The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
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DR. WILMOT GODFREY JAMES

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INTERVIEW

[Note: This interview was not edited by Dr. James]

Q: We are here in the South African parliament building in Cape Town, interviewing Dr. Wilmot James, who is a member of parliament, and I hope that Dr. James is willing today to give us a perspective of his career development, his perception of the Struggle period as he remembers it, and some comments about his Fulbright grant which he had in a year he is about to mention because I don't what year that was.

JAMES: Thank you very much. I received the Fulbright grant in 1976, and I received it during the Soweto riots. And I had not used it before I went into prison; I spent 6 weeks in prison, at the age of, it would be 22. And I went to the US in July of 1977, and it was the first time I ever went on a plane, and the first time I ever went to a foreign country. I went to the University of Wisconsin to do a Master's degree in sociology.

Q: Amazing, but as you just said, it was very dramatic. Let's get up to that point chronologically. Can you tell me about your background in this complex society, and what was it that got you to the point of having a Fulbright? What was your previous academic training?

JAMES: I finished high school. I was born in a town of Paarl, which is about 30 miles from here in a rural town, and I am the son of two teachers, so I come from a teaching family. I grew up in the city of Cape Town, in Athlone, and finished high school in 1970. I spent a year working before I went to the University of the Western Cape, which was at that time an institution set aside for the so-called colored people. I went there between 1972 and 1976 and completed a BA degree and a BA with Honors degree which I received with praise. The early '70s were heady times; it was a time of black consciousness, a time of ferment in black society, and I was part of that ferment and played a sort of third string lead role. I had a particular interest in theatre, the more technical side of theatre, and the theatre group that I was a part of at the university was led by a poet and a writer, called Adams Moore. And we went around the country with theatre that was essentially hard social commentary on what was going on. So I was a part of that, and academic training was tied up with this kind of politics, and that was what got me in trouble with the police.

Q: Not to pick at a scab, but can you tell us about what it was that got you in the crosshairs of the police?

JAMES: They used to have a strategy for targeting individuals that they wanted to see

out of circulation; they wanted information from them and so on. Then they had a second level of security operations, when they wanted to place individuals in cold storage, to take them out of circulation and hide them somewhere – I was one of them. I was very lucky, because they didn't want any information from me, so there was no interrogation, there was no torture – or any of that, they just took me away. It wasn't very pleasant.

Q: This was in the Cape?

JAMES: Yes, in Victor Verster in fact, the prison where Mandela was released. That's where I was. And I was a part of a group of about 70 individuals. At the time, I was in prison for 6 weeks, so not that long compared to some of my colleagues. But at the same time you know, coming out from a teaching family, there was always an academic aspiration. And, I didn't do all that well while I was a graduate student; I was a very average student. When it came to finalizing my degree and doing, you know we do a separate one-year honors degree in this country unlike in the US. And that's really where I excelled.

Q: In what discipline - sociology?

JAMES: In sociology and history. History was my other major.

Q: And yet, theater was a keen personal interest on the side? Is that right?

JAMES: Yes, theatre and music. I am a pianist by training. I have a grade 18 in classical music piano training. The art side was always powerful. Science came later as well, so it's rather interesting. I listened to Rachmaninoff the other night at the Cape Philharmonic Orchestra, and I absolutely loved it. And of course, this is the 200th anniversary of Frederic Chopin, so we are celebrating that.

Q: How so? Will there be concerts?

JAMES: Yes, there is one this Thursday night.

Q: Well, then I have to stay, or come back.

JAMES: Please stay. It is going to be fantastic. We have a very, very good city orchestra– I was chairman of the board for four years of the orchestra. And I loved doing that.

Q: I played in a lesser orchestra at Tufts student orchestra where I learned an enormous amount. This country is astounding in so many ways. We should get back to the development of political consciousness in the '70s. Perhaps, well I don't know how you can rate the periods of tension, but I don't think there was a time of greater tension than the '70s. Although I suppose it became more and more tense until it gave away in the year 1990.

JAMES: Yes, yes. But that wave of the '70s was the wave of black consciousness, and that's a wave that came to an end, partly because of the death of Steve Biko and partly

because they ran out of steam. There were a lot of shortcomings to that movement. What we did was assert black power and in a setting such as that, you were actually challenging government very directly. A surge of black power in this country was a surge of majority rule. It was quite a revolutionary thing. Very different from the surge of black power in the US.

Q: But you said there was a moment of exhaustion or a moment where it sort of spun out. Just because of people coming back with no result?

JAMES: Partly that, and partly because the security operations of the government were very effective, and partly because of analytical shortcomings. Black power never had an analysis of power and never had an analysis of where the weaknesses were and where South Africa was hurting. So there was a swing to the left towards party terms, like a Marxist direction looking at the material underpinnings of white supremacy.

Q: The advantage of historical perspective enables us to talk in these terms. At the time, do you remember what your own perceptions were of the analytical content of the movement, did you – there must have been constant thought and discussion at that time, and you were fully part of that. Do you remember the discussions?

JAMES: I do. Discussions about being vulnerable and for how easy it was for the state to stomp on us because we had no good association with the alternative sources of power, such as in the corporate world, for example. We stayed away from the corporate world entirely; we shun white people because of consciousness, but yet there were many white people who were not only sympathetic to our cause, but also had access to resources and access to an infrastructure that would have been helpful in slowly building a powerbase.

Q: Were there differences of opinions at that time, such as there were those who wanted to shun the establishment in that way, and others who wanted to approach them?

JAMES: Yeah, there were layers. There was a group within the Black Consciousness Movement who wanted to associate themselves, Mangosuthu Buthelezi for example, who was running a homeland. He straddled the extremes. And that person was Themba Sono, and Themba was thrown out of the Black Consciousness Movement because of that. So, you had that tendency. And then you had a kind of leveled tendencies within the Black Consciousness Movement too, and then you had your extreme nationalists, so there were various layers of opinions all under this broad umbrella.

Q: I take it the prevailing groups were the ones marked to the left? I think you have implied that. Was there a role model for that? Was there any truth to the claim that they were in touch with Communist parties?

JAMES: There was suspicion of Communist parties, yes. Because the Communist parties were more tied up with ANC (African National Congress) in exile, and the BCM was more attracted to the PAC (Pan-Africanist Congress), and on the extreme was the Radical Nationalist agenda.

Q: Well, it was a time of enormous ferment and enormous energy and evidently

considerable disappointment because there was no result in the 70s, and in particular, Steve Biko was killed. That must have been a moment of great disappointment and doubt?

JAMES: Yes, and sadness. He held it together, and that was because of his living.

Q: Did you know Steve?

JAMES: No, I didn't.

Q: Okay, so you had many agendas in the '70s. You had your own academic provision, your commitment to the arts, and your commitment to social change. That's quite a full agenda that you had. And in the middle of that, off you went to Wisconsin.

JAMES: Yeah, and it was freedom for me. I remember arriving in—we flew Pan Am, and I remember that we had to go from Cape Town to Johannesburg, get on to the Pan Am flight which went back to Cape Town and then went to Rio De Janeiro, and the day we landed in Rio De Janeiro was the day that Elvis Presley died (August 16, 1977). So we had the newspaper headlines in Portuguese in Brazil, and all we could recognize was Elvis and nothing else. And then we found out that he had died. It was memorable, you know. And then we went to New York, and I stayed with a family friend for five days. It was a complete shock to me walking up Amsterdam Avenue.

Q: I can guess, but can you describe this shock?

JAMES: I was just overwhelmed by the size of that place, by the people and the density of urban living, and the density of urban living on the part of black people too because South African cities were devoid of black people.

Q: Similar to the shock that confronts many visitors who have not previously been to the United States, I think. So, your friend lived – you said Amsterdam Avenue, Upper West Side?

JAMES: Yes, next to Columbia University.

Q: So, what a fascinating neighborhood. Everything! And incredible academics…

JAMES: St. Johns Church was across the way. My brother and sister in-law lived there, and she was a theatre nurse at the hospital attached to Columbia University on Amsterdam Avenue, and she had been there for a long time. Then I went to Wisconsin from there, into a quiet rural life.

Q: You must have met Crawford Young, I suppose?

JAMES: Yes, yes.

Q: Was he one of your professors?

JAMES: No, he wasn't, but I met him.

Q: Okay, so you went from the densely and overly populated urban center to Madison, Wisconsin, a lovely little idyllic town at the edge of a lake. Was this less of a shock perhaps? Plus, you arrived in warm weather perhaps?

JAMES: I did!

Q: So the shock came in December?

JAMES: No, I should get a medal for spending five winters there. There was this great joy in being able to go and sit in a library and just not come out again until curiosity has left you. Especially coming from South Africa. It is a campus of extraordinary freedom in the sense of being able to peacefully devote oneself to study and having the resources to do that.

Q: Having used the word freedom four minutes ago about when you left, was this because the sense of freedom came from being away from an oppressive system, or also freedom from a confusion of ferment and intellectual inquiry and social change? Was this, in fact, a form of retreat, self-development, and contemplation away from the tension of the times?

JAMES: Yes, it was freedom from persecution, which is an extraordinary feeling. I mean, when the police came to arrest me, three of the security police came into my house at four in the morning and walked into my bedroom, right past my parents. So that sense of vulnerability just disappeared. In the US, there was freedom from the fear of persecution, so that is the one. The second was the freedom of choice, and the third was something I associated with rural America more than anything else. It is the level of civic peace that you have, and not locking your car, you know? So safety and civic peace, and it felt wonderful.

Q: That was the first time you have ever had that freedom?

JAMES: Yes, it was very affirming, and very nice.

Q: The Midwest has some great virtues, I feel there is also a sense of community, and people are friendly to one another, even students.

JAMES: Yes. I came out. You remember when the University of Wisconsin was like the University of Michigan and Berkeley. They were the three hot places during the counter movement, and there was an academic stream there that grew out of that. It was feminism; it was a constrained version of American Marxism that was there in the academic world. The orthodoxy of the university was good, solid stuff. Good solid science, agricultural science, and—

Q: I remember it the same way because I was on campuses at the same time, and I remember there were Berkeley, Wisconsin, and two or three places on the East coast that were the center of energy that seemed to exist in the mid '70s.

JAMES: Yes! So the student body that I joined contained both foreign and US students that were coming out of that period, and it was an interesting time for me as a South African actually having come out of here. Meeting students coming out from the American counter culture, trying to make sense of this new world. Jimmy Carter was the president, and he symbolized that in a way, but he didn't last long. A part of the reason why I found it so powerful was that I was a part of that searching. What is the post '70s nature of society? It's a tailing of the counter-culture movement.

Q: And during the waning of that period was a troubled period after the war in Vietnam, which led to much inner thought and contemplation and tremendous division in America. In some cases, as I remember, it was necessary to be in a place of comfort, whatever your opinion was, of racial issues in the US, and external wars; it was very difficult to be outside of a place where people agreed with you. And there was a certain homogeneity, I think, in Madison, Wisconsin?

JAMES: Yes, and I also remembered this girl from the student body. Pinochet was running Chile, and we had quite a few Chilean students there coming out of that. Iran went through its transition at the time. I remember very emotional debates with Iranian students saying we had seen the shots from the Shah's rule to the mullah's. Is that a good thing?

Q: That was in '79 was it not?

JAMES: Yes, '79.

Q: You were there for three or four or five years?

JAMES: I was there for five years. I went, and the Fulbright funded my Masters degree, and the first semester of my PhD, and then I became a teacher's assistant, financed all the way through my PhD. So I graduated at the end of 1982.

Q: From 1977 to 1982. Wow, so you were fully immersed, and you have had the full experience at Madison and full effects of its winters?

JAMES: It was five years and some months. Yes, and what an education. My minor was in African history, and I worked with Jan Vansina, who is the master. And Steven Fireman, who was not far behind, and then, of course, Phillip Curtin. I didn't know him, but he is a great historian of slavery. So, there was an extraordinary history department in my minor and in sociology. I actually did my degree in orthodox sociology in the sense that it was quantitative sociology. I studied statistics and methods. I studied demography, and then fully immersed myself in social theory with somebody who was actually a genius in my view. Erik Wright and all the other people involved in that sociology department. There is an institute of the study of poverty there that is a well-regarded U.S. institute. So it was a great time of learning for me, and so that's what I did.

Q: At the time, you described this as a period of relief and the ability to go into a

library and satisfy your curiosity. At the time, did you see this experience as serving a greater or a future purpose?

JAMES: Yes, it the straight answer, I always saw myself, as it was, to make a contribution to my own country following my time in the U.S. It was part of the requirement of the Fulbright itself, but that was really not the issue as much as my desire to return and make that contribution. My family was all here, and one of the things that is valuable in the US is a belief that it is possible. Change is possible, and change is possible in both directions you know. Chile fell. Iran changed; it is possible. Even though one might not agree with the direction of change, it can still be done. South Africa was always seen as unchangeable, but the U.S. experience made me think about the alternatives and the possibilities of actually getting there.

Q: Did this provide some energy and daring after you came back?

JAMES: Yeah.

Q: You could actually see a direct link between the things…?

JAMES: Yes, yes. And also that the U.S. became a second home. I established friends and networks there, so I, in fact, returned many times after. I came back in 1983, and then I spent another 5 years cumulatively in the U.S. at different stages, which I can tell you about.

Q: I want to get to that, at the time not knowing what the future was, what did you imagine it might be, using the tools of the learning you acquired?

JAMES: Well, I came back in 1983, and in 1983, the United Democratic Front was formed in this country as a product of P.W Botha's efforts. He was president then, and he wished to make small concessionary changes without actually changing anything too significant. He introduced this notion of a tri-cameral parliament, you might remember. In addition to the white Chamber, there would be a small one for colored people, and one for Indians. And it was a misguided effort, and it evoked the formation of the UDF. UDF was a very, very important and essential part of understanding how change happened in this country, in the sense that we were able to create a mass democratic movement and to rule it in a civilized manner. That is something the Palestinians never could do. It was a weight that bound people together into an ethos and a set of rules and understanding in a sense of what you do and what you don't do. It was unlike the Black Consciousness Movement; everybody was welcome, and it didn't matter what color or gender and so on. It was a very loosely-framed, not tightly formulated ideology, but committed to peace, democracy, and justice, and to inclusivity as we went along the way. And that was something that created the space for me to do what I wanted to do, coming from the U.S. I went back to the University of the Western Cape to teach politics for two years in '83-84. So I was teaching to students at a time when the United Democratic Front was alive and kicking, and there was of course the normal police persecution going on, but there was such a wide range of organizations and individuals involved that there was an ever-growing community of people who shared the sense of change.

Q: You can't arrest everybody—

JAMES: No, and so it's not just fear from persecution, which is one thing, but also, it embodied hope, in the way that the BCM did not.

Q: How closely were you involved in the creation of UDF? Were you one of the original members or did you become a member? The term "membership" being loosely used.

JAMES: Because it was a federal body, my involvement was through the academic associations, so I was not a leader, and I didn't have a leadership position within the UDF, but I held a leadership position within the Academic Association who affiliated with the UDF. And I, for example, was instrumental in establishing the first non-racial sociology association in this country. I did it together with the person who is currently the Minister of Higher Education and Training, by the way. We ended up in different places, but that's just the nature of my involvement in the UDF, and there was also – there were a number of academic bodies…

Q: Inclusivity seems to be the theme of what you were working on. More than ideology. I think you said that in describing the benefits of the Wisconsin campus or the sense of freedom, and if that's not correct, please correct me.

JAMES: No, that is correct, but it's a commitment. In fact, one of the many things that I received from the University of Wisconsin was the commitment to democratic politics. And not to…

Q: Dogmatic?

JAMES: It's not a commitment to dogma; it's a commitment to democratic government in a way of finding the space where there is no conflict in searching for the truth, understanding how one organizes society, and placing importance on democracy as a set of institutions. And that if you were to have a freedom of democratic principles alongside whichever path you take towards the economy, then the future would be full of hope. That was the asset I had.

Q: Did you feel you were in good company in Wisconsin and back in South Africa? Did you find that there was a community of people who shared those beliefs?

JAMES: Yes, I did. But it was something you had to work at. You had to make that a part of the overall community because there were vanguardist Leninists around as well who didn't share those beliefs at all. Because of the ANC tradition, which is largely a vanguard tradition.

Q: It might be time to mention that you are a member of a party that is not the ANC; it's the Democratic Alliance, I think we will get to that later; we will try to be as linear as possible, but I will be fascinated to know your sense of things before the DA existed, and how you felt about the ANC. Maybe we should go into that now. There were not that many options in the '80s and '90s, and the UDF gave way I believe to the PAC and the ANC, and one had to choose. Nobody gets to be in a party that's 100 percent in

agreement with one's own principles, right? So you have to make some compromise in choosing the group that you are going to be a member of. The ANC has been the dominant group here for a long time, but what was your sense of your personal relationship to that movement?

JAMES: I need to go back a little bit. My parents were members of an organization called the Non-European Unity Movement, which is in fact Trotskyists. They were not serious Trotskyists, but they were a part of the Teachers League of South Africa, the TLSA, which was a Trotskyist group of educationists. Their greatest virtue was that they believed in education as a vocation, and they were great teachers; that's my background, so I don't have an ANC background.

Q: Maybe we should point out to the reader of this transcript that, and correct me here also, Trotskyists in Europe sometimes tend to be people who are very opposed to Leninism. Trotskyism is in their own minds, a more human and more intellectually supple form of social organizations. I mean, when we hear the word Trotskyite in the U.S., it sometimes sets off red alarms and bells. I think, is it not true that Trotskyists in Europe and, perhaps here in fact, see it the other way around, as a less dogmatic approach than say Marxism and Leninism?

JAMES: Yes, certainly less dogmatic, and also, it's part of a left tradition, but it was a far more intellectual part of it. And they saw Trotskyists as far more intellectual than Lenin, and also that it was a reaction to the ANC because the ANC was seen as Leninist and—

Q: I guess that was what I was asking—

JAMES: Yes, right! So they were not friendly towards it. My parents were not friendly toward the ANC for those reasons. And so their relationship with particularly the Communist party was highly problematic, because the communist party was the slavish, Stalinist party.

Q: Would you say you inherited the ideas from your parents?

JAMES: I think I have yes, and so I was, at the time, very suspicious of the ANC myself. The UDF was displaced by the ANC when they returned here after 1990, which is unfortunate, but that is what happened. And so, I had in fact no relationship to the ANC at all. And I formed a relationship with ANC through an old family friend of mine: Jakes Gerwel, who became Mandela's chief of Staff, and I did not get to know Mandela well, but my sympathy with ANC came through Mandela because I admired him immensely. He was an unknown entity to me as he was to most South Africans up until 1990, and I just watched him mature as he came out of jail, in the sense of understanding how to grow into the environment in which he was released, and how to be a leader within that.

Q: He no longer leads the party? Does that diminish the value of the party?

JAMES: Yes. It started with Thabo Mbeki, and with Zuma, it is worse. So in my

estimation, it sunk. And that was part of my disappointment with the ANC. I was never a member of the ANC; I wasn't a card-carrying member, but I certainly worked with them. I was involved in two projects in the President's office. Just to go back a little bit, when I came back to South Africa, I went on a post–doc to Yale in '85-'86, and then in the middle of '86, I returned to the University of Cape Town as a lecturer. I left there in 1994 as a full professor in sociology to run an institution called the Institute for Democracy in Southern Africa (IDASA), and I took over from Alex Boraine. It had, up until that point, been an organization that had facilitated dialogue between the competing groups and between the ANC in particular and the white community.

Q: And still an extremely viable group. A program next week by the way in Pretoria, having to do with communities and democracies.

JAMES: So, but just to say that as the head of IDASA then, I needed to transform the organization from being a facilitative body to an engaged body. And my other charges were really the harder ones: promote democratic practice on the basis of sound information, and honest numbers on what's going on, and how do you empower the public with that information.

Q: IDASA was at that time in Johannesburg, I think, before moving to Pretoria, is that correct?

JAMES: IDASA had, in fact, seven offices at the time, and the head office was in Cape Town. I was instrumental in creating two centers of democracy, one in Pretoria and one here. This building next door, I was the person to raise the money for it, as well as for the one in Pretoria. But at the same time, as the head of IDASA, I then helped with two things for Mandela's office. One thing was to help with renaming of the presidential residence, which is a small thing, but also a lovely project, and then the second one was Mandela asked me to see whether I could work with organizations, largely in the colored community, to make sure that the voices that are in the community are actually heard in the unfolding of democracy.

Q: So Mandela asked you to do this?

JAMES: Yes.

Q: And I think most of the world now understands when they look back at the incredible efforts he made to reach out to all groups in South Africa. Which I gather was very consonant with your own belief? Nobody could have known it would go in that direction. But it did.

JAMES: But it did yes. We had a huge conference, and Mandela addressed the conference. There is a book that is a summary of all those years, called Now That We Are Free, and that is how I, in fact, got to know the ANC: via him. And after 1999, I was an unpaid project leader for the Minister of Education. I say unpaid because it was not a good thing to be a paid adviser to Kader Asmal when he was Minister of Education. He was very bossy, but I loved working with him. I ran various education programs for him, and he is an ANC minister, and I admire his mind and commitment to democracy, and so on. And then he was booted out of office by Mbeki, yes.

Q: It was a very harsh separation when Mbeki took over, and I'm beginning to learn at more recent discussions, from what I have been hearing people say this week. It seems that the contrast between the Mandela mandate and the Mbeki mandate was enormous.

JAMES: Yes, it was enormous, and Mbeki had a different view—a very, very different view about what to do. He was not going to be the good native, you know. I saw Mandela as the good native.

Q: It is astonishing that Mbeki has said, as people have said, and me too, that Mbeki, who worked so closely with Mandela as his Deputy President, so completely diverged from him once he became the president. Working in Pretoria during the Mandela period, I was too stupid to imagine that this could ever happen.

JAMES: We were all too stupid, if you want to put it that way. I'm going to tell you a personal anecdote now. It was in 1998. I had written a letter to Arian Naya, president of the Zaras Foundation in New York. And I had copied that letter to the local office of the Open Society Foundation. And it was a letter that was a founding application. I gave my view on—

Q: Michael Savage?

JAMES: Yes, right. And in this letter, I gave an analysis on what I thought about Thabo Mbeki and so on. I said that his government would require greater democratic accountability; we have to make sure that it developed instruments where we would make them far more accountable in human rights. There were other analytical reasons that I said that, and it later got into Thabo's hands. Somebody put it on the (opposite) side in the board pack. Michael Savage was in New York that time, and somebody slipped it in by mistake. On the board sat Mojanku Gumbi, who was Thabo's legal adviser, and she just gave it to him. And I became a fallen citizen; even Zapiro made a cartoon of what happened to me because he cut me down completely. And I became a 'persona non grata'; nobody wanted anything to do with me in the ANC. It was really bad.

Q: Even the best people had a tough time during that period.

JAMES: Yes, I was not alone for sure.

Q: Would you have done it again?

JAMES: Yes, absolutely. Because I was right about him too, and I don't say that out of perverse pleasure, but, and one tribute I want to pay to Kader Asmal is that he never abandoned me, Kader did not. Neither did Trevor Manuel, but he wasn't as open about it as Kader was. So that is my experience with Thabo Mbeki, and my dissolution with the ANC. And I just think the ANC has sunk morally to where it is today, but there are some good people in it. I don't think the good people in it will survive given the current configuration.

Q: Is there any real chance of an opposition gaining enough strength or numbers in Parliament to actually slow down the ANC?

JAMES: There is a chance that the opposition can grow significantly in the present, if you would add all the present parties to the opposition, and you think of a new entity that can capture the same voters, then yes. We need a new entity though, because in the existing entity, some parties have historical baggage that make it difficult to actually form a coalition. It would be very hard. I think we should try, but I think it is going to be very tough.

Q: What did the Nationals become? Do they still call themselves the Nationals?

JAMES: No, they disappeared.

Q: But they sub-morphed into other entities I guess?

JAMES: The only one, the closest is the Freedom Front…

Q: The Freedom Front, of course.

JAMES: But what's required is a significant section of the ANC itself becoming part of the new entity.

Q: People talk about a split, and they also talk about abandonment of the party. Is the opposition working towards either or both of those options?

JAMES: Both! There are people in the ANC presently, who find it very hard to leave the ANC because it has always been a family; who find it extremely difficult to join any of the existing opposition parties, but who could be attracted to a new entity. But it would take someone who could exercise a leadership.

Q: So this is where your energy goes these days?

JAMES: Yeah, yes.

Q: Now, you mentioned Yale, I have to go back. I have to ask you about Yale. What was that all about? Post-doc?

JAMES: Post-doc in the Southern African research program, run by Leonard Thompson, and Stanley Greenberg was there, and Bill Faults was there. I was invited to go as a Fellow, and in fact, that was my first real encounter with the Fords Foundation as well, because I became the Trustee of Ford later. And I met Stanley Greenberg for the first time in 1973 as a very young student; he came on one of his early research trips here.

Q: You met him here?

JAMES: I met him here, yes. And he was working on race, state and capitalist development, a fat book of his. That's how I met Stan, and we are still friends, so it's been a long time. I spent a year and a half at Yale, and I finalized one book there.

Q: So, you specialized in cold climates?

JAMES: (Laughing heartily) I spent six months there in a little place called Guilford, north of New Haven, about 20 miles. It was quite idyllic, you know; it was a 17th century New England home, and I had my own personal lake on which to skate.

Q: Beautiful weather for six weeks a year?

JAMES: Yes.

Q: Well Connecticut is a wonderful place to be. So you were invited by Yale to go back there. I want to ask about, I might be asking this too soon in our discussion, but where does the Fulbright fit? I have to be parochial about this. Where does the Fulbright fit into the whole development of what you have become?

JAMES: It created the opportunity for my life, in fact. That's what it did. So if it wasn't for the Fulbright Fellowship, I would not have been familiar with the U.S., and I would not have done a whole range of things that kept making me return to the U.S. So I'm so grateful to it.

Q: You are not obliged to say that.

JAMES: No, no. It opened up an avenue that was monumental in terms of the consequences of my life. So, I am grateful.

Q: So you had the peace, intellectual freedom, and the camaraderie to be quite certain about what your principles were? I think you went there with certain beliefs, derived from your parents, and came back with them strengthened along the same lines? Strengthened with more tools, statistics, demographics, and such? How relevant is sociology to what you are doing now as a Member of Parliament?

JAMES: Well, after coming back from the US after Yale, I then started my academic career properly, and that vocation involves teaching and scholarship. Between then and now, I have published 14 books, including a book I wrote on the modern history of gold mining and African labor, called Our Precious Metal, published by Indiana University Press in 1992. It is a book about how change would take place and how black workers became empowered in this society. I have also worked on a reasonably long publication list including a series of edited collections of Mandela's speeches while he was president to a book dealing with South African Nobel Laureates, and I am presently…

Q: Two, three Laureates?

JAMES: South Africa has produced ten! Two in Literature, four in Science, and four in

Peace. But there are other books, I am presently copy editing a book of essays, called Nature's Gifts: essays from Africa, which is a book consisting of ten independent, self standing essays on topics of interest to people like how does skin color work?, what is HIV/Aids?, why does the brain like music?, and so on and so forth. I would need to tell you something about where this biology comes from because it is part of my history, as I spent a lot of time at the California Institute of Technology. That was my most recent stay in the US. But we were talking about something else. So it's to say that I have pursued an academic career, even while sitting in Parliament: interest in scholarship, interest in study, I have never abandoned that. But I have done that in this place and this time, and my colleague in the U.S., Michael Burawoy at Berkeley says that I practice what's called public sociology; that is the kind of sociology that matters in terms of public life, and I have worked in that space. I think that is a good description, and there is still, for me, nothing nicer than completing a well written essay, or well written chapter, or a well written book. There is no greater joy; you can't pay me for that. You can't give me enough money. It's priceless.

Q: I have a much lesser amount of that myself. I know the feeling.

JAMES: So, that brings me joy. Sitting in Parliament is a different kind, with different sets of requirements when it comes to what it is I do in terms of writing things. But I still sit there as a sociologist, I still sit in Parliament observing how people conduct themselves, and I have never lost that curiosity; it's kind of a quasi-anthropology life, looking at people's behavior when they are in the vicinity of power and what that does to them.

Q: Three-four days ago, during the opening of Parliament and the current president's State of the Union Address, which I saw on television. I was absolutely fascinated with the movement, the protocol, and the ceremonial aspects. What was your own impression of that event?

JAMES: It was overdone.

Q: The praise singer? Is that a tradition here?

JAMES: Yes, yes. I quite liked that actually. It had a certain kind of Zulu flamboyance to it, you know, that I find both pleasing and irritating, because they spend too much money on these things, and the ANC is quite good at this. You know, spending lots of money on parties and being flamboyant. So, I would have preferred a far more modest affair. But there was something tragic about it, I thought, because he is such a compromised figure, respect for him is diminishing by the day, and so this was an effort of self —glorification. He is a pathetic figure in it.

Q: Are you convinced that the falling confidence is country wide? 'You see it as a member of an opposition party; do you feel that this fall of his prestige is really across the board in South African society?

JAMES: I would say that there is disquiet in the general population among those who support him—

Q: We are talking about money and personal behavior, I think? Are those the two basic issues?

JAMES: Money, personal behavior, but also the inability to lead; an inability to lead is clear from how he will conduct his Cabinet meetings. He sits there and listens, with no particular view, asking everybody to speak, one or the other, and then he will summarize.

Q: As if he was the rapporteur?

JAMES: Yes.

Q: Rather than the president of the country?

JAMES: Yes, that's his style, and it tells you what the story is. Yesterday, he listened to scathing criticism of his behavior. Let's see how he responds to that. This will be a mark of his character today. So my feeling is, and it might be a statement of hope, that he will not last long, because people within his own party are so unhappy with him. We have senior members in yesterday's Parliamentary session, and not a single full minister was on that speaking program. Not one. And the Deputy President wasn't either.

Q: What could happen? He just became president recently? How short could a presidency be?

JAMES: The ANC has a power of recall of its president. It does it at conferences. I mean, Thabo Mbeki was recalled, and I think that as it becomes clear that his support base within the ANC is diminishing, as he compromises himself because this is going to go on.

Q: Are there any rumors of who it might be instead?

JAMES: No.

Q: Very likely, the ANC leadership might not even have discussed this?

JAMES: I am not sure whether they have, but there is certainly a sense of that they have.

Q: Nelson Mandela is quite frail, they say, and has withdrawn from activity to some extent. Isn't that somehow, at least emotionally involved in this, with his legacy? Does he not wish to have some influence in how this comes to pass? Surely he must.

JAMES: I would imagine so. I don't think he has ever been a supporter of Zuma. Zuma was the first ANC-exiled individual to return to South Africa, and I have it on good record that Mandela refused to see him when he returned a number of times. And that had to do with the fact that he was ANC Chief of Intelligence at the time when "quatro camps" were going through an awful period of persecution. They, in fact, had arrested some so-called spies, and two of the spies were executed. And at the time

Q: This would have been when Mandela was president, or before?

JAMES: No, he was still in jail when this happened. This was in the late '80s.

Q: Well, you said he refused to see him?

JAMES: Just in the sequence of events. The ANC had an insurgency, a group of dissidents, who were arrested, and they were jailed in a camp in Angola called the "quatro camps". They were interviewed, interrogated, and two were executed. It was on Jacob Zuma's watch–He was the ANC Chief Intelligent. There is a book that came out called Quatro about one of the people involved in the camp. So what I learned from one of the women who looked after Mandela after he was released from prison is that Jacob Zuma tried to see Madiba but he refused to see him, and I think that had to do with Jacob's role in the Quattro Camps. This is not a nice story. And Jacob Zuma has managed to keep out of public domain; nobody is looking at his history there. So that is where he comes from firstly. And secondly, when it came to KwaZulu-Natal, do you remember? In a transition period, the worst of the killings were taking place there, and Jacob Zuma was just the right person at the right time. He was seen as a peace-maker between the ANC and the IAP, and he could speak to the IAP, and they can tell you that he actually played a constructive role. Buthelezi would tell you that story as well.

Q: Zuma is from KwaZulu-Natal?

JAMES: Yes, so his reputation changed as a result, and certainly, Madiba spoke to him. There were two occasions where I was actually present at a dinner with Mandela: the first time I met him was at a house in Weinberg. He was called away from the dinner table, and he returned after 30 minutes, apologizing profusely for being so rude because he is such a polite man. But he said, "I had to speak to Jacob Zuma about the problems in KwaZulu-Natal." And the second time, there was another event, so they clearly made up. But, then Zuma became an emissary for the KwaZulu-Natal province, and he was responsible for financial affairs. He had an undistinguished ten years there, and then he was pulled into the office Deputy President, and it wasn't serious. I mean, this is one of Thabo Mbeki's maneuvers, to put a really weak person there, not thinking there was any chance that he will be outsmarted by this weak person and lose the presidency. Nobody in the ANC ever, ever thought that Jacob Zuma - - would become president. They thought it was a way of

Q: It was a repeated pattern in so many places.

JAMES: Yes, they thought it would be an accommodation to keep this guy quiet. Give him something to do; it's not serious, he is not…

Q: Considered to be mediocre. Ineffective, and was chosen for that reason.

JAMES: Yes, which is Thabo Mbeki's habit; that's what he did. You know the strong people he had; he had to have them, like Trevor Manuel, because he understood that it was necessary for his own future as a president.

Q: There seems to be universal approval for Trevor Manuel, in and out of the country, and everybody seems to trust

JAMES: If it wasn't for the ANC's insistence to have an African person as a leader, he would be president. I would vote for him. He would be great. It's because he is colored.

Q: So it's not characteristic of the ANC to have such a person be at the forefront?

JAMES: Their philosophy is that it's an inclusive, non-racial party, but at this time and place, it's African leadership. I don't see them changing their minds either.

Q: What do you see happening? You have said that you and your party hope for a possible split in the ANC? This would be a very dramatic thing. And also a possible erosion of people. Now we're in the Cape here, which is the only province that has leadership that is not the ANC. Does this color a person's perspective? It must inevitably give a person a sense of greater possibility to oppose the ANC because this is the only province that has done so.

JAMES: There really has been a split in the ANC, and others have captured a significant part of the vote as a result of that. It's happened.

Q: So it's diminishing as a force?

JAMES: That's a separate discussion. But to say that split has occurred, and a second split is possible is correct. A third split is possible. The question is "how does it split?" and "who are the individuals involved?" Ideologically, we can see what the differences are essentially between the people of moderation within the ANC and its areas leftist, populist factions. And for the good of this country, we would like to see the people of moderation, of good common sense, prevail. Trevor Manuel exemplifies that; the Minister of Finance does as well. Gordon as well, and a number of other individuals who might want to play it out in a different entity. And so, we would want to find a way of engaging not the individuals, but the essential voting public that stands underneath the ANC support. To get there, for the Democratic Alliance (DA) is very hard. But, it's possible. What happened in the Western Cape is unusual because this is a province with a population and a voter public that is more white than colored. So many black people voted for us.

Q: It's the only such province in the country?

JAMES: Yes. So to repeat this exercise in other provinces would be demographically difficult. So we would need a partner in that exercise, and COPE as a possible partner. So we have COPE. So, it's a separate party with its own leadership, and we talk to them. We have regular conversations. We haven't formed the coalition, but there is discussion taking place there. They have coalitions formed for the municipal elections that are coming up in 2012. That's quite soon.

Q: So could a coalition ever produce an actual new party? Or is that way down the line?

JAMES: That's down the line, yeah. It might be that we would want to go into the next national elections as a new party. But that's up in the air.

Q: DA-COPE is too long of a title

JAMES: Yeah. We need to pull in either the Independent Democrats or Inkatha Freedom Party. All those others find a way, even though they are very small right now.

Q: Is it also very regional?

JAMES: Also very regional.

Q: So we have different regional challengers coming from different directions, maybe with overlapping notions?

JAMES: Yes. We need to find some common ground and values. That's the challenge right now. COPE is not cohesive. They say one thing today and something different tomorrow. They need to sort themselves out, in fact.

Q: Maybe you can assist them in doing so.

JAMES: Well, they need to sort themselves out.

Q: In respect to Frank Sassman, we should draw to a close.

JAMES: Yes.

Q: How could we possibly do so? Any backwards glance or forwards glance or reflections that spill over that have not yet been expressed?

JAMES: I'm going to say a couple of things. The one is that I've always had an interest as a demographer trained in sociology, in mortality, fertility, and migration. The nature of death, as it is understood biologically, has always intrigued me. And then as a sociologist I taught a series of courses on race. I would always get up and say to my students, "You know there is no such thing as race? It is a construction." And I used to justify this. But I always wondered about the nature of human variation. What makes us different? Because it's not something you make up in the shower. It's not just a construction. And I wanted to understand, almost like a car mechanic. I've had an interesting cause. How does it work biologically? And so I started reading in the area of science and biology of human variation. I was invited to be a visiting professor at Cal Tech in the Humanities Division. David Baltimore invited me, who was president at the time. So I was sitting in this great science institution and was somewhat overwhelmed by it. But it was a chance for me to actually go back to school. So I taught my courses, and I took some courses in biology and came back from there, not as a biologist, but with a better sense of what it was about. And on the basis of that experience, I wrote a series of essays in biology. How does skin color work? What are the genes involved? How do the genes express

themselves? Why is it here? How did it evolve? What does it say about humanity? What does it say about human adaptation? This thing called race is a product of 80 genes out of 26,000 in the body. It's a reason why we are adaptive, but it is miniscule. It is .0008% of the genome. And so there is an insignificant amount of biological material that makes us look different. Making us look different is highly adaptive. There's a reason why we're still sitting here. And it has caused such harm. And so what I am busy with now, is promoting the public understanding of the science of human nature. And I do it in parliament too. I give my colleagues lectures in diversity. But, I wanted to say that. Retrospectively, in terms of academic training, it wasn't like this in the 19th century. If you were a scientist in the 19th century, you understood and took an interest in psychology, you took an interest in biology, and you took an interest in physics, chemistry, and music.

Q: 19th century?

JAMES: Yes. And what has happened in the 20th century is this specialization explosion, which one understands and is trained in. I was trained to be a master in the field of sociology. And I ignored everything else. And I had the opportunity to begin to understand a bit of science twice. It's a thing a lot of people yearn for and never get the chance. It's not something you can learn very easily. So when I go into the concert hall, in the concert hall in the city, I listen, and I am sensitive to what happens to the human body when you hear a semitone drop in the music. And you burst out in goose bumps. It's a contraction of the tiniest muscles you can imagine around here. And it's a peripheral nervous system response to an oral pattern. That's what it's doing.

Q: There's a moment in the Saint John Passion of Bach, where he goes through the entire circle of fifths. And at the moment of Crucifixion, one chorus, who seems to be the lowest possible place of despair, goes down half a tone. Beyond where you can imagine because it goes through the entire circle of fifths in one moment. That's a moment that you— yeah—

JAMES: And so I ended up where I wanted to start studying what human nature is. How do we understand emotion? How do we understand behavior, particularly as a sociologist where it is clear that human behavior is partly programmed and partly learned? And the question is, what is the balance? And what is the role of justice in dealing with it? Because we have a sense as we're sitting in the parliament that justice is at the heart of what we want to do in this country. I understand justice as being a restraint of the natural tendencies of human beings to be really naughty to one another. And we are capable of great love and great beauty; we are also capable of murder. And the question is what human institutions work best in finding a balance to keep us in the good part. And that's why I think we need the politics of moderation in this country, not the politics of excess. The ANC represents the party of excess right now.

End of interview