

Review

Kader Asmal and Adrian Hadland with Moira Levy
(2011) *Kader Asmal: politics in my blood, a memoir*.
Auckland Park: Jacana Media

Olivia Greene
opg2103@gmail.com

Of the many lively and engaging figures to emerge from the anti-apartheid and ANC exile movements, few were more influential than Kader Asmal. Many will perhaps remember and respect him now for his pointed critique of the ANC, to which he had a lifelong allegiance, in his last years. Indeed, he resigned from parliament in 2008 in protest over the disbanding of the Scorpions, a move which he could not in good conscious support. But this would be to short-change the immensity of his contributions to the democratic process in South Africa, both in exile and at home after 1990. At the centre of nearly every significant ANC debate of the last 30 years, perhaps his most original and important contributions were in the realm of international law, most specifically in working with the ANC and members of the UN to use law to combat the apartheid government and to frame the principles of the ANC's struggle. Asmal was the force behind the ANC's 1980 declaration to adhere to the Geneva Conventions, the first such declaration by any non-state organisation.

Asmal founded and led the Irish Anti-Apartheid Movement (IAAM) from the 1960s to 1990, galvanising Irish men and women of all walks of life to identify with and lend their services and time to the IAAM and its mission. He served on the ANC's constitutional committee that drafted its constitutional proposals in the late 1980s and was a key member of the ANC's negotiations team over a new constitution in the 1990s. In his 1993 inaugural address as Professor of International Human Rights Law at the University of the Western Cape, he proposed the idea of a truth and reconciliation process for post-apartheid South Africa. In the Mandela cabinet, he served

as Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry and breathed new vigour and vision into a ministry previously regarded (and forgive the pun) as a ‘backwater’. Little surprise then that President Mbeki moved him in 1999 to tackle perhaps the most taxing of apartheid’s many crippling legacies, the education ministry. In all that he did, Asmal placed the issue of human rights centre stage. It shaped his legal scholarship, his advocacy and his efforts as a cabinet minister.

It needs to be noted that this memoir is an unfinished work. When Asmal died in June 2011, it was in its final stages, but the last chapter that Asmal planned as a tribute to his wife, Louise, was unfinished. In its place is the address given by Louise at Asmal’s Cape Town memorial service. She was a huge presence in not only his personal life, but also in his professional endeavours. He wrote of her as ‘[t]he quiet force behind the IAAM office in our home, she was also a quiet – and sometimes not quiet – force behind all the decisions in my life, large and small ... it is unlikely that I could have done what I have achieved in my life – and not only personally but, above all, politically – without her. Every tribute with which I have been honoured for my efforts in the struggle against apartheid and for human rights anywhere and everywhere in the world I ... owe at least in part to Louise and share with her’ (p 60). Although Louise’s influence resonates throughout the book, there is a noticeable void left by the absence of that concluding chapter.

Perhaps because of the absence of the chapter on Louise, the core of the book in this reader’s view lies in the first chapter on Asmal’s childhood. It is there that we learn about the experiences that oriented him towards politics, and of the memories that would later preoccupy his recollections about the past and shape how he understood politics and his role as a public servant. Asmal tells us that the Irish poet Seamus Heaney once wrote ‘our best poetry merges the timeless and the timely, the eternal and the ordinary’. So does, Asmal continues, ‘our best in law, our best in politics’ (p 84). At its best, Asmal’s memoir brings out this quality. His section on his childhood not only roots the rest of his memoir, as one might expect, it also explains the timeless substance for the issues that are explored in his later sections on his life in public service.

The section explores the quotidian, and yes timeless, experiences of growing up under apartheid in the small Natal town of Stanger where his father owned a small shop, above which his family lived. It is here that we learn about the everyday hassles of using the family toilet – a bucket in the

wooden shack behind the chicken coop. It is these early experiences with the family toilet and its humiliating lack of privacy that drove his attempt as water minister to bring clean water and modern sanitation to South Africa's poor. It is also where we are reminded of the rituals of segregated life before and during apartheid where no signs or enforcements were needed to keep non-white residents on certain sides of the street and out of certain areas of town. But we also see the limitations of those rituals – we read of the Afrikaans police officer who regularly listened to the news of World War II with Asmal's father, the two on friendly terms.

One of the pleasing features of the book is Asmal's frankness especially when it comes to describing his time in political office. Asmal does not pretend that he had all the answers and he is at ease in discussing his lingering questions and doubts about the effectiveness of certain policies or the direction and the quality of the changes the ANC pursued. As his memoir progresses into his time spent in the Mandela and Mbeki cabinets, he reflects on disappointments he experienced with some of the actions of the government of which he was a part – such as the Lesotho invasion of 1996, the abandonment of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), which he describes as a disaster, and his dismay at the interest of Mbeki and his Health Minister in the supposed HIV/AIDS cure of Virodene, described by Asmal as 'snake oil' sold by 'two quacks' (p 215).

His experiences in the field of education outline the trajectory of his political endeavours from his days as a schoolteacher in the sugar-mill town of Darnell on Natal's north coast, to his exile years in Dublin as a law professor, to his final cabinet post as Minister of Education. Those sensitive to the bleak state of education in the country might have a hard time fully accepting his generally positive outlook of the changes to the educational system at all levels from primary to tertiary that his tenure brought about. Some of these have since been abandoned or modified. However, the chapter on education brings his story full-circle showing the effects of the Bantu Education Act, introduced as he was starting out as a teacher, on the education system he inherited as minister.

If there is any tendency to resort to grandiose claims, it is not in his accounts of himself or ANC leaders, but rather in the principles that he argues represent the core of the ANC's vision. For example, his assertion that the ANC was an organisation that championed human rights long before the organisation set about drafting its constitutional proposals, would likely be questioned by those familiar with the ANC's treatment of detainees in its

camps in Angola. However, if there is one thing to be learned about the ANC as Asmal knew it, it is that the organisation was not the monolithic party it is often presented as today. Asmal was devoted to the ANC through and through but his vision of the party's meaning and fundamental philosophies were different from the visions of some of his colleagues. But what is important is that those differences were part and parcel of his ANC. The ANC that Asmal was deeply dedicated to was one in which members could be at once, with no apparent contradiction, the same and different, and robust debate and fiery critique were part of the course. No surprise then that in his last years and no longer bound by cabinet discipline, Asmal became outspoken about ANC policies and proposals and shifts in internal dynamics that appeared to him to threaten that precious space between discord and consensus.

The memoir's main drawback lies with its largely linear chronology that noticeably limits the possibilities for the kind of story telling that I feel could have emerged from this intriguing text. Asmal tells us what events shaped his perspective but we don't really know what his deeper thoughts about those events were both at the time and in retrospect. For example, Asmal tells us, 'My very bright sister Khatija was forced to leave school at the age of twelve because of the 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 it is from her I take my enthusiasm for women's education' (p 14). In chronicling his time as Minister of Education, Asmal refers to this story as a particularly poignant and influential memory in the context of his work, but we are not really told how.

These quibbles aside, this memoir reveals Asmal as a vivacious and vigorous thinker. We see this in the frequency with which he took contrary positions to those of his colleagues and his innovative applications of international law during the anti-apartheid struggle. But even so, in the memoir we do not often get to witness his inner debates. Asmal came from a devout Muslim family and he went to mosque with his father every Friday until he abruptly stopped after his father's death in 1958. When pressed on that choice by his mother, he told her he had read Bertrand Russell's *Why I am Not a Christian*. But he could not get her to understand why a book about Christianity could influence a Muslim's belief in Islam. Neither did his short retelling of the story convince this reader. My curiosity about his perspective on religion only increased as he talked about his formative

relationships with Chief Albert Luthuli and Oliver Tambo, both of whom were deeply religious individuals. Chief Luthuli lent Asmal a copy of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, and the pilgrim's journey serves as an allegory for Asmal about Luthuli, Tambo, Mandela, and to some extent his own, life and personal struggle in pursuit of a political ideal. Indeed, glimpsing into his inner debates would have been a gem.

This is perhaps the reason why to this reader this memoir, while clear, interesting, and certainly worth reading, does not stand out from the plethora of South African biographies and memoirs of individuals involved in the anti-apartheid struggle. It does not break from the mold of a linear march through the struggle, through life. We do not see much of the hundreds of contingencies, alternate paths not taken, doubts, second thoughts, frustrations, and internal moral and philosophical reckonings that must have muddled his experiences and would positively contort and confuse any ordered remembering of a life. One might ask, why harp on a common trait of biographies and autobiographies? Simply put, Asmal's complexities, which are not fully explored in the book, are what need most to be remembered about him. In Fintan O'Toole's words: 'What makes Kader Asmal such an important figure in modern history ... is that he was the rarest of things – a non-authoritarian revolutionary' (p 295).