

## Thabo Mbeki Speech

TM: Thabo Mbeki

FW: Fiona White

FW: So I've got about 5 or 6 questions that I'm going to run through, and I'm sure Karin will add things as she sees fit. So really the first thing I want to ask you is what your understanding of non-racialism is? It's quite a broad question, but obviously given your own experiences in the ANC, we would just like to know about how leaders feel about non-racialism?

TM: What do you think?

FW: Hmm, we've had very interesting perspectives because we have had a lot of people say that it is all about the historical ANC view of non-racialism, whereas others have said that we can't look beyond colour, but we have to work with it in order to bring about change. And then we have had a very small number who have thought that multi-rationalism is the way forward, and not non-racialism. So those are kind of the three broad ways of trying to understand. Does that give you a sense of what I was asking? And another thing we were asking was the idea of how non-racialism has travelled, from the time of the Freedom Charter until now?

TM: It's much older than the freedom charter, much older than that. I mean I think the issue is that in this country, it's very straightforward. You have a particular social construct which comes out of the years of colonialism and apartheid, which divides South Africa into black and white categories in every respect. Whether it is to do with land ownership, political rights, anything. So this racial divide. So when you say we want a new South Africa, part of what must be new must surely be a destruction of that divide. So non-racialism must surely mean the eradication of that legacy. In all its elements. So to say to build a non-racial South Africa, what it means in the first instance is that we then have to build this new South Africa focused on the eradication of this legacy, in all elements of that legacy. So to create a non-racial South Africa means equal political rights, which is the easier part of the equation, is the thing to achieve. But equality in all other respects, whether it is ownership of property, access to opportunity, skills or whatever. Even this language policy we have, this equality of languages is very much part of that. So I would imagine that is what non-racialism is. It means create a society of equal south Africans, and therefore eradicate the legacy that we inherited.

K: How would you see, for instance the equality of languages, how would you see that happening?

TM: Well I think the first most important thing was the recognition of the equality of all these languages. In our constitution, that's the first step. The next step is to put that into effect, so that, starting with the state institutions, it surely must be possible that as a citizen, any citizen should be able to do business with government in any language of its choice. So the government itself should ensure that they have the capacity to deal with this person, so you don't perpetuate in the practice this racial inequality, by giving preference to English and Afrikaans. I am saying that is very much part of the system of this racial

construct, these were the official languages, the rest... That's changed. So the state would have to empower itself to be able to relate to the citizen in any language of the citizen's choice.

There are many other things that would have to happen, with regard to language policy. One of which is the treatment of language at school. I think part of the weakness of the education system in South Africa has been the failure to use people's native language as a medium of instruction for a number of years. SO you use English as a medium of instruction with a child who does not understand English. So for example if you instruct a child in Geography in English, they will not understand geography because they do not understand the language you are using to teach them. So these are some of the things you would have to do, so that means that you have got to have teachers at school who can instruct children in that language. You can take this thing further up, even into South African universities – you will find very few that actually teach the Indigenous African languages. What is this construct that was built during centuries of colonialism and apartheid, it affected everything. So when you say to create a non-racial south Africa, you have to address the entirety. Education is one of a number of elements. So in summary, to create a non-racial South Africa, first task is to do what is necessary to eradicate the legacy of the past.

FW: Can I ask you if you think that your understanding of non-racialism is similar to what the current government, the ANC thinks?

TM: What do they think?

FW: What I am trying to understand is whether you think the core understanding of non-racialism is what is seen by leadership in the country today, as still being a main driver behind building a non-racial society?

TM: The country continues to be what it used to be in the past. Poverty. Poverty in this country continues to be defined in the old terms. The poverty divide is essentially a black and white divide, it remains that. Or take anything. The skilled and the unskilled – who are the unskilled in the country, they remain those people who were unskilled before 1994. SO I'm saying if you talk about this, we must talk about honoring what the constitution requires in terms of creating a non-racial society. Addressing the racial imbalance in society must surely be one of the driving issues in any policy that the government implements.

FW: In a sense of futures of a non-racial state, obviously addressing racial imbalance is one key feature you are alluding, but are there other features of a non-racial society that should be seen today and in the future.

TM: Everything. All you have to do is to say what happened to South Africa during this 350 years of colonialism and apartheid? There was land redistribution. There was the erosion of social and political rights. Denial of access to education, for instance. Denial of access to skills, all manner of things. So it's all of these things. That's the racial divide that was created, and so a non-racial South Africa must address all of those, whatever they may be.

K: So how would we know that we are pursuing a non-racial South Africa, what are some of the milestones along the way that we can say yes we are progressing towards a non-racial society?

TM: I think that it's.. well it shouldn't be too difficult to measure should it? What are the poverty levels in the country? Who is poor. If you said 10 years ago 70% of the population lived below the breadline, and of that 70%, 95% was black, and 10 years later, 50% below the breadline, of whom whatever percentage is black, and is that an improvement? So it should be quite easy to measure. As long as you have these disparities in income and so on, based on what happened in the past on this black, white thing, that is a continuation of racism. So in the sense of producing a more equal standard of living, then you can say that on this issue, we have indeed made more progress on eliminating racism. Take any of the professions, accountants. How many accountants do we have in the country, how many are white and how many are black? Look at it 10 years ago and look at it today, it may very well be true that the gap is closing. That shows that we are making a difference, we are moving towards eliminating racism in our country. So across the board, even the other thing we were talking about, language. It is more difficult, but if tomorrow there are more white people who speak Zulu than there were yesterday, that also tells you something about the integration of the society, and therefore that this person, who before would have said but this is a primitive, native language, you find that tomorrow they are very happy to recite Zulu poetry. It tells you something, that we are moving towards that ideal of a non-racial society.

The matter is very specific here in this country, there are psychological elements to it, racism as a state of mind. A kind of ideological thing. But I'm saying in the South African context, racism is already daily material things. To what extent our city is integrated, Johannesburg sure, parts of the Northern Suburbs, it's true that since 1994 there has been some de-segregation, but essentially Johannesburg remains what it always was. The bulk of the population is separated in the way that it was. In reality, you've still got white Johannesburg, and then you've got Soweto, Alexandra township and so on. The old apartheid racial settlement patterns persist. And you will be able to tell if there is progress in terms of non-racialism just by watching the way population is moving.

Q: So you spoke about this change being an indicator of moving towards a non-racial society. But how do you decide whether this rate of change is fast enough?

TM: That is entirely a political decision. There is no objective measure, there's no mathematical measure to say if you move at this rate its slow, if that is fast enough. It's a political decision. There are some people who might very well say that, for instance I have heard it conveyed about local government, that people move too quickly in terms of trying to deracialise systems of management at local government, as a consequence of which skilled experienced white people have left, since you reduce the capacity of local government to deliver services, because the process was too fast. I have had people argue that. But equally I can argue that it isn't, that it is too slow. It is entirely a political decision, there is no independent criteria you can use to measure slow, fast, faster.

FW: And in your personal view, what do you think in terms of the pace of change?

TM: No of course in the situation from where we come, all change is slow. Slow because of the scale and the impact of the problem. Like take the issue of poverty – you and I wouldn't want anybody to be poor,

starting from today. So to the extent that if anybody is poor today, we are moving too slowly. So the question is that have we utilized whatever capacities we have to move forward faster, and then you have to deal with each issue on its own. If we say we want to deracialise the system of management in government, the DGs and the Directors and all those people, what has happened there? Have we deracialised management? Have we moved fast enough? I'm saying then that we have to answer the question, have we used the capacities we have in order to move forward to produce a non-racial society. It's not a matter of saying we are moving too slowly, it may be that we can't move faster because there is no capacity to move faster. It's not necessarily a failure, it's because the means and the capacities and all that are not there. So it's not a failure from that point of view. What would be a failure would be if we had the capacity but we didn't use it, for whatever reason. And in that context, I can't think of any instance where I would say we had the possibility to move faster and we didn't.

FW: And do you think there are some areas that have been more successful than others, in particular affirmative action and BEE?

TM: I mean obviously the bigger success has been in the political sphere, because I think the political system in the country has been deracialised. Probably the easiest sphere. The economy generally, in terms of ownership of wealth, obviously not. Movement has been very slow. It relates to other issues, it's not necessarily about race. As a country we haven't been very successful in terms of developing small and medium business, which is obviously the level of the economy where you would expect that new entrance in terms of owners of capital. New capitalist entrance would be essentially from the black population. So to the extent that we have not moved as fast as we should have, with regard to the cultivation of small and medium business. To that extent we haven't created a space for your black entrepreneur to enter the economy. So that issue of changing the structure of ownership of the economy relates to something else. Economic policies broadly. Certainly with regard to ownership of wealth, I don't think we have moved as fast as we should have.

And I mean the land redistribution program, again hasn't moved as fast as it should have. Partly because of the policies that were adopted of willing sellers and willing buyers, that determined the pace. But even where these land transfers have occurred, over the years there has been a mistake in that the government has not supported sufficiently the new land owners. So whereas you could have used the land transfers as one of the points of entry in terms of addressing that matter. But it didn't happen, so people might have the land but they don't know how to use it as an economic asset.

But of course I mean there is progress in all sorts of areas, I mean student populations at university, that has changed. There are much larger numbers of black students that are accessing higher education than in the past, so there is progress there. I am not talking about the quality of education, who qualifies and who drops out and everything, but I mean there has been progress.

FW: Can I just go back to the policy of economic transformation, I just want to ask you about your opinion on the Youth League's view of, that has been in the media lately, that white people should voluntarily, or not voluntarily, but they should redistribute their wealth?

TM: Now hang on, what are we talking about here? What is wealth?

FW: I don't really know I must be honest I didn't really understand the coherence of the argument, but something about the Oppenheimers for example, the idea that redistribution and economic growth is going to happen through the redistribution of white wealth, it was very much a racial take, which was quite different to the way that you spoke about it. And then on a milder take, Desmond Tutu's latest idea about a white tax – how do you feel about all of that?

TM: No look, the reason I was asking what was meant by wealth is that people might talk about redistributing – a house is wealth. Are you talking about the redistribution of houses? Or some person might have a million rand in the bank, that's wealth. Are you talking about dishing that out, giving you R10 and you R10? What are we talking about? Because the fundamental challenge we face here is that we've got to do something that this economy grows faster, it expands, it generates more wealth, so that we are able to address all the challenges that we face. That is the fundamental problem. Now generation of wealth in any economy means new investment, so you've got to invest in creating services, new factories, that's what you've got to do. Now if that's your starting point, then you should say I want him to get involved in the economy, to participate in that process of wealth creation and expansion of the economy. I know that he is penniless, if you say to him go to Standard Bank and borrow some money, they won't give him some money, because he doesn't have collateral. So we as a state, we should ask that person, what business do you want to start, how much money do we need? And the state should provide it. And then we must go to Anglo Platinum who is mining Platinum, and we should say that you need trucks to transport things. Why don't you subcontract a trucking company to do the transport for you? Help to train them properly, to get them to operate efficiently. So that is your white business, helping to grow a black business. This platinum – why are we just exporting bars of raw platinum? Why don't we do something with this platinum, let's create more jobs? And I mean that's how I come at it. To distribute existing wealth, people going to the banks to borrow money to buy existing wealth, it doesn't happen. It doesn't do anything to change the country for the better. You are not creating any new wealth in the country. It's of no meaning to the rest of us, you have created no new jobs, the economy has not expanded. Sure, there may have been redistribution, but it means nothing at the end of the day. So the challenge is not redistribution here – the challenge is doing something about growing the economy. IF someone sets up a business and employs 10 people, that is a much better contribution to this country than someone who goes and takes that money and buys 10% of a successful country. Which is redistribution, in that sense. But it doesn't have any serious impact on the society. It has only a very good impact on the individual involved. It does nothing in terms of addressing the challenges of the country.

FW: I also want to ask you about any other key challenges towards building a non-racial society, is there anything else you want to mention?

TM: I think that as a country we are not discussing these things sufficiently, there is a certain level of shyness about discussing this racial legacy. And when people raise it, that it's very real, you've heard I'm sure the expression that you are playing the race card. And people say that in order to stop the discussion, that's not going to help us. I think that the country is not discussing these things sufficiently,

in the sense that you know a long time ago, I was in Brazil, and we had a meeting. And one of the leaders says to me as we walk into the meeting, he says look at my delegation sitting at that side of the table, the Brazilians. What's wrong with that delegation? So I said I don't know. He said look, the population of Brazil, 60% is not white. 40% is white. But look at our delegation, it's 100% white. 60% of Brazil's population is not that. And then he said that we as Brazilians, we solved this race question long ago, and the way we solved it was saying that it does not exist. So we don't address it. I'm saying that in this country to some extent we are turning in that direction. People keep saying, apartheid is long gone. But I am saying that this society remains fundamentally structured according to the racial legacy of the past. And we are afraid to talk about it, and the failure to talk about it means in the end that you then don't act as purposefully and consistently as we should. That is a problem we need to face.

K: And how do you think we can face that? Is there a way we can tackle it head on, but still have a rational, constructive discussion on issues of race?

TM: We must surely be able to say that look, as a country, as an economy, we are losing a great deal by not having skilled people. Even today, I was talking to someone who was telling me about work that is going on in the power stations that Eskom is building, and they have run out of welders. They are importing welders from Asia. It's wrong, and we have millions of South Africans who are unemployed – take them to technical college, and teach them welding. But it's not happening fast enough, and as a result even skills at that level have to be imported. And that's a major loss. When we were in government, we had an advisor on ICTs, and all the major companies were represented in this. All of them. HP and Dell and Nokia. And one of the things they complained about was that they work together, and say that there is a shortage of 80 000 jobs in the sector in the country, but they need people with a particular skill in the sector, and the skills are not there. And if the skills were there, 80 000 jobs are waiting. And then they would say that we also want to work here in South Africa, but there is a very restricted skills base here, so South African skills are very expensive, and I can ask for any price I want, because I am the only one with these skills. So they were saying they are shifting a lot of work to Egypt, because it is cheaper. And they relate very directly to this legacy of racism, of apartheid, which deliberately set out to make sure that a large section of the population was unskilled. We have not been able to correct that. So why don't we as a society say that this must come to an end?

K: And I'm saying, how can we start that conversation, without people saying that we are playing the race card?

TM: Well, you can't avoid that. Some people are always going to be saying that you are playing the race card, or whatever. It is in the nature of the subject. That must happen, you can't tell people to shut up. In Pretoria we have at least 2 automobile companies, we've got BMW and Ford motor factories. We've got some further educational training colleges in the Pretoria area. Now what I would do, I would take the college and the automobile companies, put them together. Say you automobile people, surely you need skilled artisans? So why don't we put you together with these technical colleges, design a curriculum that fits your needs. And that is actually a practical example, because what the automobile companies were saying that there was a disjuncture between what they needed and what the technical colleges were teaching them. Because the equipment that was being used at the college was 10, 15

years old. So I'm saying, practically, you could say that you automobile companies and the colleges should get together, design courses for the kind of people who are required. So I mean you can. I will just give you that as an example, and say that as a country we have to address these issues. There is no need to import welders from Thailand, but we do.

FW: And are there any other sectors in particular you can see in playing a role in building a non-racial society?

TM: Everybody. You know in the early 1990s, or let me start a bit back. There is a school of mining in the UK, and I met some of the students from there. And they used to do their practicals here, and they would say that they would come and work here for however many months. And when you go down the mines in the lift, your white supervisor would be there at the lift, and as you go in, the supervisor never goes down. So they would say that in their practicals, they were taught entirely by the black mine workers. So this actually means that you would produce a person with a master's degree in mining quicker who comes from a practical experience, than a young person who comes from high school. So we took a group of mine workers, and we sent them to university to study mining in Cuba, and a couple of years later they came back with master's degrees because they know mining. So the mining companies can give scholarships to their people to go to Wits and study mining engineering, and they would pass with flying colours, coming back with better skills, understanding mining better. This can be done very easily. But it requires that as a society, we must recognize the fact that there is a problem.

K: So there was a speech that you made, two speeches. A 78 speech and a 2000 speech, and it's one question, but for instance you asked in that 78 speech whether we can count on the liberal party as allies. And then elsewhere you talk to the liberal party again, and say can you fight for the rights of all people for cooperation among all people in the world. And in that 2000 speech you said that we must abandon the thought that racism is another person's problem, someone else's responsibility. Can you comment a bit on that? This responsibility of building a non-racial future, how do you see that?

TM: I think you have to answer that question yourself. I don't know what individuals do. Institutions, I can talk about, but what do individuals do? I don't know. If you said to me, be non-racial, what should I do? Of course I'm non-racial – I think it is not an individual issue, it's not a challenge that faces individuals. It might in a particular context, if there is a domestic worker who has helped you, then sure you might say what is your relationship, how are you interacting in an individual sense? But it's an institutional thing. Let's say a school principal, in charge of an institution. And you can say principal, your school is mixed, what do you do that will encourage the development of non-racialism in this small context? But as individuals, what can you do when you walk out of this house?

K: How does non-racialism work on an everyday South African level?

TM: It's up to you. I mean I fly, two weeks ago, I fly SAA. So the crew, the stewards want to take pictures with me. Now there must have been 8 or so, of whom 7 were black, one was white. So we take this picture, and individually, they all want pictures. The white woman was not part of this, I noticed that. And I said, but why is she excluding herself? So I said to her, why don't you come and take a picture and she came very readily. But there was something that said to her, this isn't meant for me, and so she

stood aside. I thought it reflected some of the underlying tensions that are still prevalent in society. Someone else might not have noticed it, but it is up to you.

K: But are you saying that there is no space for leaders to begin to say that as a personal level, we are citizens of this country, and this is how I would like to see you make citizenship work.

TM: I really don't know. How do you tell a person in that context, how do you tell them to behave themselves, if you are a white person, and you meet a black person, please smile? I mean you can say that there are some things that are wrong – when you have public holidays, like heritage day, and there is a public rally somewhere, why are there no white people there? You can say that. You know, encourage people to get together. And I mean the Springboks are playing the All Blacks at Ellis Park – go to the black people and say, why aren't you going to support the national team. Sure, that you can do. But in terms of individuals, I don't know what you can tell them. I would personally find it very difficult to direct people like that, in that sort of narrow space. I mean the broad general statements you can make, to work together to create a non-racial society, and you can say ok, what should I do on Sunday when I go to church.

FW: So do you think change will come about through more institutional levels, such as policy and education?

TM: I think so yes.

FW: Ok, I actually wanted to ask you earlier about what you think the role of the media, or any other sectors of society can play, if they can play a role in building non-racialism?

TM: Yes, of course, the media is obviously good certainly from the point of view of education. It can, and it should. But I don't know if it would agree that it should, because of editorial independence and all of that sort of stuff. And you are right about generally, civil society. Religious communities, faiths of all kinds, they attract lots of people. And they must also ask themselves what they can do. The Jewish community for instance are doing a lot of community development work, a deliberate conscious decision. They are saying that look, we are Jewish, we are comfortable in the professions, we have some money, so let's go do something in terms of upliftment of people who are not as advantaged as we are.

So I mean the basic challenge is what we were talking about earlier, for all of us as South Africans to say that we need to create a non-racial society. Let's do something about it. So everybody, wherever they may be. A bishop in a church may then say in my space, what do I do, someone else who is a trade unionist can say what can I do, and so on. It's a national challenge, a national task. And there isn't going to be anyone sitting drawing up tasks for everybody. The citizen must be able to say well I understand, and in my context this is what I am going to do. And that is again where the media might help, if they generate that kind of consciousness. So that all of us feel driven to address this particular challenge. Now it's way over 45 minutes.

Thank you so much.



