New SA, new Idasa director

Two things enticed sociologist Wilmot James into accepting the job of Executive Director at Idasa from August: it offers an 'attractive interface' between where ordinary people are at and ideas about how societies are organised and how they can be changed; and it provides a unique 'institutional platform' for engagement in politics without involvement in party politics. SHAUNA WESTCOTT reports.

AS IN South Africa, so in Idasa: a new hand takes the helm. As current incumbent Alex Boraine bows out gracefully to take up the question of how to deal with the crimes and agonies of the country's past, Wilmot James enters with his gaze focused keenly on the future. He has a vision, he says, incomplete and "by no means comprehensive", of how Idasa's role as ally to the transition may shift to include "assisting the government to rule by consent".

Ruling by consent means "pursuing policies based on a clear sense of what people want, need and think is important". James believes that Idasa can play a critical role in assisting the new government to read this. Secondly, he would like to see the institute developing a policy review role: one of assessing how government policy is working and failing to work, and offering inputs on alternatives.

He adds, however, that he sees a need to continue – and to expand – established areas of work, particularly materials production, education and training for democracy, and Idasa's facilitation and mediation function.

James will have a more difficult task than the new government in so far as Boraine's will be a hard act to follow. For, whatever pyrotechnics fellow Idasa founder Van Zyl Slabbert was pulling off centre-stage, it was Boraine who steered Idasa from its humble beginnings in 1987 as a three-person outfit on a shoestring budget to its present shape as a national organisation with a staff of 70, six regional offices, an enviable international profile and an influence on South African affairs that has been immense.

But if anyone can walk sure-footed in the footsteps of the great man it will be Wilmot James. He's too accomplished himself to feel insecure, no matter how long the shadow his predecessor may cast, and he shares with Boraine a kind of courtly charm that one imagines is the right stuff for meetings with the captains of large corporations looking for social responsibility opportunities.

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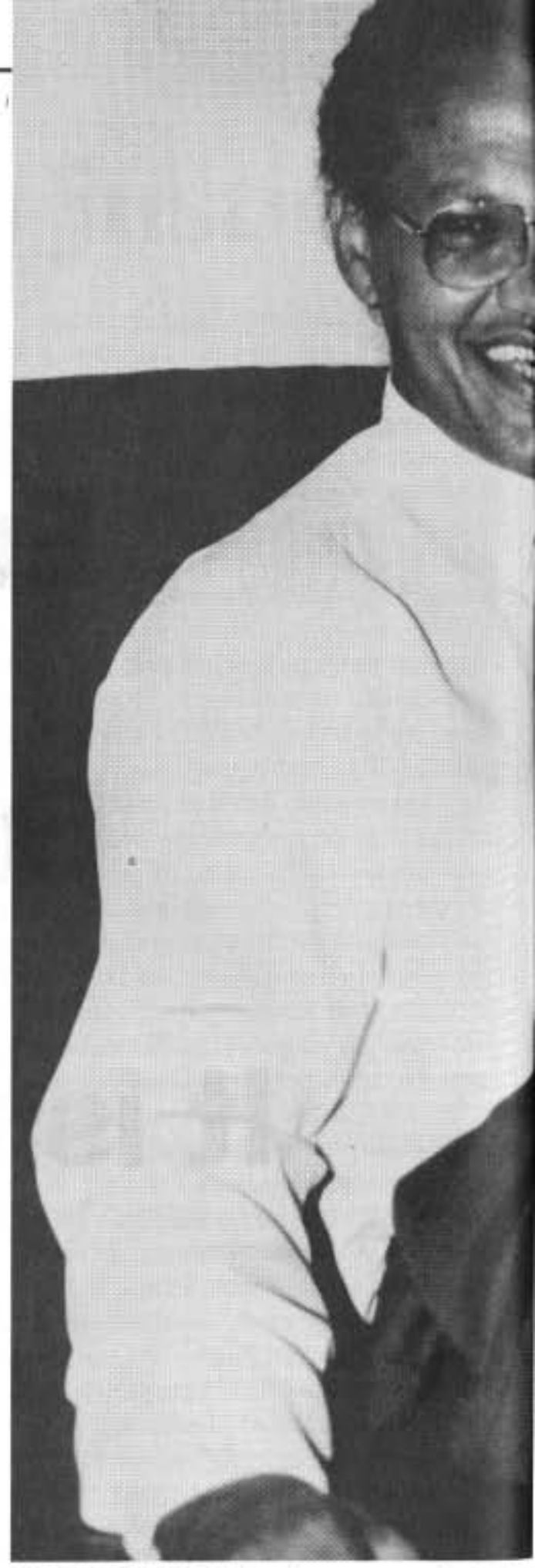
An interesting difference between the two men is the gap in age that has been so striking in the transition from George Bush to Bill Clinton in the United States. A mere 40, James sizzles with contained energy, plays squash and describes his strength as "a capacity to conceptualise a problem and find a reasonable solution in a short space of time". He adds that he's "extremely hardworking", and laughs.

He laughs a lot does Wilmot James, a really engaging laugh, one that signals an ease with people and a capacity for enjoyment of situations. "Post-modern bizarre" is how he describes his first day in the offices of the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), where he has been been seconded from his post as Professor and Head of the Sociology Department at the University of Cape Town (UCT) to run the Western Cape analysis function for its monitoring directorate. (Why post-modern bizarre? They had computers but no chairs.)



WILMOT JAMES: 'A serious person who also kn

He's also very clever: got a BA Honours *cum laude* from the University of the Western Cape; knocked off a master's degree from the University of Wisconsin-Madison a year later and then a doctorate four years after that; has an almost indecently long list of publications to his credit, including *Angry Divide: Social and Economic History of the Western Cape*, which he co-edited with UCT colleague Mary Simons.

Asked for a thumbnail sketch of James, a quotable quote, Simons says: "I think he's an extraordinary human being. Anything he sets out to do, he does. He is prodigious in output and excellent at human relations. Idasa is very lucky to have him."

She pauses to send herself up (doesn't

w to play'.

want to sound "over the top like an adoring middle-aged fan") before adding: "He's focused but not obsessive and he plays properly. I have a sense that he plays; a serious person who knows how to play."

But Simons worked with, rather than for, James. What of subordinates? Well, the accolades continue. Linda Foulkes, secretary to James in his role as Head of the Sociology Department, is "very sad to lose him". She describes James as "the best boss I ever had. He's incredible to work for; he's open, he's fair, he's fun."

This paragon was born in Paarl, second-eldest of a family of four (three boys and one girl). "We used to stay opposite a vineyard which we used to raid. I used to enjoy having grapes at hand in my backyard," he says.

He has less pleasant memories, though. "It was a rough place, Paarl. The farmer (owner of the vineyard) was quite old-fashioned – racist, I guess, a bully. The cultural milieu often was not all that pleasant."

But the family escaped in 1963 and James moved on to Garlandale Primary and then Athlone High, which he remembers as "a very good school" where he enjoyed dedicated teachers and gifted classmates.

Fascinatingly, James grew up surrounded by teachers. "My dad comes from a family of nine and all except one are teachers. My granny in Paarl was a teacher; taught Afrikaans in a largely white school at the turn of the century. On my mom's side they are all teachers as well. There are teachers everywhere. So when the family gets together they talk about school."

'The world political environment welcomes countries organised democratically and showing economic growth. We could deliver both'

It was a bit overwhelming, James says. All the kids learned to play the piano, for instance, because the family idea of what a child should be included time at music school.

Also part of this formative ethos was the political style of the New Unity Movement (then the Non-European Unity Movement). James had two uncles who were "senior, serious NUM members" and he was "part of an environment where boycott politics was the norm, where there was quite a lot of political discussion; quite a vigorous intellectual environment".

James is married to artist Julia Teale, whom he met at a party in Johannesburg. ("She was a Fine Arts student at Wits and I was doing some research in Johannesburg and the friend I was staying with took me to the party. I was the only non-artist in the place and she picked on me.")

He says it's "interesting" being married to an artist. What they do is "incredibly different" and he is fascinated by the foreign rhythm of the process of creation his wife goes through and by creativity that is evident ("there's no picture and then there is a picture"). But, he confirms the popular wisdom, living with an artist can be "quite demanding". This has to do with the highs and lows of the creative process and, naturally, it's not the highs that are difficult.

If marriage is interesting, fatherhood is "a lot of fun". James says he's involved in parenting two-year-old Gabriele, although not as involved as he'd like to be. She's "at the very talkative stage and you can see that little brain being very busy"; she's "amazing"; James is "surprised by her all the time".

So who does the laundry in the James household? "Julia, typically, would stick it in the washing machine," says James. "I often take it out and hang it up and often take it down." And who cooks? "We both cook. Julia cooks more than I cook."

Careful answers, you will agree. Would he describe himself as a feminist? "Um, yes; I suppose it depends on what one means. But if it is about working towards egalitarian power relations; about respecting people across the board; about paying attention to the discrimination women often experience – then, yes, I would make those commitments."

And is he a Green? Yes ("Julia is more than I"). Religious? Yes ("not in the denominational sense, but in a general sense"). His favourite place in the world? "A toss-up between Chicago and Florence." Favourite meal? A southern Provencale chicken dish (made with tomatoes, chillies, anchovies and capers) that Julia once cooked.

Is there an image that sums up South Africa for him in some way? "Julia just finished a painting – it's on exhibition at the Mount Nelson – and it's of Cape Town, a black woman looking into a mirror and peeling a lush, rich, colourful fruit against a background of Table Mountain and squatter camps."

Like Gauguin? Hmm. ("Julia's more realist than Gauguin.")

Leaping on to the future of the country, James responds like this to a question about the chances of a South African success story:

"We've got some serious problems. We may be in a situation where we cannot get it together politically. The test for that will obviously be the next few months. Among the other problems we face is the fact that we have a badly educated population. But we also have enormous capacity. It's possible that this country will take off. It has a good economic base, incredible human potential, and the world political environment welcomes countries organised democratically and showing economic growth. We could deliver both."

Wilmot and Julia live in Observatory in Cape Town; have done so since 1988. When they moved in, the neighbours complained about the "mixed couple" next door and called the police. They still have the same neighbours. "Yeah, they're great," James says. "It's amazing how when a regime changes, attitudes become more natural."

So, a lesson on tolerance thrown in. Are there any weaknesses to this Wilmot James? Well, he does have difficulty saying "no".