No denial

MARTIN PLAUT

Mark Gevisser

THABO MBeki

The dream deferred
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Andrew Feinstein

AFTER THE PARTY
A personal and political journey inside the ANC
R160.
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the utter poverty that surrounded the family in those early years. They were merchants, although his father, Coovan, was frequently away on political business. When Thabo was not helping to run the shop, he would sit and write letters for the illiterate peasants who were their customers, thus learning their community’s problems. “I should not be reading other people’s letters”, he told his mother, who reassured him that it was all right, as long as he kept the contents confidential. Thabo grew up a lonely child, whose parents were wrapped up in the political struggle. Gevisser tells of a protective hardening of the soul as Thabo Mbeki, a clever, perceptive child became a reserved, distrustful man. Gevisser is at his strongest tackling the most difficult subject of all – Mbeki’s denial of the science surrounding HIV/AIDS. With tens of thousands of South Africans dying around him, the President searched out his own explanation for the pandemic, rejecting what he saw as the easy consensus of the medical profession: a consensus that he believed portrayed Africans as sex-crazed germ carriers, “doomed to an inevitable mortal end because of our unconquerable devotion to the sin of lust”. Combining this angry denunciation with a distrust of globalization, a rejection of the greed of the pharmaceutical companies and an almost pathological belief that the world was conspiring against him, Mbeki joined the ranks of the Aids denialists.

Pressure from his Party has, in recent years, persuaded Mbeki to step back from the Aids controversy. South Africa now has an effective programme providing anti-retrovirals. But Mbeki himself has not changed his intense scepticism about the medical orthodoxy on the subject, and his Health Minister still peddles ridiculous solutions involving traditional medicines and dietary supplements. Gevisser, who is an Aids activist, struggled for years to finish the book because he could not come to terms with his subject’s stand on the subject, and he can offer no verdict on Mbeki.

Andrew Feinstein’s book is – by comparison – a jog through the subject, and no worse for that. After the Party is a personal account of how Feinstein came to join the ANC, and of his meteoric rise through its ranks until he found himself sitting in the country’s fit multiracial parliament. Where he comes in his own is in describing the circumstances that surround one of the most painful eras in South African history since 1994. The arms deal. Re-equipping the armed forces after the arms embargo was lifted he country with a billion of $4.8 billion. Firm from around the globe fought for the contra and there was enormous scope for corruption. A sitting on the Public Accounts Committee, Feinstein was in a critical position to unravel just who had been paid and what they had offered in return. At first he was supported by his Party and by Jacob Zuma in particular. But inevitably, as they began uncovering the real story, the ANC turned the screws on him. Shaken, Feinstein went to see an unammon senior Party member who explained that he would never be allowed to get to the bottom of the contracts because the ANC funded the 1999 election from the kickbacks it received. The pressure became intense: Feinstein quotes a colleague’s remark that imprisonment on Robben Island didn’t break his but the ANC just might.

Finally, reduced to tears in a toilet, the author made his own choice. Cutting his professional science before his Party, he demanded the truth. The result was perhaps predictable as Feinstein was forced out of Parliament. I now lives in London, at loggerheads with the ANC hierarchy. It is a painful journey and telling it he has done his country, and mine, great service. Until South Africa has the courage to confront the corruption that is eroding its soul, it will never escape from the slough in which it now finds itself.