

ABDUL KADER ASMAL

National Executive Committee, African National Congress

Kader Asmal, nicknamed the Bee for his prodigious energy, was born on 8 October 1934 in Stanger, Natal. Growing up in a large family (four brothers and two sisters), the warmth, generosity and constant debates compensated for their lack of material wealth. He was close to his shopkeeper father, Ahmed, who encouraged reading, debate and independent thinking in his children. His mother, Rassool, was a housewife.

Asmal started his schooling in Stanger and then attended the Oriental Primary School in Pietermaritzburg, returning to Stanger where he matriculated in 1952. At school his leadership and debating abilities were recognised and he was elected prefect, house-captain and won the province-wide Islamic Debating trophy.

During his school years several factors influenced his later life and political thinking. From the age of 10, books and newspapers, particularly *The New Statesman*, turned him into a lifelong Anglophile and encouraged an ambition to study at the London School of Economics. He decided to become a lawyer at the age of 12 after seeing films about Nazi concentration camp victims, hoping to root out practices which could lead to such atrocities.

Meeting former ANC president Dr Albert Luthuli, who was restricted to the Lower Tugela area of Natal at the time, started his lifelong commitment to human rights and the ideals of the ANC.

As a youngster he sold ANC newspapers and later arranged the first public meeting for Luthuli in Stanger. Asmal's love of cricket led to his first political act when, as a schoolboy, he opposed the segregation of cricket clubs. In matric he led a stay-at-home as part of the Defiance Campaign of the Congress movement.

Daily encounters and experiences in the small racially segregated rural community helped develop his strong aversion to inequality and injustice.

In 1954 Asmal qualified as a teacher at the Springfield Training College. He then taught in the sugar cane company town of Darnall and in Stanger while studying for his BA degree in History, English and Politics through Unisa.

Asmal realised a childhood ambition when he enrolled as a law student at the London School of Economics in 1959. Within a few months of his



arrival in London, he started the Boycott Movement with a group of South Africans (he shared a house with ex-South Africans, among them Mr Mac Maharaj of the ANC), members of the Labour government and student groups.

Asmal also became a founder member of the British Anti-Apartheid Movement which scored its first victory in 1963 when it succeeded in stopping the sale of arms to South Africa.

During this time Asmal met and married his wife, Louise. Despite his political commitments, Asmal won an award as a law scholar and lectured in law at the London Polytechnic.

In 1963 Asmal was offered a post as junior lecturer in law at Trinity College, Dublin University, and moved to Ireland. There he founded the Irish Anti-Apartheid Movement (he was chairman from 1974 and his wife worked for the movement from their home). He was also vice-president of the International Defence and Aid Fund which over the years aided apartheid victims.

Asmal also obtained his LL.M from the London School of Economics (1964), qualified as a barrister at Lincoln's Inn, London (1964) and became a barrister at law at King's Inn, Dublin

(1975). In 1966 he obtained his MA from the University of Dublin.

Asmal's campaigns against inequality also made him aware of gender inequalities and he became a supporter of the Irish feminist movement. In 1966 he was the only Irish lawyer willing to discuss the legal aspects of contraception at a conference in Dublin. Visits to the USSR alerted him to the fact that equal employment opportunities for women do not result in equality in a patriarchal society. Although he grew up in a very stratified society, he has always promoted gender equality.

As founder and chairman of the Irish Council for Civil Liberties (1976), Asmal became involved in various campaigns for human rights. The council became a public watchdog and pace-setter for changing attitudes – for instance promoting freedom of speech, trade unionism and controls on abuse of police power.

Asmal's prominence as a campaigner for civil liberties led to international recognition. In 1979 he became a member of the International Commission of Inquiry into the Crimes of the Apartheid Regime and in 1982 was appointed rapporteur of the International Commission of Inquiry into violations of International Law by Israel. In 1983 he chaired an International Lawyer's Inquiry into the lethal use of firearms in Northern Ireland. In the same year he was awarded a Unesco prize for human rights.

Asmal's stature as a lawyer and academic grew and in 1974 he became president of the Irish Federation of University Teachers and the following year he lectured at Christ's College, Cambridge as a visiting academic. During 1980 he was appointed dean of the Faculty of Arts at Trinity College, Dublin. Late in the 1980s he was given the inaugural Nelson Mandela Chair at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, and was a visiting academic at the University of Warwick.

In 1979 Asmal was elected vice-president of the Haldane Society of Socialist Lawyers and became vice-president of the African Association of International Law in 1986. He also acted as legal advisor to Sanroc from 1980-90. In addition, his interest in labour and consumer issues resulted in his appointment to the Irish National Consumer Advisory Council in 1973.

Since 1963 Asmal has written numerous

chapters in books, articles and reports for the UN and European Community on various aspects of law, workers and human rights and apartheid. He was invited to deliver special lectures in Amsterdam, New York and Ottawa and his DN Pritt Memorial Lecture at the London School of Economics in 1989 was published. He delivered many papers at conferences in Europe, Africa, India and, since 1990, South Africa.

Although Asmal considers himself to have been an ANC member for 35 years, he officially joined the movement in 1965 when Mr Oliver Tambo went to London. He feels that the contribution he made through the Anti-Apartheid and Boycott Movements played an important role in creating the climate that led to the unbanning of the ANC on 2 February 1990. Among all his achievements he considers his work for the ANC as the most important. He even declined an offer to be full-time secretary of the National Council for Civil Liberties because it would have interfered with his work against apartheid.

In 1986 Asmal became a member of the ANC's Constitutional Committee which has the task of preparing the organisation's proposals for a new constitution for South Africa.

Asmal returned to South Africa in September 1990 and at the ANC congress in July 1991 was elected to serve on its National Executive Committee. In addition to the Constitutional Committee, Asmal serves on the organisation's Elections Committee and the Commission on Gender Discrimination and assists with the establishment of new ANC branches.

Asmal is employed by the University of the Western Cape as the country's only professor of human rights. As such he actively promotes the concept of affirmative action, which he prefers to call positive action. He defines this as deliberate actions to make reparation for past inequalities by providing education for all – including adult education, extended education in rural areas and training and re-training of the work force – and the provision of basic rights such as housing, water, electricity and schools. In the employment sphere he believes that the civil service should be more representative of the country's demography.

Asmal is a member of the Board of Sponsors of Nicro, a trustee of the Street Law Project, a

member of the National Association of Democratic Lawyers and a member of the Friends of the South African National Gallery. In the latter capacity he hopes to negotiate for paintings on apartheid by some of the world's leading painters, commissioned by the UN, to be transferred to

Cape Town after a new constitution has been adopted. In February 1993 Asmal was elected Chairman of the University of the North.

Asmal's wife is an executive assistant and they have two sons who are living in Ireland. He lives in Rosebank, Cape Town.