

# An unlikely anti-Apartheid crusader looks back, and forward

By Godwin Lo

**"There is", according to George Bizos, "a misconception that human rights is a modern phenomenon." At a Castan Centre public lecture in March, Bizos, a leading South African human rights lawyer who defended Nelson Mandela in his 1963 murder trial, said that human rights are simply the laws of humanity.**

Bizos became aware of the injustices in South Africa when he arrived from Greece in 1931 as a 13 year old refugee. His interest in human rights was sparked at the University of Witwatersrand where he started in 1948. Speaking of his time there, Bizos declared that "black students made me a leftist and I was proud of it". It was a heady time and he recalled participating in a student run "defiance campaign" in response to two dichotomous events that year - the harsh apartheid laws enacted by the South African government and the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It was during the campaign that a large student population questioned whether they had to abide by the rules of the apartheid. The Prime Minister at the time commented that "reasonably manner students" would soon put a stop to the student rebellion.

One act that particularly appalled Bizos during this period was the closure of schools that taught black students. The Education Minister claimed that it was pointless teaching mathematics and science to black students as it would "only frustrate them because they are incapable of civilisation." Legislation was enacted which required mathematics and science to be taught only in Afrikaans, a language that very few black students and teachers spoke.

In addition to the National Party's attempt to limit access to education, Bizos recalled the enactment of the *Group Areas Act* which forced black shop keepers to move successful businesses to

the "semi-wild", where it was extremely difficult to make a living. In response to an application to declare the legislation unjust, the majority of the Appellate Court decided that the Act was a social experience that would be beneficial to the nation. One "brave" judge declared it unjust.

Bizos met Nelson Mandela at university. Early on, Mandela told Bizos that he wanted to live in a place of "equality and freedom" and he was prepared to die to bring about such change. It was standard practice at the time that a black person causing political disturbance would be offered a small role in parliament in exchange for silence. Mandela resisted similar conditional offers, stating that: "I will be the last political prisoner to be released in South Africa". At the beginning of Mandela's term in government, Bizos went into the community and asked the community for a definition of freedom. Overwhelmingly, the community felt that meaningful freedom would be a product of union among the population, the antithesis of apartheid.

Bizos concluded the talk by saying that modern South Africa "is a troubled country" today. The nation had been plagued by three centuries of injustices that have been sanctioned by the law. While significant steps have been made to correct the injustices of the past, he admits that there is still a long way to go. There is still a large division between the rich and the poor and there are still problems within the education sector. However, he remains hopeful and appreciative of the efforts made to rectify the wrongs: "You cannot know what freedom means until you have been repressed".

**Video recording of George Bizos's lecture can be found at:**  
[www.law.monash.edu.au/castancentre/events/2010/bizos-lecture.html](http://www.law.monash.edu.au/castancentre/events/2010/bizos-lecture.html)



George Bizos reflects on his work in South Africa