

Harold Wolpe Foundation  
Minutes 19 Feb. 2008

Speakers:

Adam Habib  
Jeremy Cronin  
Mark Gevisser

Welcome:

Welcome to all to the first meeting of the year. We are planning a fantastic program. A form is being sent around to all who are not on the mailing list. The trust has been meeting regularly. If you desire to know more go onto webpage which is the [www.haroldwolpetrust.org](http://www.haroldwolpetrust.org). We try to deal with controversial matters in an informed debate. Sometimes we slip up but mostly we're on form. I'm of an age that means I knew World War II. The events which have impacted on me have had a major effect on my family and children. As for the book, someone said this is the best biography ever written. While reading it, my heart bled for Thabo, I know what it's like to be a child of parents not actively involved. It is very moving to read the early life of Mbeki. It raises the tension between intellectual life and normal life.

I'd like to introduce the speakers. Mark Gevisser is the author of 'Thabo Mbeki, The Dream Deferred'. Jeremy Cronin is a member of the SACP. Harold Wolpe was probably the oldest member of the SACP. Adam Habib is known for a number of things, but he is a member of our executive committee. I'd like to thank Butlers pizza who was so moved by the book that they donated the pizzas. There is a collection box outside.

Mark Gevisser gives his speech. See transcript.

Jeremy Cronin:

I'm feeling a bit like Jacob Zuma, Mark's is a hard act to follow. He's written a wonderful book and has given a wonderful speech now. I just have rough notes, not a polished speech.

Thinking about tragedy, is Mbeki our tragedy as South Africans? There are other things around the edge that Mark alluded to, things that read South Africa's progression as a foregone conclusion. There is a tragedy in South Africa like that of Rwanda. South Africa is a tragic epic, it begins with 1994 and ends in South Africa today. Antonio Grumpy said that there is pessimism of the intellect and optimism of will. Here, there is pessimism of both. People say that the country is going to dogs, look at what happens when 'they' take over. But there is a different view, the boom-bust view. In 1906, a young student won a university debating prize in America with a powerful speech (which was particularly good coming out of South Africa). It started with 'come with me to the ancient capital of Egypt', he said that 'Africa is on doorstep threshold of revolution', it is 'living on the brink of a wonderful new world'. Africa has been left off the map. Now there is a need to reclaim our spot... 'The giant is awakening the African renaissance'.

Mark represents ANC history, but it remains contentious. The politics were lousy in the sixties, seventies and eighties. The people in London hadn't noted that African majority in South Africa, and the ANC thought that a few delegations sent to London would result in the English recognising the African majority. We disowned that mode of politics, of diplomacy, of pleading with the north to recognise us. Mbeki resurrected these earlier writings of the ANC. He did so by aspiring to an African Renaissance.

Mbeki addressed parliament about Africa in 2001. He structured his speech as though it was a commentary by historians looking back to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He held that historians looking back will see Africa emerging out of darkness and fear, and into a bright dream. He looks for a historian to write up Africa's past to convince the rest of the world that we have a history too. The historian looks back from hundreds of years ahead and says that Africa emerges from darkness. He confirms the process Mbeki envisages. It is a tragic epic. Africa will emerge, but there is no enquiry as to how and why this will happen.

The student who won the competition gave his speech in 1906, on the cusp of globalisation happening. But there was a dark side at that time, there was imperialism. Imperialism was in many ways very progressive, it brought telegraphs and ports. But at the same time it was very barbaric, it also involved genocide and slavery. The speaker ignores this. Mbeki does same thing. He doesn't understand the world. He only understands one side of it. But we need to understand the world as advancing and barbaric. To simply view Africa as happy and advancing is not realistic. Mbeki once began a speech with 'it was best of times and it was the worst of times...'. I thought 'Finally! He's getting it. History is not marching happily forward'. But he disowned it, he said that it was the best of times. The message was one of demobilisation – history is on autopilot - 'I know where it's going'. This is the tragic flaw with the politics of the individual. But problems did arise with the presidency. The response was initially denial, for example, with regards to AIDS and Zimbabwe. When denial fails, the next response is that there is problem, but the instruction is 'don't change. We can't tell you what we are doing, but don't change anything.' The next response is that there is a problem, but it is the problem behind problem. Hence, the Zimbabwe problem is the British MI6. However, this can't explain things such as the rocketing inflation. The next response is the 'some amongst us' approach. Anyone that raises a critical question is part of the conspiracy. However, this approach shuts down democratic debate. It doesn't allow for democratic discussion. By taking such an approach, you demobilise your capacity, you do not deal with the problems.

The tragedy is not ours, it may well be Mbeki's and he's visited it on us. The positive thing about Polokwane is that there were 4000 delegates backed by three million people who reclaimed the organisation for themselves. They said 'away with top-down central commands!' I must say 'Aluta!'

Adam Habib:

We must thank the succession struggle for opening up discourse in society. We can't have a democratic society without a democratic discourse. It is good to talk to you on a platform in memory of Harold Wolpe. It's a pleasure to be here on a panel with Mark and Jeremy. I will engage Mark's analysis on why we stand here today. His book was fantastic on explaining Mbeki the individual, but not on explaining Mbeki the decision-maker. Jeremy is always stimulating, he is great for fun, combatant engagements.

Regarding the reflections post-Polokwane, so many people give political analysts a bad name. People say that analysts got it wrong. But the majority of analysts actually got Polokwane right. They said that if Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma stand against each other, Jacob will win. I believed in the possibility of a compromise candidate, but that can only happen if one person stands down. If Mbeki had stood down, the result would have been different. A significant part of the Zuma camp wanted neither Mbeki nor Zuma. I believe that many got rid of Thabo and are hoping that the court case gets rid of Zuma. If we add the voters in Thabo Mbeki's camp with this part of Zuma's camp, and add another candidate, we could have had a different result.

What does Polokwane mean? Rebellion. But rebellion about what? The managerial style of Thabo Mbeki – he is aloof, centralises power, and doesn't consult. But I think there's a second reason for this rebellion. It was the fact that a significant part of the delegation thought that the transition has benefited the rich and not the poor. How did we arrive at this place, where the president is not consultative, state apparatus is manipulated, and BEE empowers the rich. The analysis given in explanation is about Thabo Mbeki the individual. The most sophisticated analysis in this regard is given by Mark Gevisser. The situation is a product of aloofness, which is a product of his daddy not being a daddy and of his being more an international than a national. But I don't buy it. It doesn't explain Mbeki's decisions. Men make history, but not as they please. It is not determined by the circumstances of the men themselves, but by the circumstances of the past. To understand decisions that have been made, we need to understand the systemic environment of the decisions. The ANC liberation movement inherits the straining state coffers, and are brought to power by people with legitimate expectations – of houses, schools etc. But the people with the money are the big companies and they are on an investment strike. So, to get investment, Mbeki has to make concessions. The result is programs like GEAR. But you don't pass it through parliament because you won't get it through your own party. So, you pass it through cabinet and say it is the implementation of the transition. But then you have to appoint premiers to implement these policies. The result is a centralised system. Hence, it is clear that in order to explain the current situation, analysis has to understand systemic variables. This is why Mark's presentation was weak.

Are things going to be different under Zuma? Will he have a different management style and economic policy? The economic policy will not be different – in recent times there's been a shift to the left, there's been talk about the development state, about infrastructural state-led investment programs, and about more spending on health and schooling. Zuma's not going to nationalise big industries. Systemically, there isn't as much pressure as there was in 1994. The War on Terror legitimates incursions into the budget and there is no longer the Washington Consensus. Expect a more consultative managerial style, as there

is more space for this now. Will Jacob Zuma make president? A large group of people will say to Zuma 'you're on trial for corruption' and will call for Motlanthe to be president. But other people will say no, Zuma as president will be a message to the SACP.

For the presidency, there are various issues and challenges. The first is that of two centres of power. There is a need for a great deal of maturity to manage that. Mbeki appointed the SABC board director without consulting Actions such as these show the leader's level of maturity. The second challenge is that ruling parties have different factions and the trick is to represent the various factions in the leadership. This was Mbeki's mistake, he kicked out the factions. We need representative leadership. The third challenge is the need to legitimize state institutions. Take the example of the Scorpions. There are various arguments raised against the Scorpions by the ANC. The first is that the scorpions have been manipulated by Mbeki. But the Scorpions are not the only state institution to be manipulated. Rather establish checks and balances than dissolve the institution. The second reason was that they have been going after ANC leaders. Empirically, this is not true. Another argument is that they are too flashy. However, this is a managerial issue and should be addressed by improving management. The final argument is that such an institution undermines the separation of powers, but this is not what separation of powers is. There are multiple examples of where there's been a merger of prosecution and investigation. Mbeki said that we must create the structure that will best defeat crime. But his minister pulled the rug out from under him. This creates the impression that the politicians are more interested in short term political gains than the constitution.

In the Trotsky trilogy, the author entitles the final chapter 'defeat in victory'. This is because Trotsky sowed the seeds of his final defeat with his earlier victory. If the ANC doesn't institute foresight to build institutions and not undermine them, to remember that were brought in to aid transition, and to build representative leadership, they will be sowing the seeds of defeat like Trotsky did.

Questions:

1. Have the recent political events at Polokwane and focus on Mbeki been because Mbeki is Mbeki or because he has been leading the government for the last 15 years? Would it be possible for anyone to win at Polokwane given the economic conditions post-apartheid? Could it be any better given the last 50 years?

Jeremy Cronin: Let's try to locate Mbeki in a time and place, in an economy that had been in decline. I think that retreats may have been necessary in the transition, and that urgent macroeconomic interventions were required in 1996. It was Mbeki and not Slovo that developed concept of sunset clauses. But Mbeki never brought it to the organisation. He never said that we needed to make retreats in order to compromise. Slovo heard of this idea and said that this was a tactical position that we needed to take. We debated it and Slovo won the debate. Mbeki should have brought it forward and debated it and he should've debated macroeconomic intervention. It weakens you when you fail to bring things forward for discussion and debate.

In terms of an analysis of systemic variable and of who has the money, Anglo has resources, but the state also has. Mbeki said that they had it all and we had none. In drawing this dichotomy, he demobilised the mass base, he marginalised COSATU. We must not ignore the complicity of business in all of this. The Centre for Development said that we need a strong candidate, based on Machiavelli - he must be strong, have an MBA and know how to deal with the delicate white people. To explain the political events, we need to look at a structural analysis and at the agenda of outer forces in SA. The ANC at the moment has problems, it is factionalised and demobilised. It will be a major challenge to go forward.

Adam Habib: Too often analysis deals with individuals and not structural forces. I do think there was space for different opinions. The ANC leadership began implementing neo-classical economics. Contrast this with the way countries such as Chile and East Asia dealt with development. If Mbeki had stood down for Polokwane, those decisions would be looked upon more kindly, but by not standing down he has tied his legacy to those positions. By not standing down, he didn't allow the nuances to be observed.

Mark: Political scientists look at systems in the analysis of decisions. Biographers look at the individual. I looked at what Mbeki felt. He felt there was no choice, that he was disempowered by being in government and was not able to do what he and his leadership had been planning because of forces such as globalisation. He felt that he didn't have a choice and the result was demobilisation and a lack of consulting, because he felt disempowered.

2. Mark, in your book you refer to an occasion when Joe Slovo goes to Moscow to discipline the young Thabo Mbeki. However, unlike the rest of your book, there was very little detail. What actually happened? Were you gagged or were you just being polite?

Mark Gevisser: Define gagged. If you are told something off the record and it is confirmed off the record, it is a journalistic ethic that you won't publish it. I was told about the incident by people other than Mbeki. I could only represent it as saying that Slovo thought that there had been bad blood between himself and Mbeki after that visit because Mbeki felt humiliated by it. But I couldn't say exactly what the disciplining consisted of.

3. Should Zuma be found guilty, would Mbeki give him a pardon?

Mark Gevisser: The chance of Zuma being found guilty while Mbeki is in office is very slim. The trial is set for August, but will likely be delayed.

Adam Habib: The case will take 4-5 years. This is guerrilla warfare at its best. If Zuma is a candidate, I think that the case will only be resolved once he's done with the presidency. But I'm not sure that he is a candidate. It makes me think of the debate of whether it makes sense for political stability to grant an amnesty for people in the arms

deal. The danger is that if you create enough mayhem, 'we'll make a plan'. We need to say that there are consequences, otherwise we've institutionalised bad incentives.

Mark Gevisser: Regarding the arms deals, there is a committee that has been set up to deal with it. I've heard that one of the functions of the committee is to assess the possibility that in end there will be an amnesty. Perhaps Jeremy could tell us more about it.

Jeremy Cronin: (in response to Mark) The Committee to discuss the arms deal has not yet had its terms defined. It is not an investigation, it has no investigative capacity. And it is not about digging up dirt. It should be a committee that looks into the politics of the arms deal. It should ask questions such as 'How did we go on a huge spending spree when we have a country where poverty is rife?' We need to look at this before we repeat the mistake.

4. Jeremy, do you think that Jacob Zuma should be the president of the country? Put your cap as a politician, and a member of the SACP and ANC, aside. Do you think that the Scorpions should be dissolved?

Jeremy Cronin: I think Jacob Zuma *will* be the president of the country. The question about the Scorpions is about whether they should be relocated, not dissolved. Should the scorpions be relocated? They will definitely be relocated. There will be serious dangers, but there will also be real possibilities. As the president of the country said, it is not a stand-alone issue, there needs to be a comprehensive review of the criminal justice system in our country. We shouldn't dissolve the Scorpions for bad reasons, such as that they are manipulated or that certain leaders feel that they are after them. As a communist I think they shouldn't be dissolved because they are successful at prosecuting the bourgeoisie who are involved in white collar crime.

The issue with the Scorpions is that we have a two-part state. We have one part to deal with the people and one part to deal with the elite. Why not have one department to deal with both. Let's not lose the capacity to deal with white collar crime, but let's make it a democratic discussion.

5. Mbeki was called Mr Delivery. But the arms deal, AIDS and Zimbabwe are the three defining features of his rule. The president came into office talking of renaissance – is he De Vinci or Machiavelli? Was he a brilliant intellectual or a clever political manipulator? What do you think? What do you think about Zuma? Will he burn himself out?

Mark: Clearly there are limitations to the certain kind of politics exercised by Mbeki. He was limited from start. He didn't seem to enjoy the types of things Mandela and Clinton etc. enjoy, he doesn't enjoy mixing with the masses. But people thought that least he's Mr Delivery. This is the reason why people are angry, it's because he's not Mr Delivery. The book tries to explain why he wasn't Mr Delivery. One of the reasons was his response to the environment when he became deputy president. The environment made

him react in a certain way to the arms deal. There is not evidence that he's guilty of corruption, but he powered the arms deals. Why? Because he felt disempowered, my book explains this in detail. Another reason was that he always felt that he was the leader of a democratic party, but was also in charge of holding a family together. Maybe that is why he favoured loyalty over efficiency at times. He hasn't necessarily been able to express his intellect to the extent in which one could in the formation of policy. Being an intellectual and being able to communicate are not the same thing Mbeki has failed to communicate.

Adam Habib: It's important that we don't only remember the arms deal, AIDS and Zimbabwe. We must see the beauty – that a deputy president can get fired and taken to court, that the president can be held accountable by the people of the party at Polokwane. There is a great deal of beauty in this.

6. Adam is right, the bottom of society's triangle is not getting any money. Are there people in the wings willing to take on this challenge, as opposed to there just being people wanting to fill their nests with feathers?

Adam Habib: The crisis is not about individuals. The only way to get true accountability is when people get heard, when poor people are given a voice and when the opposition elite are not certain of the future. There are institutional mechanisms to build accountability e.g. electoral reform.

Jeremy Cronin: In terms of individual accountability, I get annoyed by opposition parties because they say that we should fire everyone. Is the solution to the electricity crisis to fire x y and z. No, we should look to solve problems.

7. Generally, the view of many people is that the president is listening to the international community and not to those at home. Zacob Zuma is here to address the people's needs and uplift the poor. Adam, should we also chase back Americans when they try to enter our country?

Jeremy Cronin: We need to change our approach and not view someone as being here to 'uplift the poor'. We need to be more down to earth. No-one will uplift us. We need community, we need collective initiatives and we need to uplift ourselves. Polokwane said that we can make moves to uplift ourselves.

Adam Habib: How should we react to the Americans? We must construct a society of rights. If we do the same thing as the Americans to react to the Americans, we undermine our society based on rights.

8. You referred to the manipulation of state agencies. How do you see the future of this one party democracy? Besides through civil society etc, can you see parliament as a means of exercising checks on the government?

Jeremy Cronin: Polokwane was an interesting check. We have a dominant party, but unlike Zanu PF, where we see a situation that when the leader was selected, there was a bar on democratic discussion. In Zanu PF, the party report was not released. Just note that Polokwane is in itself an important mechanism for checks and balances. Otherwise, in order to empower parliament to act as a check, it should be able to amend budgets.

9. Mark, there's a point where we become empathetic or we become analysts. You use psycho-analysis to describe Mbeki as an archetype. How do we separate Mbeki from his archetype?

Mark Gevisser: A biography is written and read like fiction – the protagonist goes through life and overcomes obstacles. This is a pitfall and a joy of biography. I have avoided it. Rather, I have taken a psycho-analytic approach. But Mbeki is not my patient. I don't write my book from this perspective. Jeremy has a line in his poem – save pessimism for better times. This is interesting given his critique of Mbeki's optimism. But the overall message from all of us is that Mbeki's tragedy is not our tragedy.

10. One of the biggest tragedies in South Africa is the HIV crisis, The problem is that people will continue to be infected and will not enjoy ARVs. How much of this crisis is about Mbeki and his feelings on science and how much of it is systemic?

Jeremy Cronin: I agree that the AIDS situation is a crisis. How could the ANC get it so wrong? It comes down to the notion that we're living in a new, happy world. We just need to make new macroeconomic adjustments and things will be fixed. There was a terrible tendency to move to denialism. This has to do with the paradigm itself - that of moving to a new, happy, integrated world.

Adam Habib: There is the need for systemic checks and balances. The government was forced to change its policy when the TAC started taking to the streets. It poses the issue of accountability. We have to hold the government accountable. A free press and electoral reform are vital to do this. I argue that ultimately, a viable opposition party is a vital requirement for an accountable government. Much happens over time, we never would've added Polokwane ten years after the transition in India. So I don't think that we will have to wait for 30 years for a viable opposition party to develop.

Mark Gevisser: I don't think Mbeki alone should carry blame for the AIDS policy. There is a difference between his denialism and social denialism. To truly place blame, we also need to look at denialism on the ground.