

# Interview: Caspar van Rensburg, Deputy General Manager, Public Servants Association

**Luci Nyembe:** *When was the PSA formed and what is your present membership?*

**Van Rensburg:** The PSA was established in 1920 and recognised by the Commission for Administration as a staff association. We have 102 000 members including public servants and scientific personnel. In the Central Bargaining Chamber, which negotiates improvements to conditions of service, the PSA has 42% of the votes.

**Luci Nyembe:** *Tell us a bit about your membership and organisation.*

**Van Rensburg:** Originally, we had only white members, but we assisted in the establishment of the Public Servants Union and the Institute of Public Servants who recruited black and Indian personnel. In the 1980s we started competing with them for membership and we now represent all racial groups including about 31 000 general assistants. I estimate that more than half our membership is now black.

We have members in all categories of employment in the public service – artisans, professionals like helicopter pilots and a few deputy Director Generals. We are not canvassing membership in the management echelon and do not represent the majority of senior management personnel. Our members would be those who have been members for many years and who have been promoted into the ranks of management.

**Nyembe:** *The public service is often accused of being bloated, lazy, inefficient and corrupt. Is this a fair perception?*

**Van Rensburg:** This is a generalisation. The workforce is diligent, hard-working and not properly remunerated. As public servants they are career-orientated and will serve the government of the day. Because the public



**Caspar van Rensburg**

service has implemented the policies of the present government does not mean that we are aligned to the National Party. There are instances of corruption and these must be dealt with.

**Luci Nyembe:** *But is the present public service, with its culture of apartheid discrimination, really capable of serving a democratic government and implementing policies based on non-racialism, non-sexism? Should we remove and replace those who are unwilling to serve the new government and retain and retrain those who are committed to a democratic government?*

**Van Rensburg:** The public service must act in accordance with the policies of government and therefore it will serve the government of tomorrow as diligently as it

serves the present government. Personnel who are not willing to serve the new government, do not belong in the public service. Those who are willing to serve should be retrained for their new roles.

**Luci Nyembe:** *Democratic elections take place in April. Most opinion polls show that the ANC will be the new government. Do you see this as positive or negative? Are your members prepared to work under an ANC government?*

**Van Rensburg:** Definitely, there is no other option, that will be their official duty. But, the public service and the new government must be given the opportunity to learn to know each other and work together. There has been no communication between the public service and the future government. Opportunity for communication must be created before 27 April, so that both sides can begin to adjust their perceptions of each other. I believe that we will find more good will than we expect and that the public service can adapt.

We are prepared to work under an ANC government. The PSA couldn't care who the government is. We represent members from the far-right to the left and we are concerned with the employer-employee relationship and the rights of our members.

**Luci Nyembe:** *In a survey carried out by the Human Sciences Research Council in 1992, the report stated that the PSA had not communicated effectively with its members regarding political and administrative change. Your comment?*

**Van Rensburg:** In the past year, we have done more to inform our members, particularly around the constitution and the Bill of Rights. We inform our members through our magazine and our liaison staff have made contact with over 68 000 public servants about what the future holds. We have been able to respond more reassuringly to members concerns and have been instrumental in making our constituency more restful about the future, with specific emphasis on employee rights and rationalisation.

**Luci Nyembe:** *An ANC government will introduce a number of significant reforms in the public service – greater public accountability, transparency, public participation in decision-making, effective services to townships and rural areas. Public servants will be expected to be more responsive to the needs of ordinary citizens and will have to improve their performance. What will be the attitude of public servants to such reforms?*

**Van Rensburg:** Public servants will be instrumental in making the transition. Without their expertise it will not be possible to fulfil these aims. They have gone through PW Botha's rationalisation exercise, the tricameral changes, and the public service will again in full devotion give effect to the new order. The public service must comply with the regulations set out in law.

**Luci Nyembe:** *If the PSA disagrees with the changes introduced by government, will you resist that change, will you dig in your heels or will you lead your members into the future?*

**Van Rensburg:** Transitions are never easy. Our role is to show people that they have rights, but that they also have duties and responsibilities. They should not act in contravention of applicable legislation. We cannot support them if they act contrary to government policy, government decisions and legislation. This would be to the detriment of our members. Our role will be to make sure that our members' rights are secured, but we cannot promote obstruction to the lines of authority and decision-making in government.

**Luci Nyembe:** *The new Public Service Commission will oversee appointments, efficiency and effectiveness and establish a Code of Conduct. There will also be Commissions at provincial level. What are the PSA's views on such a Code and what values do you feel should be written into the Code?*

**Van Rensburg:** Values should include that public servants should not accept gifts from



the public and should not perform remunerated work outside the public service; freedom of political expression in the workplace; the duty to give effect to the policies and decisions of government and a devotion to duty.

In terms of the constitution, central government and provincial governments will have their own policies which may be different and diverse. We feel it is necessary for there to be uniformity in the attitude of all public servants. We would argue very strongly for a central ethos, for a single Code of Conduct to apply equally to all public servants under single legislation for both central and provincial levels.

**Luci Nyembe:** *What should be the new image of the public service?*

**Van Rensburg:** The public service must be seen to serve the public. They must show an understanding of their responsibilities and must be community-friendly. While government must give them due recognition and raise morale, public servants must also take the initiative to improve their image.

The government must take responsibility for improving the image of the public service. Civil servants are not recognised as valued employees. With the rationalisation of the public services of central government, the TBVC and self-governing territories, we must have a Code of Conduct which is binding on all public servants and on government.

**Luci Nyembe:** *A new government will have many demands on its resources and may be unable to grant large salary increases!*

**Van Rensburg:** Morale can be raised through other means, through offering security of employment, work satisfaction, feeling proud of your work/employer and through recognition of achievement.

**Luci Nyembe:** *What are your views on an affirmative action programme? What do you see as either positive or negative about such a programme and how can the negatives be overcome?*

**Van Rensburg:** We have no problem in

principle. It is right that each and every person must have equal opportunity. But we need to know more about the policy. There should be consultation with the workforce and training programmes for affirmative



action. Under the present employer there is no communication at all in this regard. We believe that such a programme must be thrashed out between employee associations and the future employer as it would be wrong to pre-empt what a future government will do.

Certain elements of the programme will be the employer's prerogative, but some elements will be matters of mutual interest. Once again, there must be a central policy as having many different affirmative action policies will be divisive. It will be a bad idea to get rid of the present incumbents in the managerial echelon, as the new office-bearers will be inexperienced. Replacement of management should be phased in.

**Luci Nyembe:** *Do you believe that your members should exercise their right to strike and under what circumstances should they do so?*

**Van Rensburg:** I believe that our members should exercise their right to strike where their rights have been affected so fundamentally that they have no other option, for example, a halving of their pension benefits or a unilateral decision on conditions of service. But this decision is not in the hands of the PSA, it is in the hands of public servants themselves. We will follow the procedures provided by law – deadlock, ballot and give effect to the majority decision. We would not support a political strike, we will not enter into the political arena. ☆