Callistus Ndlovu](#) was meant for one Alfred Mpofu. This triggered further investigations that implicated four top

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government officials.^[1]

Background

Willowvale was the only legal importer of cars into Zimbabwe so there was a long waiting list for these vehicles, but the law allowed ministers and members of Parliament to jump to the head of the line, on grounds that they need cars for official business. Instead of keeping these cars, however, many officials were reselling them at markups of as much as \$30,000, in violation of a law controlling the prices of secondhand vehicles. The restriction in importing vehicles was because Zimbabwe, even though more prosperous as an economy than most African countries, had a shortage of foreign currency. As a result, even though Willowvale, had the capacity to turn out more than 4,500 cars a year, in 1987 built only 1,400. This was against a country demand of about 20,000 vehicles a year.^[2]

How the scandal came to light

A letter got lost and landed on a businessman's in-tray when he was not entitled to the tax rebates for a newly-assembled Toyota Cressida by government's Willowvale Mazda Motor Industry (WMMI). By that time, the letter and enclosed cheque were misdirected to businessman [Obert Mpofu](#), who later became a politician.

Mpofu was mystified as to why he would be entitled to a rebate from the WMMI assembly plant for a car he had not ordered. He was also not entitled to buy the vehicle on relaxed terms as he was not yet a government official back then. In the letter, Mpofu reportedly noticed that both items were actually not meant for his office, but were meant for one A Mpofu. This other Mpofu later turned out to be an employee of a leading Bulawayo businessman, who was neck-deep in shady deals with many prominent politicians.

As the events unfolded, the letter eventually found its way to a local newspaper, The Chronicle, which then broke the story under a screaming headline: Cars Racket and the story had a huge impact throughout Africa.^[3]

Investigations & Findings

President Mugabe set up an inquiry (Sandura Commission) which was headed by former Judge President [Wilson Sandura](#). Over seven weeks the commission called 72 witnesses, including six Cabinet ministers, two deputy ministers, three members of Parliament, two senior army officers and 40 directors and managers of private companies, generally the buyers of the politicians' cars. The commission's court sittings were attended by the public whose number was so large to accommodate in the courtrooms that they had to take turns.

The commission found that many officials had abused their positions to buy cars and resell them. The then Minister of State [Frederick Shava](#), had bought and sold so many vehicles that the Sandura commission criticized him for "behaving like a car dealer," because he made about \$70,000 in a year.^[2]

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Then Higher Education Minister [Dzingai Mutumbuka](#) who was called before the commission called it "coincidence" that he and his wife placed \$55,000 in their bank accounts on the same day they sold their Toyota Cressida, which they said they sold for a legal \$27,500. The buyers admitted paying \$55,000.

When then Defense Minister Enos Nkala testified appeared before the commission he is reported to have blamed his wife "If you do find any racket at the end of the day, I was not in any way involved." In turn, his wife said she meant to sell her Cressida to her employers for about \$15,000, a legal price, but the businessmen forced another \$30,000 on her.

On March 31 the panel gave its report to Mugabe, who ordered it published about a week later.

The Sandura panel implicated five government officials:

- [Maurice Nyagumbo](#) - The inquiry found out that his bank account had twelve suspicious transactions from twelve different individuals totaling Z \$11 500. Nyagumbo who was minister for political affairs and [Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front](#) (ZANU PF) administration secretary resigned from his post and later committed suicide in April 1989 after being implicated in the scandal.^[4]
- [Callistus Ndlovu](#) - He allegedly purchased a motor vehicle for Z \$22 087 and resold it for Z \$65 000.
- [Mark Dube](#) - He was the Matabeleland South provincial Governor who allegedly purchased a vehicle for Z \$24 000 and resold it for Z \$80 000 to one Mr G Scultz.
- [Enos Chikowore](#) - It was revealed that he used his position as Minister of Local Government and Urban Development to assist his secretary, Alice Sakupwanyana and her friend Esther Gupo to buy two Nissan Sedans.
- [Enos Nkala](#) - Despite having denied any guilt previously, he announced his resignation during one of the commission's sittings after overwhelming evidence was presented by the commission.

Aftermath

Despite the findings of the inquiry Mugabe went on to grant a pardon to those implicated.^[5]

Soon after the Chronicle began investigating the scandal, its editor, Geoffrey Nyarota, was promoted by [Zimpapers](#) to a headquarters public relations job, a move seen more as a way to silence him. There were appeals by prominent writers and politicians for the reversal of the promotion, but President [Robert Mugabe](#) refused, arguing that the new post's higher salary was Nyarota's "reward."^[2]

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