

[Trevor Ngwane Interview](#)

TN – Trevor Ngwane

JS – Jonny Selemani

JS: So I have a few questions here that I would like to pose to you. The first question we have is what is your understanding of the historical root of non-racialism, pre-1994.

TM: Ok, I think in the struggle for the democratic South Africa, the notion of non-racialism was key, in fact it was central, because we were fighting against apartheid which was a racist system. So the first opposition was that we want people to be judged on their own terms, irrespective of race. So that was crucial. Secondly, because it was the main plank of the struggle, there were differences enmeshed, as you know, in fact that issue hasn't really been resolved, according to at least one book by David Everett, and his argument is that it hasn't actually been resolved. And I agree with him. I mean he goes into the history, where there was this whole argument between non-racialism and multi-racialism. So unfortunately my ideas about the subject are now influenced by his writings. But it's true. The issue of multi-racialism was about recognizing that there are blacks, colored, Indians, whereas the non-racial paradigm as saying let's go beyond all that, so it was almost a vision of the future, a Utopia. Me, I'm a socialist in my political beliefs, so I'm all for vision, so I would prescribe more for non-racialism, that people's skin color should not count. But I do agree that the starting point is to acknowledge firstly that Africans, colored, Indians were discriminated against, so I do support affirmative action and so on. That is how I understand that.

JS: I will poke about affirmative action, but I wanted to find out in relation to the freedom charter and the white contribution to the struggle, how do you think that impacts on non-racialism? I see that you have mentioned here that multiracialism was actually acknowledging that there were actually other people participating in the struggle.

TM: Ok look, I come from a socialist perspective, so I have a little problem with the Freedom Charter, because although it talks about nationalization, it was kind of also a transitional program that accepts capitalism. I think the reason it talks about nationalization is because at that time, there was this strong idea of what I could call import substitution, where you needed the state to actually intervene in the economy, so it made sense. But if I had been there then, I would have been among one of the more radical elements calling for the eradication of capitalism in order to move forward. But the Freedom Charter did its job, because it was able to accommodate other races, whites, who wanted to support the struggle. It also provided a basis for unity among the oppressed races, Africans, Indians, coloreds. It also provided for unity among tribes, Zulus, Xhosa, Venda. So it did its job. And I think for its time, it was quite advanced and progressive. But obviously like I say socialists are also Utopians, we look far into the future. But I mean it did its job, it kept the forces of liberation together, through many difficult times. I know individuals, groups, who were able to withstand quite difficult circumstances, you know prison, torture, because of their faith in the freedom charter. So you know I am not going to undermine that document, I respect it.

JS: In relation to the ANC in exile and the notion of non-racialism, do you believe that was a strong push towards non-racialism, was it greater in exile than locally?

TM: I think there the complication, even with respect to what we have been discussing, one should introduce the idea of nationalism. So now in the 40s, 50s, one of the key ideas which galvanized colonized people to fight, was nationalism and in Africa it was African nationalism. So now I think the ANC was able to, both through the freedom charter and in exile, to reconcile what at first appears to be a contradiction, you know non-racialism together with the struggle for the indigenous people, for self-determination so to speak, defined as indigenous people must control their own country, in this case Africans. SO the way I understand it, I think this whole thing was a political calculation, putting together various ideas, some of them slightly in contradiction or not really in sync with each other, to build unity which was strong enough to pose a threat to apartheid. SO I think they were able to do that, if you look at how white people, liberals, they were of two minds, they were white, now they were supporting the struggle of the blacks, so it was almost self negation. So the ANC was able to, through these intricate formulations, almost through political science, to actually pull through that difficulty. The PAC had a bit of a difficulty because in the end they were saying we must drive the whites into the ocean, and black consciousness later, although it was good as a mechanism to revitalize a struggle that was lagging and getting tired, in the long term you can't build a struggle based on black consciousness, because you still have white people you know. But black consciousness was able to through some political fancy footwork, to unite Indians, colored and Africans, because they defined blackness to incorporate Indians and colored, which was good because that provided a sense of unity between Africans, Indians and coloreds. All ideologies of necessity are hybrid forms, they have to mix, because if it is going to appeal to the widest section of people, it must please everyone, so it must have a bit of religion, a bit of socialism, a bit of racial affirmation. So I think the ANC was able to do that in exile successfully, because one of the challenges of exile was to get the international community to believe in the cause of the ANC, or of black people. And I think you know OR Tambo, Thabo Mbeki, they managed that splendidly, they ended up having office sin most Western countries, at the same time they also got the support of the Soviet Union. I mean look at Mbeki's political career, student career, you know he studied at the Marx learning institute, that is amazing, how did he manage that? So my approach is more open minded, because I understand that ideologies, there are mechanisms to get certain things done. The more I studied Marx, the way he put together his philosophies, I can see the tensions and how he balanced things out, you know. So if you approach it in that way, I think it is more enjoyable.

JS: And in a post-1994 society, in the current environment, what is your opinion has the current government, what have they done to carry this idea of non-racialism, or have they abandoned this notion?

TM: look, they are trying. The constitution, it's very kind of non-racial, even if it accepts the need for affirmative action. But I think the real challenge, or main factor, is the difference between the ANC being a national liberation movement, and being a government in power. For example, me, I supported the ANC when it was struggling, for leading our struggle, but I began to be more critical when they are now in power, because now they were running a state, a capitalist state, and they don't seem to want to do beyond capitalism, so what I am trying to say is that most of the criticism or the challenges is because of

that main difference, they are running the country now. So what is nationalism, what is the use of nationalism now that you are in power? Well, if you are in power, the first priority unfortunately is to keep in power. So you must maintain your power. Now your ideas of non-racialism and all kind of other political concepts get deployed to maintain power. So I think that is why they are failing. So they will use non-racialism, not so much to get rid of racism, but to ensure their rule over society. So they might even be prepared to slide back a bit, to waiver on principle, for the sake of maintaining power. So for example, if there's a threat of the Afrikaner nationalization rearing its ugly head again, Zuma will go the Afrikaner community or say you Afrikaner's are a good nation. People like Malema, you know, they start being racist. So I think that is where they are failing. And an element of expediency, some might even say opportunism, creeps in. Even tribalism, was a problem you know one of the black forms which Zuma used to become president was his Zuluness, which I think was completely out of order, it was wrong from a principled, non-racial position. Certainly from a socialist, it's wrong. So I think that's the problem, there's expediency tied with the desire to hang onto power. People say every day, you know, power corrupts. So I don't mean corruption in the sense of stealing money, but eroding your principles, being more willing to be flexible. So you know politics in a sense is a game, but you can't bend so much that you break, you know.

JS: What do you think would be the core values that would lie behind an ideal non-racialist state?

TN: Absolute equality. And why do I say absolute? It relates to your skin color, to your class, which means we have to move to classlessness, because there was this debate this morning about equality before the law, where the argument even by mainstream judges is that there is problem, if you've got more money, you've got better justice, people drag out cases for years, because they have lawyers, to the detriment of poor people because they don't have that money. So absolute equality means equality on all scores, on all social dimensions, as far as is possible. I agree with affirmative action in so far that it recognizes the inequality, say between men and women, so because women are kind of shortchanged, we must put our shoulder to lift them up the same level as men. Because Indians and Africans and coloreds were discriminated against, we must put our shoulder to lift them up so that we are equal, but I wasn't happy with the way the ANC at first approached affirmative action. We had this problem where white and colored people used to have bigger pension payouts than Africans, so what the ANC did was to lower, so what I am trying to say is that equality is not about bringing down, you know. Which is a contradiction because there is so much wealth you know. So if Oppenheimer has a billion rands, we have to take it from him, so that's where socialist principles come in, but certainly absolutely equality, absolute freedom.

JS: I like the way you touched on the economic side of things, you know BEE, affirmative action. But you know social values, socially for example, if we are talking about an ideal non-racialist state, what can society do to attain that level?

TN: Education is important, we have to educate our kids to be non-racial. I was lucky, I grew up in a kind of cocoon in a missionary hospital, where there was an attempt by the guy in charge to be very non-racial. So when I came to Joburg, I went to Wits university, I saw all those whites, to me they were just human beings. But I soon realized that other students didn't think that way, they had grown up in

isolation from white people, and they white people they knew, you know, they were the police, they were the bad guys. So they had to be educated, to be accepting. They had an almost inherent, socialized suspicion, even fear, hostility to white people, which I didn't have. So we have to educate our kids, educate each other, on TV we should have soapies, not of black people only. You don't know how happy I am when you know sometimes we have these exchange programmes, when some Swedish student comes and leaves in Soweto. So you know I'm getting old, I just feel it's good when I walk down the street and I meet some white guy, and I'm just happy, you know, it's not like you have to go to town or court or jail or to an up market restaurant to see whites. So I think we have to structure things so that there is more interracial interaction, obviously there should be equal status, but even if it's not yet equal status, to see it happening you know it's good. Obviously you know I already told you the real barriers to that, because we have a history, black working class people live in Soweto, so whites are not going to go to Soweto, why would they come to Soweto, so you have those structural problems, But I agree with you, society can do a lot to actually leave out that non-racialism.

I also think that even the course of economic equality, of socialism, is served by developing a spirit of non-racialism, you see, because what happens is whiteness is the same now with blackness, with the sense of BEE. Whiteness was used by the capitalists, to monopolise wealth as capitalists, not as whites, you see. And American doesn't really care whether you are black or white, they want profits, you see. But now in the American was calculating what is going on in South Africa, how can I control my work force, ah ok I will hire colored supervisors. And then in the mines, where they used to do, the Zulus used to be the security at that gate because they are so called aggressive, but it was just a form of divide and rule. So what I mean is if we Zulus and Xhosas and Vendas and Tsonga, you know, overcome that tribalism, the boss can't use that, because they will put a Zulu at the gate and I'm Xhosa and I still respect, I won't say, there's a Zulu. So with BEE, it's obvious that the black aspirant bourgeoisie are using their blackness to become millionaires, can you see? So when they want a car deal, easy money, they will cry foul, hey we're blacks. But when they run the mines, they still exploit the black people. I mean I haven't seen any difference between Motsepe's mines and Oppenheimer's mines, sometimes Motsepes' mines are worse, you know. Look at Aurora. It's terrible. So what I am trying to say is that non-racialism should not, because sometimes socialists or people like myself get a bit confused and say, we only have non-racialism once we've cleared, sorted out the economic question, yes, in the broad sense it's true, but in the immediate, I think non-racialism is good, even for the cause of socialism. So let me just give you one topical example, you see the xenophobia, how is it peddled? The boss, whether black or white by the way, employs Mozambicans at a lesser rate because of their desperation. Maybe they don't even have legal papers, can you see. Now how do you fight that, because the local South Africans will resent, you know. The way to fight it is just to make a law that ensures that whether you are Mozambicans, Zambians, Xhosa, Zulu, from Spain, you get the minimum wage, you know, you get the same working conditions, the same respect from the boss. Then the boss has no need you know to hire African nationals or local South African workers. This is my logic. I think so.

JS: The notion of identity I think is also very key to non-racialism. I refer to your Xhosa identity, your parent's identity. You brought up education, what would you say about religion, because those are also

lines in which segregation can be introduced, so things like religion, education, or political parties, how do those key elements play a role in a non-racial society.

TN: Religion like you say, it was used to say whites are the chosen people, so certainly that must change you know. If only to educate Dutch Reformed members who are imbued with that idea. But I think they have changed, you have had liberation theology which said that religious leaders, pastors, must be part of the struggle for equality, for justice. So certainly religion can play that role. There might be a problem where for example you have these African independent churches, which most of them affirm African traditional culture, which is not a bad thing in itself, but sometimes there is a thin line between tradition and racism. Or exclusivity. But of course, you know, I do take the acumen that people exclude people in certain ways, I mean I don't know anyone in the bedroom when you are with your wife, so you exclude, but it is not discrimination. So we have to look at like black churches, where only black people attend, so this is problematic. Although they don't set out to be racist, but it can fit, so it will be good for them to be aware of that, and to be challenged and then even if the whole congregation is black, there should be education to say accept, same as homophobia you know, priests must stand up to say gay people, we have to accept them. So these days you find you know, religious leaders opposing the country's constitution on gay marriages, you know the bible says, you know. They will oppose the constitution on gender equality, God said the man is the head, you know, and they will say things like women mustn't wear trousers. Recently at this Islam, Muslim controversy about Muslim wives being discriminated against, so there's that. Which we have to work through. Obviously you can't force people to change, but you have to use education, also we have to use law, to channel towards, it has to be done. I think the Muslim case is a good example of that. But that is the stuff of politics, it's never straightforward. The problem we are having now, you know, with people like Malema, even Zuma sometimes. They are coming with a political approach which we Marxists would say, it's either or, there are no grey areas. So once you approach things that way, then you have problems. So the bible is good, man is born good.

JS: And the role of the media in conveying, I'm sure it played a large part in the struggle, but in this current state, post-1994, what do you think the role of the media should be in pursuing non-racialism

TN: Ok, the media is a big culprit. The media is not just the newspaper, it's also movies, TV, soapies, stories that get today, it's amazing, when I start noticing someone's skin color, usually I say there must be something wrong, because I know my own history, you know, how I grow up. So all these movies, white heroes, can you see, so there's something wrong there. You look at the Sunday Times back page, I know people don't acknowledge that they look at the back page, naked woman, but it's always a white woman! It's also spreading racialism. And I've seen, even when comrades, socialist people do their documentaries, the voice over is always done by a white person. And they do that for credibility, because they know that once you have an Indian accent, no one is going to, or an accent like mine, you know, so what I am trying to say is that even those who are the do-gooders, who are on my side, they even fall into that trap. I don't think we can change society by bowing down to their prejudices. We have to challenge the prejudices, even though what is this thing, ABC you know, the ratings, are going down, you have to do it. Because the media tends to focus on selling newspapers or getting viewers, they tend to bow down to current prejudices, to the advertiser's priorities, and the advertisers are not here to promote non-racism. I mean I look at the adverts, they are terrible! You can see the racial profiling – it's

not exactly racism, it's stereotypes you know, manipulating and working within the stereotypes rather than challenging them. And it's difficult for lawmakers to actually deal with that, because you also have freedom of expression, but any grown up can see through it. If you look twice, the second time you can see. So the media has a very kind of important role to play, it needs to be self-reflective and it needs to be informed not just by the profit margin, the bottom line, but also by social considerations.

JS: I noticed you touched on this, but if we're looking at the key challenges to building a non-racial society, you mentioned things like the shift in the political struggle, if we're looking at the economic challenges, how would you see them in the fight against non-racialism?

TN: Ok, it's all mixed up now because the ANC has decided to maintain the capitalist system, that's the way the world is moving. But as a socialist, that's very problematic, because capitalism accepts inequality, exploitation, competition. So obviously even what at first appears to be good things, like we must promote the interests of South Africans, proudly South African, but it also means things Mozambican or Zambian comes second. SO I think that whole paradigm is problematic. And as you move to the micro it gets difficult, because basically it ends up saying as long as we've got some black people being millionaires, the system is fine. Black people are still the worst suffering, but they come with their own reverse racism, this is the problem. I was in Durban for two years, studying there, and I actually ran away from Durban, because in Durban among African people there is a strong anti-Indian ideology, and it is spoken about, you know, the Indians are bad. Now, ok, I came out at least once publicly, I wrote against that, because fortunately I lived in Chatsworth, and Indian area, and the Indians embraced me, made me feel at home, so I got sensitive to that, working class Indians. But at the university, my problem was that there was a lot of Indian racism against Africans, and sometimes I was a victim of that. So it became quite agonizing to me. This is how I experienced Durban, or KZN, I just felt... Ok, it's the same feeling I once felt when I once went to Israel, and I went there on the side of the Israeli, I stayed with Israeli people, but I really lost faith and I got demoralized, because even with the most radical elements of the Israeli, I could see the racism, so this is problematic. And then obviously with the liberal form of democracy where every 5 years people have to go out asking to be voted in, a lot of expediency, short cuts, opportunism creeps in, because when people want votes, they might use racial arguments, xenophobic arguments, sexist arguments. And the system is now inherently stable, you know, from the side of the power holder. Because we are entering new territory now. You see it was slightly better when the ANC felt that it's majority vote was unassailable, because it wasn't threatened by losing power. Now with the DA, it does now introduce an anxiety which, I know theories, for a democracy to work, there must be the possibility of losing power, there is that positive thing, but there is a negative to that – hey, we're going to lose power, we must do everything possible to hang on to power, including sliding back to racist arguments, to abuse of state institutions, what Thabo Mbeki did when he tried to get rid of Jacob Zuma, he used actually state institutions to make sure his rival gets discredited. These are not easy things to be sorted out, I'm just pointing out the complexity which we face now, the challenges. And I think unless we recognize them as such, it is going to be hard to deal with them properly. Ok my last point on that, there is a study, my wife always loves to call it transology, it is the study of democratic transitions. So one thing I got from that is that even if you are not a Marxist, it's a fact that when societies change from one form to another, there are going to be certain problems and

challenges which are just inherent in social change, you know sometimes you even have to change your road signs, names of things. So there are kind of systemic challenges, and sometimes elements from the old era, they use that to try and claw back some of their lost power. You know you see with the DA, suddenly Zille is wearing takkies, doing the toitoi, and I mean I admire that but I wonder to what end? So I'm just saying, in a way now, the DA becomes the custodian of non-racialism, and the ANC is pushed towards being the custodian of African Nationalism, so to fight Zille now, Malema must remind us that Zille is white – now this is terrible. It's the dynamics of the situation, I think it just arises from transition, when things are no longer straightforward, you know the good versus evil, so the good guys get all confused. I'm just saying that we actually are facing quite huge challenges now.

JS: Two more questions. If we talk about, according to you, what is the primary thing that needs to be addressed, towards a non-racialist state.

TN: Well obviously you have to address the historical legacy of racism, and I think a large part of it is inequality, the fact that black working class people are economically deprived. We have to address that, because no amount of education is going to change people's minds when they still see that whites are rich, and I don't think that whites were arrogant or looked down on black people just because they were white, it was because they felt superior because they had the resources, freedom, more education. This is why you find that black people, African people, I'll give an example, African middle class parents, they don't want their kids to study Zulu or Xhosa, because they associate these languages with inferiority, so they want their children basically to become whites. SO I think the economic question must really be addressed. But this doesn't mean we must wait until the economic question is addressed before we promote non-racialism, because if everyone was decent to each other, there would be no inequality, because when I meet you now, I would ask you, have you eaten today? Coming in, let's see it's my factory, if I'm decent, I care about where the workers live, I wouldn't just be concerned about production, so I find that you live in a shack, oh my god, the poor guy is living in a shack, what can I do? So what I mean is that non-racialism in itself is a good value to fight for, whether you are socialist or liberal. So I am affirming the project of non-racialism, because I know some theories, politicians might say but you are wasting time, because these problems can't be sorted out until we have dealt with the economic problem. These things go hand in hand. It's like gender equality, we can't sort out gender equality until we get the means of production, you know, we have to treat women equally, we have to share in the chores in the house, we have to socialize our male children to be decent to women, clean the house, you know, this is very important to me. In fact, sometimes even if you have a society which is based on non-racial, equal principles, unless those filter into the every day. That is why I have a strong belief in involving ordinary people, all policies must be driven by ordinary people, because they are the future. It is when their thinking changes, that everything changes, including the ivory towers, you know, the citadels of society.

JS: Final question, the Katharada Foundation, what would you recommend in terms of their activities, that they could do to improve or carry the banner of non-racialism forward.

TN: I think they should, in addition to being involved in education and research, that sometimes racism is subtle, and I think that since it's within the congress camp, I mean Ahmed Katharada is respected, I

think they should sensitize the ANC leaders to some of the problems I have referred to, but for them to understand you have to map the overall picture for them, so they understand, it's not just a moral issue, Malema don't be racist, you should show him why he is being pushed to that position. And then secondly, I think that they should really support the struggle of ordinary people for economic, social, political empowerment, because people are fighting for basic things, water, electricity. The cry which I always hear from working class people is we don't count, as human beings. And it's not because anyone is looking down upon them, they feel like their needs and interests don't feature in the broader agenda. So I think the foundation should affirm many communities. Many communities are now protesting, but many are not. So we have to go to those communities and work with them, and affirm them. So what the ANC used to do in the 50s was that the problem is not the white man, it is racism, it is the system which is a problem. And obviously the system acts through, but the system needs to be addressed, so I recommend that for the foundation. But I appreciate its work, I can never be cynical about any attempt to change society for the better, if I feel they are trying to raise issues, I think it's good, they might be wrong, but at least they are not indifferent.

JS: Thank you very much.