

Zapiro's Aids denialism accusations look like yellow press

ZAPIRO'S cartoon (November 20) captioned "Aids denialism just got even weirder" leaves the impression that Anthony Brink and I are Aids denialists. Brink is, but I am not. President Thabo Mbeki is not.

In his noisy manuscript, Brink himself concedes that, far from ever buying his quackery, my response was "to roll (my) eyes or smirk, as if (I) knew better. Roberts's own faith in HIV/Aids was adamant, and, as I discovered only recently, had been so, on the record, since at least 2000".

As I point out in *Fit to Govern*, Brink habitually attributes the full and varied

range of his own views to the president, among others (John Pilger and John Le Carré are other such victims). This has got him into trouble before.

After he claimed in a letter to a prospective supporter that Mbeki had instigated the formation of his Treatment Information Group (TIG) as a counterweight to the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), the Presidency responded: "Mbeki has 'declare(d) his views on Aids and anti-retroviral treatment, and the claims in Brink's document of secretive counter-mobilisation, intimate friendships and his special influence on the thinking of

government leaders do not, we believe, deserve a response' " (Mail & Guardian, March 25, 2005).

On page 131 of his recent diaries, Tony Blair's former spin-doctor, Alastair Campbell, writes: "I called (Blair) and he said he was writing an article in response to a cartoon in the Guardian. I said you're doing what? Have you gone mad? ... Tony, I said, please don't write an article in response to a cartoon. People will think you are bonkers... I (later) called him and asked to be put through to the New Labour Cartoon Rebuttal Unit. He laughed but said we did have to tackle the underlying

arguments because they were bollocks."

As the bollocks of the seven-year TAC propaganda against Mbeki as a denialist steadily unravels (the most recent blows being the 40% write-down by the United Nations of world Aids figures and the concession by Aids-drug lobby sympathiser Mark Gevisser that Mbeki is indeed not a "denialist"), cartoons have yet again come to the fore. As I point out on page 240 of *Fit to Govern*, caricature has consistently displaced truth in the Aids debate.

"Yellow press" is a phrase people traditionally use when they want to suggest that a newspaper has

systematically abandoned truth and the public interest, instead embracing sensationalism, profit, illegality or lack of integrity.

Hugh Cudlipp explains that the origin of the term "was a strip cartoon character, the Yellow Kid, so called because of his colouring from head to foot ... The taunt came to be used generally for the (scandalous and dishonest) type of journalism in which Hearst and Pulitzer at the time indulged.

"The Yellow Kid himself was a loveable scamp." Zapiro too.

RONALD SURESH ROBERTS
CAPE TOWN