

No denial

MARTIN PLAUT

Mark Gevisser

THABO MBEKI

The dream deferred

892pp. Jeppestown: Jonathan Ball. Paperback.

R225.

978 1 86842 101 5

Andrew Feinstein

AFTER THE PARTY

A personal and political journey inside the ANC

287pp. Jeppestown: Jonathan Ball. Paperback.

R160.

978 1 86842 262 3

There was a moment, after those extraordinary days following the release of Nelson Mandela in 1994, when intellectual life in South Africa almost came to a halt. It was as if the country, so long racked by apartheid, was holding its breath to see what emerged. Journalists lost their edge, authors abandoned their critical judgement. What more was there to say? The miracle that so many had waited for had finally arrived. Thankfully, that moment has now passed, and passed with vengeance. The gloss has gone from the ANC Government, with many of its senior members now mired in corruption and infighting.

A new mood of pessimism has fallen over the country, but, perhaps not surprisingly, it has been accompanied by a proliferation of new writing, of which these two books are outstanding examples. *Thabo Mbeki: The dream deferred* by Mark Gevisser is probably the finest piece of non-fiction to come out of South Africa since the end of apartheid – a nuanced portrait of a President routinely described as enigmatic, and rightly so. How does one understand a man who is among the finest minds of his generation, yet doggedly denies the scientific evidence over HIV/Aids? How does one describe the achievements of a President who has worked with energy and determination to bring peace to his continent, yet appears to cower before Mugabe in Zimbabwe?

Gevisser has sought an answer by getting close to Thabo Mbeki himself. He has had extraordinary access to the President and members of his family, and it has paid dividends. A journey with Mbeki's mother to their ancestral home in the Transkei reveals

the utter poverty that surrounded the family in those early years. They were merchants, although his father, Govan, was frequently away on political business. When Thabo was not helping to run the shop, he would sit and write letters for the illiterate peasants who were their customers, thus learning their community's problems. "I should not be reading other people's letters", he told his mother, who reassured him that it was all right, as long as he kept the contents confidential. Thabo grew up a lonely child, whose parents were wrapped up in the political struggle. Gevisser tells of a protective hardening of the soul as Thabo Mbeki, a clever, perceptive child became a reserved, distrustful man.

Gevisser is at his strongest tackling the

most difficult subject of all – Mbeki's denial of the science surrounding HIV/Aids. With tens of thousands of South Africans dying around him, the President searched out his own explanation for the pandemic, rejecting what he saw as the easy consensus of the medical profession: a consensus that he believed portrayed Africans as sex-crazed germ carriers, "doomed to an inevitable mortal end because of our unconquerable devotion to the sin of lust". Combining this angry denunciation with a distrust of globalization, a rejection of the greed of the pharmaceutical companies and an almost pathological belief that the world was conspiring against him, Mbeki joined the ranks of the Aids denialists.

Pressure from his Party has, in recent years, persuaded Mbeki to step back from the Aids controversy: South Africa now has an effective programme providing anti-retrovirals. But Mbeki himself has not changed his intense scepticism about the medical orthodoxy on the subject, and his Health Minister still peddles ridiculous solutions involving traditional medicines and dietary supplements. Gevisser, who is an Aids activist, struggled for years to finish the book because he could not come to terms with his subject's stand on the subject, and he can offer no verdict on Mbeki.

Andrew Feinstein's book is – by comparison – a jog through the subject, and no worse for that. *After the Party* is a personal account of how Feinstein came to join the ANC, and of his meteoric rise through its ranks until he

found himself sitting in the country's first multiracial parliament. Where he comes in his own is in describing the circumstance that surround one of the most painful episodes in South African history since 1994: the arms deal. Re-equipping the armed services after the arms embargo was lifted left the country with a bill of \$4.8 billion. Firm from around the globe fought for the contract and there was enormous scope for corruption.

Sitting on the Public Accounts committee Feinstein was in a critical position to unravel just who had been paid and what they had offered in return. At first he was supported by his Party and by Jacob Zuma in particular. But inevitably, as they began uncovering the real story, the ANC turned the screws on him. Shaken, Feinstein went to see an unnamed senior Party member who explained that he would never be allowed to get to the bottom of the contracts because the ANC funded its 1999 election from the kickbacks it received. The pressure became intense; Feinstein quotes a colleague's remark that imprisonment on Robben Island hadn't broken him but the ANC just might.

Finally, reduced to tears in a toilet, the author made his own choice. Putting his conscience before his Party, he demanded the truth. The result was perhaps predictable as Feinstein was forced out of Parliament. He now lives in London, at loggerheads with the ANC hierarchy. It is a painful journey and telling it he has done his country, and mine, great service. Until South Africa has the courage to confront the corruption that is eroding its soul, it will never escape from the slough in which it now finds itself.