

How Pahad censored Roberts

The president's biographer might have left some telling details out of *Fit to Govern*

Nic Dawes

Presidential biographer Ronald Suresh Roberts was asked by Essop Pahad, the Minister in the Presidency, to make a series of cuts softening criticism of the Oppenheimer family in his 2007 book, *Fit to Govern: The Native Intelligence of Thabo Mbeki*.

In 10 out of 11 cases, Roberts complied, and he now concedes that the effect of the changes was to take the edge off his analysis of the mining dynasty's legacy, arguing that this was necessary to reflect more accurately Mbeki's views, rather than his own.

But an email from Pahad's aide, Louis du Plooy, which a person familiar with the circumstances says was sent the month before publication, suggests that there was little room for dissent.

"The following are Minister Pahad's comments on the latest version of the book. He has repeated some of the comments and would now like to urge in the strongest terms that the following be addressed immediately," Du Plooy wrote.

Eleven cuts were requested, all concerning negative references to the Oppenheimers or to their relationship with liberal politician Helen Suzman.

But Roberts is adamant the list simply represents the reasonable suggestions of a collaborator, rather than demands, and that he found himself

agreeing with them. The email was sent, he says, to his publishers, STE, and its peremptory tone should not be interpreted as "orders issued from on high".

Nevertheless, Roberts says, "it does accurately reflect the substance of the changes I had agreed with Essop Pahad".

Evidence of Pahad's intervention was uncovered by Anthony Brink, a lawyer-turned-campaigner who claims credit for introducing Mbeki to theories that question the link between HIV and Aids and deny the efficacy of antiretroviral drugs. Brink, who was until last year on friendly terms with Roberts, had a spectacular parting of ways with him, accusing him of pilfering his research and "falsifying" Mbeki's views on Aids.

The scale of the cuts varies. In some cases where a negative reference to the family appears in passing, Pahad demands that it be deleted or replaced with something more neutral. In others large sections analysing Oppenheimer politics are redacted.

One deleted section quotes Harry Oppenheimer: "I think people would also agree that it is very desirable to have residential segregation." The draft continues: "Harry said in Parliament: 'I think everyone in this house is agreed that it is most undesirable to put political power into the hands of uncivilised, uneducated people, as far

as we can help it."

The draft goes on to conclude that Oppenheimer was not simply a "conservative" as he claimed, but a fascist: "When Mbeki called the Oppenheimer liberals 'Tories', he was being, if anything, overgenerous," the draft reads. "[T]he violence of mining house liberalism during apartheid was fascist, not Tory."

Almost all of this section was cut at Pahad's insistence. Roberts dropped any suggestion of fascism.

"Oppenheimer believed that universal suffrage would bring 'chaos and disorder'," the published text reads.

"President Mbeki was correct when he suggested, in his state of the nation address on June 30 1999, that 'whether they know it or not, the Democratic Party are our hometown Tories, the offspring of Thatcherism.'"

Similar cuts were demanded elsewhere.

The draft reads: "Through the depraved practices of its mining compounds, through its systematic trespass upon black bodies, De Beers later lived up to [Saartjie Baartman's captors] ... this was simple slavery minus the shipping costs."

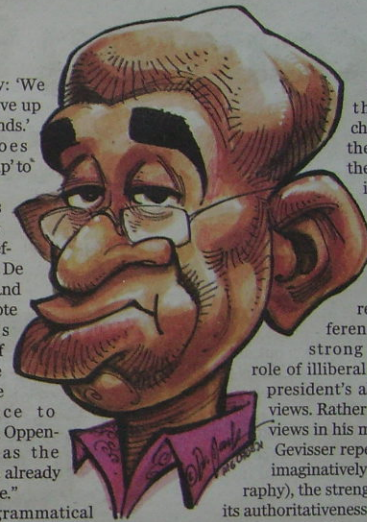
The draft concludes: "Jonathan Oppenheimer, the latest adult beneficiary of the De Beers slave labour history, spoke like a private school prefect when explaining the modern aspirations of the family company in an

interview: 'We have to live up to diamonds.' How does one 'live up' to fascism?"

Pahad's notes say: "Delete reference to De Beers ... and in the quote towards the end of the page delete reference to Jonathan Oppenheimer as the point has already been made."


An ungrammatical sentence in the published text is all that remains of this: "Through the depraved practices of its mining compounds, through its systematic trespass upon black bodies."

Other changes are more minor. A passage describing the "Rape of Namibia" as the foundation of Oppenheimer wealth is changed to refer instead to Anglo/De Beers's wealth, and a line referring to the "Reagan-Thatcher-Suzman-Oppenheimer anti-sanctions camp in the 1980s" is changed to refer simply to the "anti-sanctions camp".



Roberts insists that all these changes strengthen the book, because they ensure that it is an exposition of Mbeki's views rather than his own.

"The changes accurately reflected the difference between my strong views on the role of illiberal capital and the president's almost-as-strong views. Rather than placing my views in his mouth (as [Mark] Gevisser repeatedly and even imaginatively does in his biography), the strength of my book is its authoritativeness as an account of President Mbeki's world view, not least on the Aids issue, where Brink has systematically tried to put words in the President's mouth. These comments add to that authority," he says. "No world or African leader has expressed as strong a critique of De Beers and Anglo as has President Mbeki. Part of proper respect for his radicalism is in not misrepresenting it."

 More online Read full details of changes made to Roberts's book

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