

[Baleka Mbete Interview](#)

BM : Baleka Mbete

FW: Fiona White

FW: My first question is, what is your understanding of non-racialism, and where do you get your understanding from?

BM: My understanding of non-racialism is that it is the kind of society we have always driven as the ANC to work towards a. It's a society where the question of racial considerations play no role in determining what happens to people, what they are entitled to, what their roles and place should be in life. That really what should matter is that which they as a person are able to bring to life as a contribution for the common good, for the community, for society, for the country. So non-racialism is for me that while we cannot turn a blind eye to the fact that we emerge from a past where racism was the order of the day, and we therefore live in a very unbalanced society, and for some time as part of correcting that imbalance, we have to take these matters into account, we can't pretend this didn't happen. While that is so, where we are going is a future where in fact race must not be a factor in looking at human beings.

FW: And do you think, how far do you think society has travelled to fulfill this idea of non-racialism?

BM: Oh, I think we are very far. I think we are still at a stage where there isn't even an understanding of the damage that has happened, because we are still a new south Africa, for the past 17 years, we ought to have been able to get over it and move on, but it doesn't work that way you know, things take time, there are lots of things that still need to be worked on. So we have put into place a constitutional framework that will help us to move on, but we need to be aware that this will take more time.

FW: So what do you see as the key features of a non-racial society?

BM: I think we are working towards a situation, where starting with our children who are growing up now, who are having the benefit of a South Africa where they go to school together, where they don't even notice that they are not the same color. So I think we are making a beginning, so that actually goes back to your earlier question. When they grow up to become adults, and they continue to relate to people of the same generation as themselves, as just friends and human beings, after some decades we will get to a point where people are able then to be attracted to each other and even to have families together, today's situation, the fact that constitutionally we no longer have legal obstacles TO relationships, socially we begin to relate more normally. So that will be one feature, where socially we begin to be more integrated. And in fact another element where we have already started, we live in the same communities, neighborhoods. Yes the issue of the economics of it all come into it here, because there are people out there who just cannot afford to get out of their little shack, their little matchbox house in the township. So that is another feature, the socioeconomic situation needs to be balanced with the assistance of the state, to help create this atmosphere that is conducive for people to actually be able to cross the boundaries that were previously put between racial groups. You know one has lived in countries where you realized that people didn't notice that they are different colors, they speak the same language, I mean you go to Tanzania and everyone, whether you are white, Indian, African, they

Speak Swahili. So those would be some of the things where for instance our African languages are spoken by people coming from different communities, so we can all pool the symbols of cultural heritage. So those would be some of the features, in my view, where in a non-racial society the issue of your color should not be a factor in where you go to school, what language you want to speak, where you study, it should be a question of choice. For as long as it's so difficult for people to realize preferences, choices, and rights, because at the end of the day, those things are there only for those who have money, and given the past of South Africa, the majority of black people would not be in that category, to be able to afford to send their children to university and colleges to train their children. So it should come to the point where the state is able to enable any child to access whatever kind of training that would bring out the best in them.

FW: What role do you think different policies like affirmative action or BBE play in the features of a non-racial state?

BM: I think for a start, let's go back to the constitution, and say that even those policies are based on the fact that the bill of rights does recognize that there is a lot of catching up to do, there is a whole lot of backlog. So the bill of rights, in the equality clause does say that everyone is equal however it is ok to do certain things in favor of those who are disadvantaged, so you can help them to catch up. I think the detail is where the devil comes in, as to how best to implement that. However the policy in my view is a necessary one, without which you will never be able to even begin to deal with the imbalances. So those kind of policies and regulations are necessary, they are there for a reason, but I'm not going into the detail, and therefore I'm not going to be able to say what exact role, but it is something that is needed because without that, you will never make progress, because there is a lot of merit that is buried under centuries of discrimination, and disadvantage, and is not given the opportunities to make progress and bring out the merit in themselves.

FW: I think that all the interviewees have said that these policies are important, but some people say that in order to have a non-racial state, there should be an end to it, a time when race no longer comes into it. Other people say that no, there should be no end, you know, it should continue forever. So what is your sense on policies like that?

BM: No, you have the policy because you are trying to correct a wrong. Surely you are working towards an end goal where that balance begins to get right, how long that will take, I don't think any of us will be able to say. So you've got to review this, you've got to evaluate what progress is being made, and you've got to be hard-nosed about it, because it is not a pleasant thing. It is how we are able to explain it to one another, and explain how this is some of the hard choices we have to make, in order to make things right again, otherwise we will be disadvantaging people who have already been historically disadvantaged. However it can't be correct to say that it must just go on forever, no, there has got to be a time, and I don't think we are able to say how long it will take, that we should be able to review the situation and say that no, we are now at a point where we have made some difference. Now we are having a national planning commission who is going to give us a draft basis for us as a society, agreeing on some areas that we must deal with, where we really need to turn the situation around very fundamentally. We've got to be able to look and see how far we have gone, to what extent we have

begun to seriously make inroads into changing the socioeconomic conditions under which the majority of black citizens live under. When we are talking about deracialisation, we are talking very concretely about people's daily lives, you know. It shouldn't be a situation where the only places where people live in the worst squalor, are people that live on the margins of a township. The most horrible conditions, that people live under, and you try to understand how people got there, and some of them will tell you that they prefer to come and live here, leaving even a house perhaps, because it is closer to their job, and they can't afford the bus far. So there are people in this society for whom daily life is such an uphill battle, that people live under horrendous conditions just to survive. Now I'm saying there should come a time when as a state we should have addressed these things so that our people no longer have to live under these types of conditions. So there should be a time where our people are taken care of, they don't live in mansions, but they all have decent shelter, access to socioeconomic conditions which at least enable them to feel dignity.

FW: Another question aligned to the idea of policies that address race specifically, is the idea of forms, and several respondents have said that they hate having to tick the boxes of black, Indian, white, and it got me thinking about when this is going to change, and I was wondering what the ANC's view on that is?

BM: Well I don't think the ANC has specific views on such detailed matters. However, I think it can be expected that for black people, the very thought of being asked to identify yourself on race is revolting because of the past. It can be said also for colored and Indians. For white people, I am quite sure it is revolting from the point of view of thinking about what happened in the past, so why must they continue to think of themselves as being white and not south African? But it is also so that for some time it will be necessary for the state to track these trends, for purposes of being able to make a determination as we go, to what extent we are making progress. So it's a difficult one, because it's uncomfortable, none of us like that. But at the same time, if you don't check those detailed issues, you won't quite know if you are making a difference or not.

FW: Yes, and in terms of the features of building a non-racial society, what do you think the role of different sectors of society can play, any sectors you can think of?

BM: The sectors I would relate to would be women, youth, cultural workers, different groupings into which people fall and they work together and they feel comfortable together in that particular space, in terms of the activities that share and do together. I mean in parliament, in some time we have to be engaging with the European Union about some help that we were getting, and we realized that we were actually a legislative government, because there is sectoral body that brings us together, on common issues that we work on. So I think that the role of the sectors is a very important one, because it is there in those sectors that people come together, not based on the community you come from, social background, you come together based on the activities you are involved in, as adults now. You have grown up, you are no longer toddlers, and you are coming together into a space that really undermines those other issues, of race, the suburb that you come from, the township that you come from. I think sectors are actually a very important space in which people can interact, and begin to know one another in a deeper way than just assuming that if a person comes from Soweto, they have nothing to

contribute. And that happens, you know, when young people do not come from the same places, cultural backgrounds, universities and so on. But those young people meet and they debate things together at a university, or they meet in church, across color lines, I think that begins to assist us in the process of deracialising society, social life, and making the human beings that meet and engage realize that what is more important is the human element of us all, and we learn from each other.

FW: Do you have a view on what the role of different areas are like the media or business, in terms of building non-racialism?

BM: you know when it comes to the media, it is a difficult area for the simple reason that the issue of the policy that drives the content of the media is one that is based on a particular background. If things were determined by just the journalists it would be one thing, but it is not only the journalist that is involved, it is also the policy of the media house that they belong to, so that is an area that needs to be broken down and looked into deeper. So what in my view should be possible, is for the media to play a constructive role in enabling there to be a debate about issues of non-racialism, what it means, how in fact we would like to see a future South Africa. It would be good, if we were just to have a lot of space in the media to debate these issues, so it is not just a word in the ANC or the freedom charter, but it should be something that we as society consciously engage on and move on together in the future.

Now we passed a law in 2000, the equality law. And one of the things we did there was to say that in the ministry of justice, we need to have an equality review community, which would be a structure that would enable us as a society to see whether we are making progress, in which areas are we still finding things difficult, because we have listed something like 10 areas that this review committee would always be looking at, just to check. I don't know what progress we are making there, whether these things are always happening. Because it is those kind of regular evaluations that would assist us in having a very sober look at ourselves, what kind of treatment does an African old woman get when she gets to a shop, or in a hospital, is it the same as when a white old lady arrives? Some small daily things that would enable us to crack the questions about if race remains a factor in how human beings are treated, are seen, are engaged or not.

So your question was, so that was the media. The media should play a constructive role in pursuing honest debate, not this thing of people phoning in and saying let's leave race, apartheid is long over, that is just a person who is uncomfortable and embarrassed. Ok, I understand that, but for masses of people there, this is a critical question, so the embarrassment of the elite is really not the issue, the issue should be what is the life of the ordinary person in some dump somewhere. And yes, we can say the government this, the ANC that, but we should ask ourselves honest and hard questions even when we talk about what is happening on the farms, you know the way Terreblanche died. The question we should ask if what is going on on those farms?

I once had a constituency office in the Southern Cape, and I was horrified by what I saw there. Because a lot of those areas around George and so on are farms. And I used to have meetings and address farm owners, and I found two types of people. Many who were very responsible., decent human beings, who were responsible for their workers. But I also came across horrible people. I mean this one guy, I went to

his farm because a situation was brought to my attention of farm workers who live in this mud house which is always wet, because there is this huge sprinkler which keeps their house wet all the time, and there is no debate with the farmer, they are working here, they live in that house. They have a baby, and the baby has TB because of these conditions. They don't have clean drinking water, it's horrible, dirty water that they share with animals. So I had to go to that farm, I ventured there and I didn't find the farmer, but at some point we managed to meet, and I raised my concern, that you can't have human beings living under these conditions. And his attitude was really, what is your issue. I don't know what the solution is. So finally he came round, but initially his attitude was.. So you have that mentality. For a whole lot of South Africans, that continues. There are lots of people who live under conditions like that, who have not felt the freedom of the new South Africa, where they live under those conditions. So I'm saying, if only the media could take more interest in those conditions, and helping to bring out some of these things, not for playing politics, but for us to begin to really make inroads and make a difference and change in people's lives.

FW: Just out of interest, I did my PhD on farm workers in Stellenbosch, and they just recently did an expose on farm workers and the conditions they live in, especially in the Western Cape. And it actually got a lot of attention, I mean I was surprised by how much media attention it got.

BM: Yes because the minister had told me, that there are lots of problems and that they were going to be spending a lot of energy into what is going on there. In Mpumalanga as well, we found as the ANC, sometimes we visit provinces and move around the regions and give feedback. And they had gone to some farms and they were horrified. Where people really don't know that there is a new South Africa. It's quiet.

FW: Do you have any views on the role of business or political parties in building non-racialism?

BM: I think business might be another one that is not so easy because generally the tendency is to be stuck on saying that business is all about profit. But I don't think that anything is cast in stone, the human beings involved in a particular sector have a responsibility to take charge of the policies and the practices that inform their activities. We can't say that because we are business, all we are interested in is profit and we can go round being irresponsible. So business should ask themselves hard questions as well as to what contributions they can make to building a non-racial society. So I really think there is no organisation or structure which has no role, we are all human beings, we are all adults, we have all chosen to be part of different areas. So there where you are, with the people you are with, when you go home, what is life like around you, what is happening in that community, what does it say to you as a responsible citizen? Those questions must be asked by each one of ourselves, and we should take decisions that are honestly informed about the reality around us, so I do think that business should play a role. In fact where wealth is being made, there ought to be questions about the distribution thereof, in terms of how that particular sector plays a role in helping society. Because in any case, they are not going to be able to continue making profits, if the kinds of imbalances that exist in our society continue. So even in those terms, in terms of a selfish consideration for that particular sector, you want stability in society, But in society where you pretend everything is ok because you are making money, you are likely to very soon hit a very hard rock and your money will go up in flames.

FW: And the role of political parties.

BM: Absolutely. Every political party plays a role, because in the end, we come together, as different political policies with different values, as in those things which preoccupy us the most. But at the end of the day, and here I am talking mainly about the parties that earn enough support to end up in parliament, and parliament is a critical organisation. And political parties obviously do have a responsibility because there in parliament, you can't run away from sitting around a table and looking at various matters that get put before you, one way or another, by society, by the people of the country, by the citizens. The very issues that matter in everyday life end up in parliament.

FW: You have spoken about a lot of challenges already, but is there anything else you want to mention, any other challenges you see that stop us from building non-racialism.

BM: I think the challenges that I see are mainly about the volume of backlogs we have, and the resources, are they easily accessible and available to us to deal with those volumes of backlogs in the shortest possible time. Services, conditions of living, your basic needs, housing, sanitation, rural development, rural social infrastructure. For me, if you were to very quickly deal with ensuring that in rural areas people no longer need to come to urban areas, because rural areas are attractive, there is no need to go find jobs. If you deal with that, then you will deal with the squalor of the urban areas, so that people have decent units and some of those kind of things, you build factories, you know you do some of the things you see in other communities, in China. So the biggest challenge I see is the volume of that backlog and the resources that are available to deal with that backlog.

But secondly, I think the other challenge I see is that of, being on the same wave length. Having the kind of honest communication with one another as South Africans, listening to each other, hearing each other, not doing some of what I observed would happen in parliament, when we first went there. Our first minister of Health, Nkosizana Zuma would come under attack, but what shocked me was that her biggest critics would then walk across the house and say to her, actually we think you are the best minister of health this country has ever had. So they are playing to the gallery. South Africa is watching the debate, so every day they hear all this criticism, and yet all these people who are the mouthpieces of this criticism, they actually believe that she is doing a good job, they actually believe in the policies that she is putting forward. But what they communicate to South Africa, is a different matter, based on what? That is the question? What is the issue? So I'm just saying, there is a need for more honesty in how we engage with one another, with issues, and therefore not to confuse our people because we are playing politics. So a South African who is watching is sitting there and thinking yes, that minister, look what she is telling us, but this person actually thinks the minister is correct. So you end up with the public space having this noise, this clutter, no real serious consideration of the issues that are facing our society. And yet what in fact happens when those politicians sit in portfolio committees is that they listen to each other, they bring positions to meetings and they end up with a slightly different outcome, but they pretend to the outside world that my position is the correct one. And I think that it is not constructive, it's not helpful. So I just think this thing that I call playing politics, not communicating honestly, is not right.

FW: I agree with you, I'm not sure how that system would change, because it seems to be so entrenched now, and it is what the public has become used to. But we didn't grow up with this playing politics, and now that they are playing it, eventually the public become much more savvy and educated. So I don't know if that will happen, if things will change.

BM: I think it will. Because the South African society is in fact a highly politicized society, both from the background of having gone through the struggle, and also because a whole lot of people are educated because what we found in parliament is that the majority of the population don't engage in public hearings, unless parliament spends the resources, people are not going to be able to go there, one because they are just not used to the culture, they are ignorant, they don't know that they are able to come and make an input, two because you can't afford it, so those who do participate are the elite, the more educated, the more well informed. But I think as time goes on, more South Africans are conscious and interested, and are seeing that those debates are very important.

FW: Are there any other challenges you want to highlight?

BM: It is really the public awareness. The more South Africans are educated, are used to these processes, are able and willing to make an input and are feeling confident to make those inputs, the better, because otherwise they will always be represented by the louder ones, who don't always represent the plight or the aspirations of the many who have very good ideas, who are thinking but who are just silenced by their conditions. You get to know this when you go around to the communities and you find that people have very sound ideas, about their communities, what could work, what they don't think is right, but they just need to develop that culture, and I think as we move into the future, that culture will develop. And it's not even a bad thing, from a political party point of view, it is not a nice thing to see a lot of black people joining a lot of the traditionally white parties in the country. But I can also tell you that it is a trend that is not necessarily negative, about this society broadly. The fact that human beings are getting beyond the considerations based on past experiences, and those times, people are now able to decide that here in this township, I am going to join the DA. I would discourage that, because I do not think the DA intends to solve their problems. But there is another side of me that wants to congratulate them for getting over that mental barrier. I also want to congratulate Helen Zille for being a woman who is leading a political party, conservatively but she is, she might try to sound progressive, she's not, but there is a part of me that likes the fact that she is a woman leading the party, and Patricia De Lille, it's a good thing. These are small steps forward, of women getting into politics, even if it the wrong politics. It is an illustration of some steps that we are able to take as members of this society to get past certain barriers of the past. Look at the NFP, that's a very positive thing, in KZN. I just think that old man didn't handle the situation well, I'm not into their dynamics, but I think that woman is a fantastic politician in her own right, just for herself, and as a symbol of leadership by women, and an example that is can be done, even in the most conservative of situations and communities, a woman can actually strike out and start a political question.

FW: There is one question, we have been asking the leaders , is there anything in your private life that you use to foster non-racialism, that we can kind of use as an anecdote? I mean obviously there is a lot that you do in your public life, but anything private that you want to share?

BM: Private life? What's that? Well all I'm doing is trying to prepare myself for a slowed down life, and I've started a little foundation which is not about non-racialism per se, but it is about working in a space where we look more into heritage, cultural heritage, working with youth in particular and saying what are the values and principles that we should ensure do not get lost, you know the values and principles that informed the last decades that we are emerging from, you know the last 20th century, as we have in fact now come through. And part of that is that it is not about race, it is about humanity and the best that we can learn from and share, within a safe space that we create for ourselves. So I think it would be unfair to say I am focusing on non-racialism, I am focusing on young people and ensuring that they do not lose that which has informed you know the liberation struggle. Because we know that young people, they are faced with more and more complex challenges in the social space than we did when we were their age. We were not faced with drugs, not to say there were no drugs, but the situation is much more intense, younger people are much more heavily targeted. We didn't face the kind of human trafficking which is happening, so we need to assist our younger generation to find the resources within themselves, but also within the decades we are emerging from that brought their freedom, so that within the context of this freedom, is not something that lives the future at the mercy of the worst types of behavior and conduct that we see happening globally, in terms of the challenges that young people are faced with.

FW: Is it based in a certain area?

BM: We are here, we have not even launched, we are a small little foundation that meets, based in Pretoria.

FW: So my last question is if you have any views on here you think the Katharada Foundation should focus their work on building non-racialism in the future?

BM: I would like to see the Katharada Foundation leaving us with the heritage of, from Katharada's own life, he is able to share with us the experiences that have shown how the struggle that we have all gone through has shaped the experience of non-racialism. How a whole lot of them were in Lilliesleaf, across the color lines, at a time of apartheid, where in fact the struggle became a leveler and defied, undermined the racism, racial policies of the time. So I think it will be a good thing to get out of Katharada, because we don't do enough of that, breaking things into the minutest detail, of the personal experiences of our veterans. How, in his own experience, did he live out the possible future non-racial South Africa. Secondly a lot of books must come out of the foundation because we need to leave these stories for the younger generation. And some of that is really the stories of the human beings that have lived through the period during which Katharada himself has lived through and given his life to South Africa. And maybe what else can be done is from this research, and from other stuff, you bring out the main points and you call together some gathering where you know you share what you came out with, with all of us, or even have a series of such gathering. You can do it even as part of next year's program, the centenary, which is going to be year of a lot of activities where we should walk the journey you know of the last 100 years. Katharada is in his 80s now. If I was in the foundation, I would already plan that to mark his birthday during the year of the centenary of the ANC, to have something that is celebratory but also in terms of its content, very meaningful.

FW: Yes, a very interesting idea. I mean I will pass that information on to them, and we will also definitely be in touch with you about whatever comes out of our findings, and there is a conference in October where we would be presenting the data. Thank you very much for your time, it's been very very useful.