

JESSE JACKSON

STUART HALL INTERVIEWS AMERICA'S LEADING BLACK POLITICIAN

Former Martin Luther King lieutenant and civil rights organiser, Reverend Jesse Jackson was active in equal rights, vote registration and affirmative action campaigns before emerging in 1984, from a host of possibles, as the first black presidential candidate. His appeal to the black, Hispanic and Asian communities to join women, the poor, gays, liberal progressives and peace activists to form a 'Rainbow coalition' challenged the Democratic party establishment at the 1984 convention (and nearly upset the Hart and Mondale candidatures). Combining shrewd political judgement with the charisma of the black prophetic tradition, Jackson is now the leading progressive figure in national American electoral politics.

You are the first black to run for the presidency. Can you recall what sorts of political calculations were in your mind when you decided to stand?

The conservatives and liberals are often two faces of the same coin. They are going in the same direction, with the same pre-suppositions about economic policy, foreign policy and race relations. After all neither a Democrat nor a Republican led the movement to end the apartheid laws or for the right to vote. Martin Luther King led that. Those who want change must accept neither personal gains from conservatives nor be satisfied with public grants from liberals but must fight for liberation. It's neither conservatism nor liberalism but liberation that represents the direction those who are locked out must take. Fundamentally liberation represents a change in direction.

Mondale and Kennedy, for example, have real liberal credentials. Chicago is a city that is almost 40% black and about 2% Irish. There were two Irish people running for mayor - Byrne and Daley. Harold Washington, a black state senator and US congressperson, who at one time or another had worked for both of them, was also running. Yet in the primary campaign before the general election, Kennedy came to Chicago in support of Byrne and Mondale for Daley - two outstanding liberals came into town to defeat Harold Washington. So it became patently clear to me that our drive for self-respect and self-determination would have to be led by us and that we had to change the direction. There's a broad body of people in this country across lines of race, religion, region and sex who desperately want that new direction within this country and new connections with other people and forms of government in the world. So with our restricted options, we either had to concede to this humiliation or fight back in some symbolic way, take up a real role and revive a real live alternative for the American people. That was a big political decision. The risks were enormous, the cost great, the dangers tremendous.



I received 311 death threats in the campaign - more than any candidate in American history. It was a long and dangerous campaign. My opponents raised \$15-20m, I raised \$3m, yet we got 3.5m votes plus, which means our campaign cost about 99 cents a vote - the most cost-efficient campaign in history. They said we would get less than 100 delegates and we got 465.5. We would have got 865 except 45% of my voters were disenfranchised because in the Democratic primary they use an artificially high threshold before your vote counts. If I'd have had the benefit of proportional representation, I'd have had 865 delegates, Mondale would have been 400 short and Hart would have been 300 short, so all options for the Democratic presidential candidate would have then revolved around the Rainbow coalition.

What was the basic idea behind the Rainbow coalition?

Rainbow is not so much about a race as a direction, because all colours are in the rainbow. I looked at the growing racial polarisation and said what about the Indians, the Hispanics, the Asians, the blacks, but also the gays, the handicapped people and women? You put all these people together and you have a rainbow. In the biblical sense the rainbow is of course after the flood; the tyranny is over, it's a new beginning and it's God's promise for peace, justice and a new reign. It's all about involving people who historically have been locked out - that's the whole point of the Rainbow. And of course with the right-wing shift in the country, there are now even more people locked out.

Do you think there has been sufficient of a shift within the Democratic party, either as a result of your campaign or indeed as a result of the response to what's happened under Reagan, to make it a vehicle for the kind of alternative you envisage?

The Democratic leadership now is relatively weak because it's not a strong principled leadership that moulds public opinion. It's a leadership that's following opinion polls. You take, for example, strong labour leaders like A Phillip Randolph or Walter Reuther. These men had a clear ideology about workers, would mould opinion. They said, 'against the odds and the polls, here's where we stand.' You don't have that in this generation of Democratic leaders. You have poll-watchers who are trying to find out where the people are and then jump in front of them saying, 'I am your leader'. You have what I call schizophrenic leadership where the stylists say you should look like John Kennedy and act like Reagan.

The Rainbow represents a different thrust. It starts from the premise of humane priorities. Our first commitment must be to wipe out malnutrition. We must educate the children. We must rebuild urban America.

It all comes from the basic premise of humane priorities at home, and human rights abroad. The problem right now is that our priorities at home are not humane and our condition for foreign policy is not human rights. That premise is off. And it throws us on the wrong side of significant liberation struggles around the world. It leaves us with military authority, but without moral authority. The reason why Reagan's call for boycotting Libya was unsuccessful was that he didn't have the moral authority to call it. You can't support state terrorism in South Africa, sponsor it in Central America, ignore it in the Philippines, and call for an end to it in the Middle East. People ask the basic question, 'By what authority do you speak?' By no moral authority, and that's why it's not working.

You suggest there is a strong desire for new priorities. A rather more cynical calculation would be that the mood of the country under Reagan is not one in which you can put together a major popular base around those kinds of humane priorities, and the goal of renovating social and economic life in America.

I believe, like priest like people. I've seen people make some amazing changes based upon the thrust of courageous leadership. The humane priorities required of a new president would very possibly not be as great as was required of Kennedy and Johnson, who were presidents at a time when the country had been bred for three and a half centuries on blatant, overt, legal racism, and a caste and a class system. I remember marching down the road on the way to jail in Greensboro around 1963, and Robert Kennedy made a statement in Washington about the marchers. He said,



'not only do the marchers have a right to march, but they are morally right.' I had never heard an attorney general go beyond the calculated legal talk and say that a protest was morally right. That kind of language inspired a generation.

Lyndon Johnson, who had all the credentials of the Southern bigotry of that period came forth as a man converted, with new insight and said, 'we shall overcome and we must right the wrongs of the past. . . we must not only have equal opportunity but equal results.' And Americans said, 'Well, if Lyndon Johnson believes that, surely we can believe that.' Every modern liberal, by definition, had to deal with it, and so did a whole bunch of Southerners. That set the pace. Even Nixon did not try to alter it, nor Ford. They did not pursue it as vigorously, but they did not change it. If leadership casts a ray of light rather than a shadow, if leadership at least sets the tone for people, it's a big factor in how people respond, if for no other reason than they have the access to people's minds, more so than anybody else, particularly here in the States of course.

What effect has Reagan had on all that?

The Reagan forces have made political hay of reviving the fears of many poor and threatened white people. Take the white males. White males have experienced tremendous anxiety in this country because of the redistribution of power and decision-making. The fears they have are not well-grounded but they have them all the same. 25 years ago white males obviously had preferential treatment. They did not have to compete with women - who represent more than half the American population. Nowadays, very seldom would you have an all-white male slate - congressperson, governor and state treasurer. At that time white males had those positions without any competition from women. Nor did they have to compete with blacks, Hispanics or Asians. Now for the first time white males sense that the domain they once monopolised is shared by the legitimate aspirations of many other people. Their fears have no foundation. After all, you're talking about them sharing power with their fellow Americans - their wives, their aunts, their cousins, their mothers, their allies and their neighbours. We're not talking about their sharing power with a foreign country. Good leadership would have to alleviate those fears and proffer an interpretation to them of why it is moral and cost-efficient to share power and responsibility.

But that presumes that white males are likely to take a rational view of sharing power.



The point is that leadership can either help them to become more rational or it can revive their fears and make them become less rational. Their becoming less rational is not going to make those who have been locked out less determined to be free. It is not going to make women or blacks, Asians or Hispanics less assertive about their rights. They will either accept the transition gracefully, or they'll accept it painfully, but there will be a transition one way or the other. Once the baby has been born it cannot reverse itself and go back in the womb. There's no room for it. Nor is there any great motivation to go back. A freedom baby has been born and it's now coming into its maturity. It is in a position to demand certain basic changes.

Can a major black politician win in America when white males are so fully in control of so much of the political and governmental apparatus?

The answer is yes. The passing of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and Lyndon Johnson's executive order for affirmative action led to profound changes. We've gone from 400 black elected and appointed officials in 1965 to about 6,000 now. That's a long way, though it's even further to the other 50,000 that would constitute parity, given blacks represent 12% of the population. That will be another long struggle. Our challenge right now is not only to sustain the Voting Rights Act passage, but to ensure that section two, its enforcement provision, actually operates. Without voting rights enforcement, the right to vote is the hole in the doughnut.

What does your perspective mean in terms of the different elements within the Rainbow coalition? For instance, how does that strategy look from the position of organised labour?

It does not threaten labour. Rather, it enhances labour because many of the bollweevils - those who run as Democrats and vote as reactionaries, who run on a base of poor people but vote for the interests of rich people - are very anti-labour. No block of voters is more pro-labour in its voting than the Afro-American vote because blacks are mostly workers. The Hispanic vote is pro-labour too, because Hispanics are mostly workers. So when blacks vote in great numbers it improves the lot both of blacks and of Hispanics, because their interests tend to coalesce. In part, Tom Bradley is mayor of Los Angeles because of the black, Hispanic and progressive white coalition. Pena is Hispanic mayor of Denver because of a black, Hispanic and white progressive coalition. Harold Washington is mayor of Chicago on the same coalition, and the same is true for the mayor of Miami.

When blacks and Hispanics vote in great numbers, the lot of

women also improves because the majority of blacks and Hispanics are women. When blacks, Hispanics and women vote together, children prosper because most poor children live in a house where there is no man. So the black vote is not a selfish and isolated vote, it is the trigger vote, the catalytic vote, for the entire progressive coalition.

But isn't it the case that those different elements in the coalition have been traditionally organised - either within the Democratic party, or within the unions, or within ethnic groupings - in such a way as to sharpen rather than reduce their sense of difference, of different interests from each other?

Sometimes those differences have been exaggerated for the purposes of exploitation. For example, Hispanics have a great interest in a humane immigration policy since, given the impact of the Third World debt crisis south of the border, they've been driven north, not because they want to leave home, but out of desperation. By and large, blacks have been overwhelmingly supportive of their right to flee for life. And many of the jobs they have taken are not jobs that would go to blacks in the first place. Our coalition has been a fairly productive coalition. There have been those who have tried to divide blacks and Hispanics and give the impression that our interests are different, because our culture and languages may be different. But we are both basically Third World peoples. The coalition also embraces the right of self-determination for native Americans on the Indian reservations, and their right to develop as well as to control the land on which they live. That doesn't threaten our interests. In our drive for labour/management relations that protect the worker, our interests converge. The need for a healthy industrial policy which gives room for business development is also part of our thrust. So we really can reconcile labour, management and business as well as reconcile the ethnic interests of white, black, Hispanic, Asian and Indian.

Politically your strategy seems to be based on an attempt to cut across existing traditional divisions and alignments in American politics to redraw those lines of connection in a different way, around a new programme.

Alignments are changing. Some of your old liberals are now your new conservatives. Many of them are intimidated by Reagan. With his success in being elected and re-elected, they're trying to follow his pattern and style. And what they're doing, in this radical shift to the right, is leaving, or creating, a new majority. There are more people to the centre and to the left of centre than right of centre. There are more people who are locked out than locked in. The polarising economic shift in this country is embarrassing in terms of the wealth concentration in, say, the top 5% and the poverty concentration in the bottom 25%. And that gap between the haves and the have-nots is becoming very pronounced. There is no sense of planning in the economy. There's not enough central leadership to keep the labour, management and business forces in a proper relationship. The radical shift in taxation is a pretty good indicator of it. In 1932 68% of taxes were paid by corporations and 32% by individuals, and now 92% are paid by individuals and 8% by corporations. That's extreme. That's revolutionary.

People in Britain followed very closely the rise of the civil rights movement in the period of King's leadership. They know that black

politics in the 80s in the States is no longer the same. But they don't have a clear sense of what the changes are. How do you see them?

Well, some of the changes are less apparent than others. For example, I remember a time that there was a problem of some sort in Los Angeles and they wanted Dr King to come to LA and give a big speech. There was a demand for an improvement in the basic flow and distribution of goods and services that did not exist at that time for blacks. King came to Chicago for a great freedom march. That role is no longer necessary. Tom Bradley, a black, is now mayor of LA and distributes goods and services every day. And we have black mayors in other cities. These represent very fundamental shifts in the rules. But at exactly the time that blacks were taking over the cities, power began to shift to the suburbs, and often business interests did too. And now, with Reagan, it's shifted to the state level. So as blacks take over a centre, the power shifts away from that centre. Mayors have become mayors of cities that are shells. They are basically distributing available services, not wielding power as it once was wielded when industrial power was concentrated in those cities.

One of the things that marks off the later 70s and 80s from the earlier period is this emergence of blacks as an independent political force in the mainstream of American electoral politics. Would you see that as the crucial shift?

Well, one would have expected that to happen, but the mainline Democratic leadership has resisted accepting blacks as peers. They grew accustomed to accepting blacks as patrons. But they find some difficulty in accepting blacks as peers in power. As a result there is an amazing lack of communication between the powerbrokers in the Democratic party and basic black leadership. Most blacks are elected without the Democratic party. They choose to associate with Democrats rather than Republicans, once they get elected. Harold Washington won, over the objections of the Democratic party. He is an independent who chooses nationally to be a Democrat rather than a Republican. He is an independent Democrat. Mayor Milner of Hartford, Connecticut has won there three times, but he was never endorsed by his state Democratic party. In Mississippi, you've got more blacks who run as independents than who run as Democrats.

The ally of blacks is re-apportionment lines and voter registration, not white Democrats. Very seldom do blacks get more than 10-12% white support. Of course, in some instances that's not true, for example, Bradley in LA. But there are very few blacks that get elected by a substantial white base. It's an aberration as opposed to a trend. By and large, blacks will vote for white Democrats - 70 to 80% - over the so-called bad guy, the Republican. And whites will reciprocate with blacks, 7 or 8%. One of our challenges now is to demand reciprocal voting - we vote for you, you vote for us - and to run an integrated slate: we vote together, we must be slated together, we must win together. That's where the new challenge is taking place.

Let me explore the relationship between the black political leadership and the grassroots. What sections of the black community does this thrust to electoral politics leave out? Does it leave out marginals in the cities, the black underclass?

Not really, because blacks in various classes in our cities may live apart but our interests are the same. From Seattle, Washington to Miami, Florida the basic views of blacks on Southern Africa are

about the same. Our interests are the same. Blacks by and large find the systems in Dade County, Florida or in New York City or in Los Angeles are pretty much organised by a common predicament - a scheme to deny equity and parity. So when we ran on our desire to wipe out malnutrition, we appealed to the hungry; our desire to rebuild the industrial base appealed to the workers; our demand for affirmative action appealed to business; our demand for moral regeneration appealed to religious leaders; our demand for political empowerment made an appeal to all those who had some ambition to become empowered. So our basic thrust appealed to *all* segments of the population.

How do you maintain political roots in black community politics, in local grassroots organisations in the cities and elsewhere?

We are going to have the mid-term convention of the Rainbow coalition in April where we will be pulling all segments of our leadership together for a common thrust. I work hard at trying to knit and build relationships. Many people don't have time to do that because they are busy working on their city or their legislation. I spend a lot of time serving them by registering people to vote, inspiring people to vote, or interpreting the issues and so forth.

Is the continuing connection between politics, religion and the role of the black churches, another important way of sustaining those links?

Last year the ministers were in the forefront of the Rainbow coalition struggle. And many of them are now having to assess their relationships with the given power structure to which they have been connected. The churches, which were in fact their political bases, immediately identified with me as a person, as a minister, as one of the heirs of Dr King's legacy, as a direct



actionist, with what I represent, as well as being put off by the opposition, Mondale and Hart.

How important is the question of moral conscience in your own position, in the history of the civil rights movement and for American politics as a whole? I remember at one point in the campaign you said, it's part of the Rainbow coalition's function to become the conscience of the campaign. It seems to me there is a sort of moral vacuum at the centre of American politics generally. . .

Oh, without question. Vanity would ask the question 'is it popular?' Politics would ask the question 'does it work, is it expedient?' Prophecy would ask the question 'is it right?' Even if it is not popular, or expedient, 'is it right?' And that's the conscience question. I try to stay close to that question, even if it hurts. Is it right to support Afghan rebels and not support the ANC or Swapo rebels? If it is right to support one, it is logically right to support both. If you can talk with Gorbachev, and if you can go to China, why can't you talk with Castro? That may not be popular or expedient but it's right, and it's consistent. If you are wrong to support Samozia in his reign of terror and land occupation, surely you know that he created the conditions that brought Ortega to power. And is it not better to negotiate with him than to engage in terror activities to try to overthrow him? Is it right? Marcos is convenient but Marcos is not right. Voting rights enforcement does not show up as a great issue with Democrats in the polls, but it's right to enforce the Voting Rights Act.

The attempt to ask the piercing, prophetic question makes one a little different from the poll-watchers - those who try to ride with the tide. I try to change the tide. If I read the polls I would not have gone to Cuba to get the Americans back home - but that was the right thing to do. I'm glad I met Castro and glad I went to Cuba. Meeting Gorbachev in Geneva - the polls have said no, but it was the right thing to do, trying to appeal to him and to Reagan to ban these nuclear tests and to get verification. It was right. Now, when all the dust settles, the sum total of going to Cuba, Nicaragua, Geneva and also to Syria - no matter how impractical it seemed, how unpopular it was - has given me moral authority and experience in foreign policy.

I want to ask you now, some specific questions about particular areas of foreign policy. You talked just now about Cuba and Nicaragua. Certainly it's our impression that the positions you've taken on Latin America are among the most distinctive and the most radical to be found on the American scene.

I would call them the most moral as opposed to the most radical positions, because radical has the connotation that you are out of step with reality, or out of step with our interests. And those positions are neither. They are in step with our interests. Our making a political settlement with Nicaragua through the Contadora process is morally correct *and* in step with our national interest. Our organising a national campaign to overthrow Ortega is immoral and the worst thing that could happen is if we are successful. Cuba is central to peace in Central America, and a key to the Contadora process, because Castro is seen as the David who survived Goliath. He is the cult hero of that part of the hemisphere. Therefore you can't dodge around Castro in Central America. Like you can't dodge around Assad in the Middle East. Like you can't dodge around the ANC and Mandela in South Africa. There are some forces you must deal with, or else face the consequences of not having made the right judgement.



In recent weeks there are once again signs of serious and dangerous developments in the Middle East. Do you see it that way?

Oh, there's no doubt about it. We have high stakes in the Middle East. We're losing ground as a nation there. We do not have a coherent foreign policy in the Middle East. From an American point of view, there are at least four issues which must be reconciled. Israeli security within internationally recognised boundaries is a national interest. Palestinian justice, or a state for the Palestinian people, is a fact in the equation that will not go away. The redevelopment and reconstruction of the Lebanon, protecting its sovereignty, is part of our national interest. And normalised ties with the Arab world is part of our national interest. At present we cannot protect these vital interests in the Middle East because we lack a coherent policy.

How difficult is it to put the case you've just made about American interests in the current political situation?

The domestic concern is about the American Jewish preoccupation with Israel. The reality is that the present policy hurts and does not help Israel. The present policy also angers Israel's enemies and therefore endangers Israel. It subjects Israel to a permanent state of protracted war, which is too much pressure to live under. I think there's a growing appreciation that the way to protect Israel, which is a great American interest, is to get Israel's enemies not to be its enemies. If the West Bank settlement stopped and the Palestinians were allowed to come home to the West Bank and Gaza and build and develop, and a mutual recognition and security pact was worked out, Israel with its resourcefulness would become one of the major trade centres in the world.

So the question for Israel ultimately is, will it remain a military garrison or become a major centre for trade, commerce and culture? And that will never happen as long as it remains an oasis in an Arab desert. Its alliances must be with its neighbours. That's its first priority. Israel in the long term must not be seen as a stranger in the Middle East, but as a Middle Eastern people.

To observers in Europe the platforms you've been advancing on the economic and industrial front seem to have a strong anti-capitalist or anti-corporate content. They aim to bring the corporations into a

framework of social responsibility. Your policies also have a strong anti-imperialist thrust on the world scene, centring on Third World questions, and a powerful anti-racist thrust, not just in terms of domestic politics but on a global scale. This looks like the first time for a long while we have seen, struggling for a central place within mainstream American electoral politics, a genuinely progressive political alternative. Is that how you would characterise your position?

Well I'm not sophisticated enough to understand all the labels you made up. I just try to use the natural reasoning process. For example, it just makes good sense to feed the flower you rob. Many American industries rob the flower that feeds them. That's not good sense. A honey bee - it doesn't have a brain, it's just a bug. It only has an instinct. But whatever it's got, it's got enough sense to drop pollen when it picks up nectar. These corporations get their nectar from America - their bank loans, their education, their labour and consumer base. But they're maintaining slave labour markets abroad. When the honey bee comes back, if it didn't leave any pollen, the flower will die. And if the flower dies, the honey bee will die.

So if these corporations forsake the flower that fed them and gave birth to them, when they come back - and at some time they will have to come back - they will find that the flower is dead and they will die too. An industrial policy which says give tax stimulation and tax breaks to get the corporations going is inadequate. Their obligation, once they get it, is to reinvest, reindustrialise and retrain. That's just a natural process. I cannot deal with labels in an ideological sense - you know the terms that ideologues play around with - but it just seems to me that our industrial base must not operate as if the world is unlimited. The world is limited and it must operate with some sense of coherence and planning. At present, what you've got is a wild west mentality. When the west is open and options appear to be unlimited, you can do that. But in real life, the world is limited and you must take that into account. Planning must displace greed.

But on a world scale, how much of a shift in power does that entail? If you really applied that perspective to the relationships of the US economy on a global scale and took into account the extent of Third World poverty, you could demonstrate the long-term interests of the American economy lay in changing its economic relations with the Third World. But to actually bring that about means some very fundamental changes in those economic relationships.

This shift is going to take place. And it's going to take place in part because these nations are shifting from domination and colonialism to political self-determination. The next step is economic self-determination. There was a time when we could have gone to other countries without much competition, without much resistance, without a formula for development there. But now these countries are exacting a price for our presence there. So on a global scale it's not just a matter of what our desire is, but we also come into competition with the desires of others. Every political awakening has with it, as a matter of time, an economic awakening. It comes as the next logical step. If Mayor Harold Washington is elected politically, people soon say, 'We elected you, now what about our share of jobs, what about our share of business?' And in the end they had to work out an affirmative action programme for jobs. That's what all politicians do, at their best - redistribute the economic spoils and re-organise the economic system. All these liberation movements have as one of

their objectives the renegotiation of those relationships with the US.

Is it this change in awareness which explains why the South African issue has taken off so powerfully in American politics in the last two years?

We raised that issue over and over again in our campaign. I kept trying to inject it into the debates. It was always rejected, the media would pursue the next question. When we were in New York, the media would force you to explain your Middle East position, but not your Caribbean policy. There are more Caribbean folk living in New York than in the Caribbean. They would not force you to stick to African policy, yet one of the great centres of African people - Afro-American people - in the Western world, is New York. The media will not let you off the hook on the Middle East question but they will on the Caribbean and African question. But that's changing because of our persistence. By the time we got to Pittsburg in the Pennsylvania primary they had to start articulating some kind of African policy. In years to come, that will continue to change because of the new level of competition that we represent.

You were in Britain briefly and you know a little bit about our troubles there. From the impressions you formed when you were there, do you think that the conception of a Rainbow coalition is in any sense applicable to our situation there?

Sure. You have a significant Afro-Caribbean population that has known the legacy of colonialism and racial rejection. And you have a Conservative government that has expressed no plan or policy to make them first-class citizens. There's a tremendous sense of alienation within Afro-Caribbean people on the ground. They are very disappointed people because a lot of them left the Caribbean and other places with a sense of going home to the ultimate democratic experience. But they've been reduced to living in the maid's quarters of the Crown. They've come to accept that they were somehow inauthentic, somehow not the beneficiaries of the royal blood. Of course our religion teaches us that we all have royal blood.

The alienation was expressed in the riots. The riots did not represent a social policy by blacks. They represent the pain and frustration of people who speak but can never be heard. You've got 18% blacks in London - something like that. You've got 26,000 police in Britain, only 300 of whom are blacks. That is symptomatic of a lockout. There should be at least 5,000 black policemen. Of course there's a real concern about whether they would behave differently from the white police. I tried to convince them, when I was last there, that the idea of fighting for the right not to have your share of police is a very unwise strategy. Because if a black and a white police are riding together in the same car, it alters the behaviour of both of them.

The Afro-Caribbean people have got to deal with the identity question. They are *not* going back to the islands or to Africa. That is one of the options - but the great majority are going to stay. And if they stay they must fight for justice and equity. That means fighting for your share of everything that's available, vertically and horizontally. So blacks and Afro-Caribbean people in Britain must begin to fight for equity and parity - in the labour movement, in the government, in property ownership. They must break up the red-lining process of the disinvestment from Brixton and the investment in South Africa. •