Ronald Suresh Roberts

The smear of denialism

"Denialism" and "dissidence" have worked as ill-defined synonyms in the Aids debate. And the former has been wielded in McCarthyite fashion.

The *Guardian* in London recently reported, rather implausibly, that President Thabo Mbeki had announced himself an Aids dissident. The headline was: "Mbeki admits he is still Aids dissident six years on" (6 November 2007), but the content didn't add up to that. The article ended with a quote from Mark Gevisser's book *Thabo Mbeki: The Dream Deferred:* "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'."

But what "initiative" was this? The *Guardian* insinuated that the "initiative" in question was the so-called "Aids dissidence" to which Mbeki had supposedly confessed. But, in order to achieve this effect, the writer of the *Guardian* article, Chris McGreal, left out what Mbeki went on to say in the same quotation, which appears in full on page 758 of Gevisser's text. There Mbeki explained that, in order to suppress a 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! Very, very regrettable."

This was hardly the much-trumpeted confession of "denialism". ("Denialism" and "dissidence" have worked as ill-defined synonyms in the Aids debate. But, at his book launch, Gevisser confusingly distinguished the terms. By "denialism", which he says Mbeki isn't part of, Gevisser means the beliefs that HIV does not cause Aids and that no pandemic exists. "Dissidents", of whom he says Mbeki is one, ask questions within or about Aids policy. This must be wrong because Anthony Brink, who indeed denies that HIV causes Aids and that Aids exists, embraces the term "dissident" and vociferously rejects "denialist").

Only a few weeks earlier, the Aids-drug lobby's similar propaganda assault against attorney and SABC board deputy chairperson Christine Qunta had collapsed, following her successful complaint to the Press Ombudsman, which drew a humiliating multi-part apology from the *Sunday Times*: "In 'So how dangerous is the Queen of Racial Politics?', we stated in a caption that attorney Christine Qunta's Aids denial was cited by her critics. We accept that she is not an Aids denialist. We also retract our statement that she was one of 12 signatories, including Anthony Brink, Anita Allen, Matthias Rath, David Rasnick, Roberto Giraldo and Ronald Suresh Roberts, who supported President Thabo Mbeki at the outset of the Aids debate. We accept that none of those mentioned signed such a document. We also retract our statement that Qunta came to the President's defence when he accused ANC heavyweights Cyril Ramaphosa, Tokyo Sexwale and Mathews Phosa of planning to oust him. We apologise for the errors and for any embarrassment they have caused Qunta and others mentioned."

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This was presumably the "200% accuracy" of which the newspaper's controversial editor, Mondli Makhanya, boasted during the Manto Tshabalala-Msimang imbroglio.

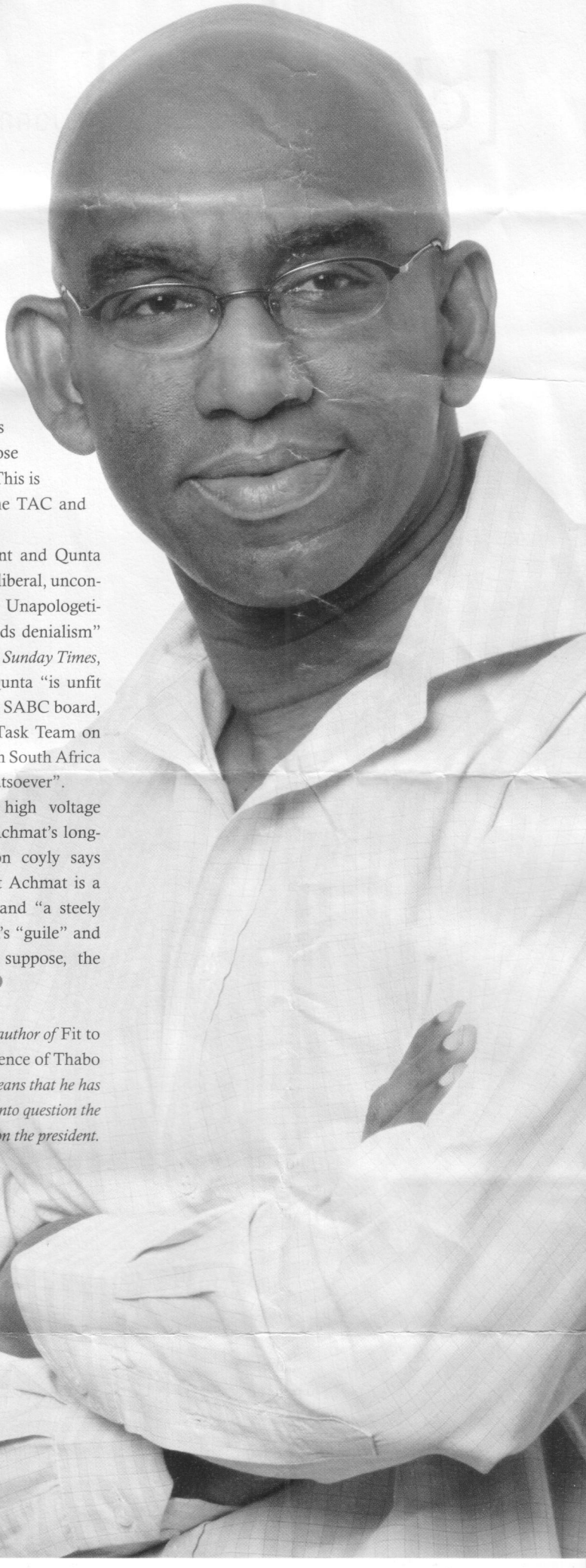
By "others mentioned" the *Sunday Times* meant to obscure the fact that the present columnist was the only other complainant to the ombudsman about the fictional petition, which was supposed to establish my own so-called "Aids denialist" status. "Aids

denialism" is a McCarthyite discourse of smear, not healthcare. On 20 October 2005, after the Democratic Alliance named the supposed "Dirty Dozen" of Aids denialism, *Business Day* dutifully reproduced the list – afterwards, like the *Sunday Times*, correcting itself. In an editorial on 21 October 2005, the newspaper attacked the same DA "Aids denialist" list upon which it had relied the previous day: "Minister in the Presidency Essop Pahad is on it. So are writer-lawyer Ronald Suresh Roberts and lawyer Christine Qunta, whose low estimation in the eyes of the DA would not surprise any regular reader of this newspaper... The DA has clearly used its 'research' to settle some personal scores. It does itself no good at all. In particular, health spokeswoman Dianne Kohler-Barnard is developing a reputation as a thoroughly unreliable source of information on her specialist subject... Roberts's articles attacking Leon for his activities in [apartheid] military service and in which he has raised Leon's father's past as a hanging judge would no doubt also have marked him for inclusion on the 'dissident' list."

This particular propaganda theme recurs because its sponsors are more respectable than propagandists ordinarily are. Last June *Mail & Guardian* journalist Vicki Robinson said she found in my book, *Fit to Govern,* "a convincing argument for how Mbeki's stance on HIV/Aids has been misunderstood and in turn capitalised on by powerful individuals such as Supreme Court of Appeal Judge Edwin Cameron". In the absence of persuasive arguments for their own cause, Cameron and the TAC have attempted to mobilise scorn and contempt against their opponents, smeared with the hopelessly ill-defined sin of "denialism".

On pages 148-149 of his memoir, Cameron says that when he attacked Mbeki and compared "Aids denialism" with Holocaust denialism, he fully intended to trigger intolerance against his ill-defined opponents, whom he described, in blanket fashion, as "reprehensible morally" and "discreditable intellectually". This is flatly at odds with the recent Constitutional Court ruling in the Billy Masethla case, which held that democracy "presupposes tolerance for those with whom one disagrees and respect for the dignity of those with whom one is in dispute". This is precisely the core value that the TAC and Cameron systematically attack.

Mbeki is the most prominent and Qunta merely the latest victim of this illiberal, unconstitutional, Cameron doctrine. Unapologetically invoking the spurious "Aids denialism" allegations now retracted by the *Sunday Times*, Zackie Achmat insisted that Qunta "is unfit to be a lawyer, a member of the SABC board, a member of the Presidential Task Team on African Traditional Medicines in South Africa or to hold any public office whatsoever".

The Cameron doctrine is high voltage stuff. Far from ever rebuking Achmat's long-standing recklessness, Cameron coyly says on page 55 of his memoir that Achmat is a person of "unequalled guile" and "a steely sense of strategy". One person's "guile" and "strategy" and "steel" are, I suppose, the other's muscular illiberalism.

Ronald Suresh Roberts is author of Fit to Govern: The Native Intelligence of Thabo Mbeki. *This in no way means that he has anything to gain from calling into question the veracity of other books on the president.*