

‘One Step at a Time’: An Interview with Jean-Bertrand Aristide (Pretoria, 20 July 2006)

Complete transcript

[*Introduction*] In the mid 1980s, Jean-Bertrand Aristide was a young parish priest working in an impoverished and embattled district of Haiti’s capital city Port-au-Prince. A courageous champion of the rights and dignity of the poor, he soon became the most widely respected spokesman of a growing popular movement against the series of military regimes that ruled Haiti after the collapse in 1986 of the US-backed Duvalier dictatorship. In 1990 he won the country’s first democratic presidential elections, with 67% of the vote. Perceived as a dangerous threat by Haiti’s tiny ruling elite, he was overthrown by a military coup in September 1991. Conflict with that same elite and its army, backed by their powerful allies in the U.S. and France, has shaped the whole of Aristide’s political trajectory. After winning another landslide election victory in 2000, his enemies launched a massive propaganda campaign to portray him as violent and corrupt. Foreign and elite resistance eventually culminated in a second coup against him, the night of 28 February 2004. A personal and political ally of the ANC’s Thabo Mbeki, Aristide then went into a reluctant exile in South Africa, where he remains to this day.

Since his expulsion from Haiti three years ago Aristide’s supporters have suffered the most brutal period of violent oppression in the country’s recent history. According to the best available estimates perhaps 5000 of them died at the hands of the US- and UN-backed régime that replaced the constitutional government in March 2004. Although the situation remains tense and UN troops still occupy the country, the worst of this violence came to an end in February 2006, when after another extraordinary electoral campaign Aristide’s old prime minister and ally René Préval (who succeeded him as president in 1996) was himself re-elected in yet another landslide victory. Calls for Aristide’s immediate and unconditional return continue to polarise Haitian politics. Many commentators, as well as some prominent members of the current government, acknowledge that if the constitution allowed Aristide to stand for re-election again then he would easily win.

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Peter Hallward: *Haiti is a profoundly divided country, and you have always been a profoundly divisive figure. For most of the 1990s many sympathetic observers found it easy to make sense of this division more or less along class lines: you were demonised by the rich, and idolised by the poor. But then things started to seem more complicated. Rightly or wrongly, by the end of the decade, many of your original supporters had become more sceptical, and from start to finish your second administration (2001-2004) was dogged by accusations of violence and corruption. Although by every available measure you remained by far the most trusted and popular politician among the Haitian electorate, you appeared to have lost much of the support you once enjoyed among parts of the political class, among aid-workers, activists, intellectuals and so on, both at home and abroad. Most of my questions have to do with these accusations, in particular the claim that as time went on you compromised or abandoned many of your original ideals.*

To begin with though, I’d like quickly to go back over some familiar territory, and ask about the process that first brought you to power back in 1990. The late 1980s were a very reactionary period in world politics, especially in Latin America. How do you

account for the remarkable strength and resilience of the popular movement against dictatorship in Haiti, the movement that came to be known as lavalas (a Kreyol word that means 'flood' or 'avalanche', and also a 'mass of people', or 'everyone together')? How do you account for the fact that, against the odds and certainly against the wishes of the U.S., the military and the whole ruling establishment in Haiti, you were able to win the election of 1990?

Jean-Bertrand Aristide: Much of the work had already been done by people who came before me. I'm thinking of people like Father Antoine Adrien and his co-workers, and Father Jean-Marie Vincent, who was assassinated in 1994. They had developed a progressive theological vision that resonated with the hopes and expectations of the Haitian people. Already in 1979 I was working in the context of liberation theology, and there is one phrase in particular that remains etched in my mind, and that may help summarise my understanding of how things stood. You might remember that the Conferencia de Puebla took place in Mexico, in 1979, and at the time several liberation theologians were working under severe constraints. They were threatened and barred from attending the conference. And the slogan I'm thinking of ran something like this: *si el pueblo no va a Puebla, Puebla se quedará sin pueblo*. If the people cannot go to Puebla, Puebla will remain cut off from the people.

In other words, for me the people remain at the very core of our struggle. It isn't a matter of struggling for the people, on behalf of the people, at a distance from the people; it is the people themselves who are struggling, and it's a matter of struggling with and in the midst of the people.

This ties in with a second theological principle, one that Sobrino, Boff and others understood very well. Liberation theology can itself only be a phase in a broader process. The phase in which we may first have to speak on behalf of the impoverished and the oppressed comes to an end as they start to speak in their own voice and with their own words. The people start to assume their own place on the public stage. Liberation theology then gives way to the liberation of theology. The whole process carries us a long way from paternalism, a long way from any notion of a 'saviour' who might come to guide the people and solve their problems. The priests who were inspired by liberation theology at that time understood that our role was to accompany the people, not to replace them.

The emergence of the people as an organised public force, as a collective consciousness, was already taking place in Haiti in the 1980s, and by 1986 this force was strong enough to push the Duvalier dictatorship from power. It was a grassroots popular movement, and not at all a top-down project driven by a single leader or a single organisation. It wasn't an exclusively political movement, either. It took shape above all through the constitution, all over the country, of many small church communities or *ti legliz*. It was these small communities that played the decisive historical role. When I was elected president it wasn't a strictly political affair, it wasn't the election of a politician, of a conventional political party. No, it was an expression of a broad popular movement, of the mobilisation of the people as a whole. For the first time, the national palace became a place not just for professional politicians but for the people themselves. The simple fact of allowing ordinary people to enter the palace, the simple fact of welcoming people from the poorest sections of Haitian society within the very centre of traditional power — this was already a profoundly transformative gesture.

PH: You hesitated for some time, before agreeing to stand as a candidate in those 1990 elections. You were perfectly aware of how, given the existing balance of forces, participation in the elections might dilute or divide the movement. Looking back at it now, do you still think it was the right thing to do? Was there a viable alternative to taking the parliamentary path?

JBA: I tend to think of history as the ongoing crystallisation of different sorts of variables. Some of the variables are known, some are unknown. The variables that we knew and understood at the time were clear enough. We had some sense of what we were capable of, and we also knew that those who sought to preserve the status quo had a whole range of means at their disposal. They had all sorts of strategies and mechanisms — military, economic, political... — for disrupting any movement that might challenge their grip on power. But we couldn't know how exactly they would use them. They couldn't know this themselves. They were paying close attention to how the people were struggling to invent ways of organising themselves, ways of mounting an effective challenge. This is what I mean by unknown variables: the popular movement was in the process of being invented and developed, under pressure, there and then, and there was no way of knowing in advance the sort of counter-measures it might provoke.

Now given the balance of these two sorts of variables, I have no regrets. I regret nothing. In 1990, I was asked by others in the movement to accept the cross that had fallen to me. That's how Father Adrien described it, and how I understood it: I had to take up the burden of this cross. 'You are on the road to Calvary', he said, and I knew he was right. When I refused it at first, it was Monsignor Willy Roméus, whom I trusted and still trust, as an elder and as a counsellor, who insisted that I had no choice. 'Your life doesn't belong to you anymore', he said. 'You have given it as a sacrifice for the people. And now that a concrete obligation has fallen on you, now that you are faced with this particular call to follow Jesus and take up your cross, think carefully before you turn your back on it.'

This then is what I knew, and knew full well at the time. It was a sort of path to Calvary. And once I had decided, I accepted this path for what it was, without illusions, without deluding myself. We knew perfectly well that we wouldn't be able to change everything, that we wouldn't be able to right every injustice, that we would have to work under severe constraints, and so on.

Suppose I had said no, I won't stand. How would the people have reacted? I can still hear the echo of certain voices that were asking, 'let's see now if you have the courage to take this decision, let's see if you are too much of a coward to accept this task. You who have preached such fine sermons, what are you going to do now? Are you going to abandon us, or are you going to assume this responsibility so that together we can move forward?' And I thought about this. What was the best way to put the message of the Gospels into practice? What was I supposed to do? I remember how I answered that question, when a few days before the election of December 1990, I went to commemorate the victims of the ruelle de Vaillant massacre, where some twenty people were killed by the Macoutes on the day of the aborted elections of November 1987. A student asked me: 'Father, do you think that by yourself you'll be able to change this situation, which is so corrupt and unjust?' And in reply I said: 'In order for it to rain, do you need one or many raindrops? In order to have a flood, do you need a trickle of water or a river in spate?' And I thanked him for giving me the chance to present our collective mission in the form of this metaphor: it is not alone, as isolated drops of water, that you or I are going to change the situation but together, as a flood or torrent, *lavalassement*, that we are going to change it, to clean things up, without any illusions that it will be easy or quick.

So were there other alternatives? I don't know. What I'm sure of is that there was then an historic opportunity, and that we gave an historic answer. We gave an answer that transformed the situation. We took a step in the right direction. Of course, in doing so we provoked a response. Our opponents responded with a coup d'état. First the attempted coup of Roger Lafontant, in January 1991, and when that failed, the coup of September 30th 1991. Our opponents were always going to have disproportionately powerful means of hindering the popular movement, and no single decision or action could have changed this. What mattered was that we took a step forward, a step in the right direction, followed by other steps. The process that began then is still going strong. In spite of everything it is

still going strong, and I'm convinced that it will only get stronger. And that in the end it will prevail.

PH: The coup of September 1991 took place even though the actual policies you pursued once in office were quite moderate, quite cautious. So was a coup inevitable? Regardless of what you did or didn't do, was the simple presence of someone like you in the presidential palace intolerable for the Haitian elite? And in that case, could more have been done to anticipate and try to withstand the backlash?

JBA: Well it's a good question. Here's how I understand the situation. What happened in September 1991 happened again in February 2004, and could easily happen again soon, in the future, so long as the oligarchy who control the means of repression use them to preserve a hollow version of democracy. This is their obsession: to maintain a situation that might be called 'democratic', but which consists in fact of a superficial, imported democracy that is imposed and controlled from above. They've been able to keep things this way for a long time. Haiti has been independent for 200 years, and we now live in a country in which just 1% of its people control more than half of its wealth. For the elite, it's a matter of us against *them*, of finding a way of preserving the massive inequalities that affect every facet of Haitian society. We are subject to a sort of apartheid. Ever since 1804, the elite has done everything in its power to keep the masses at bay, on the other side of the walls that protect their privilege. This is what we are up against. This is what any genuinely democratic project is up against. The elite will do everything in its power to ensure that it controls a puppet president and a puppet parliament. It will do everything necessary to protect the system of exploitation upon which its power depends. Your question has to be addressed in terms of this historical context, in terms of this deep and far-reaching continuity.

PH: Exactly so — but in that case, what needs to be done to confront the power of this elite? If in the end it is prepared to use violence to counter any genuine threat to their hegemony, what is the best way to overcome this violence? For all its strength, the popular movement that carried you to the presidency wasn't strong enough to keep you there, in the face of the violence it provoked.

People sometimes compare you to Toussaint L'Ouverture, who led his people to freedom and won extraordinary victories under extraordinary constraints — but Toussaint is also often criticised for failing to go far enough, for failing to break with France, for failing to do enough to keep the people's support. It was Dessalines who led the final fight for independence and who assumed the full cost of that fight. How do you answer those (like Patrick Elie, for instance, or Ben Dupuy) who say you were too moderate, that you acted like Toussaint in a situation that really called for Dessalines? What do you say to those who claim you put too much faith in the U.S. and its domestic allies?

JBA: Well [*laughs*]. 'Too much faith in the U.S.', that makes me smile... In my humble opinion Toussaint L'Ouverture, as a man, had his limitations. But he did his best, and in reality he did not fail. The dignity he defended, the principles he defended, continue to inspire us today. He was captured, his body was imprisoned and killed, yes; but Toussaint is still alive, his example and his spirit still guide us now. Today the struggle of the Haitian people is an extension of his campaign for dignity and freedom. These last two years, from 2004-2006, they continued to stand up for their dignity and refused to fall to their knees, they refused to capitulate. On 6 July 2005 Cité Soleil was attacked and bombarded, but this attack, and the many similar attacks, did not discourage people from insisting that their voices be heard. They spoke out against injustice. They voted for their president this past February, and this too was an assertion of their dignity; they will not

accept the imposition of another president from abroad or above. This simple insistence on dignity is itself an engine of historical change. The people insist that they will be the *subject* of their history, not its object. As Toussaint was the subject of his history, so too the Haitian people have taken up and extended his struggle, as the subjects of their history.

Again, this doesn't mean that success is inevitable or easy. It doesn't mean we can resolve every problem, or even that once we have dealt with a problem, that powerful vested interests won't try to do all they can to turn the clock back. Nevertheless, something irreversible has been achieved, something that works its way through the collective consciousness. This is precisely the real meaning of Toussaint's famous claim, once he had been captured by the French, that they had cut down the trunk of the tree of liberty but that its roots remained deep. Our struggle for freedom will encounter many obstacles but it will not be uprooted. It is firmly rooted in the minds of the people. The people are poor, certainly, but our minds are free. We continue to exist, as a people, on the basis of this initial *prise de conscience*, of this fundamental awareness that we *are*.

It's not an accident that when it came to choosing a leader, this people, these people who remain so poor and so marginalised by the powers that be, should have sought out not a politician but a priest. The politicians had let them down. They were looking for someone with principles, someone who would speak the truth, and in a sense this was more important than material success, or an early victory over our opponents. This is Toussaint's legacy.

As for Dessalines, the struggle that he led was armed, it was a military struggle, and necessarily so, since he had to break the bonds of slavery once and for all. He succeeded. But do we still need to carry on with this same struggle, in the same way? I don't think so. Was Dessalines wrong to fight the way he did? No. But our struggle is different. It is Toussaint, rather than Dessalines, who can still accompany the popular movement today. It's this inspiration that was at work in the election victory of February 2006, that allowed the people to out-fox and out-manoeuvre their opponents, to choose their own leader in the face of the full might of the powers that be.

For me this opens out onto a more general point. Did we place too much trust in the Americans? Were we too dependent on external forces? No. We simply tried to remain lucid, and to avoid facile demagoguery. It would be mere demagoguery for a Haitian president to pretend to be stronger than the Americans, or to engage them in a constant war of words, or to oppose them for opposing's sake. The only rational course is to weigh up the relative balance of interests, to figure out what the Americans want, to remember what we want, and to make the most of the available points of convergence. Take a concrete example, the events of 1994. Clinton needed a foreign policy victory, and a return to democracy in Haiti offered him that opportunity; we needed an instrument to overcome the resistance of the murderous Haitian army, and Clinton offered us that instrument. This is what I mean by acting in the spirit of Toussaint L'Ouverture. We never had any illusions that the Americans shared our deeper objectives, we knew they didn't want to travel in the same direction. But without the Americans we couldn't have restored democracy.

PH: There was no other option, no alternative to reliance on American troops?

JBA: No. The Haitian people are not armed. Of course there are some criminals and vagabonds, some drug dealers, some gangs who have weapons, but the people have no weapons. You're kidding yourself if you think that the people can wage an armed struggle. We need to look the situation in the eye: the people have no weapons, and they will never have as many weapons as their enemies. It's pointless to wage a struggle on your enemies' terrain, or to play by their rules. You will lose.

PH: Did you pay too high a price for American support? They forced you to make all kinds of compromises, to accept many of the things you'd always opposed — a severe structural adjustment plan, neo-liberal economic policies, privatisation of the state enterprises, etc. The Haitian people suffered a great deal under these constraints. It must have been very difficult to swallow these things, during the negotiations of 1993.

JBA: Yes of course, but here you have to distinguish between the struggle in principle, the struggle to persist in a preferential option for the poor, which for me is inspired by theology and is a matter of justice and truth, on the one hand, and on the other hand, *their* political struggle, which plays by different rules. In their version of politics you can lie and cheat if it allows you to pursue your strategic aims. The claim that there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, for instance, was a flagrant lie. But since it was a useful way of reaching their objective, Colin Powell and company went down that path.

As for Haiti, back in 1993, the Americans were perfectly happy to agree to a negotiated economic plan. When they insisted, via the IMF and other international financial institutions, on the privatisation of state enterprises, I was prepared to agree in principle, if necessary — but I refused simply to sell them off, unconditionally, to private investors. I said no to untrammelled privatisation. Now that there was corruption in the state sector was undeniable, but there were several different ways of engaging with this corruption. Rather than untrammelled privatisation, I was prepared to agree to a *democratisation* of these enterprises. What does this mean? It means an insistence on transparency. It means that some of the profits of a factory or a firm should go to the people who work for it. It means that some of those profits should be invested in things like local schools, or health clinics, so that the children of the workers can derive some benefit from their work. It means creating conditions on the micro level that are consistent with the principles that we want to guide development on the macro level. The Americans said fine, no problem.

We all signed those agreements, and I am at peace with my decision to this day. I spoke the truth. Whereas they signed them in a different spirit. They signed them because by doing so they could facilitate my return to Haiti and thus engineer their foreign policy victory, but once I was back in office, they were already planning to renegotiate the terms of the privatisation. And that's exactly what happened. They started to insist on untrammelled privatisation, and again I said no. They went back on our agreement, and then relied on a disinformation campaign to make it look like it was me who had broken my word. It's not true. The accords we signed are there, people can judge for themselves.¹ Unfortunately we didn't have the means to win the public relations fight. They won the communications battle, by spreading lies and distorting the truth, but I still feel that we won the real battle, by sticking to the truth.

PH: What about your battle with the Haitian army itself, the army that overthrew you in 1991? The Americans re-made this army in line with their own priorities back in 1915, and it had acted as a force for the protection of those priorities ever since. You were able to disband it just months after your return in 1994, but the way it was handled remains controversial, and you were never able fully to demobilise and disarm the soldiers themselves. Some of them came back to haunt you with a vengeance, during your second administration.

JBA: Again I have no regrets on this score. It was absolutely necessary to disband the army. We had an army of some 7000 soldiers, and it absorbed 40% of the national budget. Since 1915, it had served as an army of internal occupation. It never fought an external

¹ The text of the Paris accords was published in the August 1994 issue of *Multinational Monitor*, <http://multinationalmonitor.org/hyper/mm0894.html#haiti>.

enemy. It murdered thousands of our people. Why did we need such an army, rather than a suitably trained police force? So we did what needed to be done.

In fact we did organise a social programme for the reintegration of former soldiers, since they too are members of the national community. They too have the right to work, and the state has the responsibility to respect that right — all the more so when you know that if they don't find work, they will be more easily tempted to have recourse to violence, or theft, as did the Tontons Macoutes before them. We did the best we could. The problem didn't lie with our integration and demobilisation programme, it lay with the resentment of those who were determined to preserve the old status quo. They had plenty of money and weapons, and they work hand in hand with the most powerful military machine on the planet. It was easy for them to win over some former-soldiers, to train and equip them in the Dominican Republic and then use them to destabilise the country. That's exactly what they did. But again, it wasn't a mistake to disband the army. It's not as if we might have avoided the second coup, the coup of 2004, if we had hung on to the army. On the contrary, if the army had remained in place then René Prével would never have finished his first term in office (1996-2001), and I certainly wouldn't have been able to hold out for three years, from 2001 to 2004.

By acting the way we did we clarified the real conflict at issue here. As you know, Haiti's history is punctuated by a long series of coups. But unlike the previous coups, the coup of 2004 wasn't undertaken by the 'Haitian' army, acting on the orders of our little oligarchy, in line with the interests of foreign powers, as happened so many times before, and as happened again in 1991. No, this time these all-powerful interests had to carry out the job themselves, with their own troops and in their own name.

PH: Once Chamblain and his little band of rebels got bogged down on the outskirts of Port-au-Prince and couldn't advance any further, U.S. Marines had to go in and scoop you out of the country.

JBA: Exactly. The real truth of the situation, the real contradiction organising the situation, finally came out in the open, in full public view.

PH: Going back to the mid 1990s for a moment, did the creation of the Fanmi Lavalas party in 1996 serve a similar function, by helping to clarify the actual lines of internal conflict that had already fractured the loose coalition of forces that first brought you to power in 1990? Why were there such deep divisions between you and some of your erstwhile allies, people like Chavannes Jean-Baptiste and Gérard Pierre-Charles? Almost the whole of Prével's first administration, from 1996 to 2000, was hampered by infighting and opposition from Pierre-Charles and the OPL. Did you set out, then, to create a unified, disciplined party, one that could offer and then deliver a coherent political programme?

JBA: No, that's not the way it happened. In the first place, by training and by inclination I was a teacher, not a politician. I had no experience of party politics, and was happy to leave to others the task of developing a party organisation, of training party members, and so on. Already back in 1991, I was happy to leave this to career politicians, to people like Gérard Pierre-Charles, and along with other people he began working along these lines as soon as democracy was restored. He helped found the *Organisation Politique Lavalas* (OPL) and I encouraged people to join it. This party won the 1995 elections, and by the time I finished my term in office, in February 1996, it had a majority in parliament. But then, rather than seek to articulate an ongoing relation between the party and the people, rather than continue to listen to the people, after the elections the OPL started to pay less attention to them. It started to fall into the traditional patterns and practices of Haitian politics. It started to become more closed in on itself, more distant from the people, more

willing to make empty promises, and so on. As for me I was out of office, and I stayed on the sidelines. But a group of priests who were active in the Lavalas movement became frustrated, and wanted to restore a more meaningful link with the people. They wanted to remain in communion with the people. At this point (in 1996) the group of people who felt this way, who were unhappy with the OPL, were known as *la nébuleuse* — they were in an uncertain and confusing position. Over time there were more and more such people, who became more and more dissatisfied with the situation.

We engaged in long discussions about what to do, and Fanmi Lavalas grew out of these discussions. It emerged from the people themselves. And even when it came to be constituted as a political organisation, it never conceived of itself as a conventional political party. If you look through the organisation's constitution, you'll see that the word 'party' never comes up. It describes itself as an organisation, not a party. Why? Because in Haiti we have no positive experience of political parties; parties have always been instruments of manipulation and betrayal. On the other hand, we have a long and positive experience of *organisation*, of popular organisations — the *ti legliz*, for instance.

So no, it wasn't me who 'founded' Fanmi Lavalas as a political party. I just brought my contribution to the formation of this organisation, which offered a platform for those who were frustrated with the party that was the OPL (which was soon to re-brand itself as the neo-liberal *Organisation du Peuple en Lutte*), those who were still active in the movement but who felt excluded within it. Now in order to be effective Fanmi Lavalas needed to draw on the experience of people who knew something of politics, people who could act as political leaders without abandoning a commitment to truth. This is the hard problem, of course. Fanmi Lavalas doesn't have the strict discipline and coordination of a political party. Some of its members haven't yet acquired the training and the experience necessary to preserve both a commitment to truth and an effective participation in politics. For us, politics is deeply connected to ethics, this is the crux of the matter. Fanmi Lavalas is not an exclusively political organisation. That's why no politician has been able simply to appropriate and use Fanmi Lavalas as a springboard to power. That will never be easy: the members of Fanmi Lavalas insist on the fidelity of their leaders.

PH: That's a lesson that Marc Bazin, Louis-Gérald Gilles and a few others had to learn during the 2006 election campaign, to their cost.

JBA: Exactly.

PH: To what extent, however, did Fanmi Lavalas then become a victim of its own success? Rather like the ANC here in South Africa, it was obvious from the beginning that Fanmi Lavalas would be more or less unbeatable at the polls. But this can be a mixed blessing. How did you propose to deal with the many opportunists who immediately sought to worm their way into your organisation, people like Dany Toussaint and his associates?

JBA: I left office early in 1996. By 1997, Fanmi Lavalas had emerged as a functional organisation, with a clear constitution. This was already a big step forward from 1990. In 1990, the political movement was largely spontaneous; in 1997 things were more coordinated. Along with the constitution, at the first Fanmi Lavalas congress we voted and approved the programme laid out in our *Livre Blanc: Investir dans l'humain*, which I know you're familiar with. This programme didn't emerge out of nothing. For around two years we held meetings with engineers, with agronomists, with doctors, teachers, and so on. We listened and discussed the merits of different proposals. It was a collective process. The *Livre Blanc* is not a programme based on my personal priorities or ideology. It's the result of a long process of consultation with professionals in all these domains,

and it was compiled as a truly collaborative document. And as even the World Bank came to recognise, it was a genuine *programme*, a coherent plan for the transformation of the country. It wasn't a bundle of empty promises.

Now in the midst of these discussions, in the midst of the emergent organisation, it's true that you will find opportunists, you will find future criminals and future drug-dealers. But it wasn't easy to identify them. It wasn't easy to find them *in time*, and to expel them in time, before it was too late. Most of these people, before gaining a seat in parliament, behaved perfectly well. But you know, for some people power can be like alcohol: after a glass, two glasses, a whole bottle... you're not dealing with the same person. It makes some people dizzy. These things are difficult to anticipate. Nevertheless, I think that if it hadn't been for the intervention of foreign powers, we would have been able to make real progress. We had established viable methods for collaborative discussion, and for preserving direct links with the people. I think we would have made real progress, taking small but steady steps.

Even in spite of the aid embargo we managed to accomplish certain things. We were able to invest in education, for instance. As you know, in 1990 there were only 34 secondary schools in Haiti; by 2001 there were 138. The little that we had to invest, we invested it in line with the programme laid out in *Investir dans l'humain*. We built a new university at Tabarre, a new medical school. Although it had to run on a shoestring, the literacy programme we launched in 2001 was also working well; Cuban experts who helped us manage the programme were confident that by December 2004 we'd have reduced the rate of adult illiteracy to just 15%, a small fraction of what it was a decade earlier. Previous governments never seriously tried to invest in education, and it's clear that our programme was always going to be a threat to the status quo. The elite want nothing to do with popular education, for obvious reasons. Again it comes down to this: we can either set out from a position of genuine freedom and independence, and work to create a country that respects the dignity of all its people, or else we will have to accept a position of servile dependence, a country in which the dignity of ordinary people counts for nothing. This is what's at stake here.

PH: Armed then with its programme, Fanmi Lavalas duly won an overwhelming victory in the legislative elections of May 2000, winning around 75% of the vote. No one disputed the clarity and legitimacy of the victory. But your enemies in the U.S. and at home soon drew attention to the fact that the method used to calculate the number of votes needed to win some senate seats in a single round of voting (i.e. without the need for a run-off election between the two most popular candidates) was at least controversial, if not illegitimate. They jumped on this technicality in order to cast doubt on the validity of the election victory itself, and used it to justify an immediate suspension of international loans and aid. Soon after your own second term in office began (in February 2001), the winners of these seats were persuaded to stand down, pending a further round of elections. But this was a year after the event; wouldn't it have been better to resolve the matter more quickly, to avoid giving the Americans a pretext to undermine your administration before it even began?

JBA: I hope you won't mind if I take you up on your choice of verbs: you say that we *gave* the Americans a pretext. In reality the Americans *created* their pretext, and if it hadn't been this it would have been something else. Their goal all along was to ensure that come January 2004, there would be no meaningful celebration of the bicentenary of independence. It took the U.S. 58 years to recognise Haiti's independence, since of course the U.S. was a slave-owning country at the time, and in fact U.S. policy has never really changed. Their priorities haven't changed, and today's American policy is more or less consistent with the way it's always been. The coup of September 1991 was undertaken by

people in Haiti with the support of the U.S. administration, and in February 2004 it happened again, thanks to many of these same people.

No, the U.S. *created* their little pretext. They were having trouble persuading the other leaders in CARICOM to turn against us (many of whom in fact they were never able to persuade), and they needed a pretext that was clear and easy to understand. ‘Tainted elections’, it was the perfect card to play. But I remember very well what happened when they came to observe the elections. They came, and they said ‘very good, no problem’. Everything seemed to go smoothly, the process was deemed peaceful and fair. And then as the results came in, in order to undermine our victory, they asked questions about the way the votes were counted. But I had nothing to do with this. I wasn’t a member of the government, and I had no influence over the CEP (Provisional Electoral Council), which alone has the authority to decide on these matters. The CEP is a sovereign, independent body. The CEP declared the results of the elections; I had nothing to do with it. Then once I had been re-elected, and the Americans demanded that I dismiss these senators, what was I supposed to do? The constitution doesn’t give the president the power to dismiss senators who were elected in keeping with the protocol decided by the CEP. Can you imagine a situation like this back in the U.S. itself? What would happen if a foreign government insisted that the president dismiss an elected senator? It’s absurd. The whole situation is simply racist, in fact; they impose conditions on us that they would never contemplate imposing on a ‘properly’ independent country, on a *white* country. We have to call things by their name: is the issue really a matter of democratic governance, of the validity of a particular electoral result? Or is actually about something else?

In the end, what the Americans wanted to do was to use the legislature, the senate, against the executive. They hoped that I would be stupid enough to insist on the dismissal of these elected senators. I refused to do it. In 2001, as a gesture of goodwill, these senators eventually chose to resign on the assumption that they would contest new elections as soon as the opposition was prepared to participate in them. But the Americans failed to turn the senate and the parliament against the presidency, and it soon became clear that the opposition never had the slightest interest in new elections. Once this tactic failed, however, they recruited or bought off a few hotheads, including Dany Toussaint and company, and used *them*, a little later, against the presidency.

Once again, the overall objective was to undermine the celebration of our bicentenary, the celebration of our independence and of all its implications. When the time came they sent emissaries to Africa, especially to francophone Africa, telling their leaders not to attend the celebrations. Chirac applied enormous pressure on his African colleagues; the Americans did the same. Thabo Mbeki was almost alone in his willingness to resist this pressure, and through him the African Union was represented. I’m very glad of it. The same pressure was applied in the Caribbean: the prime minister of the Bahamas, Perry Christie, decided to come, but that’s it, he was the only one. It was very disappointing.

PH: In the press, meanwhile, you came to be presented not as the unequivocal winner of legitimate elections, but as an increasingly tyrannical autocrat.

JBA: Exactly. A lot of the \$200 million or so in aid and development money for Haiti that was suspended when we won the elections in 2000 was simply diverted to a propaganda and destabilisation campaign waged against our government and against Fanmi Lavalas. The disinformation campaign was truly massive. Huge sums of money were spent to get the message out, through the radio, through newspapers, through various little political parties that were supposed to serve as vehicles for the opposition... It was extraordinary. When I look back at this very discouraging period in our history I compare it with what has recently happened in some other places. They went to the same sort of trouble when they tried to say there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. I can still see Colin

Powell sitting there in front of the United Nations, with his little bag of tricks, demonstrating for all the world to see that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. Look at this irrefutable proof! It was pathetic. In any case the logic was the same: they rig up a useful lie, and then they sell it. It's the logic of people who take themselves to be all-powerful. If they decide $1 + 1 = 4$, then 4 it will have to be.

PH: From My Lai to the Iran-Contras to Iraq to Haiti, Colin Powell has made an entire career along these lines... But going back to May 2000: soon after the results were declared, the head of the CEP, Leon Manus, fled the country, claiming that the results were invalid and that you and Préval had put pressure on him to calculate the votes in a particular way. Why did he come to embrace the American line?

JBA: Well, I don't want to judge Leon Manus, I don't know what happened exactly. But I think he acted in the same way as some of the leaders of the Group of 184. They are beholden to a *patron*, a boss. The boss is American, a white American. And you are black. Don't underestimate the inferiority complex that still so often conditions these relationships. You are black. But sometimes you get to feel almost as white as the whites themselves, you get to feel whiter than white, if you're willing to get down on your knees in front of the whites. If you're willing to get down on your knees, rather than stay on your feet, then you can feel almost as white as they look. This is a psychological legacy of slavery: to lie for the white man isn't really lying at all, since white men don't lie! [laughs]. How could white men lie? They are the civilised ones. If I lie for the whites I'm not really lying, I'm just repeating what they say. So I don't know, but I imagine Leon Manus felt like this when he repeated the lie that they wanted him to repeat. Don't forget, his journey out of the country began in a car with *diplomatic* plates, and he arrived in Santo Domingo on an American helicopter. Who has access to that sort of transport?

In this case and others like it, what's really going on is clear enough. It's the people with power who pull the strings, and they use this or that *petit nègre de service*, this or that black messenger to convey the lies that they call truth. The people recruited into the Group of 184 did much the same thing: they were paid off to say what their employers wanted them to say. They helped destroy the country, in order to please their *patrons*.

PH: Why were these people so aggressively hostile to you and your government? There's something hysterical about the positions taken by the so-called 'Democratic Convergence', and later by the 'Group of 184', by people like Evans Paul, Gérard Pierre-Charles and others. They refused all compromise, they insisted on all sorts of unreasonable conditions before they would even consider participation in another round of elections. The Americans themselves seemed exasperated with them, but made no real effort to rein them in.

JBA: They made no effort to rein them in because this was all part of the plan. It's a little bit like what's happening now [in July 2006], with Yvon Neptune: the Americans have been shedding crocodile tears over poor imprisoned Neptune, as if they haven't been complicit in and responsible for this imprisonment! As if they don't have the power to change the situation overnight! They have the power to undermine and overthrow a democratically elected government, but they don't have the power to set free a couple of prisoners that they themselves put in prison [laughs]. Naturally they have to respect the law, the proper procedures, the integrity of Haitian institutions! This is all bluff, it's absurd.

Why were the Group of 184 and our opponents in 'civil society' so hostile? Again it's partly a matter of social pathology. When a group of citizens is prepared to act in so irrational and servile a fashion, when they are so willing to relay the message concocted

by their foreign masters, without even realising that in doing so they inflict harm upon themselves — well if you ask me, this is a symptom of a real pathology. It has something to do with a visceral hatred, which became a real obsession: a hatred for the people. It was never really about me, it's got nothing to do with me as an individual. They detest and despise the people. They refuse absolutely to acknowledge that we are all equal, that everyone is equal. So when they behave in this way, part of the reason is to reassure themselves that they are different, that they are not like the people, not like *them*. It's essential that they see themselves as better than others. I think this is one part of the problem, and it's not simply a political problem. There's something masochistic about this behaviour, and there are plenty of foreign sadists who are more than willing to oblige!

I'm convinced it's bound up with the legacy of slavery, with an inherited contempt for the people, for the common people, for the *niggers* [*petits nègres*]... It's the psychology of apartheid: it's better to get down on your knees with whites than it is to stand shoulder to shoulder with blacks. Don't underestimate the depth of this contempt. Don't forget that back in 1991, one of the first things we did was abolish the classification, on birth certificates, of people who were born outside of Port-au-Prince as 'peasants'. This kind of classification, and all sorts of things that went along with it, served to maintain a system of rigid exclusion. It served to keep people outside, to treat them as *moun andeyo* — people from outside. People under the table. This is what I mean by the mentality of apartheid, and it runs very deep. It won't change overnight.

PH: What about your own willingness to work alongside people compromised by their past, for instance your inclusion of former Duvalierists in your second administration? Was that an easy decision to take? Was it necessary?

JBA: No it wasn't easy, but I saw it as a necessary evil. Take Marc Bazin, for instance. He was minister of finance under Jean-Claude Duvalier. I only turned to Bazin because my opponents in Democratic Convergence, in the OPL and so on, absolutely refused any participation in the government.

PH: You were under pressure to build a government of 'consensus', of national unity, and you approached people in the Convergence first?

JBA: Right, and I got nowhere. Their objective was to scrap the entire process, and they said no straightaway. Look, of course we had a massive majority in parliament, and I wasn't prepared to dissolve a properly elected parliament. What for? But I was aware of the danger of simply excluding the opposition. I wanted a democratic government, and so I set out to make it as inclusive as I could, under the circumstances. Since the Convergence wasn't willing to participate, I invited people from sectors that had little or no representation in parliament to have a voice in the administration, to occupy some ministerial positions and to keep a balance between the legislative and the executive branches of government.

PH: This must have been very controversial. Bazin not only worked for Duvalier, he was your opponent back in 1990.

JBA: Yes it was controversial, and I didn't take the decision alone. We talked about it at length, we held meetings, looking for a compromise. Some were for, some were against, and in the end there was a majority who accepted that we couldn't afford to work alone, that we needed to demonstrate we were willing and able to work with people who *clearly* weren't pro-Lavalas. They weren't pro-Lavalas, but we had already published a well-defined political programme, and if they were willing to cooperate on this or that aspect of the programme, then we were willing to work with them as well.

PH: It's ironic: you were often accused of being a sort of 'monarchical' if not tyrannical president, of being intolerant of dissent, too determined to get your own way... But what do you say to those who argue instead that the real problem was just the opposite, that you were too tolerant of dissent? You allowed ex-soldiers to call openly and repeatedly for the reconstitution of the army. You allowed self-appointed leaders of 'civil society' to do everything in their power to disrupt your government. You allowed radio stations to sustain a relentless campaign of misinformation. You allowed all sorts of demonstrations to go on day after day, calling for you to be overthrown by fair means or foul, and many of these demonstrators were directly funded and organised by your enemies in the U.S. Eventually the situation got out of hand, and the people who sought to profit from the chaos certainly weren't motivated by respect for the rights of free speech!

JBA: Well, this is what democracy requires. Either you allow for the free expression of diverse opinions or you don't. If people aren't free to demonstrate and to give voice to their demands there is no democracy. Now again, I knew our position was strong in parliament, and that the great majority of the people were behind us. A small minority opposed us, a small but powerful minority. Their foreign connections, their business interests, and so on, make them powerful. Nevertheless they have the right to protest, to articulate their demands, just like anyone else. That's normal. As for accusations that I was becoming dictatorial, authoritarian, and so on, I paid no attention. I knew they were lying, and I knew they knew they were lying. Of course it was a predictable strategy, and it helped create a familiar image they could sell to the outside world. At home, however, everyone knew it was ridiculous. And in the end, like I said before, it was the foreign masters themselves who had to come to Haiti to finish the job. My government certainly wasn't overthrown by the people who were demonstrating in the streets.

PH: Perhaps the most serious and frequent accusation that was made by the demonstrators, and repeated by your critics abroad, is that you resorted to violence in order to hang on to power. The claim is that, as the pressure on your government grew, you started to rely on armed gangs from the slums, so-called 'chimères', and that you used them to intimidate and in some cases to murder your opponents.

JBA: Here again the people who make these sort of claims are lying, and I think they know they are lying. As soon as you start to look rationally at what was really going on, these accusations don't even begin to stand up. Several things have to be kept in mind. First of all, the police had been working under an embargo for several years. We weren't even able to buy bullet-proof vests or tear-gas canisters. The police were severely under-equipped, and were often simply unable to control a demonstration or confrontation. Some of our opponents, some of the demonstrators who sought to provoke violent confrontations, knew this perfectly well. The people also understood this. It was common knowledge that while the police were running out of ammunition and supplies in Haiti, heavy weapons were being smuggled to our opponents in and through the Dominican Republic. The people knew this, and didn't like it. They started getting nervous, with good reason.

The provocations didn't let up, and there were some isolated acts of violence. Was this violence justified? No. I condemned it. I condemned it consistently. But with the limited means at our disposal, how could we prevent every outbreak of violence? There was a lot of provocation, a lot of anger, and there was no way that we could ensure that each and every citizen would refuse violence. The president of a country like Haiti cannot be held responsible for the actions of its every citizen. But there was never any deliberate encouragement of violence, there was no deliberate recourse to violence. Those who make and repeat these claims are lying, and they know it.

Now what about these ‘chimères’, the people they call *chimères*? This is clearly another expression of our apartheid mentality, the very word says it all. ‘Chimères’ are people who are impoverished, who live in a state of profound insecurity and chronic unemployment. They are the victims of structural injustice, of systematic social violence. And they are among the people who voted for this government, who appreciated what the government was doing and had done, in spite of the embargo. It’s not surprising that they should confront those who have always benefited from this same social violence, once they started actively seeking to undermine their government.

Again, this doesn’t justify occasional acts of violence, but where does the real responsibility lie? Who are the real victims of violence here? How many members of the elite, how many members of the opposition’s many political parties, were killed by ‘chimères’? How many? Who are they? Meanwhile everyone knows that powerful economic interests were quite happy to fund certain criminal gangs, that they put weapons in the hands of vagabonds, in Cité Soleil and elsewhere, in order to create disorder and blame it on Fanmi Lavalas. These same people also paid journalists to present the situation in a certain way, and among other things they promised them visas — recently some of them who are now living in France admitted what they were told to say, in order to get their visa. So you have people who were financing misinformation on the one hand and destabilisation on the other, and who encouraged little groups of hoodlums to sow panic on the streets, to create the impression of a government that is losing control.

As if all this wasn’t enough, rather than allow police munitions to get through to Haiti, rather than send arms and equipment to strengthen the Haitian government, the Americans sent them to their proxies in the Dominican Republic instead. You only have to look at who these people were — people like Jodel Chamblain, who is a convicted criminal, who escaped justice in Haiti to be welcomed by the US, and who then armed and financed these future ‘freedom fighters’ who were waiting over the border in the Dominican Republic. That’s what really happened. We didn’t arm the ‘chimères’, it was they who armed Chamblain and Philippe! The hypocrisy is extraordinary. And then when it comes to 2004-2006, suddenly all this indignant talk of violence falls quiet. As if nothing had happened. People were being herded into containers and dropped into the sea. That counts for nothing. The endless attacks on Cité Soleil, they count for nothing. I could go on and on. Thousands have died. But they don’t count, because they are just ‘chimères’, after all. They don’t count as equals, they aren’t *really* people in their own right.

PH: What about people in your entourage like Dany Toussaint, your former chief of security, who was accused of all kinds of violence and intimidation?

JBA: He was working for them! It’s clear. From the beginning. And we were taken in. Of course I regret this. But it wasn’t hard for the Americans or their proxies to infiltrate the government, to infiltrate the police. We weren’t even able to provide the police with the equipment they needed, we could hardly pay them an adequate salary. It was easy for our opponents to stir up trouble, to co-opt some policemen, to infiltrate our organisation. This was incredibly difficult to control. We were truly surrounded. I was surrounded by people who one way or another were in the pay of foreign powers, who were working actively to overthrow the government. A friend of mine said at the time, looking at the situation, ‘I now understand why you believe in God, as otherwise I can’t understand how you can still be alive, in the midst of all this.’

PH: I suppose even your enemies knew there was nothing to gain by turning you into a martyr.

JBA: Yes, they knew that a mixture of disinformation and character assassination would be more effective, more devastating. I'm certainly used to it [*laughs*].

PH: How can I find out more about Dany Toussaint's role in all this? He wasn't willing to talk to me when I was in Port-au-Prince a couple of months ago. It's intriguing that the people who were clamouring for his arrest while you were still in power were then suddenly quite happy to leave him in peace, once he had openly come out against you (in December 2003), and once they themselves were in power. But can you prove that he was working for or with them all along?

JBA: This won't be easy to document, I accept that. But if you dig around for evidence I think you'll find it. Over time, things that were once hidden and obscure tend to come to light. In Haiti there are lots of rumours and counter-rumours, but eventually the truth tends to come out. There's a proverb in Kreyol that says *twou manti pa fon*. Lies don't run very deep. Sooner or later the truth will out. There are plenty of things that were happening at the time that only recently are starting to come to light.

PH: You mean things like the eventual public admissions, made over the past year or so by rebel leaders Rémissainthe Ravix and Guy Philippe, about the extent of their long-standing collaboration with the Convergence Démocratique, with the Americans?

JBA: Exactly.

PH: Along the same lines, what do you say to militant leftwing groups like Batay Ouvriye, who insist that your government failed to do enough to help the poor, that you did nothing for the workers? Although they would appear to have little in common with the Convergence, they made and continue to make many of the same sorts of accusations against Fanmi Lavalas.

JBA: I think, although I'm not sure, that there are several things that help explain this. First of all, you need to look at where their funding comes from. The discourse makes more sense, once we know who is paying the bills. The Americans don't just fund political groups willy-nilly.

PH: Particularly not quasi-Trotskyite trade unionists...

JBA: Of course not. And again, I think that part of the reason comes back to what I was saying before, that somewhere, somehow, there's a little secret satisfaction, perhaps an unconscious satisfaction, in saying things that powerful white people want you to say. Even here, I think it goes something like this: 'yes we are workers, we are farmers, we are struggling on behalf of the workers, but somewhere, there's a little part of us that would like to escape our mental class, the state of mind of our class, and jump up into another mental class.' My hunch is that it's something like that. In Haiti, contempt for the people runs very deep. In my experience, resistance to our affirmation of equality, our being together with the people, ran very deep indeed. Even when it comes to trivial things.

PH: Like inviting kids from poor neighbourhoods to swim in your pool?

JBA: Right. You wouldn't believe the reactions this provoked. It was too scandalous: swimming pools are supposed to be the preserve of the rich. When I saw the photographs this past February, of the people swimming in the pool of the Montana Hotel, I smiled [*laughs*]. I thought that was great. I thought ah, now I can die in peace. It was great to see. Because at the time, when kids came to swim in our pool at Tabarre, lots of people said

look, he's opening the doors of his house to riff-raff, he's putting ideas in their heads. First they will ask to swim in his pool; soon they will demand a place in our house. And I said no, it's just the opposite. I had no interest in the pool itself, I hardly ever used it. What interested me was the message this sent out. Kids from the poorer neighbourhoods would normally never get to see a pool, let alone swim in one. Many are full of envy for the rich. But once they've swum in a pool, once they realise that it's just a pool, they conclude that it doesn't much matter. The envy is deflated.

PH: That day in February, a huge crowd of thousands of people came up from the slums to make their point to the CEP (which was stationed in the Montana Hotel), they made their demands, and then hundreds of them swam in the Montana's pool and left, without touching a thing. No damage, no theft, just making a point.

JBA: Exactly. It was a joy to see those pictures.

PH: Turning now to what happened in February 2004. I know you've often been asked about this, but there are wildly different versions of what happened in the run-up to your expulsion from the country. The Americans insist that late in the day you came calling for help, that you suddenly panicked and that they were caught off guard by the speed of your government's collapse. On the face of it this doesn't look very plausible. Guy Philippe's well-armed rebels were able to outgun some isolated police stations, and appeared to control much of the northern part of the country. But how much support did the rebels really have? And surely there was little chance that they could take the capital itself, in the face of the many thousands of people who were ready to defend it?

JBA: Don't forget that there had been several attempts at a coup in the previous few years, in July 2001, with an attack on the police academy, the former military academy, and again a few months later, in December 2001, with an incursion into the national palace itself. They didn't succeed, and on both occasions these same rebels were forced to flee the city. They only just managed to escape. It wasn't the police alone who chased them away, it was a combination of the police and the people. So they knew what they were up against, they knew that it wouldn't be easy. They might be able to find a way into the city, but they knew that it would be hard to remain there. It was a little like the way things later turned out in Iraq: the Americans had the weapons to battle their way in easily enough, but staying there has proved to be more of a challenge. The rebels knew they couldn't take Port-au-Prince, and that's why they hesitated for a while, on the outskirts, some 40 km away. So from our perspective we had nothing to fear. The balance of forces was in our favour, that was clear. There are occasions when large groups of people are more powerful than heavy machine guns and automatic weapons, it all depends on the context. And the context of Port-au-Prince, in a city with so many national and international interests, with its embassies, its public prominence and visibility, and so on, was different from the context of more isolated places like Saint-Marc or Gonaïves. The people were ready, and I wasn't worried.

No, the rebels knew they couldn't take the city, and that's why their masters decided on a diversion instead, on attacks in the provinces, in order to create the illusion that much of the country was under their control, that there was a major insurrection under way. But it wasn't the case. There was no great insurrection: there was a small group of soldiers, heavily armed, who were able to overwhelm some police stations, kill some policemen and create a certain amount of havoc. The police had run out of ammunition, and were no match for the rebels' M16s. But the city was a different story.

Meanwhile, as you know on February 29 a shipment of police munitions that we had bought from South Africa, perfectly legally, was due to arrive in Port-au-Prince. This decided the matter. Already the balance of forces was against the rebels; on top of that, if

the police were restored to something like their full operational capacity, then the rebels stood no chance at all.

PH: So at that point the Americans had no option but to go in and get you themselves, the night of 28 February?

JBA: That's right. They knew that in a few more hours, they would lose their opportunity to 'resolve' the situation. They grabbed their chance while they had it, and bundled us onto a plane in the middle of the night. That's what they did.

PH: The Americans — Ambassador Foley, Luis Moreno, and so on — insist that you begged for their help, that they had to arrange a flight to safety at the last minute. Several reporters were prepared to endorse their account. On the other hand, speaking on condition of anonymity, one of the American security guards who was on your plane that night told the Washington Post soon after the event that the U.S. story was a pure fabrication, that it was 'just bogus.' Your personal security advisor and pilot, Frantz Gabriel, also confirms that you were kidnapped that night by U.S. military personnel. Who are we supposed to believe?

JBA: Well. For me it's very simple. You're dealing with a country that was willing and able, in front of the United Nations and in front of the world at large, to fabricate claims about the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. They were willing to lie about issues of global importance. It's hardly surprising that they were able to find a few people to say the things that needed to be said in Haiti, in a small country of no great strategic significance. They have their people, their resources, their way of doing things. They just carried out their plan, that's all. It was all part of the plan.

PH: They said they couldn't send peacekeepers to help stabilise the situation, but as soon as you were gone, the troops arrived straight away.

JBA: The plan was perfectly clear.

PH: I have just a couple of last questions. In August and September 2005, in the run up to the elections that finally took place in February 2006, there was a lot of discussion within Fanmi Lavalas about how to proceed. In the end, most of the rank and file threw their weight behind your old colleague, your 'twin brother' René Prével, but some members of the leadership opted to stand as candidates in their own right; others were even prepared to endorse Marc Bazin's candidacy. It was a confusing situation, one that must have put great strain on the organisation, but you kept very quiet.

JBA: In a dictatorship, the orders go from top to bottom. In a democratic organisation, the process is more dialectical. The small groups or cells that we call the *ti fanmis* are part of Fanmi Lavalas, they discuss things, debate things, express themselves, until a collective decision emerges from out of the discussion. This is how the organisation works. Of course our opponents will always cry 'dictatorship, dictatorship, it's just Aristide giving orders.' But people who are familiar with the organisation know that's not the way it is. We have no experience of situations in which someone comes and gives an order, without discussion. I remember that when we had to choose the future electoral candidates for Fanmi Lavalas, back in 1999, the discussions at the Foundation [the Aristide Foundation for Democracy] would often run long into the night. Delegations would come from all over the country, and members of the *cellules de base* would argue for or against. Often it wasn't easy to find a compromise, but this is how the process worked, this was our way of doing things. So now, when it came to deciding on a new presidential candidate last year,

I was confident that the discussion would proceed in the same way, even though by that stage many members of the organisation had been killed, and many more were in hiding, in exile or in prison. I made no declaration one way or another about what to do or who to support. I knew they would make the right decision in their own way. A lot of the things 'I' decided, as president, were in reality decided this way: the decision didn't originate with me, but with them. It was with their words that I spoke. The decisions we made emerged through a genuinely collective process. The people are intelligent, and their intelligence is often surprising.

I knew that the Fanmi Lavalas senators who decided to back Bazin would soon be confronted by the truth, but I didn't know how this would happen, since the true decision emerged from the people, from below, not from above. And no-one could have guessed it, a couple of months in advance. Never doubt the people's intelligence, their power of discernment. Did I give an order to support Bazin or to oppose Bazin? No, I gave no order either way. I trusted the membership to get at the truth.

Of course the organisation is guided by certain principles, and I drew attention to some of them at the time. In South Africa, back in 1994, could there have been fair elections if Mandela was still in prison, if Mbeki was still in exile, if other leaders of the ANC were in hiding? The situation in Haiti this past year was much the same: there could hardly be fair elections before the prisoners were freed, before the exiles were allowed to return, and so on. I was prepared to speak out about this, as a matter of general principle. But to go further than this, to declare for this or that candidate, this or that course of action, no, it wasn't for me to say.

PH: How do you now envisage the future? What has to happen next? Can there be any real change in Haiti without directly confronting the question of class privilege and power, without finding some way of overcoming the resistance of the dominant class?

JBA: We will have to confront these things, one way or another. The condition *sine qua non* for doing this is obviously the participation of the people. Once the people are genuinely able to *participate* in the democratic process, then they will be able to devise an acceptable way forward. In any case the process itself is irreversible. It's irreversible at the mental level, at the level of people's minds. Members of the impoverished sections of Haitian society now have an experience of democracy, of a collective consciousness, and they will not allow a government or a candidate to be imposed on them. They demonstrated this in February 2006, and I know they will keep on demonstrating it. They will not accept lies in the place of truth, as if they were too stupid to understand the difference between the two. Everything comes back, in the end, to the simple principle that *tout moun se moun* — every person is indeed a person, every person is capable of thinking things through for themselves. Either you accept this principle or you don't. Those who don't accept it, when they look at the *nègres* of Haiti — and consciously or unconsciously, that's what they see — they see people who are too poor, too crude, too uneducated, to think for themselves. They see people who need others to make their decisions for them. It's a colonial mentality, in fact, and this mentality is still very widespread among our political class. It's also a projection: they project upon the people a sense of their own inadequacy, their own inequality in the eyes of the master.

So yes, for me there is a way out, a way forward, and it has to pass by way of the people. Even if we don't yet have viable democratic structures and institutions, there is already a democratic consciousness, a collective democratic consciousness, and this is irreversible. February 2006 shows how much has been gained, it shows how far down the path of democracy we have come, even after the coup, even after two years of ferocious violence and repression.

What remains unclear is how long it will take. We may move forward fairly quickly, if through their mobilisation the people encounter interlocutors who are willing

to listen, to enter into dialogue with them. If they don't find them, it will take longer. From 1992 to 1994 for instance, there were people in the U.S. government who were willing to listen at least a little, and this helped the democratic process to move forward. Since 2000 we've had to deal with a U.S. administration that is diametrically opposed to its predecessor, and everything slowed down dramatically, or went into reverse. The question is how long it will take. The real problem isn't simply a Haitian one, it isn't located within Haiti. It's a problem for Haiti that is located outside Haiti! The people who control it can speed things up, slow them down, block them altogether, as they like. But the process itself, the democratic process in Haiti itself, it *will* move forward one way or another, it's irreversible. That's how I understand it.

As for what will happen now, or next, that's unclear. The unknown variables I mentioned before remain in force, and much depends on how those who control the means of repression both at home and abroad will react. We still need to develop new ways of reducing and eventually eliminating our dependence on foreign powers.

PH: And your own next step? I know you're still hoping to get back to Haiti as soon as possible: any progress there? What are your own priorities now?

JBA: Yes indeed: Thabo Mbeki's last public declaration on this point dates from February, when he said he saw no particular reason why I shouldn't be able to return home, and this still stands. Of course it's still a matter of judging when the time is right, of judging the security and stability of the situation. The South African government has welcomed us here as guests, not as exiles; by helping us so generously they have made their contribution to peace and stability in Haiti. And once the conditions are right we'll go back. As soon as René Préval judges that the time is right then I'll go back. I am ready to go back tomorrow.

PH: In the eyes of your opponents, you still represent a major political threat.

JBA: Criminals like Chamblain and Philippe are free to patrol the streets, even now, but I should remain in exile because some members of the elite think I represent a major threat? Who is the real threat? Who is guilty, and who is innocent? Again, either we live in a democracy or we don't, either we respect the law or we don't. There is no legal justification for blocking my return. It's slightly comical: I was elected president but am accused of dictatorship by nameless people who are accountable to no-one yet have the power to expel me from the country and then to delay or block my return [*laughs*]. In any case, once I'm finally able to return, then the fears of these people will evaporate like mist, since they have no substance. They have no more substance than did the threat of legal action against me, which was finally abandoned this past week, once even the American lawyers who were hired to prosecute the case realised that the whole thing was empty, that there was nothing in it.

PH: You have no further plans to play some sort of role in politics?

JBA: I've often been asked this question, and my answer hasn't changed. For me it's very clear. There are different ways of serving the people. Participation in the politics of the state isn't the only way. Before 1990 I served the people, from outside the structure of the state. I will serve the people again, from outside the structure of the state. My first vocation was teaching, it's a vocation that I have never abandoned, I am still committed to it. For me, one of the great achievements of our second administration was the construction of the University of Tabarre, which was built entirely under embargo but which in terms of its infrastructure became the largest university in Haiti (and which,

since 2004, has been occupied by foreign troops). I would like to go back to teaching, I plan to remain active in education.

As for politics, I never had any interest in becoming a political leader ‘for life.’ That was Duvalier: president for life. In fact that is also the way most political parties in Haiti still function: they serve the interests of a particular individual, of a small group of friends. Often it’s just a dozen people, huddled around their life-long chief. This is not at all how a political organisation should work. A political organisation consists of its members, it isn’t the instrument of one man. Of course I would like to help strengthen the organisation. If I can help with the training of its members, if I can accompany the organisation as it moves forward, then I will be glad to be of service. Fanmi Lavalas needs to become more professional, it needs to have more internal discipline; the democratic process needs properly functional political parties, and it needs *parties*, in the plural. So I will not dominate or lead the organisation, that is not my role, but I will contribute what I can.

PH: And now, at this point, after all these long years of struggle, and after the setbacks of these last years, what is your general assessment of the situation? Are you discouraged? Hopeful?

JBA: No I’m not discouraged. You teach philosophy, so let me couch my answer in philosophical terms. You know that we can think the category of *being* either in terms of potential or act, *en puissance ou en acte*. This is a familiar Aristotelian distinction: being can be potential or actual. So long as it remains potential, you cannot touch it or confirm it. But it *is*, nonetheless, it exists. The collective consciousness of the Haitian people, their mobilisation for democracy, these things may not have been fully actualised but they exist, they are real. This is what sustains me. I am sustained by this collective potential, the power of this collective potential being [*cet être collectif en puissance*]. This power has not yet been actualised, it has not yet been enacted in the building of enough schools, of more hospitals, more opportunities, but these things will come. The power is real and it is what animates the way forward.

[END]

Editorial note: This interview was conducted in French, in Pretoria, on 20 July 2006; it was translated and edited by Peter Hallward, professor of philosophy at Middlesex University. An abbreviated version of the interview appeared in the *London Review of Books* 29:4 (22 February 2007), http://www.lrb.co.uk/v29/n04/hall02_.html. The text of the complete interview will appear as an appendix to Hallward’s forthcoming book *Damming the Flood: Haiti, Aristide and the Politics of Containment*, due out from Verso in the summer of 2007.