



LIONEL ZINSOU

Co-chair of SouthBridge, former Prime Minister of Benin

Thierry de MONTBRIAL

My dear Lionel, you're up next.

Lionel ZINSOU

Thank you Thierry. Hello everybody. I would like start out by saying that my point is modest compared with the one made by my friend who has just spoken to you, because he has achieved slightly more than 10% of GDP growth in Ethiopia. He has done Africa the favour of knowing that it was possible. My neighbour allowed us to glimpse the hope of brisk, balanced growth in a country with a highly diversified economy. The fact that that it is possible releases the whole continent's energies. I want to thank him for that here. I am delighted to be with him. We have been side by side in several circumstances, and working with him is very stimulating. He has allowed the continent to imagine a bright future under our control.

I will answer your question: what has been positive and what has been negative about our experience of public affairs? On the positive side, there is mixing. You have a problem in politics in Africa if you are not quite like everybody else. It is always a bit hard to be different. When I speak publicly in France, at a progressive think tank I run for example, fascist-leaning people on social media tell me, "Go ahead, do that in Africa. What legitimacy do you have to lecture us?" And when I am a candidate for president in Benin, I am told, "Go back home to the white folks, you do not know us." That is extraordinary because you see your society from a more distant perspective each time. I am delighted that this conference is taking place in Morocco because people on the street speak to me in the Moroccan Arabic dialect, which I cannot understand at all, because they think I am from here. For a mixed-race person, it means a lot to have someplace in the world where people think you were born. That is not the case for my mother or father. But instead of experiencing that as something sad, I think of it as something wonderful because it allows you to try combining cultures and experiences. One of the most rewarding things I experienced in an electoral campaign, when you meet millions of people and travel to the end of the furthest clearing in your country's most remote forest, is how open and non-xenophobic the people are. Perhaps that is a blessing. They tell me, "Where you come from, up north, it seems to be a meritocracy, where people can move ahead in society. Will you bring that here to us?" You see, even when people tell me, "You are white, you are not really one of us," they say it in a positive way.

I am struck by how mixed we are in Africa. Mr. Prime Minister, our Ethiopian friends think they are the best possible mix of civilisations. They think that God made whites, who are underbaked loaves of bread, and He made people like me, who are burnt loaves of bread, and then He made Ethiopians, who are perfect. Although I am a burnt loaf, what strikes me is how much desire there is to be at the root of a people, despite extreme diversity. The prime minister started with that desire of a people, a continent, an identity largely based on the fact that all of us were dominated at one point or another, except Ethiopia. When we built the postwar system of global government, Ethiopia was Africa's only representative. It is a somewhat special case. The seat of the African Union is there, but all of us are extraordinarily mixed in Africa, which would delight Léopold Sédar Senghor, a great friend and mentor of Governor Trichet opposite me. Senghor would enjoy our mutual admiration, the extreme mixing, which can even be seen in His Majesty's goal of making Morocco a completely and fully African country present in all the other countries of Africa.

I am aware that there are still tribal conflicts and tendencies towards racism. But what strikes me is how much the momentum is flowing in the other direction and how capable we are of combining differences. Another thing about the diaspora is seeing the young leaders in the civil service the prime minister talked about, who come from everywhere, who have studied everywhere and who return home. In the final analysis, home is where the heart is. I have three daughters. Two live in Benin. None was born there. They have no problem saying "We, the Beninese". Sometimes there



are people who ask, not in Benin but abroad, “Are there many white Beninese?” because they are whiter than I am, but that is not a problem for them. They return to Africa because anything is possible there. We created a financial company with ADB chairman Donald Kaberuka, a familiar face here. We only get CVs from young Africans, none at all from Benin or Rwanda but from throughout Africa, who say, “Wall Street is fine, the City is fine, Paris is fine—Agnès introduced me to one who was in Chicago—but all of us want to come home and build our Africa.” That is striking. Nigerians call them repats.

What I find the most negative, the saddest, is my inability to convince Europeans and non-Africans that there are some preconceived ideas about Africa, which no longer bother Africa, but will bother them. There is a degree of ignorance or indifference that is problematic for Europe and the West in general. When I was in business, before entering politics, for a long time I considered it my duty to try to explain what is really happening in Africa, that what is happening is extremely vigorous, extremely transformational, and people called me a naive Afro-optimist. That word was invented to describe me and a particularly silly kind of wishful thinking that Africa is doing better and better despite the obvious fact that it is beset by myriad scourges, epidemics, conflicts, corruption, a whole series of Biblical plagues. Whether sharing my experience as a financier or as prime minister, I cannot dispel that image. The prime minister says, “Africa is not a humanitarian case, it is an investment case”, but the world does not see Africa that way. That is how Africa sees itself now, but it is very hard to share that vision when you are told that the risk of investing in Africa is overrated. It is actually quite easy to insure and de-risk Africa—there are more and more mechanisms to do it—but the risk is still overrated. A great many more Africans are migrating within Africa than to Europe. Outside of conflicts and refugees—and conflicts are decreasing—outside wars and their effects, migration is happening within Africa. The rush to Europe is a fantasy. In 21st-century Europe, the black peril has replaced the yellow peril, the obsession of the early 20th century. It is very hard. Nobody manages to completely accept that line of thought, when you explain—and this is absolutely the case in Ethiopia and Benin—that demography is not what you think it is in our economies. In other words, it is not a result of fertility. It makes absolutely no difference that there are six children per woman in the Sahel, which, by the way, only accounts for 1% of Africa’s population. No, what matters is that our demographic growth comes from rising life expectancy. You are here in a country where the fertility rate is reaching that of southern Europe. The same thing has been happening in Tunisia for a longer time, and it is becoming the norm in Algeria. It is happening along the entire coast of West Africa. There are 2.8 children per woman in Cotonou. Fertility does not explain our demographic growth. Our demographic growth comes from life expectancy, which is rising due to better nutrition, education and health care. But since Europe and the West see us as the world’s most poorly educated, nourished and cared-for people, that idea does not catch on. Yes, we are the world’s most poorly nourished people, but we are better fed than we were 20 years ago. The result is that life expectancy in the countries of central Africa is increasing by one year every year.

We have been speaking to each other for much too long. Thierry will say that I am keeping you from eating because we have already been speaking for at least 15 or 20 minutes. The life expectancy of our Congolese brothers has just risen by 20 minutes. Life expectancy has never increased so quickly in history. Europeans only look at fertility, but that is a basic mistake of a first-year sociology or economics student. On the other hand, Europeans do not see that 100,000 Chinese lived in Africa 20 years ago and a million and a half today. I think that is very good for mixing. I think it is perfect. But if I were 100% French instead of just half, I would ask myself, “Am I not imagining—a kind of primitive imagination—that I am going to be overrun?”, as though the poor, the wretched of the Earth, were rising up and rushing towards me, instead of looking at the facts, in other words the knowledge that I am gradually disappearing. I am humanly abolishing myself in Africa because I do not see that there are interesting migratory flows worth analysing. There are migratory flows in the other direction. Repats are streaming back. Our highly skilled young people are coming home, reversing the brain drain. It is increasingly a relationship with Asia and the other emerging parts of the world, which have a population reality. I am happy about those movements but unhappy about my inability to successfully explain them.