

# Aids, lies and dissidents

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## Comment

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In his take on “the Mbeki legacy” in the *Mail & Guardian* (September 26) Ronald Suresh Roberts persists with his thesis advanced in *Fit to Govern*, that in the words of *M&G* journalist Vicki Robinson, who actually bought it, “Mbeki’s stance on HIV/Aids has been misunderstood”. He quotes her further to say he’d made a “convincing argument” that “Thabo Mbeki is not now, nor has he ever been, an Aids dissident”, as he famously declaimed in his book.

Roberts goes on to rubbish Mark Gevisser’s account in *Thabo Mbeki: The Dream Deferred* of how Mbeki phoned him in June last year, the month *Fit to Govern* came out, inquiring whether he’d read *Castro Hlongwane*, confirming that this radical critique of Aids orthodoxy set out his thinking. He delivered

him an updated, amplified version of it the next day.

Roberts derides as “flat earth crap” Gevisser’s conclusion from this that Mbeki “wished the record to reflect that — despite his near-silence since it was initially distributed — he still held to the views expressed in *Castro Hlongwane*, which clearly remained a living, breathing document on his desktop. ... There is no question as to the message Thabo Mbeki was delivering to me along with this document: he was now, as he has been since 1999, an Aids dissident.”

Unfortunately for Roberts, in the contest of rival claims concerning what Mbeki thinks of the HIV theory of Aids, Mbeki has come down on Gevisser’s side. Shortly after Gevisser’s book was published, Mbeki wrote to him specifically to confirm that he had correctly described him as an Aids dissident — adding that if he would just look at the evidence he would be one too.

In an extensive critical analysis of Roberts’s Aids chapters, *Lying and Thieving: The Fraudulent Scholarship of Ronald Suresh Roberts* (it’s

free online), I showed how he had systematically abused his sources, fabricated and falsified the history of Mbeki’s intellectual and political engagement with the HIV/Aids paradigm and falsely represented him as a subscriber to it. (Also how he had massively plagiarised my own work — the Press Ombudsman’s Panel agreed on July 16 — but this was the least of it.)

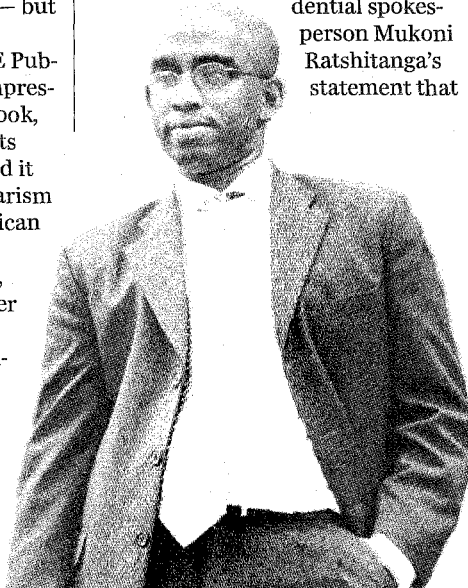
After reading my exposé, STE Publishers cancelled the second impression of Roberts’s best-selling book, then about to go to print, and its editor Dr James Sanders judged it “the most serious case of plagiarism and literary fraud in South African literary history”.

As Roberts notes in his piece, Mbeki did indeed write Gevisser a second letter disavowing his resort to psychologistic portraiture in place of proper factual exposition of his controversial policy positions.

Notwithstanding this serious shortcoming of Gevisser’s book — on Aids in particular — no one has suggested he’s a dishonest

scholar, and no one should. But Roberts accuses him of “partisan implantation of words in Mbeki’s mouth”, when as *Lying and Thieving* demonstrates over and over again, this is precisely Roberts’s habitual crime.

As evidence for his charge, Roberts puts up presidential spokesperson Mukoni Ratshitanga’s statement that



Gevisser shouldn’t confuse his own opinions with Mbeki’s. In point of fact Ratshitanga was responding to *Business Day*’s misreporting of Gevisser’s authoritative assertion in his book that Mbeki remains an Aids dissident; the word “denialist” was misattributed to Gevisser in its report.

Like many people, Roberts may think Mbeki’s dissident views on Aids “flat earth crap” — and Gevisser’s hostile account of them in his biography shows he holds much the same opinion.

The difference between the two writers, however, is that Gevisser honestly conveyed to his readers that Mbeki is an Aids dissident, as Mbeki had wished, whereas, as *M&G* editor Ferial Haffajee noted on her blog concerning Roberts’s dishonest claim to the contrary, Roberts is a shameless, self-serving “peddler of lies”.

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**Ronald Suresh Roberts**