

divisive leadership contest. *BBC Focus on Africa* magazine asks:

aged the ANC?"

"Has Thabo Mbeki damaged the ANC?"

No



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Last February, the *Financial Times* journalist Alec Russell commented on what he called Thabo Mbeki's "almost other-worldly refusal to pander to the soundbite culture". This is by far Mbeki's most important and most misunderstood legacy ensuring that the African National Congress does not stray from its historical principles – the creation of a non-racial and prosperous South Africa.

A discussion document that was circulated in advance of the ANC's national conference last December describes the party's approach to "building a national democratic society". The ANC cannot, this document urges, "behave like a shapeless jellyfish with a political form that is fashioned hither and thither by the multiple contradictory forces of sea waves".

The elevation of policy discipline above spin-doctoring is not merely Mbeki's personal eccentricity, but instead reflects the party's historical role. Ever since its founding protests against the 1913 Land Act, the ANC has seen itself as "an organisation for focusing native opinion". The party has always blended moral and political convictions with intellectual leadership.

This historical firmness of purpose can sometimes be hard to grasp, let alone believe, in the spin-dominated ethos of contemporary UK politics, for example, where, for instance, Prime Minister Gordon Brown's status as a "conviction politician" did not last very long, undone by election-date shenanigans and the pseudo-patriotism of his outing to Iraq. The ANC saw Brown's grandstanding demand for the banning of Zimbabwe's leader Robert Mugabe from the European Union/African Union summit in Portugal as the elevation of media management above conviction politics.

Even more than on Zimbabwe, Mbeki's approach to policy making in the area of HIV/Aids has shown firmness during a public-relations disaster. He has had unambiguous policy successes in moving the global agenda towards a better balance between the roll-out of anti-retroviral (ARV) drugs and the emphasis upon

poverty and underdevelopment as the root cause of the horrendous spread of the disease. In an era of multi-billion dollar lawsuits involving Vioxx and other drugs, Mbeki's insistence upon proper risk assessment of early ARV drugs turns out to have been eminently correct. Institutions such as the United Nations and forums such as the *New York Review of Books* now accept the importance of "African solutions".

William Easterly, professor of economics at New York University, now writes unchallenged that "the activists have been only too successful in focusing attention on treatment instead of prevention". Mbeki was ridiculed for saying this six years ago, but now Easterly's book, *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good*, is book of the year in *The Washington Post*, *Financial Times* and *The Economist*.

If much of this remains misunderstood, it is as much the fault of bad journalism as it is of the ANC's aversion to spin-doctoring or its supposed "straying" from old virtues. Last November the UK *Guardian* carried this headline: "Mbeki admits he is still Aids dissident six years on". But the piece conspicuously failed to live up to this.

The article ended by quoting a recent biographer of Mbeki, Mark Gevisser, as follows: "When I asked him [Mbeki] in 2007 how he felt about having to withdraw from the Aids debate, he told me it was 'very unfortunate' that his initiative had been 'drowned'." Left at that, the "initiative" that Mbeki lamented might appear to have been Aids dissidence as insinuated in the headline. But the *Guardian* omitted the back half of the quotation from the same biography: "in order to suppress what he [Mbeki] maintained was vital and legitimate public inquiry, 'a campaign was launched, that I've said that HIV does not cause Aids, which I never did, and all sorts of other things, all these charges about genocide, and so on. The consequence of which was to stop the scientific inquiry, and I'm afraid that doesn't solve the problem!'"

On another issue that Mbeki's critics say has compromised his leadership of the ANC – that of the arms deal – media reporting ignores his obvious anti-corruption position, backed by prosecutions past and ongoing. Instead, discourse is dominated by the hearsay of disaffected activists such as Andrew Feinstein, who writes in his recent book: "I was told by someone from the [parliamentary joint investigation team] about a meeting with the president at which they... were told who they could and could not investigate." Is that "fact" by BBC standards?

Meanwhile, those who campaign against arms acquisitions as a matter of principle merely ensure the military irrelevance of African countries as players in the geopolitics of our oil-rich continent and in situations such as Sudan. Although well-meaning, they enable metropolitan arms (freighted with metropolitan priorities) to continue to dominate African lives.

The big problem for Mbeki's ANC today is not any supposed drift from its moral and political moorings but rather the persistence of an appalling metropolitan reporting upon Africa.

