

KADER ASMAL

Politics in My Blood

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A Memoir

by Kader Asmal and Adrian Hadland

with Moira Levy



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*For my mother, my father, Louise and my family,
and for all those in South Africa and elsewhere
who have inspired me*

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An Appreciation

by President Nelson Mandela

Kader Asmal is one of our most valued comrades. He has demonstrated a remarkable ability to grasp a broad range of complex issues, and to pursue challenges with rare insight and vigour.

As Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry in our historic government of national unity, he alerted the entire nation to the huge environmental challenges we faced; under his guidance innovative programmes were developed to conserve scarce water resources and restore indigenous plants so vital to our environment.

As Minister of Education he displayed a similar capacity for innovation and creativity. Furthermore, such was his dedication to good government that he soon became known amongst his colleagues in my Cabinet as the Minister of All Portfolios.

As well as being an astute political leader, he is a renowned academic and thinker who has made his mark on our country and internationally. Above all, his honesty and integrity, his willingness to challenge orthodox thinking when necessary, is something we should cherish as South Africans.

We thank him for what he has meant to South Africa and for what he has contributed to the wider world.

Acknowledgements

This work is not an autobiography nor is it a straightforward memoir. It is, rather, the account of my life, from growing up as the son of a shopkeeper in a small country town in KwaZulu-Natal, moving to England to study and then to Ireland to teach law, and finally returning to a free country, where I played a part in devising a new constitution and served as a Cabinet minister for two terms. Along the way I have learnt much from books, from encounters with many and various people, and from my experience of life in South Africa, England and Ireland. I have not attempted to include every last detail or nuance. That would require a very much larger work, and this one is already quite large enough.

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Prologue

The First Day

The day that South Africa convened its first, democratically elected, non-racial Parliament, 9 May 1994, was one of the most important days of my life. As I sat at my desk on the leather-covered benches of the government side of the National Assembly in my new suit and Trinity College Dublin tie, I saw the order paper was titled ‘First Session, First Parliament’. It was as if the previous three hundred years of illegitimate state oppression had melted away at the hand of an astute parliamentary officer with a keen sense of history. I wondered who had arranged for this re-ordering of history on the order paper. Orthodox parliamentary protocol suggested this should have been the first session of the tenth Parliament (since the formation of the Republic of South Africa). Instead, this was the first day of the first Parliament. And, in many ways, that was exactly right.

I looked over at the benches of the National Party, the political party that had presided over more than forty-five years of oppression, and its leader, former State President F.W. de Klerk. I felt the exhilaration of a victor and the vindication of the just. The regime had fallen and with it three hundred years of racism and injustice.

Nelson Mandela, who was soon to be chosen by Parliament as South Africa’s first democratic President, had often talked to me about the importance of forgiveness and tolerance. I sometimes found this hard to accept. I was courteous towards our opponents during the negotiations for political power because it was correct and productive to do so. But I never forgot with whom I was dealing.

All the same I didn’t feel vindictive or angry even as they sat across the floor in the opposition benches, grinning and patting each other on the back. Instead, I asked myself: What had we won? State power had been wrested from the grasp of the unjust by the will of the people.

Now I was sitting there, a minister in Nelson Mandela's first Cabinet, and thinking of what we would have to do to overcome the awful legacy of colonialism and apartheid.

This, for me, was the real beauty of that first election and the government it produced. It was a compact of unprecedented historical dimensions. If I was religiously inclined I would call the first democratic poll, and all those that followed, a sacrament of democracy. It was a ritual of high moral currency. Voting confers great dignity on people who have previously been denied a role in their own governance. There is a grace that is close to the divine in enjoying this for the first time. Can there be a more fundamentally democratic act than taking up your right to vote and claiming your stake in determining who rules?

A pamphlet circulated by the African National Congress (ANC) at that time captured much of what many of us were feeling. 'So much hope, pain and suffering have been expended in the achievement of this dream,' it said. After nearly four years of negotiations, much of which had taken place far from the lives and preoccupations of ordinary people, a peaceful transfer of power to a legitimate government had finally taken place. 'Legitimacy entitles us to say proudly: this is our government, not this government or this illegitimate regime. The mistakes we make will be our errors. Neither hostile nor even benign prescriptions can any longer be imposed on us. We will share in decision-making.' The pamphlet went on to say that our struggle had been bound together by the 'golden thread of non-racialism', a thread that had held us together in exile, in the torture chambers and in the hell-holes of our prisons. It was this thread, as well as the just nature of our cause, that had also inspired the rest of the world to set up solidarity movements without parallel in history.

On the first day of voting in that famous election, 27 April 1994, I was an hour or two up the east coast from Cape Town in the fishing village of Hawston, close to Hermanus, monitoring the election there on behalf of the ANC. As at many of the thousands of polling stations across the country, the logistics of our first democratic election in Hawston were problematic. There weren't enough ballot papers or officials. Voters queued for many, many hours almost without exception and almost without complaint. There was no water or food available, neither for the voters nor for the polling station staff. But, as anyone who was there or who has read about those most amazing of days will recall, the people

of South Africa waited quietly, with dignity, to share in the sacrament of democracy. They would not be denied. They had waited too long, given too much.

On the second day of voting I was in Bellville, in Cape Town's northern suburbs, which is traditionally a stronghold of white Afrikaners. It was a very tiring day. There were so many emotions swirling around within all of us. People queued for hour upon hour, white middle-aged women standing patiently next to their African maids in their pink or light-blue overalls. Officials went without food and water and didn't seem to mind or notice. The people waited. Our people. They waited and they smiled and they seized their right with both hands. There was hardly a person there who didn't realise the importance of making their mark on the ballot paper that day.

Can there be a more important human condition than dignity? Without it, we are bitter, downtrodden, unheard, humiliated, embarrassed and disempowered. With dignity, we are peaceful, collegial, kind, compassionate and even at times cohesive. The notion of dignity resides at the very heart of our constitutional settlement here in South Africa and is fundamental to our bill of rights. It is implicit in the right to equality. It is assumed within the right to political association, in our freedom of speech and in our freedom of movement. How can we have dignity if we cannot go where we wish, say what we want and join with others who share our passions and our dreams? Along with equality, freedom and justice, dignity is one of our most important principles. Apartheid stripped our dignity away every bit as brutally and systematically as it curtailed our other fundamental rights. Voting in a real election gave it back again.

In Parliament on that first day of the first session I thought of those whose sacrifices had brought us to that air-conditioned hall filled with singing, happy, colourful people. I thought of my struggling, generous father. I would have given anything to have taken his hand that day and led him up Parliament Street. How proud he would have been along with scores of other parents and compatriots.

And I thought too of the other reason, or rather the other person, who made this moment so very special. He sat not far from me in a navy suit and white shirt with more gravitas and dignity than seemed possible for a living person. Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela. Madiba. To be

a minister in the first Cabinet of Nelson Mandela was almost too much to grasp, even in the midst of the pomp and ceremony. The election that brought Madiba to the presidency had been an extraordinary event. South Africa had stood on the brink of war and catastrophe, divided against itself. Now we all sat in the same parliamentary chamber, united in a government of national unity led by our Madiba.

I sat at my bench that late autumn afternoon in Cape Town and readied myself to recite my affirmation of office rather than the oath. A torrent of emotions and thoughts coursed through me. Here, at this moment, was the death knell of apartheid. Here, at this moment, was the birth of a legitimate state acting on behalf of its people for the first time.

It may have been Day One, but the roots of this moment are to be found far back in South African legal, constitutional and political history. 'One person, one vote' was adopted by the African National Congress as official policy in 1943. This policy of universal suffrage found powerful and indeed indelible expression in the Freedom Charter, which was drawn up by South African democrats in 1955 following an extensive, nationwide consultative process. The vote was the *leitmotif* of freedom fighters' demands and the core issue of the liberation movement's legal and constitutional struggle for justice. The central issue was not the creation of a bill of rights, nor was it equality, nor was it even the freedoms black people didn't have. At that momentous time, it wasn't even about the need to overcome poverty, provide services and dismantle the other shameful trappings of apartheid. On those two days on which we South Africans voted for the first time, the central issue was universal suffrage. The vote was the prime determinant of the kind of society we wanted to build. Its eventual expression in those two days in late April 1994 was a glorious, spiritual affair that held the world in awe. Apart from my own personal feelings, I was deeply aware of the enormous importance that moment would have in determining the kind of South Africa the ANC would create. After three hundred years, freedom had arrived and, with it, the chance to put into practice at least some of the ideas on social justice, dignity and constitution making that I had been gathering and developing over the years, as these memoirs will make clear.

Although this work is not intended to be strictly autobiographical, some of the personal events and relationships that marked my life have

shaped the way in which I think about things and help explain my passion and interest in different notions. If, for instance, I had never sat in the cinema as a boy watching a newsreel depicting the liberation of Auschwitz, I would not have taken such a special interest later in the Nuremberg Trials and their applicability to South Africa. My career grappling with international law, participating in UN conferences, proposing a truth commission and helping to author a country's constitution has its roots in a piece of scratchy black-and-white cinematography that has haunted me for my entire life.

It is also true that my family and social environment have had a powerful impact on me. They have shaped how I feel about intimate things such as one's right to privacy, about education and the power of the word, about religion, about dignity and about duty.

When I was a boy, the family toilet was situated at the far end of the yard. Getting there was dark and unpleasant and scary. This was not particularly unusual for a South African then, nor is it even now, but when I joined the Cabinet as minister responsible for water, my early experience of sanitation resonated in every policy I established.

In my twenties, I was prevented from attending a residential university because my family couldn't afford it. Instead I became a teacher. This instilled in me a deep appreciation of the privilege of learning and a love of engaging and growing young minds. As Minister of Education, how could such experiences not weigh on me as I mulled over the restructuring of the higher education sector?

This memoir is not all rose-coloured recollection and fanciful idealism. There are aspects of my life of which I am not proud, decisions I have made that I regret and people I have encountered whom I should have stood up to or fought off.

The ANC that has been my whole life may have wavered in its mission in recent years. The heady principles and morals we championed even unto death appear to have been tarnished by the complacency and acquisitiveness of power. Some leaders have become greedy, self-serving and cynical, and the serpents of ethnicity and populism have wound their powerful coils around our ankles. I have no doubt that there are many South Africans, of all colours, who retain the fundamental values of the Freedom Charter and our Constitution, but we shall need to assert ourselves. I only hope that in time the ANC as an organisation

will recall and revere the things that created and inspired it. Perhaps this book will help.

This is a story of many journeys. It is the story of my own journey to adulthood and comprehension. It is the story of the ANC's victorious struggle against apartheid. But most of all it is the story of my country's journey from the darkness of injustice to the dappled sunlight of freedom.

1

Formative Years

I was born on 8 October 1934, in a small country town called Stanger (now KwaDukuza), which lies about seventy kilometres north of the port city of Durban. It's a small, unremarkable town surrounded by sugar-cane fields. Everything grows well in Stanger. Flowers bloom in the gardens, lawns are neatly cut, and trees line the streets. Outside beautiful, spacious houses, maids and servants loiter and chat in the sunshine. The cricket square is meticulously prepared and the tennis courts are well maintained.

But I didn't grow up in this Stanger. That was the Stanger where the white residents lived, the forbidden zone on the mountain side of Durban Road. I would never have dared go there as a child, even though it was a short walk from the small, cramped house where my family stayed. There were no tree-lined streets or neat pavements in the part of Stanger in which I spent my first nineteen years.

It wasn't that the police stopped you from going to the white side of town, unless you were African, nor were there fences or walls. Such was the effect of racialism that proscriptive measures like these were transmitted by a kind of osmosis. I knew, instinctively, that the white suburbs of Stanger were out of bounds. Only on my return from exile, when I was fifty-seven years old, did I venture into the forbidden zone for the first time. By then, of course, everything was changing.

The part of Stanger in which I grew up was an area of great poverty. There were ten of us in the Asmal family, my parents and eight children, and we lived in a small, two-bedroomed house. The toilet was a bucket located outside in a wooden shack. We had to pick our way through the chicken run to get to it – an ordeal for me especially

at night or when a subtropical storm blew in from the Indian Ocean.

My father, Ahmed, came originally from a town called Kathor in Surath, India. In 1898 he and his family sailed to South Africa to join his grandfather Ebrahim, who was already settled there and had a thriving merchant's business in Durban. Grandfather Ebrahim was famous in Durban for his acute business sense and for zooming around town on a big, noisy motorbike. He must have passed some of his daredevil genes on to my father, as he too never shirked a challenge or failed to stand up to bullies. On one occasion the white mayor of Stanger was about to hit my younger brother with a sjambok when my father grabbed it and pulled it away from him. On another occasion he nearly knocked down a well-known lawyer. Towards the end of his life he was charged for punching the dustman and paid an 'admission of guilt' fine. The dustman was never again quite so sloppy when it came to emptying our 44-gallon drum of rubbish. But my father was also extraordinarily generous and caring of those around him.

My mother, Rasool, was South African-born and -bred. She and my father were brought together by a matchmaker, as was the custom then. They were married in 1918. After their marriage my parents moved from Durban and settled in the not-too-distant town of Stanger, where my father opened a grocery shop specialising in fruit and sweets. By the time war broke out in 1939, our financial situation had not improved: we owned neither our house nor a car. We were perhaps 'discreet lower-middle-class'. My father's grocery shop sold the best homemade ice cream in town. He relished making it in a big tub almost as much as we enjoyed sampling it. The counter top was always full of long jars crammed with chocolate-covered coconut sweets and other delicious goodies. We sold icicles for one penny each. I am sure that's where I developed my sweet tooth.

We lived upstairs from the shop in Reynold Street (now renamed Chief Albert Luthuli Street), in a tin-and-wood structure. It was often hot and usually crowded. The lavatories were outside, three of them. Anyone in the street could use them and they were open to the road beyond. From an early age I began to value privacy very much indeed.

As I suffered terribly from asthma as a child, my parents decided against sending me to school until I was nine. They wanted me where they could keep an eye on me during the day and my bed was moved to

a small space under the shop counter. Here, equipped with a pillow and blanket, I spent much time listening to the world around me, to people coming and going and interacting with my shopkeeper father. I learnt a great deal in this way. Though I only started school at the age of nine, I completed my matric at eighteen, having received 'double promotion' because of the knowledge acquired in my father's shop.

Every now and then, the local police sergeant used to come into the shop, after lock-up time. The sergeant was an Afrikaner and, like other Afrikaans-speaking public officials, he caused some trepidation as he walked around Stanger. The Afrikaners were somehow more intimidating than their English-speaking counterparts.

But here was the police sergeant sitting down with my father to listen to the crackling, screeching sound from the radio. As a seven-year-old, invisible to the sergeant, I was intrigued by the apparent friendliness of my father, who did not speak Afrikaans. The two sat listening to what I subsequently discovered were pro-Nazi broadcasts from the Zeesen radio service, produced by a South African expatriate, Erik Holm.

As I collected material for my scrapbook on what was called 'the war effort', I discovered that Zeesen's obsessively anti-Semitic broadcasts were meant to mobilise Afrikaner sentiment against the war. My father did not approve of the war against Hitler though he was no anti-Semite. He thought it illogical that while the French, the British and South Africa's Prime Minister, General Smuts, demanded support for the anti-Nazi campaign, in their empires or at home they maintained racist and colonial systems based on violence.

I realised from listening to the two men discussing the radio broadcasts that, though my father was not a formally lettered man, he knew all about the latest news and current affairs, and he enjoyed reading newspapers, something I learnt from him. He and the sergeant debated the news heatedly. My father talked about colonialism and about recent political developments in our own neck of the woods. In his own way he was an anti-colonialist. This was a real education for me.

In the lead-up to the Second World War, the 'Fusion' government had held sway in South Africa. This was a parliamentary alliance forged in the 1930s between the United Party of Jan Smuts and the National Party headed by General J.B.M. Hertzog. It was during this period that legislation was enacted that consolidated and entrenched the process of

segregation and strengthened the foundations for apartheid. Qualified Africans in the Cape were removed from the common voters' roll, a right they had held since 1853, and ownership of land by Africans was pegged to a mere thirteen per cent of South Africa's landmass.



My father was a serious-looking man, forbidding even. He wasn't tall but had a commanding voice. He obtained a driving licence in 1932, and I have a photo of him sitting proudly at the wheel of his Oakland, with three of his cronies. He inculcated in us a sense of curiosity and whetted my interest in the world. He also had an extraordinary generosity. As a shopkeeper he gave credit to everyone, especially to those white women whose husbands were fighting in North Africa or Italy, even though he didn't really believe in the war. He not only extended them credit, but he gave them food parcels to send to their husbands at the front.

A local white lawyer who knew that my father's generosity had pushed him to the edge of financial ruin came round one day and spoke to him. 'Ahmed, so many people owe you so much money, yet you won't make them pay you,' he said. 'How can I bankrupt these women?' my father replied. Before long, he lost everything. If he had been more ruthless, he could have evaded the ignominy of bankruptcy. Perhaps if he had been less scrupulous about cheating African people, a common business stratagem in the 1940s, he would have kept his beloved grocery shop for a little longer. The sugar-mill owners in the area were anything but scrupulous about exploiting their workforce. They would load dozens of their workers at a time into the company lorries and drive them down to a 'friendly' shop. There they would be encouraged to run tabs and borrow to buy the overpriced bread, milk, sugar and blankets that were on offer. The employees had no choice. The prices were fixed, and the shopkeepers and the mill owners pocketed generous profits.

My father never condoned such schemes, but being a humanitarian had its downside. To be a successful businessman, my father once told me, you have to be tough, hard-hearted and a bit of a bastard. After all, the Catholic patron saint for rogues and brigands and for merchants, he added, is the same! So maybe it was for the best that his grocery store went under. If it hadn't, my brothers and I might have remained

in Stanger selling fruit and ice cream, and all that I have seen and done would be somebody else's story.

The bankruptcy had an immediate and profound impact on our family's fortunes. The car went. The shop was gone and my father left Stanger to seek work. He took on piecemeal jobs as a shop assistant or salesman in distant towns and sent home what he could. He was gone for long periods, though when he returned there was much joy and excitement. No one was more pleased than I was to see his familiar frame in the doorway; his red beard, his rough face and his kind eyes.

Though my father never read a book, he appreciated both their power and his bookish son's love for them. He brought me home books so often from his travels that he had to order a specially built bookshelf with a glass door. I have no idea where he got the books from, perhaps from Durban or second-hand markets he happened across on his travels. One or two of them were first editions that I devoured with the relish of an acolyte. Others were tattily covered tomes rescued from the bonfire. I built up a wonderful collection of books, all of which were later scattered as my role in the exiled liberation movement became known and the apartheid regime stepped up its harassment of my family.

Following the bankruptcy, we left our house and moved about a hundred yards away to an even smaller house in Reynold Street. If the flat above the shop had been hot and crowded, our new rented home was much worse. By now my sisters had left home but there were still nine of us living together. My eldest brother, Ebrahim, and his wife shared one of the bedrooms; my second brother, Mohammed, the other; and the rest of us slept in the remaining bedroom. Even when we moved again to Colenbrander Street on the outskirts of Stanger, my parents had to put up partitions which reached about two-thirds of the way to the ceiling and didn't really provide any privacy at all.

We slept under heavy eiderdowns that intensified the stifling Stanger summer heat. The eiderdowns soon smelled rank and, in the morning, were gathered up into a big, odiferous pile ready for use the next night. During the war years we children slept in pyjamas that my ever-resourceful mother made out of flour bags.

But while the bedrooms were uncomfortable and untidy, the sitting room was sacrosanct. It was a space to be kept neat and clean where the family could gather and where we could entertain guests and friends.

My mother was uncompromising on the need to keep it this way: clean and clear of clutter. It was the public face of the Asmal family.

We had a shower and basin in a very small room for the use of all of us, and once again there was an outside toilet at Colenbrander Street, but at least it was for use by our family alone. Though there was no view into the toilet from the road this time, the trip to the toilet, through the chickens and their mess, often in the dark, was never very pleasant. I hated those expeditions. I did have, though, some interesting conversations, full of expletives, with the night-soil removers who objected to my holding up their work by sitting on the toilet reading by candlelight. All this gave me an enduring appreciation of the dignity that is provided by decent sanitation.

My childhood was punctuated by debilitating attacks of asthma. When it got out of control and I began wheezing and straining and coughing for breath, my mother called Mr Bux, who would come with his medical kit and give me an ephedrine injection in the backside. I must have had hundreds over the years. He was not a doctor but provided medical assistance for a small fee. My mother tried everything to bring me relief. When the family fasted at Ramadan, only I was allowed to eat. When the children went to school, I remained at home. Sometimes I wondered if she'd prefer that I die rather than suffer so, day after day. We didn't know then that a bit of exercise is good for asthmatics, so I was kept in cotton wool, not allowed to strain or run or compete physically. When I reached eighteen years, one doctor recommended a daily dose of whiskey mixed with the yellow of an egg and some nutmeg. And while the liquor is not exactly a mainstream curative, it has given me a solace that I have enjoyed, in greater or lesser amounts, to this day. I don't know what whiskey I drank then, but in Dublin I was introduced to Irish whiskey, which remains my favourite.

A second positive outcome of my asthmatic condition was that I became involved in cricket. I couldn't play the game, unlike my brother Dawood, who played for a team of South African 'Non-Europeans' in Kenya in 1958 under the captaincy of Basil D'Oliveira. Nevertheless, there was often a need for an umpire and I enjoyed being part of the action. From time to time I used to assist illiterate traders or shopkeepers to write or read letters they wanted to send or understand, and so, when the position of club secretary of the local Muslim cricket club, the

Commercial Cricket Club of Stanger, became vacant, I was asked to step in, even though I was only thirteen at the time. One of my first acts as club secretary was to introduce a motion to open the club to everyone, regardless of race or religion. This was duly passed. It was my first small taste of idealism in politics.

I retain some recollection of what was happening politically in 1940s South Africa, though this information swirled around in my head without purpose or clarity at the time. I had vaguely heard of the 'Africans' Claims' document adopted in December 1943 by the African National Congress (ANC). The document sought to take up the promise of greater participation in government for all oppressed peoples offered by Churchill and Roosevelt in the 1941 Atlantic Charter. It even contained a comprehensive bill of rights. The document was rejected by the Prime Minister, Jan Smuts, which led me to the realisation that Smuts was both a political charlatan and a racist. I remember, too, the famous 'Three Doctors' Pact' signed in 1947 by Drs A.B. Xuma of the ANC, Yusuf Dadoo of the Transvaal Indian Congress and Monty Naicker of the Natal Indian Congress, after a series of clashes between Indians and Africans in Durban. This again set out ordinary South Africans' demands for basic rights such as universal suffrage and freedom of movement. I was proud that this document was the first such agreement between a 'majority' and a 'minority' about the future of their country.

For me as a boy in Stanger, the 'Three Doctors' Pact' was a milestone on the path of non-racialism, giving me a clear sense of what it was to be South African. But the Pact also provided me with a sense of the international scope of the struggle for human rights. The declaration concluded by urging that 'a vigorous campaign be immediately launched and that every effort be made to compel the Union Government to implement the United Nations' decisions and to treat the Non-European peoples in South Africa in conformity with the principles of the United Nations Charter'. The struggle for human rights, I saw, was both non-racial in principle and international in scope.

I remember meeting that extraordinary leader Yusuf Dadoo when I was still young. He had been banned by the apartheid government and was not supposed to travel. But he came to Stanger, illegally, to encourage the collection of ideas and petitions that would lead to the formulation in 1955 of the Freedom Charter, one of South Africa's most

important struggle documents. The Charter was a widely consulted, visionary declaration of rights and is the foundation for our country's present democratic Constitution.

I can also recall the sense of siege we felt when the National Party took power in 1948 and began to tighten the screws on 'non-white' lives. I am reminded even now of how my black compatriots felt about apartheid: apprehension, fear, mistrust, pessimism.

But these are youthful recollections and are frosted by the passage of time. It was only a few years later when I got to know Chief Albert Luthuli that my thoughts and understandings started to develop into a more concrete perspective on the world.



With my father's ruin and departure in search of temporary work, it was left to my mother to hold the family together. This was especially tough through the long, late-war years of the mid-1940s. With income from my father and from the two eldest brothers who lived with us, it was she who ensured there was food on the table, shirts on our backs and shoes polished for school. Though her diabetes caused her to suffer a great deal, this did not affect her infinite capacity to rear and care for us. In a male-dominated and heavily patriarchal society, mothers were usually relegated to the background, but in our case my mother was the anchor who provided stability and guidance in our lives.

I don't think my mother ever went to school. It was inconceivable then for a Muslim girl, and it had not changed much by my childhood. My very bright sister Khatija was forced to leave school at the age of twelve because of pressure from local Muslims, who told my parents that they would no longer frequent the shop if she was allowed to continue to secondary school. She has been angry about this ever since, and from her I take my enthusiasm for women's education.

With no formal education, my mother ran a household of ten virtually single-handed. She instilled in us the absolute need to live within our means. Some sacrifices had to be made, and it was painful for all of us, and especially for her, that the brightest of the Asmals, the second-born son, Mohammed (whom we called Nullabhai), had to leave at the end of primary school in order to augment the meagre family income.

My mother was illiterate in the precise sense of the word. But her inability to read and write did not preclude her from holding deep feelings for education, which she nurtured among the male children in particular. Ours was a close-knit family and she encouraged those who had to leave school early for work in order to assist those who were still at school or who hoped to enter higher education. She didn't understand our homework, but she insisted that we did it. We were too poor to give *zakāt* – a tithe for charity paid by those who could afford it – but my mother's approach was one of solidarity rather than of charity.

My mother raised no obstacle to my political awakening, even when later, as a school teacher, I supported the boycott of schools and brought the iconic Albert Luthuli, president of the African National Congress, to our home, an unheard of experience for most Indian families. All my mother wanted was that I should explain what I was doing. Too many books, she used to tease me, too many ideas, for a small head!

Small-town politics and narrow parochialism passed her by. She lived for her family though she did not entirely subscribe to the sentiment that 'every beetle is a gazelle in the eyes of a mother', because she could be critical of wrong turns and misbehaviour. There were many pressures exerted on her to conform to the mores of a small country town. She defended all of us from the outrageous demands and the sly hints of narrow-minded bigots. I recall one such incident when some neighbours complained to her that I was setting a bad example as I was too obsessed with books, listened to 'Western' music and did not show the appropriate degree of religious piety. I was a *moffie*, they declared – a terrible insult at the time. I recall my mother's anger at what she considered to be abuse of her son.

If she chastised us for our behaviour it was with words, never with her hand. In a society where corporal punishment was *de rigueur* in homes, schools and prisons, this discipline of hers set a remarkable example for me and nurtured a lifelong opposition to corporal punishment. I made a small salute in her direction when I successfully defended the abolition of such violence against children before the Constitutional Court during my tenure as Minister of Education.

Ours was a very argumentative family, with debate and loud conversations among the siblings: this in a traditional society where silence before elders was considered to be the only form of respect. Not

once did our mother show the slightest inclination to silence us. We loved her because of her tolerance, her gentleness and understanding, values which were not entirely common currency among our relatives in Stanger.

She had little to laugh about, what with the demands made on her, an absent husband and, before long, two married sons under the same roof. She made time for all of us and attended to our needs. In my case, she had to respond to my constant attacks of asthma from the age of three onwards. Quite why asthmatics required special treatment is not clear to me now, but I was not about to oppose the special care and attention I received from my mother. She accepted an Asmal solution for the fast during Ramadan by appointing me official taster of the food for the family. This I had to do standing up in the pantry in the dark, to ensure that I did not enjoy the breach of the requirement to fast during daylight hours.

Although she had a central role in the family, I was strongly attached to my father. He always said he couldn't help me with my intellectual endeavours, but if I ever needed a shoulder to cry on, he was available. He used to tap his shoulder when he would tell me this. After he retired, I went with him to mosque every Friday, and I imagine he enjoyed hearing his friends pointing out his devout son. The day he died in 1958, I gave up going to mosque. I had been reading Bertrand Russell's *Why I Am Not a Christian*. My mother was upset and could not understand why a book on Christianity could influence Muslim beliefs.

At the time I was growing up, Stanger was a very colonial and racist town. When the white magistrate walked in the Main Street, as he did every evening, you went to the other side of the pavement if you weren't a white person. You never crossed his path. I became acutely aware of racism when I was chased away from a 'white' shop where I had gone to buy a newspaper. The experience stung a great deal.

As children we were not only argumentative, we were inquisitive, and we started asking questions: 'Why can't this happen? Why can't I go to a white school? Why do I have to go an Indian school?' Of course, asking those questions created fears and anxiety in the family. In such a small town, everyone was terrified of politics. Talk was dangerous.

The school I went to was by law an all-Indian one. Many of the kids used to walk eight or nine kilometres to school, without the benefit of

breakfast. They were the children of Indian labourers, grandchildren of Indian indentured workers who had been brought to South Africa to work on the sugar-cane plantations in the middle of the nineteenth century. There was only one high school for Indians in the Lower Tugela area, a magisterial district that stretched from Groutville up to Maphumulo. At least a school meal was provided, usually sugar beans and rice, even if it did contain maggots and insects. For many children, it was the only daily meal they ate. There was enormous poverty everywhere. I'll never forget the ubiquitous sight of my fellow classmates with sores around their eyes, a classic and vivid sign of true poverty.

I was one of the lucky ones. We had to walk only a couple of kilometres to the Stanger Indian Secondary School. One had to cross the river to get to it, as there was no bridge. The best place to cross was near the police station, but if it had been raining and the water was too high, we had to turn back and go home. I had one jacket, one pair of grey trousers and one pair of shoes. These would grow more and more threadbare until enough money could be found to replace them. My shoes became so worn-down that on one occasion a rusty nail went straight through the sole and into my foot.

If there was a big contrast between the white part of town and the Indian section, comparing the white area to the black township of Shakaville was on another scale altogether. The deprivation was astonishing, even to the eyes of a child. There were no tarred roads, no shops, no recreational facilities, no trees or even any pavements. Houses were lean-to, fragile affairs hardly strong enough to keep the draught out, let alone the driving subtropical rain. We weren't allowed to go to Shakaville. I tried once to chair a debate at a school there, but we were not allowed to enter the township.

Almost all the teachers at the secondary school I went to weren't qualified, so many of my contemporaries missed out on opportunities because their curiosity wasn't whetted or their talents drawn out. There were two teachers who were graduates and, though they tried their best to encourage students in their areas of expertise, for the most part we were left to the mercies of the ignorant and the vicious. I don't have any false nostalgia about my school because it was an appalling place. All we had in the way of teaching aids was the 'spit factor', putting spit on our fingers to turn the pages of our textbooks.

There was one teacher, though, a Mr Keerath, who had a genuine love for literature and language. Although he was very strict and distanced himself from his pupils, he inspired an interest in me in books, dictionaries, and the discovery of language. He encouraged me to learn ten new words every day. But even the influence of a good teacher was limited in that educational system, as the school was a closed institution with a highly authoritarian administration.

Because the teachers were unqualified, they felt uncomfortable, and some of them resorted to physical violence in order to control the children. One of the worst used to take a ruler with a steel end and hit us on the knuckles with it until we bled. Indian children at that time were a pretty docile lot really, but corporal punishment was pervasive. So too was the rote learning and cramming that were forced upon us. These two dimensions of the education system, corporal punishment and rote learning, were issues I would come to tackle later when I became Minister of Education.

The teachers also gave no consideration to the impact of poverty on performance. The poor kids, the ones who walked kilometres and kilometres to school with no shoes, who had no place to bath or do homework, who were exhausted and hungry, were the ones who got beaten the most. They were beaten for their inattention, for their backwardness and for their smell. They were beaten because their parents worked in the sugar fields all day long and had no energy or time to pay them any heed. They were beaten because there would never be an enraged father marching through the school gates nor a tearful mother upbraiding the principal. They were beaten because when you are hungry, it's hard to learn and remember.

In spite of the obstacles and hardships, my family placed its trust in education. My father used to say, 'If you come first you get half-a-crown, if you come second you get two shillings, if you come third you get a kick in the backside.' But we never got a kick as he also disapproved of corporal punishment. We were the only household that I knew of like that in Stanger. Our respect for our parents developed through our close relationship, not because of the threat of violence. So I grew up in the absence of physical coercion and in a very inquiring household.

We didn't have a car and holidays were unheard of. My father was absent, more often than not. But there was no disgruntlement among us,

no demands for better things in a society where wealth was a powerful index of status. Ours was a poor but happy, boisterous, loud family.

Every night, with Mr Keerath's encouragement in my head, I tried to learn ten new words, together with their etymology. I used to practise my new words at mealtimes and it would drive my family round the bend. 'Don't be so punctilious,' I might say to brother Sonny. 'Don't start with that nonsense, Kader,' he might reply, supported by a chorus of good-humoured family agreement. As mealtimes were so noisy, sometimes I would quietly practise the new words to myself. 'Are you mad, Kader?' Nullabhai used to ask.

With my father usually absent and my eldest brother often quiet, the loudest voices invariably belonged to Nullabhai, Sonny and me. We produced a great cacophony of noise. We would shout and gesticulate and eat and argue all at the same time. My mother would happily take in the growing crescendo of conversation; her brood enjoying each other, life, constant debate, ideas and arguments. Our meals were so noisy at times that the neighbours would ask if we were fighting.

Meanwhile, my father was packing tins and shelves in some faraway shop in a small town out there on the road, perhaps in the Midlands or somewhere along the Dolphin Coast. He was probably just starting out on a ten- or twelve-hour shift, getting the shop ready for the morning. He would be living at the back of the shop, probably sleeping on a mattress on the floor, wondering, perhaps, from time to time when he would be home and where he might find me a book.

Of my five brothers, the one I was closest to during my childhood was Nullabhai. He was about five years older than I was and was the cleverest of all the brothers. With sufficient resources, he could have gone on to do anything. I admired him greatly. He took me, Sonny and Abubaker under his wing. He pushed us really hard on our schoolwork, in part because he knew how important it was and in part to make up for his own lack of education after it was cut short. He and my eldest brother, Ebrahim, whom we called Mota, had gone to work in a garage owned by an uncle. Nullabhai was only twelve at the time, but the money they brought home was essential for the survival of the rest of the family.

Nullabhai retained great interest in and enthusiasm for academic work and went on to be a respected bookkeeper. He was really more

like a chartered accountant, which I'm sure he would have been had the opportunity been available. He took great pride in seeing his younger brother go on to get his degree in medicine, from a major international university. Nullabhai was a real go-getter. He had enormous energy and was quite obsessed with learning.



In the claustrophobic society of the 1950s, with police informers and the passage of savage laws by the apartheid regime, it would have been easy for me to have retreated into a selfish, private world. But this was the period of my political education. In 1952 the Defiance Campaign broke out in South Africa. Based on Gandhi's notion of *satyagraha* – non-violent protest and resistance – thousands of South Africans of all races joined together to oppose the newly elected National Party's first initiatives to clothe racial separation in the armour of the state.

Several of the Natal Indian Congress's leaders, including Monty Naicker and J.N. Singh, were arrested in the campaign and sentenced to terms of imprisonment. They were marched daily in their prison uniforms right down Stanger's dusty main street. I'll never forget seeing them in their khaki short pants and red shirts, in the middle of winter. They seemed impervious to their situation, heroic.

The seeds of my own political consciousness began to germinate that winter. I undertook there and then to lead my school's stay-at-home campaign in solidarity. It was during the Defiance Campaign that I engaged for the first time in organised political action.

Of course in those days, Indians couldn't join the ANC, so that wasn't an option open to me. I didn't like the idea of organisations that were limited by race and so didn't feel inclined to join the Natal Indian Congress, as closely linked as it was at the time to the ANC. In any case it was a rule of engagement that teachers could not join political parties on pain of dismissal. Instead, I became involved politically on a more local level. I was asked as a young man to become the secretary of the local ratepayers' association, though I was not a ratepayer. Perhaps the shopkeepers, traders and garage owners who urged me to help them were impressed by my depth of experience as secretary of the local cricket club! Anyway, I agreed.

Before long, an important issue surfaced that forced the members of the ratepayers' association to engage more directly with political matters. As secretary, I was pitched head first into the morass of South Africa's burgeoning system of apartheid. Unsurprisingly, the big question concerned race: who should be allowed to live in certain areas and who should not. The infamous Group Areas Act was passed by Parliament in 1950 and, as a result, the government delineated particular suburbs and residential areas for habitation by one or other race group. Ordinarily the nice, central urban areas were demarcated for white use and the more remote, poorly equipped areas were set aside for coloured or Indian people, while Africans were shunted off to special townships miles away from the centre of towns. This demarcation was carried out by a panel known as the Group Areas Board, which heard submissions from interested parties and then made its recommendations to government for implementation. Throughout the country, in nearly every *dorp* and town, Africans, coloureds and Indians were uprooted from the centre of town and sent by state diktat to outlying areas. What would the Board decide to do in Stanger?

At the time the Natal Indian Congress was leading a campaign to boycott the Board's hearings, arguing that the proceedings were merely the pretext for a racist extravaganza, but local businesspeople were undecided or unsure about what to do. Many felt they should at least make representations to the Board to declare their preferences and interests. Their rationale was that they should collaborate with the Board to save their shops. Stanger was unusual in that it was the only town in South Africa where the majority of the inhabitants were Indian. Africans in Stanger had been corralled into a distant township, as they were everywhere else in South Africa, while the whites lived in a small enclave off the Durban Road. The effects remain today.

As the Board hearing date approached, my mother's brother Goolam, who led the ratepayers' association, let me know in no uncertain terms that I should keep my mouth shut. Goolam was a powerful and influential businessman in Stanger. He also employed two of my brothers. Goolam was the driving force behind the group who wanted to make submissions. He wanted to present Indian plans to the Board and make proposals. I told Goolam that I would refrain from speaking on condition that none of these alternative plans were presented to the

Board. I even promised my mother I wouldn't speak though I told her, 'We can't do this. We can't do this.'

The day of the Board hearings arrived. The small Stanger hall was packed with people, perhaps as many as a thousand. I sat right at the back and listened to events as they began to unfold. Before long, sure enough, Goolam stood up and announced that he had a set of proposals he had developed that would assist the Board in their deliberations. I then walked to the stage and stood ready to address the community. It was my first time in the bright light of public scrutiny and I was terrified. But I felt strongly about the issue, passionately. I agreed with the Indian Congress that people should not dignify the deliberations of this Board with alternative plans. The Board had an ardently and deliberately racist agenda and had been established to execute nothing less than the systematic racial division of our country and our community.

'We are Muslims, Hindus, Christians, merchants, workers, poor and rich,' I told the assembled citizenry of Stanger. 'But we are also South Africans and we all belong to this country.' South Africans of all races should live together, I cried, not be divided by bureaucrats. 'I grew up next to poor whites and Africans. And when we had fights we didn't fight as Indians or whites or Africans, we fought each other as kids.' How could we suggest, as Goolam was proposing, that poor people or whites live somewhere else? That condoned the very division and racism that the government and the Board were planning.

There was uproar in the hall, but the sentiment had swung away from Goolam and behind me. Overwhelmingly, the Indian community of Stanger decided not to collaborate with the Group Areas Board or to consent to alternative plans to help the Board carry out its work.

The next day, as I walked down Cooper Street, Stanger's main thoroughfare, illiterate Tamil trolley traders – called ghallowallahs – came up to me. 'Am I also a South African?' they asked me. It was very touching. For the first time, they thought of themselves as belonging to more than just an ethnic or religious or racial group. They were part of a bigger thing, a nation, made up of all the shades and varieties and values that give true diversity such power.



I had always wanted to go to university. But by the time I matriculated in 1952, the family couldn't afford it. The second best option was for me to become a teacher. In order to raise the funds for teacher training college, my father and I went to friends, associates and wealthy members of the Indian community to borrow money. It was one of the most humiliating experiences of my life: seeing my father, hands clasped behind his back, asking for help on my behalf. It was excruciating. When you go as a beggar, nobody asks you to sit down and make yourself comfortable. You are made to stand and wait; passive, humble, desperate. I vowed never to do that to anyone, never to keep anyone standing for hours just for a moment of my time.

I learnt then about the insolence of wealth and power. My father and I went to these people, mainly wealthy Indians in Durban, and we asked for money. We got three pounds here and four pounds there and eventually we had enough. I was then able to enrol at the Springfield Teachers' Training College in Durban. The next phase of my life had begun.

I left Stanger in 1952 a very young and fairly immature man. Durban was a revelation. Springfield College was an all-Indian institution but for the first time I had decent teachers. At the beginning there were one or two Indian teachers, and most of the others were white, but collectively they were quality educators and I learnt a great deal about teaching, life and literature. One teacher introduced me to Shakespeare and made an enormous impact on me. I have loved Shakespeare ever since. The principal of the college, Alex Levine, was a very senior member of the South African Board of Deputies, an important body within the country's influential Jewish community. Israel had only just been established in the late 1940s following the UN partition plan, and Levine was passionate about Israel's place in the world. Though he was intensely religious, he was also a fierce believer in the necessity for Jews and Muslims to acknowledge their similarities and start getting along. He called me to his office one day to ask why I wasn't going to mosque on Fridays any more. He didn't ask me to sit down. He just blurted it out: 'Why don't you go to mosque? You have to go,' he told me. 'Jews and Muslims – we are Semites, monotheists, and we must stick together. Against the pantheists.' I laughed. It's funny how the closer you are, the more bitter the fight. But my faith was ebbing away, and I found the appalling conditions in

which many South Africans lived, coupled with the increasing burden of apartheid, of more concern than otherworldly matters.

I stayed in a flat in the centre of Durban with a cousin. We had barely any money left after paying for our fees, books and clothing. All the same we had the time of our young lives. For the first time, I met Hindus and Tamils and Christians whom I could relate to. My best friends were no longer only Muslims. I also greatly enjoyed the repartee and discussions at the college. We talked about liberation and war, about literature and history. We thought, we debated, we argued, we met new people, we engaged our peers as our equals, we asked questions and we demanded answers. All this was soon under attack as the iron fist of apartheid crushed intellectual curiosity and stripped educational institutions of the capacity to stimulate and inspire.

I enjoyed English and history, did pretty well at biology and struggled in maths. I never seriously got to grips with what maths was all about. But English really captured my attention and imagination. I loved studying the English language and, with decent teachers, it became a lifelong passion.

I stretched my finances to buy cigarettes and we had to keep whiskey in the flat, for medicinal purposes of course! I read left-wing papers like the *Guardian* and *New Age*, both of which were later banned, and even helped to sell the *Guardian* at the Victoria Bus Station in Durban, where passers-by sometimes objected vociferously.

Two happy years at Springfield instilled in me a great passion for teaching. I could think of no better way of making one's way through life than by helping and nurturing young minds. I was ready to go out in the world to unleash the enthusiasm I had developed for educating young people.

In 1954 the Natal Provincial Administration, which had its headquarters in a big building in Pietermaritzburg, assigned me my first job as a teacher. I was 'deployed' to a school in Darnall, a small country town about fifteen kilometres from Stanger. Darnall is what Americans might call a company town. The sugar mill was the only show in town and all activities, enterprises and employment radiated from the sugar silos like a cobweb from a spider. I could not say that I was looking forward to teaching at an Indian school. I wanted to teach at a school without any qualifying adjective.

South Africa in the mid- to late 1950s was a country whose illness of racial bigotry had begun to take command of its body. The National Party had swept to power, taking all by surprise, and immediately set about implementing a radical plan of social engineering called apartheid. Stanger, like all the rest of South Africa, became a frightening place. All around us signs were erected barring non-white people from making use of public facilities such as swimming pools, libraries and train station platforms. Africans were declared non-permanent visitors to urban areas and were required, under pain of large fines or instant imprisonment, to carry passes authorising their presence in the cities.

The factories, mills and mines of South Africa had long been subject to racial barriers and the separation of the workforce. And the exploitative practices that companies had been using for years were now reinforced by the new Afrikaner-centred white political elite. So it was typical of the day for the white overseers and managers to live in the fancy part of Darnall and for the Africans and Indians to live cheek-by-jowl in the mill compound. All the Africans were in bachelor barracks, their families having been exiled to the rural areas of their birth. The Indians were at least allowed to live together as families, but each family usually occupied only one small room.

I was excited to be starting teaching. On the first day of my first job, I arrived at Darnall in a new suit, and feeling nervous but excited. My expectations were sadly lowered though when I was greeted by the principal and the first thing he did was hand me a cane. 'Here is your teaching aid,' he told me. 'Hit boys on the backside and girls on the hand. Off you go.' I never did hit any children, just as I had never been hit at home myself.

Darnall was a terrible place, especially on winter mornings when it was still dark as the bus arrived in the village. The school was situated up a steep hill beside the sugar mill. It was a treacherous climb when the winter rains turned the road into slippery mush. A teaching post in this godforsaken town was a bit of a come-down in the view of some of my wealthier relations, though not for my immediate family. I was one of the first Muslim teachers in Stanger and certainly the first teacher from my *kutum* or clan. It was a very big *kutum* and, while doctors, lawyers or shopkeepers were highly regarded, teachers did not enjoy much social prestige even then.

An Indian teacher was then paid about two-thirds of a white teacher's salary, but I was happy enough to be earning for the first time in my life. On getting my salary, I immediately paid a portion over to my mother. This left me with a few pounds on which to survive for the month. My father, who had retired when I began to teach, would never accept money from me or from anyone else for that matter. He hated the idea of depending on charity during his retirement. So I used to put some cigarettes aside for him, and we left it at that.

In spite of the overwhelming poverty, suffering and hardship which people in Darnall endured day in and day out, I was constantly amazed at their incredible hospitality and generosity. Even the poorest gave what they could to help the school. As the community had raised the money and built the school itself, it meant a lot to them. It was a way of trying to ensure that the new generation had opportunities and options the older one had missed. I used to get to Darnall very early in the morning and was always offered a cup of tea and a slice of bread. Initially, I had all the lower-middle-class prejudices about drinking from somebody else's cracked cup (in case I got some terrible disease), but I was soon overcome by the people's hospitality. It was very illuminating.

There was an extraordinarily free atmosphere in the mill compound which I passed every day. It was the first time I had encountered Africans who were not servants or night-soil workers. There were of course the usual arguments, but everybody got on with their lives and helped each other where they could. I was only just over twenty and didn't have much experience, but the situation helped to develop my sense of non-racialism and in a small way gave me an idea of what might be possible in South Africa.

The notion of staying in touch with ordinary people, of 'connecting' in the sense depicted by E.M. Forster, has been a passion, not a duty, throughout my life. We were not born to be racists. I have never lost my commitment to connecting with people. It has been like a contract for me, forged by the humble generosity and companionship of the mill compound and nurtured by decades of appreciation for the innate wisdom that people of all backgrounds possess.

While teaching at Darnall, I registered to do a bachelor's degree in English, history and politics, by correspondence, with the University of South Africa (Unisa). There were no local libraries that I was able

to use and no Unisa advice centres then. I had to travel to find books. I also had to get special permission to read the ‘banned’ books that were on my reading list. This only added to the allure of the treasured texts. One of these books was James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. I loved that book, and still do. Molly’s soliloquy was the most moving thing I had ever read. It was a clarion call to my awakening consciousness. And yet, it was hardly explicit. That is one of the joys of the English language. It can be evocative without being crass or obvious. Joyce’s words sang in my heart. The Irish writers and poets had begun their assault on me.

From Darnall I was promoted to my old secondary school in Stanger, in the middle of my studies. As a result I no longer had to get up so early. Still, it took me three hard years of intellectual isolation to complete my degree. Those who have done it will know that studying while working full-time is a lonely pastime. If you didn’t understand something, you just had to shrug your shoulders and carry on. I wondered why there were strong inquisitions in Portugal and Spain, but not in Italy. I thought it interesting that Protestantism seemed so popular in cold countries. But there was nobody to ask and my questions remained unanswered.

Even though it wasn’t quite the same as going to a real university, the books I began to read opened my eyes and my political views hardened. My mother used to say that books are dangerous. In my case, it was certainly true. Books were very dangerous. I started to understand what Marxism was all about. In South Africa at that time, Marxism was vilified, the Communist Party was banned and the ANC was labelled a communist conspiracy. The Suppression of Communism Act of 1950 was one of the most vicious pieces of legislation ever passed by the apartheid state. It enabled the state to shut down any party or organisation espousing dangerous anti-apartheid notions and ban individuals. I felt I had to find out about these dangerous ideas.

As the first stirrings of socialism took place in my mind, I realised intellectually that South Africa’s most important task was to combat poverty. While apartheid was rapidly being embedded in the broader society, in Darnall fighting poverty seemed more pressing and immediate than the struggle against racism. Soon I discovered that I was wrong. Only with political equality could a free people tackle the burdens of poverty in our society.

Soon enough, apartheid came knocking at the door of my school.

The Bantu Education Act was introduced by the government in 1953. It was an iniquitous piece of legislation that prescribed a separate syllabus for African pupils, who were to be taught only the bare bones of literacy and numeracy, just enough to serve their white masters through their labour. In effect, history, science and the arts had been excised from the education of millions of young children. The Minister of Native Affairs at the time, and later Prime Minister, Hendrik Verwoerd, famously announced that Africans should not be taught to aspire to the greener pastures of their white compatriots and there was no need for them as ‘hewers of wood and drawers of water’ to gain knowledge they could never use. The effects of such a catastrophically inhuman attitude are still being felt in South Africa today, as underskilled teachers in formerly African schools struggle to teach a more ethical set of ideas and values. At the time I felt I simply could not go into school each day and teach the children in my care the disgraceful new curriculum called Christian National Education, a bigoted set of chauvinistic precepts if ever there was one.

As I studied for my degree and read articles and books full of ideas not generally encountered in a small town, I began to nurture the dream that I would one day be a lawyer and that I would study at a world-famous university like the London School of Economics and Political Science. I had set my heart on the LSE. It was a radical place, full of socialist ideas, unlike Oxford and Cambridge, which I was told were built on the blood of the slave trade. LSE had an altogether different pedigree. There was also a brilliant political scientist teaching there by the name of Harold Laski. I remember reading his book *A Grammar of Politics* for the political science course at Unisa, and admiring him greatly.

It was my brother Nullabhai who turned my dream of going to LSE into something tangible. He made it seem possible, and insisted on providing a financial contribution. ‘You’ve always wanted to go to LSE,’ he told me. ‘Why don’t you go?’ Soon, I decided to go and applied for a passport.

By 1958 I’d finished my degree and was awaiting the outcome of my passport application. I had for a little while been the secretary of the Stanger Literary and Debating Society. The society was really a front for political discussions, though we did discuss literary things from time to

time. A hot topic was the division between India and Pakistan, which still gripped our discussions ten years after partition. Tension between Muslims and Hindus was always there, but we used to joke about it to each other.

The debating society was my political home as teachers were not permitted to join political parties. In any case, membership of the ANC was closed to non-Africans even though I felt emotionally that the ANC was my political home. I saw no need to deepen my Indian affiliations. In truth, for a short while, I was embarrassed by them. As an eighteen-year-old I was ashamed of my father's beard and his red fez. I wondered why my father wasn't more like a white man, the apogee of value at that time. But while the embarrassment at my Indianness lasted only a few months in my teens, I was not inspired to embrace an Indians-only political organisation. It was Steve Biko, the Black Consciousness leader who came to the fore in the 1970s, who taught that acknowledging one's own identity did not necessarily mean excluding everyone else's. My preferred identity, even then, was South African, my awareness and appreciation of which were nurtured and inspired over these formative years by the powerful example of Chief Luthuli.

With the quashing of the Defiance Campaign and the growing strength of the apartheid state, the regime felt confident enough to lift its banning order on Chief Luthuli in 1955. As secretary of the Stanger Literary and Debating Society, I could think of no better person to address the community on the important issues of the day. I had met Luthuli on a number of occasions as he had been banned to the area of Groutville, just down the road from Stanger. I invited him to be the guest speaker at the next debating society meeting, scheduled to take place in the *Madrassa* hall in Stanger a week or two later. To my excitement he agreed. As many of my peers and even members of the community had not heard of Luthuli, the event at first attracted no particular interest.

But by the day of the debate, a very real atmosphere of expectation and anticipation had developed. Several hours before Luthuli was due to make his appearance, the hall was surrounded by police officers and the Special Branch. The chairman of the debating society took fright. 'This is your man, so you must chair the meeting,' he told me. I was nervous about being in the limelight and the possibility of a confrontation with the Special Branch, particularly as I was waiting to hear about my

passport. This was then considered, for 'non-whites', a privilege rather than a right. But I agreed to chair the meeting and spent some time beforehand briefing the Chief.

Luthuli spoke for one and a half hours and held the packed hall in the palm of his hand. His mellifluous tones and stark common sense pierced many veils of ignorance. He spoke of the notion of a South African identity, of the challenge posed by the Nationalist government and its policies, and of the mounting non-racial campaign of resistance. He spoke so movingly in our small country town that I could literally see eyes being opened as he talked. I was twenty-four years old and very proud.



At last, I received my South African passport. In late 1958 I resigned from my job in Stanger and drew the little bit of pension money that I had saved over my four years of employment. Together with some help from my brothers I used the money to pay for a one-way ticket to Southampton on the transatlantic passenger liner the *Edinburgh Castle*.

A few months before I set sail for England, my father died. He was an extraordinarily generous man, to the point of exasperating my mother. I remember him returning home from one of his working trips, bearing a tray of ripe peaches and pocketfuls of sweets, which he distributed to the children of the neighbourhood. He loved children. When he died he was only sixty-five, but life had exacted a heavy toll on him and he looked much older than his years.

According to the lights of the world, my father was not a success. He had lost his business. He had been forced to spend years away from his family. He owned nothing, had saved nothing. But to me he was a magnificent, proud, kind, courageous failure whom I loved and admired greatly.

I left all my memories behind in Stanger as I departed for London in the hope of returning four years later as a qualified lawyer. But fate plays tricks, and in my case it was by the bucketful.

Three Great South Africans

I have been fortunate in my life to have encountered many extraordinary men and women, some South African, some African, some British, some Irish, others from different parts of the world. Of this collection of passionate, principled, talented individuals, three stand out: Albert Luthuli, Oliver Tambo and Nelson Mandela. These three are men of such quality and character that I feel compelled to devote a small part of this memoir to mark their deep impact on my life. They were in large part responsible for making me into the political animal that I have turned out to be. Why their lives intersected with mine will always be a mystery, but I got to know each of them at different stages in their lives and at different stages of mine, and they, each in their own way, guided me and made me the man I am today.

I met the larger-than-life Albert Luthuli when I was only a child and spent many, many hours with him during my adolescent years. He was the midwife of my political awakening and was a towering presence who greatly assisted my comprehension of what was happening in the world and in South Africa. I came into contact with Oliver Tambo shortly after he went into exile in London in the early 1960s. And while my own period of exile was spent largely in Ireland, our paths crossed periodically. In spite of these infrequent, often short interactions, he had a major impact on my thinking. I first met Nelson Mandela in 1990 in London and then a few months later when he visited Ireland. I then went on to serve in the Cabinet of Mandela's first democratic government. We worked closely together for five years.

Here, I want to pay tribute in turn to these three great South African leaders. Each in his way has made an indelible imprint not just on my own life but on South Africa and indeed on the history of humankind. Two of them, Mandela and Luthuli, have won due international recognition by being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Tambo never earned that distinction, but none who knew him doubted his extraordinary qualities.

Tambo, Luthuli and Mandela were all men of enormous depth, conviction and dedication. They led by example, acknowledged their frailties where necessary, and never backed down from the beliefs and principles they held most dear – not even if it meant great personal sacrifice, as it often did. At heart, each was a deep humanist, totally convinced of the equality of all men and women, appreciative of the inherent worth of every individual, and committed to improving the lives of the poorest and most vulnerable. At a personal level, they were deeply empathetic, kind, compassionate, wonderful men. It was a very great privilege indeed for me to have known each of them.



Albert Luthuli was a teacher by training, although he resigned from the teaching profession when he was elected by his people as Chief of the Umvoti Mission Reserve in 1936. Through his experience of the problems of his community he became politicised. In the 1940s he became actively involved in the ANC. He was an eloquent speaker, with a commanding presence and a formidable intellect. His qualities of leadership were recognised when he was elected in 1951 to the presidency of the Natal ANC and, soon after, to the presidency of the ANC itself.

This new political role precipitated a crisis when the government demanded that he choose between his chieftainship and his political activities. Refusing to resign from either, he was deposed as chief by the government, although throughout his life his friends and followers continued to address him by that traditional title, indicating that Luthuli was not to be defined by the apartheid regime. Luthuli's statement in response to the government's denial of his traditional authority was a resounding assertion of his moral authority:

‘Who will deny that thirty years of my life have been spent knocking

in vain, patiently, moderately and modestly at a closed and barred door?

‘As for myself, with a full sense of responsibility and a clear conviction, I decided to remain in the struggle for extending democratic rights and responsibilities to all sections of the South African community. I have embraced the non-violent passive resistance technique in fighting for freedom because I am convinced it is the only non-revolutionary, legitimate and humane way that could be used by people denied, as we are, effective constitutional means to further aspirations ...

‘It is inevitable that in working for Freedom some individuals and some families must take the lead and suffer.’

In 1952, as the Defiance Campaign gathered pace in South Africa, Luthuli was banned by the government. Stripped of his chieftainship, he was now restricted to Groutville, where he was born, and the surrounding area of Lower Tugela. As Stanger was fortuitously the only big town in Lower Tugela, Luthuli became a frequent visitor to my neck of the woods. He seldom visited Stanger without stopping by a bookkeeper named E.V. Mohamed. ‘E.V.’, as he was called, was a very gentle, pleasant man. He didn’t actually have any strong political affiliations, but he clearly had his own personal strengths and convictions, and Chief Luthuli valued his friendship enormously. As Luthuli didn’t have an office in Stanger, E.V. let him use his garage for this purpose. It was a brave act at the time because Luthuli was a banned person and to consort with him was bound to lead to Special Branch interest and, usually, harassment of some kind.

My father’s fruit shop was where many like-minded people met. He knew E.V. very well and one day E.V. asked him if I would like to meet the Chief. I must have been about thirteen or fourteen years old. I felt like I’d been asked to meet the King – I was then still in my royalist phase. For me, it was a most stirring experience. I was in total awe of the famous visitor from Groutville. He was the first African I met who wasn’t a cleaner, a gardener or a night-soil remover. Over time, I too became a regular visitor to E.V.’s house and Luthuli became my mentor.

Luthuli was a large man, and when he laughed, his whole face was suffused with smiles. I asked him many questions, some of them hugely naïve. He answered gently and patiently. He spoke in this extraordinary, beautiful voice with a lilting timbre and a rhythm that was intoxicating. He may have been a very large man, but he never made you feel small.

I became then a creature of the ANC, even though it was some years before I was able to join the organisation. Like many of my generation. I was moulded, influenced and deeply affected by the party and its policies. In fact, all my fundamental assumptions came through the ANC, starting with the profound wisdom and deep humanity of Albert Luthuli. He gave me and others a vision of South Africa that overcame the prejudice of one's cultural, ethnic, social and particularly religious background. He made me feel that we were all products of a shared society, despite its welter of prejudices. Luthuli, the Chief, made me into a South African.

I remember his telling me he had visited Johannesburg in an attempt to engage with white South Africans. Luthuli wanted to speak to whites, even though his banning order meant he wasn't allowed to. During the meeting, a young white Pretoria University student had kicked him under the table. It seemed that when he did get the opportunity to communicate with white South Africans, many just didn't want to hear him.

A few years after meeting him, I asked Luthuli to visit my home. He gracefully accepted and was soon welcomed into the tidy sitting room of our small house in Colenbrander Street in Stanger. Luthuli was the first African who had come as a visitor to our home. He brought some mangoes and I gave him a plate with a fork and knife. He ignored the cutlery and took a big bite out of a mango. The juice ran down his chin and onto his shirt. He didn't care in the least. He was thoroughly humble. He had no pretensions or pomposity. He just enjoyed the fruit. This amazing man introduced me to a political sensibility that I would hold close to my heart forever.

During the 1950s, the apartheid government considered it a criminal act to address Luthuli as Chief. In Alan Paton's novel *Ah, But Your Land Is Beautiful*, the police interrogate a leader of the National Union of South African Students (Nusas) after the organisation had congratulated Luthuli on his election to the presidency of the ANC. The police insist that it is 'subversive for a students' organisation to continue to give a man a title which has been taken away from him by a Minister who ultimately derives his power from Parliament. It is in fact contempt of Parliament, which is a serious offence indeed. The penalties are heavy, and could be crippling for you and your organisation.'

Ironically, around this time, F.W. de Klerk, who was later to become President of apartheid South Africa, invited Luthuli to speak at Potchefstroom University, on behalf of his student organisation, the Afrikaanse Studentebond. Although he regarded the ANC as dangerous because of its co-operation with communists and its proposals for a universal franchise in South Africa, De Klerk was interested in Luthuli because 'we respected his position as a Zulu chief'. It appears that De Klerk was quite unaware that the government he supported had deposed Luthuli as chief, or that addressing him as 'Chief' might be a criminal offence. Despite the objections of his university, the Afrikaanse Studentebond held the meeting off campus. 'It was a strange experience,' De Klerk relates in his autobiography, 'for young Afrikaners at the time to converse with black South Africans on an equal basis.' These students might have respected the Chief, but, De Klerk reports, 'his message that all South Africans should have the right to one-man one-vote in an undivided South Africa was at the time utterly alien to us'. In view of their insistence that Afrikaners had the right to rule themselves, while Zulus and other Africans should be relegated to 'homelands', this exchange with the students left Luthuli, so De Klerk imagined, 'despondent about the possibility that Afrikaners would ever accept his message'.

Luthuli, however, possessed a remarkable generosity of spirit, although he was never tolerant of injustice. He was a Christian, with very deeply held beliefs, but his Christianity was modelled on the Jesus who threw the moneylenders out of the temple. Throughout his active political life, Luthuli was a committed and disciplined member of the ANC. He articulated the movement's non-racial policies with the same deep conviction he vested in his religion.

'Our interest in freedom is not confined to ourselves only,' Luthuli said in his ANC presidential address of 1953. 'We are interested in the liberation of all oppressed people in the whole of Africa and in the world as a whole.' Clearly, Luthuli's vision of freedom in South Africa was advanced in solidarity with the struggle for freedom throughout Africa, because he and the movement were internationalists.

In his testimony during the Treason Trial, Luthuli invited the government to participate in negotiations, observing that 'one really can't anticipate and say what will happen at negotiation', but proposing

that the ANC ‘would be very, very happy if the government would take up the attitude of saying, come let us discuss’. When the court insisted that there was ‘very little hope of negotiation’, Luthuli responded: ‘There were no signs, my lords, in that direction ... [but] hope is always there.’ Far ahead of his time, even under the most hopeless of conditions, Luthuli held out hope for a peaceful resolution through negotiations.

In a speech in Johannesburg in 1958, Luthuli challenged any assumption that South Africa, with its complexity of race, colour, creed and culture, could not develop into a democracy. ‘I personally believe’, he declared, ‘that here in South Africa, with all our diversities of colour and race, we will show the world a new pattern of democracy. I think there is a challenge to us in South Africa to set a new example for the world. We can build a homogeneous South Africa on the basis not of colour but of human values.’

In that same speech, Luthuli called for an international boycott of South African products. This call for international pressure on the apartheid regime was heard in London, where I began studying a year later, and inspired the Boycott Movement, which was to develop into the British Anti-Apartheid Movement. Despite the attempts by the government to silence him, Luthuli announced the ANC’s human and humanising values of non-racialism, freedom and democracy in such resounding tones that his words reached all over the world.

When Louise and I decided to marry in 1961, the news created a sensation in Stanger as the apartheid prohibition on mixed-race marriage meant I could not return home – unless I left Louise behind. Before we did anything I wrote to my family. I believe it was my eldest brother, Ebrahim, and my second sibling, Mohammed, who approached the Chief to write to me. I received a beautiful message from Luthuli, who said he was looking forward to my return so that we, together, could set up a strong political centre in Stanger, where I would provide legal services to the indigent. I imagine it was a painful response to a dilemma posed by the intervention of my family.

Luthuli was nominated in February 1961 by the Social Democrats in the Swedish Parliament for the 1960 Nobel Peace Prize. At the time, he was still entangled in the five-year Treason Trial, which finally resulted in his acquittal on 29 March 1961. Under renewed banning orders that restricted his freedom of speech and his movement to the Lower Tugela

magisterial area, Luthuli was confined to his home in Groutville when he learnt on 12 October 1961 that he was being awarded the Peace Prize. In a public statement, he thanked the Nobel Prize Committee, but said that the award was being given not only to himself, 'but also to my country and its people – especially those who have fought and suffered in the struggle to achieve the emancipation of all South Africans from the bonds of fear and injustice'.

The apartheid regime reacted with outrage to the award. B.J. Vorster, then Minister of Justice, grudgingly allowed him to travel to Norway, 'notwithstanding the fact that the government fully realises that the award was not made on merit'. The Cape Town newspaper *Die Burger*, a National Party mouthpiece, said the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Albert Luthuli was a 'remarkably immature, poorly considered and fundamentally un-Western decision'. With characteristic humility and humour Luthuli observed that this was the first time he agreed with the government as he also thought himself unworthy of such a great honour.

Although the government was prepared to let him go to Norway, it would not grant permission for him to attend the celebrations that were held in nearby Stanger. Buses were prevented from transporting people to the occasion. Nevertheless, a celebratory event was held. Fatima Meer spoke and Alan Paton read his 'Praise Song for Luthuli'. The praise singer Percy Yengwa received the biggest response for his tribute to the 'great bull that our enemies had tried to enclose in a kraal, the great bull that had broken the strong fence to wander far – as far as Oslo!' Yengwa concluded by praising Luthuli as 'Nkosi yase Groutville! Nkosi yase Afrika! Nkosi yase world!' (Chief of Groutville! Chief of Africa! Chief of the world!)

Luthuli received the Nobel Peace Prize on 10 December 1961, a significant day, for in 1950 it had been declared by the United Nations as International Human Rights Day. He made a brief acceptance speech. The next day, he delivered his lecture 'Africa and Freedom'. Wearing his traditional Zulu headdress, he was very much the Chief. But he surprised the audience by singing the national anthem, 'Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika', demonstrating that he was also the leader and president of the ANC.

Luthuli made a tremendous impression by bringing Africa to Europe. As a Norwegian newspaper reported on Luthuli's lecture, 'We have suddenly begun to feel Africa's nearness and greatness. In the millions

of huts of corrugated iron, mud and straw lives a force which can make the world richer ... Luthuli, the Zulu chieftain and school teacher, is an exceptional man. But in his words, his voice, his smile, his strength, his spontaneity, a whole continent speaks.' But although his words and voice could be heard in Norway, they still could not be legally heard in South Africa. 'Albert Luthuli must now return to his people in chains, to his guards in exile,' the Norwegian report concluded. 'We have never seen a freer man!'

The last time I saw Luthuli was at Heathrow Airport in London on a cold, dark December night in 1961. He was on his way to Oslo to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. A small group of South African exiles, students and anti-apartheid campaigners had assembled in the hope of greeting him and his wife, Nokukhanya, but we could only wave our placards and ANC flags from the other side of a wire fence. The South African regime had given him a passport on condition that he did not engage in any political activities. Accordingly, he was forced to pass by without speaking to us, only casting a wistful look in our direction, while we were left feeling elated that after so many years we had at least had a view of our 'Chief'.

Returning home, Luthuli was again confined to Groutville. With the Nobel Peace Prize money, he bought two farms in Swaziland which he hoped would provide a safe haven for ANC refugees escaping from the increasingly violent repression of the movement in South Africa. Any profits from the farms, he intended, would go towards supporting the ANC in exile. As Luthuli was restricted to Groutville, the responsibility for overseeing the farms fell to his wife. Nokukhanya travelled every spring to Swaziland to spend six months sowing and reaping in the fields. Enduring tremendous hardship, she demonstrated why she was held in such high regard as a force in her own right, being affectionately known as the Mother of Light.

In 1963 the American journalist, interviewer and oral historian Studs Terkel met the Chief. In his interview, Terkel was impressed with Luthuli's extraordinary generosity of spirit. Although blacks had suffered greatly under apartheid, Luthuli said, 'The white is hit harder by apartheid than we are. It narrows his life. In not regarding us as humans he becomes less than human. I do pity him.' Luthuli's vision for the future, a non-racial democracy, was the only hope for the human

spirit for all South Africans, black and white.

Apartheid, as Luthuli saw so clearly, was a tragic failure of imagination. As he observed in his autobiography, *Let My People Go*, 'We Africans are depersonalised by the whites, our humanity and dignity is reduced in their imagination to a minimum.' Recovering human dignity required imagination and courage, 'uniting all resisters to white supremacy, regardless of race'. Non-violent resistance, as Luthuli often observed, was his preferred strategy. He came from a neighbourhood in Natal where the Indian activist M.K. Gandhi had lived and where the Mahatma's idea of *satyagraha* had taken root. Luthuli advanced this non-racial, multi-religious tradition of non-violent resistance in his political work.

To advance a 'relatively peaceful transition' Luthuli advocated economic sanctions against the apartheid regime. Yet he was not a pacifist. He once observed that anyone who thought he was a pacifist should try to steal his chickens. I believe that he came to appreciate, under the pressure of events, that some measure of force was inevitable, but he felt that any use of force should be wielded through a military formation separate from the political movement of the ANC.

I know that the plans for an armed struggle, under the auspices of a new military formation, were submitted to Luthuli for his approval. Just days after Luthuli received the Nobel Peace Prize, the newly founded military wing of the ANC, Umkhonto weSizwe, engaged in its first act of sabotage of a state installation. In pursuit of peace, the armed struggle had begun.

A few months before his death in 1967, Luthuli welcomed to his home the Africanist researcher and bookseller Donal Brody, who reported that Luthuli was still actively imagining a political future for South Africa. As Brody recalls, Luthuli said, 'I will not live to see everything that I and my friends have fought so hard for, but I think you will.' In prophetic terms, according to Brody, Luthuli observed: 'There will be enormous, peaceful change in South Africa before the end of this century. People of all races will eventually live together in harmony because no one, white, black or brown, wants to destroy this beautiful land of ours. Women must play an increasingly important role in all areas of the life of the future. They were and remain the most loyal supporters in all our struggles. The big powers will eventually

turn away from all of Africa, so we must dedicate ourselves to solving our own problems.’ Certainly, these reported observations by Luthuli anticipated a unified, democratic, non-racial and non-sexist society, a new South Africa working out its own destiny in the continent of Africa and the larger world. They are consistent with his vision of South Africa’s past and future.

Looking to the future in his autobiography, Luthuli affirmed the principle of non-racialism, which was clearly identified in concrete terms in the Freedom Charter and eventually enshrined in the Constitution of a democratic South Africa. ‘The task is not finished,’ he wrote. ‘South Africa is not yet home for all her sons and daughters. Such a home we wish to ensure.’ As he imagined such a home for all, he faced and embraced this challenge: ‘There remains before us the building of a new land, a home for men [and women] who are black, white, brown, from the ruins of the old narrow groups, a synthesis of the rich cultural strains we have inherited.’ This new land, this new South Africa, he foresaw, ‘will not necessarily be all black; but it will be African’. In such an inclusive, expansive vision of what it means to be African in South Africa, Luthuli imagined this new land as a home for all.

Although he envisioned this new land for all of us, and gave so many of us the imaginative capacity to share that vision, Luthuli did not live to see its realisation in a democratic South Africa. Struck by a train in 1967, he died while those who upheld his vision were still embattled, underground, in prison or in exile.

In Ireland we kept the Chief’s beliefs alive by inaugurating the annual Albert Luthuli Memorial Lecture in Dublin, where so many ordinary people had devoted themselves to the isolation of the apartheid regime through the boycott of goods and trade, which Luthuli had been the first to articulate.

In our gratitude and love, Luthuli lives. The central offices of the ANC in Johannesburg were named Luthuli House, at my request. The government has decided that the watermark on our South African passports must bear his image, so wherever we travel, anywhere in the world, we carry Luthuli with us. Further afield in Africa, the University of Jos in Nigeria has established the Albert Luthuli Professor-at-Large, a position held by the great scholar Ali Mazrui.

For those of us who now live in a unified, non-racial, non-sexist and

democratic South Africa, we keep his memory alive because we live in the home that was designed and built by Luthuli.



In 1955 Chief Luthuli informed me that the ANC had recently elected a Johannesburg lawyer named Oliver Reginald Tambo as its secretary-general. He broke into laughter when he told me that Nelson Mandela's law partner was quiet and modest but a man of steel who would galvanise the ANC. I was to hear little more of Tambo until the early morning arrests of the 156 Treason trialists in 1956.

All of us involved in the ANC followed the vicissitudes of our heroes and heroines in the charade that passed as a trial and we celebrated their acquittal in 1961. However, what struck me afterwards was the way Tambo's life resembled the fortunes of the main character in a book that Luthuli had lent to me, John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Luthuli's words to me were: 'Read this book as it reflects a life of struggle. We will face similar struggles to those of the hero, Christian, before we win our freedom.' At the time, for me as a budding rationalist, the book was a revelation, and even now provides fresh insights.

Both Luthuli and Tambo were profoundly religious, though neither allowed his beliefs to obtrude on personal relations. Both travelled along Christian's allegorical road – the slough of despond, the hill of difficulty, the valley of humiliation – and neither reached the 'celestial city' of freedom. Both were strong men, and though they must at times have despaired, we who knew them, mostly from a distance, were never aware of this.

Tambo lived his life by the injunctions given to Christian: not to surrender to the forces of evil and not to be deflected from the path of righteousness. Life was not given to him 'merely for ease and pleasure but for the realisation of ideals of high endeavour and noble service', in the words of one edition of the book. Indeed, Tambo sacrificed his life for our freedom, and his life really did reflect these ideals.

I identify two phases of Tambo's life that relate to my own. The first was when he was in exile and based in Britain. He mobilised people to break the walls of ignorance about apartheid South Africa and he advocated sanctions. This culminated in his star performance at the first

international conference on sanctions in 1964. This event also promoted the campaign on behalf of political prisoners, which saved the lives of the Rivonia trialists, and then, most important of all, arranged for military and other forms of assistance to the ANC.

I was a student when Tambo arrived in London and was already deeply involved in the Boycott Movement. Tambo showed us that it was possible to arouse public consciousness about the evils of apartheid by reaching out to ordinary people, by working with civil society in all its manifestations, including political parties, to put pressure on governments. He was at the centre of our activities. We were all involved with him, either through the Anti-Apartheid Movement or through the ANC, or both. The loneliness of exile was largely dissipated for those engaged in solidarity work by the comradeship that grew between us all. Of course, Tambo was busy with a multitude of concerns, so as young people working at grassroots level we did not meet him often, but we followed his doings eagerly. His stature grew with each appearance at international forums and we revelled in his triumphs.

For all of us he became our lodestar, who guided us through the maze of exile politics and the complex relations with governments and domestic organisations. He introduced many of us to the burgeoning anti-apartheid and solidarity movements in Europe and elsewhere in the world. He showed us by example the necessity to remove any political or sectarian approach from our solidarity work. His humility drew us to him and strengthened our own understanding of our work for a non-racial South Africa. He was a truly modest man: for years, he insisted that he was only the acting president of the ANC, and nothing was to detract from Nelson Mandela's pre-eminent role.

A lesser man might have abandoned what must have seemed a hopeless task after the incarceration of so many of the experienced leaders in the 1960s and the suppression of resistance. Bunyan's 'hill of difficulty' proved long and steep, but Tambo's steadfastness helped us to believe that it was not insurmountable.

After I moved to Ireland and Tambo moved to Lusaka to be in closer contact with the struggle, our paths did not cross again directly for a while. Contact was never lost, though, as we celebrated the ANC's diplomatic and political victories and worked with him in the seminal conferences organised by the UN and solidarity organisations.

We all understood the intense pressures brought to bear on Tambo by the conflicting demands of the Cold War externally and by the war in southern Africa internally, which had echoes within the structures of the liberation movement. The unity and integrity of the ANC were his paramount consideration. Uniquely, compared with the fortunes of other liberation movements, he managed to keep us together.

I can attest to his moral courage and pertinacity. In 1979 he came to Ireland to speak at the first conference on the European Economic Community (the EEC) and apartheid South Africa. His words have stayed with me: 'The struggle in South Africa is one between the forces of national liberation and democracy on the one hand and the forces of colonial domination, racism and fascism on the other. Between these forces there can be neither compromise nor peaceful coexistence.'

Though the Irish government's opposition to apartheid was clear, it was reluctant to impose economic sanctions and would not support any resolution at the UN that intimated support for the struggle led by the ANC. The IRA campaign in Northern Ireland was at its height at that time. How could the Irish government support the armed struggle of the ANC when, it was argued in some quarters, the IRA was conducting a similar armed struggle against a similar colonial master? Such an extrapolation from South Africa to Northern Ireland I considered to be invalid, but the Irish government was afraid that the argument would result in a loss of support among its voters. Tambo understood the reasons for this approach, though he might not have agreed with it.

Prior to the Dublin conference of 1979 he met with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Michael O'Kennedy, who was to open the conference with him. These meetings usually last for an hour, but this one went on for two. Such was Tambo's persuasiveness that the Foreign Minister undertook to provide direct assistance to the ANC, much to the chagrin of his officials, whose body language spoke volumes. Ultimately, the Irish Anti-Apartheid Movement was not able to hold the government to this undertaking, which was made on the spur of the moment in response to Tambo's force of argument and quiet passion.

At the conference, Tambo's speech galvanised the delegates to action. A structure was soon established to co-ordinate the activities of the anti-apartheid movements in the EEC. There was a striking phrase that Tambo used in Dublin when he described the EEC as the 'life-blood of

apartheid' because of the prominent role it played in military, financial, strategic and economic relations with South Africa. This was history in the making: as a result of the conference, the focus of anti-apartheid activities would no longer be limited to national work but took on a collective European perspective through lobbying the EEC institutions in Brussels. Tambo provided the impetus for such an innovative development.

Another insight into Tambo's remarkable brand of leadership was provided by the events leading to the signing of the Nkomati Accord between Mozambique and South Africa in March 1984. My personal involvement arose from a telephone call from Tambo, requesting my presence in Lusaka for an urgent extended meeting of the ANC to discuss the legal and political implications of this agreement for the movement. This was a difficult request for me to meet. My students at Trinity College were to write an international law paper the following week and there was no guarantee that I could be back in Dublin in time for their examinations. University protocol decreed that the examiner had to be present at the examination.

This was the first time I had been invited to a meeting of the ANC's National Executive Committee (NEC) and I wanted to take part. I explained my dilemma to Tambo. His response was understanding and provided me with an instant solution to my dilemma. Stay in Dublin and do your duty, he advised me, but promise that in the next day or two, you will write an analysis of the Accord from an international law perspective.

This I did in time for the NEC meeting, drawing attention to two features of the agreement that rolled back all the gains that had been made as regards the status of the ANC at the level of international law. Firstly, it implied that combatants of the ANC were terrorists. Secondly, the agreement compelled both parties not to provide any form of assistance to these 'elements'. Apartheid South Africa had rejected the series of UN General Assembly resolutions that accepted the right of states to provide assistance to liberation movements combating racism, colonialism and foreign occupation; and now it was demanding that allies of the ANC also reject the demands made on them by these resolutions.

The Nkomati Accord stated that all ANC members should be

removed from Mozambique. In turn, Mozambique would be eligible for various economic and other benefits from South Africa, which would also halt its support for the rebel group Renamo. The Accord caused a great deal of anger at what we considered to be a betrayal of the legitimacy of our struggle. Another very serious bone of contention was that our president had not been fully informed by the head of state of Mozambique.

Yet the NEC statement on the matter was a sober and firm reiteration of the role of the ANC. Tambo, who had been slighted by Mozambique, refused to condemn that country. If he felt pushed into the valley of humiliation, he never showed it. At the time South Africa was actively assisting the forces fighting the Frelimo government in the civil war then raging in Mozambique and he understood the murderous pressures being exercised by P.W. Botha against its neighbour. He also recognised the enormous sacrifices that Mozambique had made in support of the ANC.

In the event, it was South Africa that violated the agreement by cynically continuing to support Renamo rebels. No serious injury was done to the ANC. Rather than driving Mozambique into a corner, Tambo's calm and collected approach had been the right one. He ensured that an unequal and forced treaty would not result in a breach of our relations with a valued partner. There is a place for hotheads, but this was not the time. Tambo's sense of history and his innate decency provided the correct response.

Following the 1976 Soweto uprising, there was a surge of resistance in South Africa. This was followed in the 1980s by the formation of the United Democratic Front (UDF), in which Tambo played such an important role. Delegation after delegation from inside South Africa came to Lusaka to seek his opinion and advice, even when it was still very dangerous for them to do so. In effect nothing ever happened 'at home' without his approval. I recall one such occasion when I was in Lusaka attending an ANC Constitutional Committee meeting. I was invited to attend a meeting of a large delegation of traditional leaders who were waiting to seek Tambo's advice on some matter. At the meeting, he listened to them patiently, took on board a number of their suggestions about how to organise in rural areas, and quietly put some challenges before them. Their respect was given to him not simply because he was

an older person or because he was president of the ANC, but because of their admiration for the man he was. Openness to others and their ideas was never an excuse for him to revise or weaken his principles.

The second phase of my relationship with Tambo has to do with the events in South Africa in the middle of the 1980s, when the situation in the subcontinent once again came to occupy the centre of the world stage. The State of Emergency, the emergence of the UDF, and the dramatic success of Umkhonto weSizwe attacks reflected a changing country and required a collective response from the movement. So, it was decided that a second consultative conference would be held in Kabwe, near Lusaka, in 1985. The first consultative conference, held in Morogoro, Tanzania, in 1969, had adopted the 'Strategy and Tactics' document, which provided the foundation for the ANC's activities in the 1970s. Because it was in exile, the movement could not call a national conference, which would have constitutional authority, but it was felt that the time was ripe for a second consultative conference. Though I hadn't attended Morogoro, I was present at Kabwe.

News of the conference was met with disinformation from a panicky apartheid South Africa. The Afrikaans newspapers and the 'liberal' white press were full of stories about a putsch against Tambo and the rest of the leadership because of alleged dissatisfaction among the rank and file, especially in the ANC camps. In fact, more than three hundred ANC delegates from every part of the world where the movement had a presence assembled in Kabwe in June 1985. Tambo introduced the political report of the National Executive Committee, which was wide-ranging and comprehensive. While there was overwhelming support for it, some vexed issues needed to be discussed, such as the increasing impact of the armed struggle and whether membership should be 'open' to all the so-called races defined by apartheid laws.

The ANC constitution did not refer to race at all. However, in the Congress movement, there were different structures for the various groups (such as the South African Indian Congress) and an understanding that the ANC would above all be representative of the most exploited section of our country's population, the African majority. In his political report, Tambo carefully referred to the membership issue and asked whether 'we still felt justified to keep the restriction on membership'. Even more carefully, so as not to pre-empt the right of the conference

to decide, he felt we could reach agreement on a decision that ‘will take our movement and struggle further forward’.

The following day we all broke into commissions. I spoke against opening up the membership, partly because some elements who argued that the ANC was already dominated by whites and Indians might use this to incite further hostility. Chiefly it was because I felt that the ANC should continue to be representative of the vast majority of the most oppressed and nothing should be allowed to dilute this representative capacity.

I was in a small minority of dissenters. In the middle of the night, I was quietly educated about the nature of the ANC. A group of young combatants from the camps who came to talk to me firmly told me it was wrong that while whites and Indians could lay down their lives for our freedom in the service of the ANC or MK, they were not good enough to become full members. On my way to the plenary, where I intended to speak before the vote was taken, Tambo happened to pass by me. He stopped and took me by the arm and, without any hint of trying to persuade me, drew my attention to the need to recognise that the ANC represented all oppressed blacks and also those progressive whites who had accepted the policies and programmes of the movement.

At the plenary I subsequently withdrew my objection, and the motion to admit all South Africans to membership, including the right to become members of the NEC, was passed overwhelmingly. Tambo had great respect for lawyers, especially those in the movement. He therefore proposed that Albie Sachs and I oversee the election of the NEC – not an easy task in the absence of secretarial services. It was Tambo’s unobtrusive leadership that enabled all of us to affirm the non-racial character of the ANC, and the organisation emerged from the Kabwe Conference more united than ever.

Even more significant was the adoption of a Code of Conduct, promulgated after the conference. This code established a system of justice for the ANC that was unique among liberation movements in southern Africa, even though we were engaged in a situation of war. Insisting on proper legal procedures, including the appropriate burden of proof, meant that arbitrary arrests would be reduced and improperly prepared cases thrown out at hearings. I am not aware of any partisan movement in Europe or liberation movement anywhere that emphasised,

as the ANC did, the need for restraint and respect for proper procedures during the conduct of hostilities while its very existence was at stake. This was Tambo's legacy.

One aspect of Tambo's work as president that has received little acknowledgement is the outstanding role he played in ensuring that internal controls were put in place concerning the treatment of members of the ANC, especially in the camps in Angola where our combatants were stationed. This was a sensitive matter as the security department of the ANC had to ensure the welfare and safety of our members and especially of the core leadership, but its behaviour had given rise to criticism. The Pretoria regime had made no bones about its all-out war against the ANC. Apart from the assassination of our leaders, such as the outstanding Joe Gqabi in Harare in 1981, attacks on the frontline states like Angola were part of the destabilising process against the ANC. Even more dangerous was the infiltration of agents into the ranks of the ANC with a mission to sow confusion and to attack the leaders. In this murky world, abuses by our security elements did take place.

Soon after the Kabwe Conference, new allegations of abuse arose, especially at the Quatro camp in Angola. Against the advice of his security staff, as the situation was fraught with danger, Tambo visited the camp to investigate matters. The combatants had requested Tambo's presence as they felt that no other leader would be able to deal with their grievances. Tambo the lawyer, with his overpowering sense of justice and his infinite capacity to listen to everyone, even to occasional hostile outbursts, was able to reunite the forces in the camp. The result was that the leadership of the ANC's security department was replaced and a restructured directorate of intelligence and security was created to assume responsibility. As a commission of inquiry later established, there was never a pattern of systematic abuse of rights or a policy of violations in ANC camps.

Although Tambo always insisted that he was part of a collective and that he acted on the advice of the National Executive Committee, there can be little doubt that the initiatives the ANC took were inspired by him. There was always a delicate balance to be maintained between the need for security and transparency and the morality of the movement. In one case, the decision of an ANC judicial tribunal to recommend capital punishment was rejected by the NEC and by Tambo, in line with

our historical opposition to this obscene form of punishment. Capital punishment was of course eventually abolished by the Constitutional Court of a free South Africa. Our liberation movement's hostility to capital punishment was reflected in an early draft of the country's Bill of Rights, produced in 1991, which abolished the death penalty. No international covenant on human rights had renounced the obscenity of capital punishment in such a forthright manner. Tambo approved of such an approach: this was real leadership.

By the 1980s, not many of our comrades who remained in South Africa had actually met their acting president. When some had the opportunity to do so, it was electrifying. Those of us who witnessed their response were deeply impressed. This happened once in Harare in September 1987 during a breakaway session of an international conference dealing with the appalling treatment of children in South Africa, thousands of whom had been detained, tortured or imprisoned during the 1980s.

The organisers had expected a handful of people to attend because of the State of Emergency in South Africa. Yet more than three hundred people came, many of them children. During the first day, we heard their harrowing testimonies. At the opening session, Tambo made one of his most moving speeches. He began by reading Ingrid Jonker's touching poem 'The Child Is Not Dead'. In his concluding statement he talked about cherishing children. Those views of his are now, in my opinion, reflected in the unique provisions on the rights of the child in the present South African Constitution. 'We cannot be true liberators unless the liberation we will achieve guarantees all children the rights to life, health, happiness and free development respecting the individuality, the inclinations and capabilities of each child,' he said, drawing attention to the urgent task of a free South Africa to attend to the welfare of the millions of children whose lives had been stunted and 'turned into a terrible misery by the violence of the apartheid system'.

Later that afternoon, a call was made for all South Africans to gather together, away from the conference. Tambo had been out of the country for more than twenty-five years by then. Very few would have seen him, as his photograph was banned, as were his speeches. He spoke without notes, welcoming first by name the new members of the National Executive Committee who had been elected at the Kabwe Conference of

1985, and drawing attention to the non-racial composition of that body. There was silence when he spoke about violence by the regime and then about ‘necklacing’, the practice emerging in the strife-torn townships of killing state informers by using burning tyres. ‘This must stop,’ Tambo said. There was a hush: exiles did not know what would happen next. Then there came a dramatic, full-throated roar of approval. Tambo’s was a cry that drew on the humanism of our struggle and the need to relate means to ends.

In the public eye, Nelson Mandela is most closely associated with reconciling white and black in post-apartheid South Africa, but long before that Tambo had made the case for reconciliation. I recall this vividly. I had prepared an opening speech for the children’s conference in 1987 in Harare. My address was a legal indictment of apartheid’s criminal leaders, based on the Nuremberg Principles underpinning the trials of Nazi leaders after 1945. I had intimated to some ANC leaders at the conference that I would call for the prosecution of apartheid’s leaders, after our freedom, for crimes against humanity and war crimes.

Tambo took me aside before the opening session and, with quiet persuasiveness, informed me that Nuremberg was ‘victor’s law’. There was already talk about negotiations with the apartheid regime, and he made it clear that it would be provocative in the extreme to announce that we would negotiate with the regime and, following successful discussions, we would try them for crimes against humanity.

The Nuremberg Principles were very important to me. They also came to form the basis of the International Criminal Court’s jurisdiction. But the facts on the ground in South Africa led all of us to a different conclusion, guided by Tambo. We were engaged in talks about talks and were planning to negotiate on the basis of a predetermined agenda. We could not demand prosecution and the infliction of punishment as a condition for negotiations. If the ANC had done this, there would have been no talks or settlement. For me, ten years’ work went down the drain after Tambo’s intervention and I hurriedly changed my speech. Subsequent events showed the correctness of Tambo’s approach.

By the time the subject of negotiations was first broached – and also in large part as a result of it – the boycott movement had spread to countries around the globe, and the pressure on governments to impose sanctions against the apartheid regime was meeting with increasing

success. These pressures were also beginning to have an impact inside South Africa. By the middle of the 1980s, the ANC was talking with white individuals and organisations who desired some form of progress away from apartheid. Also, under the leadership of the ANC and the UDF, initiatives were being taken to incorporate trade unions and education, religious, cultural and sports groups within the growing movement of resistance.

What, we asked, should we do when some of these bodies wanted to establish links with overseas affiliates or make overseas visits? What would become of our isolationist policies? Tambo resolved this dilemma when he spoke at the Canon Collins Memorial Lecture in London in May 1987. There he laid down a policy that had enormous implications for our solidarity work. His timing was brilliant. He first traced the effects of the State of Emergency and the way our people were responding. He looked at the serried ranks of anti-apartheid activists before him and then, quietly and firmly, told us: '[The] moment is upon us when we shall deal with the structures our people have created and are creating through the struggle and sacrifice as representatives of the masses. Not only should these not be boycotted but more, they should be supported, encouraged and treated as the democratic counterparts within South Africa of similar institutions and organisations internationally. This means that the ANC, the broad democratic movement in all its forms within South Africa and the international solidarity movement must act together.'

It was a dramatic change from the way in which we had operated previously. Tambo's message reflected the growing opposition to apartheid in South Africa. We had to respond, as he had taken us into his confidence. While the isolation of apartheid must continue and there was to be no let-up, we had to treat these 'people's movements' in a different way. This was a direct challenge to those of us in the Anti-Apartheid Movement. Strict ideology and dogmatic policy had to take into account developments at home.

In all my association with Tambo, his constant refrain was the need for equality. He insisted that we should reach out to all South Africans, in contrast with the apartheid regime, which violated every canon of equality and thrived on separating our people from each other. In hindsight, his reaching out to all the communities in South Africa

made Tambo one of the principal architects of reconciliation. It meant that he took great care to maintain and strengthen the ANC tradition of non-racialism, and knew that our struggle relied for its success on inclusiveness.

He also applied the principle of inclusiveness to gender issues and was instrumental in placing women's demands before a largely male-dominated ANC. History will honour him as the first leader of a liberation movement who argued passionately for gender equality. On more than one public occasion I heard him express his support for the Women's Charter, adopted by the Federation of South African Women in Johannesburg in 1954, which in many ways was a more revolutionary document in its approach to women's issues than the Freedom Charter of 1955.

One of Tambo's abiding qualities was the trust he placed in those who worked with him. This in turn evoked a deep respect, even love, for this highly principled leader, who was able to draw on the talents and capacity of so many of the South African men and women in exile in different parts of the world. Tambo possessed more than the ordinary virtues of leadership. I realised in my contact with him that his distinguishing quality was his accessibility, not simply in the sense that he was available to meet South Africans whether he was in Accra, Lusaka, London or New York. It was not his style to be protected by a phalanx of private secretaries or a guard of minders. If you had something to discuss with him, he was there for you.

By accessibility I mean something more. He had an openness to ideas and a capacity to respond to changing circumstances. Tambo gave us many gifts: selfless leadership, an extraordinary capacity to listen to others and consider new ideas, humility, compassion, and a belief in the capacity of people to be their own saviours. In the hell-holes of apartheid's prisons, in the countless villages and barren townships of South Africa, in the loneliness of exile and in the isolated camps of our combatants, his was the voice that spoke for us and provided the hope – no, the certainty – of the freedom which he would, sadly, not live to see.

The poet Seamus Heaney's famous line that once in a lifetime, justice can rise up, and hope and history rhyme, was written in response to Mandela's release in 1990. There is no doubt that Tambo's extraordinary determination to uphold the values of inclusiveness, non-racialism,

non-sexism and justice, and his capacity to imbue others with the same values, made an incalculable contribution to that sentiment. Tambo was a true hero of our struggle, who helped us all to reach the 'celestial city' of Bunyan's parable: a free and democratic South Africa.



Few individuals have had as great an impact on their nation and on the world as Nelson Rohlhlhlahla Mandela. South Africa's political transformation was at least in part the result of Mandela's personal capacity to purge any poison of hatred or revenge from his soul, to rise above bitterness, to demonstrate a generosity of spirit, and to reach out to others, all the while remaining true, even under the harshest conditions of injustice, imprisonment and oppression, to his political principles. Those principles, Mandela himself would argue, were not his alone. They were the shared achievement of a political movement, the ANC.

I met Nelson Mandela at a gathering for ANC members during his first visit to London after his release from prison. It was quite clear to everyone that he was going to be the next President of South Africa, but Madiba himself acted like any other visitor. On being introduced to me his first words were, 'How is Louise?' To this day I remain moved not only by his knowledge of the details of the personal lives of so many of us in the ANC, but also by the importance he placed on our families. Despite being deprived of family relationships for so many years, he had clearly not lost sight of the importance of them in even the most political of lives. I was totally taken aback, especially when he went on to say, 'Oh Kader, I have been reading your work in prison on the Island.'

A few months later I met Mandela again when, in mid-1990, he at last received the freedom of the city of Dublin, an award that was made while he was still in jail in 1988. Francis Devine, author, now retired academic and former president of the Irish Labour History Society, wrote a poetic letter to Louise and me on that occasion: 'That Mandela was actually here, a Dublin Freeman, is tribute to your energy, cause of the grey salting your moustache, the tears salting your black, sparkling eyes ... You wrapped the world in your dream and it is proud to have believed you, warm in the scarlet glow of other people's struggles, cheering him.'

‘Tomorrow morning you will be again left with true friends to clear away the chairs, the tattered bunting, making ready the platform for the next campaign, not acknowledging the riches your comradeship has given Ireland. You will pluck for us wayside flowers that will lighten our lives with the fragrance of freedom.’

Such kind words. It was mostly luck that enabled us to host Madiba in Dublin. He had accepted an invitation to attend an ANC fundraising concert in Oaklands, California, but he assured me that he would honour the promise he had made to visit Dublin, so he cut short his US visit and stopped over on his way home. We met him at the airport at two in the morning. Also there to greet him in force was the Irish press, including a young journalist from one of the daily papers, who thrust a microphone in Madiba’s face and demanded to know what he thought of the IRA. Mandela’s response was typical of him. ‘You must talk to them,’ was his reply. Well, not only the tabloids turned this into headline news; even the BBC led with the story. I had organised the trip and it was left to me to do some damage control.

I visited Mandela’s hotel early the next morning, to find him still in bed. ‘Madiba,’ I said, ‘we have a problem.’ He invited me to sit down. There was no seat in the hotel room so I had no option but to perch at the foot of his bed. I was surprised again at how tall he was: there was little room for me. ‘Kader, why are you so uncomfortable?’ he said, shifting to make room for me. I explained why I was really uncomfortable. ‘Madiba, we have a problem. It’s like a ton of bricks falling on our heads.’ I explained that the British and US governments didn’t talk to the IRA. We were in something of a quandary. While we did not want him to repudiate his words, the British Anti-Apartheid Movement was seriously perturbed.

In the end we came up with a simple solution. He was due to speak at a dinner that night with the Taoiseach (the Irish Prime Minister), so we inserted a sentence into his speech. ‘It is not my job to prescribe to anyone else how to behave in their own countries,’ said Mandela. ‘But all my life I have believed that it is important to talk to people, to negotiate. You don’t negotiate with friends. You negotiate with your enemies.’ A few years later, of course, the Good Friday agreement was signed in Northern Ireland. That day my secretary put through a call to me. She was taken aback. ‘It’s from the President.’ It was indeed Madiba, and he

was chuckling. 'Hey, Kader,' he said, 'is there a ton of bricks falling on your head?' He was as delighted as I was that negotiations had taken place in Northern Ireland and that they had ended in an agreement.

I think it was on that very trip to Dublin that Mandela again went a little far in breaking the unwritten rules. RTE, the Irish television channel, had asked a bright young TV journalist, Olivia O'Leary, to interview him. Of course, Madiba was his usual charming presence, until she posed her last question, asking what he planned to discuss with Margaret Thatcher at his meeting with her the following day. Mandela's response was tart: 'Young lady, I don't believe I should tell you what I shall discuss with the Prime Minister.' It was mostly the reference to this highly acclaimed reporter as a 'young lady' that got people bristling. I suppose we can forgive him that *faux pas*. The years of the feminist revolution had completely passed him by on Robben Island, and he could be excused for not knowing that 'young lady' was no longer a politically correct way to address a woman, even if she was really very young.

Madiba had his own way of doing things. I had done what I could to prepare him for the television interview in Dublin, even taking the liberty of unbuttoning his jacket, which had bunched up rather scruffily, but as the cameras started to roll I noticed he had buttoned himself all up again.

But these episodes were soon forgotten as the world followed South Africa's progress in the negotiations. Few people know that the ANC's National Executive Committee did consider disputing the outcome of the elections in 1994, questioning the Inkatha victory in KwaZulu-Natal and the ANC's loss of the Western Cape. At a tense meeting of the National Executive Committee immediately after the poll, Madiba allowed members to speak, but stuck to his conviction that further violence had to be avoided. The new Parliament had to be as representative as possible, even if meant a loss for the ANC in some parts of the country. Madiba seemed to have a way of cutting through the excess right to the heart of the matter, and I admired his decisiveness. Stanley Greenberg, the American pollster who assisted the ANC in preparing for the 1994 elections, wrote this of Mandela's crucial decision not to contest the result:

'As each person spoke, Mandela circled the table, thinking. Barely

noticed by the others, he took up the coffee pot and my eyes followed him as he went around offering to pour coffee for each person, an offer I accepted. Such a simple gesture but, I thought, a measure of his thoughtfulness and courtesy that made him even larger in scale. Mandela had said nothing during the discussion. Then he brought the room to a full stop. "Tell the comrades to cancel the press conference. We will not do anything to make the election illegitimate. The ANC will not say the election is not 'free and fair'. Prepare our people in Natal and the Western Cape to lose." ... As if waving a wand, he made everybody seem small for not thinking bigger, including me, who should have known better than to get caught up in the war room hothouse. He embraced and thanked each of us as he departed, without any further discussion of the issue.'

That, too, was the Mandela I knew: prowling, decisive, compassionate and always with the big picture in view. He also had an instinctive sense of the mechanics of politics and of effective negotiation strategies. Mandela was a renowned boxer in his youth and, in his political sparring, thrusting and counter-thrusting, feinting and then going for the hammer blow, he reminded me of what the young Mandela must have been like in the ring: a wily and dangerous adversary. Like all good negotiators, he only got angry intentionally.

Not long after his release from prison in 1990, it became necessary to suspend the armed struggle. There were people, powerful people, within the ANC who didn't want to do that. They were anxious to keep the military formations in place and the caches of arms and munitions concealed, just in case De Klerk and the National Party reverted once more to oppression and war. In August 1990 Mandela set up a committee that would go round the country explaining to the provincial and military structures why the armed struggle had been called off. He appointed the three ANC leaders who were most critical of the decision to suspend the armed struggle, Joe Slovo, Chris Hani and Joe Modise, to sit on the committee and undertake the work. Their co-option was crafty politics.

I worked intensely and in close proximity with Mandela for five years during his first and only term as South Africa's democratic President. He was not a perfect person or above making mistakes. For me one of his greatest *faux pas*, as President, was his advocacy of the scheme to lower the voting age in South Africa to fourteen years.

I wrote a letter to him urging him to drop the notion. 'Lowering the voting age in South Africa to fourteen is, currently, not practical politics because it will not command sufficient consensus for its introduction,' I said. To his credit, he listened to us and the idea was dropped, but not before he had subjected himself and the party to a wave of criticism and ridicule. Mandela always had a soft spot for the youth and was fully supportive of the idea of a Youth Commission to look after the particular interests of young people. The commission was intended to be part of our constitutional dispensation's Chapter 9 institutions, which were established to deepen and protect our democracy. He was deeply disappointed when our later report on these bodies showed that the Youth Commission was not doing its work.

Certainly I will never forget the extraordinary magnanimity of spirit he displayed when he was called as a defence witness during a legal case involving Louis Luyt, who was eventually sacked as president of the South African Rugby Football Union. Mandela was summoned to appear in court in connection with the setting up of a commission to investigate racism, graft and nepotism in rugby. There can hardly have been two characters more unlike than Luyt and Madiba. Yet out of respect for the judiciary, Mandela agreed to appear in court, the first time a South African President had done so, so determined was he to bolster the legitimacy of the country's courts. There seemed to be no limit to this man's largeness of heart, and no lengths to which he would not go to ensure his country went forward proudly and peacefully towards equality and dignity.

South Africa had been very keen on capital punishment during the struggle years. Many ANC cadres and other liberation movement members had been executed by the hangman at Pretoria Central Prison in the 1970s and 1980s. In his moving collection of poems *Inside*, Jeremy Cronin wrote of how the prisoners at Pretoria Central could hear the trapdoors of the gallows slamming open one after the other, like wooden seats at a cinema. I have been an abolitionist my whole life and was delighted when the Constitutional Court ruled in 1995 that capital punishment was contrary to the new Constitution.

In spite of this, the idea of reintroducing capital punishment cropped up from time to time in the Mandela Cabinet, especially from the National Party members, who continued to view the noose with

nostalgic fondness. What once had been totally ineffectual in deterring freedom fighters, they now thought for some reason would work with criminals. I recall on one occasion that a National Party minister again made the case for capital punishment. Mandela intervened. I think he spoke for about four minutes, but in that time he demolished the case for capital punishment in a devastating way. 'The death sentence is a barbaric act,' he said. 'It is a reflection of the animal instinct still in human beings.' When he did speak in Cabinet, Mandela did so with great humanism, feeling and understanding, and on this subject I had never heard him talk with such passion. His was a brilliant, determined, unemotional rebuke. If the debate does ever emerge again, there couldn't be anybody with a more compelling testimony than Mandela to speak against it.

Later, Mandela asked me whether we shouldn't consider passing a law on capital punishment, rather than leaving it to the Constitutional Court. I said that for one thing I was not the Minister of Justice, and this was a political decision. And secondly, I told him, if you leave it open to Parliament to vote on the issue, a majority would probably vote in favour. At a later stage I went to him again when there was some pressure to hold a debate on capital punishment. I told him that if such a debate were allowed, I would resign. I had fought against capital punishment my whole life and was totally committed to opposing it. 'Oh no, no, Kader. There is no question about this. We are not having a debate about capital punishment,' Madiba assured me. And that was the end of it, at least for the rest of my time in public office.

While his loyalty to the ANC was always paramount, this didn't stop Mandela from questioning ANC decisions or leadership. In doing so, he effectively protected the ANC when proposals or practices threatened to derail it from the course the Freedom Charter had set out for us. I remember his reservations about the election of the firebrand KwaZulu-Natal ANC leader Harry Gwala to the position of ANC Chief Whip in the KwaZulu-Natal legislature. Even though they had spent years together on Robben Island and retained a comradely bond, Mandela was uncomfortable with Gwala's uncompromising and militant stance in the conflict between the ANC and the Inkatha Freedom Party in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands, in which hundreds had died in the run-up to the first elections. The importance of maintaining peace and preventing

further violence took priority for Madiba. Later, his concern was borne out when Gwala, who liked to be known as a Stalinist, was suspended by the Communist Party for six months and eventually passed over for provincial leader by the local ANC.

Mandela was a magnificent fundraiser and made the most of his international reputation to meet and greet his presidential and royal counterparts from all corners of the globe. While this did much to assure South Africa of a place in the world, it also kept the ANC's coffers full. During his five years as President he hosted sixty heads of state, compared to the four or five who visited his successor in close to ten years. For his part, though, he didn't always stick to protocol. On a trip to England in 1996, at a meeting with the Queen, I saw her give way to Madiba. He had a way of turning protocol on its head. As a senior Cabinet minister accompanying him, I travelled with Louise in the second carriage behind his, and our official driver told us repeatedly that in all his years he had never enjoyed such a relaxed state visit. As we drove behind him and the Queen down The Mall we passed a group of cheering South Africans. Their spirit was so overwhelming I found it difficult to hold my right hand firmly down at my side. I longed to thrust an exuberant clenched fist into the air. When we encountered a group of schoolchildren who had come from all over Britain to catch a glimpse of Mandela, I just knew his instinct would have been to get out and greet them. But of course protocol and security provisions forbade this, although he did stop his carriage to wave to them.

On the same visit to England, Mandela broke with the long-held practice that visiting heads of state never travelled south of the Thames. He rode as far as the rough, working-class suburb of Brixton, I think because he understood that ordinary citizens wanted an opportunity to see him. When he addressed the crowds that gathered at the local town hall, he included some warm praise for Prince Charles, who at that time was in the process of divorcing Princess Diana, a subject that raised much controversy in England. His words, if I recall, were along the lines of how lucky the Queen was to have such a wonderful son. You can imagine how the British establishment must have been taken aback at the praise heaped on one who had so recently embarrassed them.

On the way back the crowds were so huge that there was no way Madiba would have been able to reach central London. Prince Charles

then sent his own Rolls-Royce to fetch Mandela, driving him through a back route, while a police escort struggled to clear a path for the official car in which Louise and I were travelling.

At our next port of call, St James's Palace, the foreign ambassadors represented in the UK were lined up to be presented to Mandela. Normal practice is for a visiting head of state to shake each hand and move on. But that wasn't Madiba's style. He engaged with each one in turn, displaying his most remarkable memory as he asked after the health of their president or commented on their country's state of affairs. I watched with much amusement as the British government flunkies looked increasingly uncomfortable, glancing at their watches, as Madiba took his time greeting each ambassador in turn.

Later, he attended a banquet where the freedom of the City of London was to be conferred on him. As he took his seat, the hundreds of dignitaries present rose as one and banged their knives on the table – not for one or two minutes, but for what seemed like a very long time. The memory of that tribute still moves me today, and even Madiba, whose stately presence was rarely disturbed and who always maintained his dignity, appeared visibly moved at the time.

Mandela has an extraordinary humility, which is the more remarkable in view of his own royal presence and his reputation and achievements. There was no quicker way to get Mandela's eyes to glaze over than to start telling him how wonderful he was. The celebration of his own qualities made him deeply uncomfortable. Perhaps that is why he loved being with children. For them, he was just a kind, lovely man with a big smile who was seemingly as old as the hills. He laughed at their questions and insights. They gathered round him like a swarm of bees and he basked in their simple affection. He was never happier than when he was in the company of children, most especially his own grandchildren. When he was at home in Qunu in the Transkei, the house was always full of people and particularly children.

On one occasion, I went to see him at his Qunu home, which was deep in the countryside, surrounded by rolling hills and villages of small, thatched huts. I was surprised to discover that his house was an exact replica of the one allocated to him in the grounds of Victor Verster Prison, where he had spent his last years of imprisonment, and where he had started to engage in the politics of reconciliation and negotiation.

He always said his home in Qunu was a replica of that prison house because it was where he had had his first taste of near-normal living, of freedom, in almost three decades.

At times Mandela made fun of his own humility, which was even more disarming. Once he came to me, when I was the Minister of Education, shortly after he had retired as President, and asked for an appointment with me at my office. I told him I would come to his home to discuss the matter. He was very formal, but he had a twinkle in his eye and the hint of a smile on his lips. 'You are a minister,' he said to me. 'I am just an ordinary, plain person.' His sense of humour never failed to impress me. He knew me as one who would stand my ground and, when he asked for my opinion, would always give him a straight answer. I was never one for saying what he wanted to hear. I recall attending a meeting of two or three Cabinet ministers where Madiba had a proposal for which he was seeking support. Then, just as he was about to put it to us, he stopped suddenly, looked up and said with a wicked grin, 'No, I can't do that. Kader is here.'

Mandela is first and foremost a loyal member of the ANC. Still, as former presidents Fidel Castro and Bill Clinton have recognised, the political assumes a distinctively personal quality in Mandela. He has proved, as former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan once observed, that one individual, with such courage and tenacity, dignity and magnanimity, can actually make a difference in political struggles. Providing a focal point for a sense of human solidarity, Mandela changed the way people experienced South Africa and the larger world.

Whether you are a child, a king or an employee, Mandela has a way of making you feel important. He holds your gaze. He squeezes your hand. I feel very fortunate indeed to have spent time with him. He is truly a great man. His life will cast ripples across the pond of humanity for all time.