

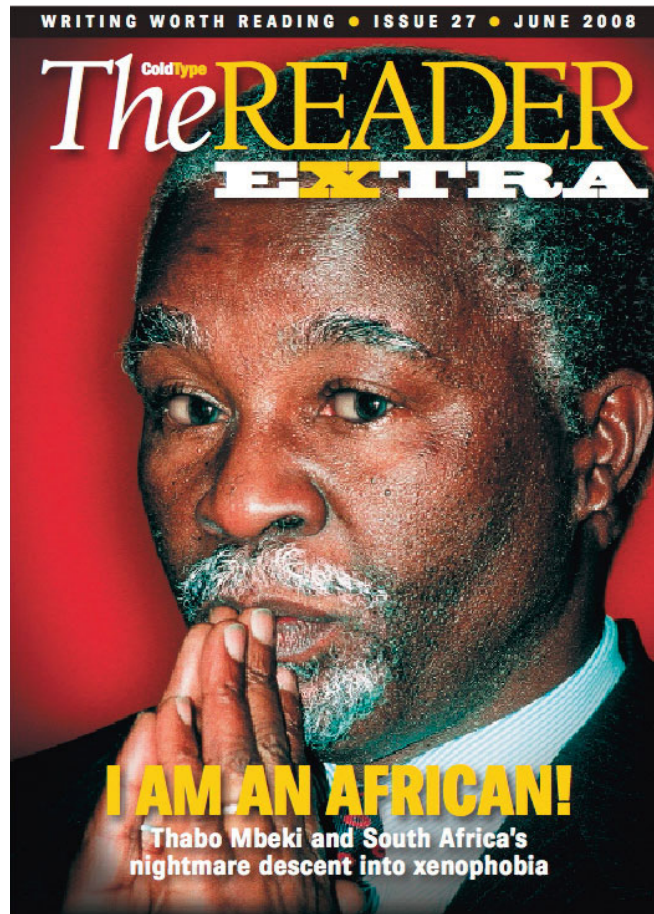
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EXTRA



**I AM AN AFRICAN!**

Thabo Mbeki and South Africa's  
nightmare descent into xenophobia



COVER PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY SUNDAY TIMES, JOHANNESBURG

South Africa's President **Thabo Mbeki**, like US President George W. Bush, is considered by the majority of his countrymen to be a failed president. Severely criticised at home and abroad for his approach to HIV-AIDS, his tolerance of the abuses of Zimbabwean leader Robert Mugabe and – his latest crisis – his low-response reaction when his poorest countrymen recently embarked on a xenophobic rampage against equally-impoorished foreigners living in their midst. In our exclusive essay, **Joe Steelman** analyses Mbeki's performance and the problems he will leave his successor.

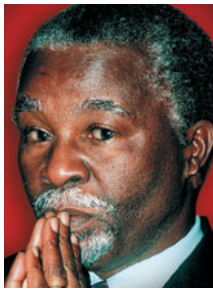
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# I AM AN AFRICAN!

*Thabo Mbeki's successor as President of South Africa will inherit a country characterised more by frustrated hopes and resentment than by optimism and tolerance*

BY JOE STEELMAN



European colonialism.

It'll probably be the last Africa Day as president of South Africa for Thabo Mbeki, whose first speech in the formerly whites-only South African Houses of Parliament included the phrase: 'I am an African'.

Mbeki was driving force behind the transformation of the OAU into the African Union, and of the African Renaissance, the concept behind the New Plan for African Development (Nepad). Nepad is an ambitious plan to pull Africa up by its bootstraps, to enable it to take its rightful place among the community of nations etc, etc, etc.

As with most Mbeki plans, Nepad and the African Renaissance came complete with a complex set of intersecting structures, accounting procedures,

It's Sunday 25 May, 2008 – Africa Day, the anniversary of the founding of the Organisation of African Unity, founded in 1963 to bring to an end centuries of Eu-

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monitoring mechanisms (including the grandly named African Parliament which, in practice has no responsibilities at all) and organisational charts – full of dotted-line and straight-line responsibility arrows – that look, at first glance, like real organisations with the power to change things.

Mbeki's had several such ambitious plans. His last Africa Day is a good time to review how they fared.

His predecessor is Nelson Mandela, the world's ranking secular saint. Whatever *his* shortcomings, he probably enjoys more affection than anyone else alive. Even young South Africans, fairly cynical of the "struggle generations", affectionately mimic his arthritic movements with a shuffling dance heavy on elbow movement but stiff and unbending in the knees. Mbeki had large shoes to fill when he was inaugurated as South Africa's second democratic president in 1999.

Asked about it before taking up the presidential mantle (and after four years as Mandela's deputy, effectively running the country), he said Mande-

la's shoes – heavy black leather things widely but fondly reviled as “prison shoes” – were too ugly for him. He would be walking his own path and building his own legacy that owed nothing to Mandela.

He's been building that legacy for nearly eight years.

In Africa? The continental economy's growing fast – mainly fuelled by oil and gas revenues flowing into the north (Libya), West Africa, and Angola, rather than by anything Mbeki's done. Life for most ordinary Africans remains unchanged.

The complex jigsaw of continental development and oversight designed to achieve a social and political renaissance remains in place. But, on the four points of the African compass, so do Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, President Mwai Kibaki in Kenya, President Umaru Musa Yar'adua in Nigeria and, closer to home, President Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe.

The elections that put them in place are unlikely to survive scrutiny by the Peer Review Mechanism, that component of Mbeki's Heath Robinson-like Nepad which is intended to demonstrate to Western governments that Africa's new generation of leaders is willing and able to provide a political environment safe for their investment dollars. Mubarak's political opponents are mainly banned; Kibaki is president by dint of a blatantly rigged election (and some sympathetic manoeuvring by Washington); Mugabe's rigged three elections on the trot; and while Yar'adua's there on the basis of a questionable election, his real problem is that he a cat's paw for one-time military dicta-

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**Despite Mbeki's gushing 2002 declaration that his first invitation to the G8 signified "the end of the epoch of colonialism and neo-colonialism", Africa remains a massive open-cast mine from which foreign mining houses extract raw materials for the financial benefit of the London, New York and Toronto stock exchanges**

tor Olusegun Obasanjo, constitutionally prevented from standing again (although he tried).

(South Africans of a certain age and political persuasion may remember Obasanjo, between presidencies and a member of the 1986 Commonwealth Eminent Person's Group describing Mandela as a man “standing on a station from which the train has already departed”, when Mandela, then still a prisoner, refused to accept an apartheid-constructed dispensation in which the black South Africans would have position but not power).

Using Mugabe may be unfair: South Africa's the southern compass point and, despite some fairly questionable tactics by his allies ahead of the party conference in December, the African National Congress has ensured that Mbeki won't be serving a third term. But the tarnish of Mugabe's three rigged elections to the presidency and his savage hold on power corrodes South Africa's own democratic and human rights credentials: Mbeki has used his Southern African Development Community mandate to resolve the Zimbabwe problem to divert what would otherwise be growing neighbourhood pressure from Mugabe to quit.

Despite Mbeki's gushing 2002 declaration that his first invitation to the G8 signified “the end of the epoch of colonialism and neo-colonialism”, Africa remains a massive open-cast mine from which foreign mining houses extract raw materials for the financial benefit of the London, New York and Toronto stock exchanges, and for the comfort, enjoyment and decoration of those

lucky enough to live anywhere but Africa.

Back home things looked more promising as Mbeki replaced Mandela's ugly prison-vintage shoes with his own trim little Guccis on the desk in The Big Office in Pretoria's Union Buildings. Prudent fiscal policies and a business-friendly environment implemented during the Mbeki deputy presidency had investors interested in re-opening shop in South Africa.

Local and foreign journalists admired him; South Africa's emerging black commercial elite worshipped him. Maybe he wasn't as adorable or approachable as Mandela had been, but The Pipe! The thoughtful demeanour! The intellectualism! The depth of philosophical understanding! The University of Sussex economics degree! The tactically brilliant acceptance of the end of history and the neo-liberal consensus! The thinly disguised contempt for socialists, trade unionists and the great unwashed! The effortless ease of his defeat of political rivals! His vision of a modernised ANC ruling a modern state! His courage in facing down the Aids establishment and their belief that Aids was a communicable disease! His restrained sartorial elegance!

Oh, how we loved him in the early days ... especially the journalists, so beloved of the neat, neo-liberal sound-bite, and the "black diamonds" enriched by the Thabonomics theory that we needed a black middle class from which wealth and opportunity could trickle down, Milton Friedman-like, to the under-nourished, unemployed majority.

It's less easy to find such unquestion-

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ing adulation these days:

Try asking the executives of the *Sowetan*, South Africa's biggest (and only black) daily paper in Mbeki's heyday. They moved the paper up market to meet the needs of the Thabo generation, with their BMWs and their endless love for "deal-flow" MBA-speak. You won't find those executives in the *Sowetan* offices – it got sold off after losing nearly half its readers in less than nine months, an almost unbelievable achievement when you consider it had no real competition.

Or perhaps Parks Mkhahlana, presidential spokesperson and a member of Mbeki's dream team. He's not here either. A pleasant and personable young graduate of the young lions who fought apartheid in the streets in the 1990s, he's one of literally hundreds of thousands of South Africans who have died of Aids-related causes because of public health authorities' reluctance to accept that anti-retroviral drugs actually do what the scientists say they do: delay the onset of Aids in those with HIV, and retard its development thereafter (or perhaps, Peter Mokaba, leader of the young lions who delivered Mbeki the powerful youth vote in the ANC. His name graces a stadium not far from the site of his grave: another premature victim of what the South African media euphemistically describes as "a short illness").

But best of all, ask 30-year-old Diana Sarala, a Zimbabwean living in South Africa for the past four years whose son is just four days old this Africa Day.

She's been living in a storeroom near the police station in Reiger Park in the urban sprawl a few kilometres east of

Johannesburg since a few days before his birth. Her possessions are gone and the shack she called home is occupied by a South African.

Zimbabweans have a penchant for literal and optimistic first names, so she named her son Xeno – short for xenophobia. She named him because she doesn't want him to rob, rape and kill foreigners when he's grown up. She's not sure where he'll grow up, or whether she wants to return to Zimbabwe. In Zimbabwe, she says, you get beaten and killed. In South Africa you get beaten and killed, but at least you can find work.

She's one of perhaps 50,000 people displaced (made homeless if you can describe the shacks illegal foreigners and poor South Africans live in as "homes") by an orgy of xenophobic hatred and violence that erupted just a week before Africa Day.

The death toll by Africa Day was 50-plus and climbing, although more slowly now that the army had been called out to occupy parts of the country for the first time since election day 1994 marked the miracle of this Rainbow Nation. Thousands have flocked across the borders to Mozambique and Zimbabwe.

Initially restricted to the dense informal settlements of Gauteng, South Africa's smallest province and the country's economic hub, it has now spread like a veld fire to all but one of the nine provinces – ironically, Limpopo, the province directly bordering Zimbabwe and Mozambique, the countries most of South Africa's *makwerekwere* call home (*makwerekwere* being the alliterative tag given to foreign

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**At home, his policies still have supporters among the black diamonds and white captains of industry. They still love his trickle-down theory of wealth creation – a licence, an injunction, to make ever more profit**

Africans here, taken from the cadence and rhythm of their diverse but "other" mother tongues).

The murderous practicalities of xenophobia don't change through time or location: ethnic cleansing in the Balkans, genocide of the Armenians and the Kurds in Turkey, of the Palestinians, of the Jews, the gypsies and so many others in Germany are essentially those of Alexandra, of Reiger Park, of Jeppes-town and of every xenophobic flashfire in South Africa in May 2008: the corpses, the dazed survivors, the burned-out homes could be anywhere there are "they" and "us" – although the pictures here show homes and looted possessions more humble than those in Europe.

The question is why? Why here? And why now?

Mbeki apologists still maintain his African ambitions could have transformed the continent if he hadn't had to waste so much time dealing with squabbles over who should lead it. And at home, his policies still have supporters among the black diamonds and white captains of industry. They still love his trickle-down theory of wealth creation – a licence, an injunction, to make ever more profit.

Even before taking the presidency, Mbeki had managed to replace the central plank of ANC policy, the Reconstruction and Development Programme with the equally worthy-sounding Growth, Employment and Redistribution strategy (Gear).

Dubbed "class apartheid" by sociologist Patrick Bond, it has meant that in the country which claimed the greatest measurable inequality in the world

under apartheid, has actually increased inequality since then - to 0,72 as a function of the Gini coefficient 12 years into democracy.

South Africa's poor – the scandal of the world under apartheid – are poorer today than they were then. Under Mbeki, the number of black South Africans living in poverty has risen from 50,3% to 57,2%, according to the South African Human Rights Commission. Even among white South Africa the number has doubled from 2% to 3,9%.

As unemployment doubled and Mbeki's technocrats failed year after year to push growth past 3%, they managed to increase social spending by just 3% in 12 years, a drop when measured against the number of people actually surviving on old age pensions, disability grants and child support grants.

Chronic unemployment, Aids and a collapsing healthcare system (overseen by a Minister whose chronic liver problems were treated in a private clinic) has seen life expectancy drop from 65 in 1994 to 50.

Basic allocations of free water don't disguise the fact that the price of water has skyrocketed. Ditto the much-heralded roll-out of electricity to people who can't afford it. Many of these services are supplied to residents of "RDP houses" – most of them smaller and further from town than the notorious "matchboxes" apartheid constructed as temporary residence for its hewers of wood and drawers of water.

The education system still struggles to overcome the massive skewing under apartheid, while the lack of job prospects even for those who pass

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school-leaving exams – coupled with the system's stubborn refusal to implement the national policy of free education – means a third of scholars have dropped out by the end of their seventh year (and with five still to go).

And to fuel South Africa's jobless growth our CO2 emissions have grown to 20 times those of George W Bush's USA.

And things have got worse as the Mbeki years rolled on: as heritage crunch-time in 2009 drew closer, word went out that the Chief needed "delivery".

With their multi-million Rand bonuses secure, housing and utility executives delivered: houses (more but with lower quality materials), electricity connections (but at massive cost to domestic users, so industry could continue to claim some of the cheapest power in the world and ordinary South Africans ran out of power in the middle of every month); water connections (with a pre-paid metering system and a cost-recovery business model so that if you don't pay you can drink from the trickling tap, but not wash or cook).

The official whirlwind love-affair with neo-liberal, market-driven growth intensified. We sold off our national steel producer, and now have to pay import-substitution prices, pushing up the cost of vehicles (and thus of transport) and of every imaginable piece of domestic or industrial hardware; we allowed our national power utility to run down its coal reserves (coal reserves!? In a country with almost endless sun and vast kilometres of windswept desert and coastline?) and let power production capacity fall steadily behind both domes-

tic and residential demand.

In the name of macro economic stability, South Africa liberalised exchange control. White business that had sung Mbeki's praises as a champion of sensible policies in a globalised world, sent their billions abroad, leaving the Rand so vulnerable that it crashed by more than a quarter – again, and again, and again, and again (1996, 1998, 2001 and 2006). It currently claims the worst record of any major currency.

Here it is useful to recall a comment from the country's wealthiest family, the Oppenheims of De Beers and Anglo American fame, to a mild criticism of their use of their economic power to influence national policy: "What's wrong with policy capture," says Jonathan Oppenheimer (the youngest of the Oppenheims and obviously still taking lesson in diplomacy), "if it's good policy?"

Good policies or not, those advocated by the Oppenheims and powerful business lobbies were those adopted Mbeki's finance tsar Trevor Manuel, embraced at about the same time as he picked up the plummy Eton accents that grace the Oppenheimer drawing room (his mum still speaks with the sing-song Mitchell's Plein accent he used to share).

South Africa's trade deficit is, at 8,1% of GDP, the highest in the world. And the current oil and global food production crises leaves the "corrected" Rand even more vulnerable (while the Mbeki government's refusal to follow India and China into blocking export of staple foods sees tons of maize leaving South Africa every week).

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**The tone of the Mbeki heyday is perfectly captured in Manuel's plummy sound-bite response to a radio journalist's question on his plans to limit the impact of massive food price increases: Social grants, Manuel opined, discourage people from cultivating crops. Social grants are currently available to pensioners, people with disabilities and children under 16**

fectly captured in Manuel's plummy sound-bite response to a radio journalist's question on his plans to limit the impact of massive food price increases: Social grants, Manuel opined, discourage people from cultivating crops. Social grants are currently available to pensioners, people with disabilities and children under 16.

This statement was made on the eve of the xenophobic eruption, And from a man who has ignored not only repeated evidence but also proof positive from his own government's Department of Social Development (DSD), that a basic income grant of R100 (about US\$13) a month to every adult South African would virtually eliminate incidence of extreme poverty. It would move 6,3-million people out of poverty and slash the number of destitute people by 10,2-million. And it would be affordable. Manuel believes a basic income grant will discourage people from looking for work.

In South Africa today, the present is worse than the past, and, on the current trajectory, the future looks even bleaker, particularly for the millions of South Africans for whom the ANC victory in 1994 held out the hope of a better life.

No surprise then that South Africa leads the world in property crimes, and is a close second in violent crimes and murder.

And the eruption of xenophobia aimed at other Africans in the days ahead of Africa Day?

Mbeki's complex and detailed rescue plans, Gear, Nepad and, more recently, Asgisa and Business Unusual (don't ask) have touched few former apart-



heid victims beyond the tiny minority of a few thousand black diamonds at the top. Neither have the many concepts accompanying them – not least the notion that “I am an African”, which has always rung particularly hollow.

Most black South Africans have little direct experience of life north of the Limpopo. And comparisons with life in Ghana, the DRC, Mozambique, the Congo and Burundi don’t resonate as strongly as those with the middle-class suburbs up the road. Most South Africans live lives of constant struggle and poverty, alongside both moderate comfort and amazing, often obscenely ostentatious, wealth.

The difference between them and their counterparts to the north is that they were given hope in 1994 – and it looks increasingly, from their perspective, like hope deferred, perhaps permanently.

For millions, the idea of “delivery” is a mirage, a cruel joke of benefit offered – accessible water, electricity, a telephone in the house – only to be snatched away by the policies of “cost recovery”; the prospects of a formal job growing ever more distant as more and more neighbours, relatives, friends come home retrenched and with no prospect of ever working again (and no grants because they encourage sloth).

They live in a country in which a powerful state allocates more resources to preventing and solving crimes against property than crimes against people (the current controversy over the closure of the Scorpions – South Africa’s FBI – is as much about the Mbeki’s deployment of law-and-order resources to

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address white-collar crime rather than the murder rate in black townships as it is about his use of the Scorpions against his political rivals).

An invasion of angry mobs from the informal settlements wanting to grab a liberation dividend in middle-class suburbs isn’t really on the agenda: the suburbs are too far away and too well protected. The *makwerekwere* are much more convenient targets.

They’re also the target of constant agitation by South African informal traders and informal shop-owners and hawkers, who have stereotyped them as mean and grabby for their willingness to undercut established prices to win customers.

And low-key intolerance to “them” has always been a factor of township life, insular, with a (formerly racial) tradition of “them” and “us” – with “us” defined by a known, and generally understood, set of languages, common cultural practices and experiences.

Add to this the ethnic assertiveness mobilised in protest against Mbeki’s antagonism towards his former deputy, Jacob Zuma, and the explosive is primed. Zuma comes from peasant stock in the KwaZulu hinterland, proud of his heritage. He is, for the majority of black South Africans living in Gauteng – Zulu-speaking and with strong ties to KwaZulu – “one of us”.

This is not to suggest that Zuma encouraged the xenophobia in any way. He joined the ANC as a young man, served on Robben Island with Mandela and other ANC icons where he learned to read and write – and a great deal more besides; went into exile (where he was welcomed by ordinary Zambians

beside whom he lived), rose through the ANC ranks to key positions in the operational underground and political structures; and was the first senior ANC official to return home to prepare the ground for talks-about-talks with the apartheid government.

It was because he represented the broad-church, multi-class tradition of the ANC's roots that he retained widespread support in the ANC and that delegates to the ANC's December conference overwhelmingly elected him party president (and thus president-in-waiting of South Africa).

He has been outraged at the xenophobia, and particularly so that, as they killed and looted, roaming gangs in Gauteng sang "Umshini 'wami", a liberation struggle song closely associated with Zuma himself. ANC officials at all levels have been ordered into townships to de-mobilise the xenophobia.

But Zuma is a man of two worlds – and one of them (or part of it, the part that approves his enthusiastic polygamy) saw his election as meaning their time had come; the dawn of the liberation dividend, long-deferred by Mbeki's policies, was about to break. For months black South African whose mother tongues are languages other than Zulu have reported increasing tribal chauvinism from Zulu speakers, and particularly those with direct roots in rural KwaZulu.

It is this network of transplanted rural-KwaZulu communities, and the former migrant worker "hostels" in Gauteng, around Johannesburg, that served as a communication system for the abortive 1992-1994 attempt by Buthlezi's Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) to

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set Gauteng ablaze and thus derail the negotiated democratic arrangement. It is no accident that the current violence erupted in a part of Alexandra called "Beirut", an informal settlement of shacks and wood-and-corrugated iron houses in the shadow of Alexandra's vast "hostel" – the fortress and arsenal of the 1992-1994 IFP, from which hostel residents covertly armed by the apartheid state ventured out to expel residents and replace them with family members and friends from KwaZulu.

The extended break between Mbeki's defeat at the ANC conference and his departure as president of the country after next year's general election hasn't helped.

Neither has the rearguard action by Mbeki supporters to hold on to power in the provinces they dominated before December.

Allegations of delegate election rigging, vote counting fraud and bribery to achieve this are rife ahead of provincial ANC conferences in the run-up of the national conference to nominate Zuma as presidential candidate for the 2009 general election.

Physical fights have broken out at two pre-election conferences gatherings – fist-fights only perhaps, but the first since the black exclusivist PAC break-away in the 1950s, and an unheard-of break with convention in the modern ANC built by Mandela and his predecessor and one-time law partner, Oliver Tambo.

High political tension and cultural and ethnic chauvinism have thus added to tensions and frustrations already high in poor, black communities over the daily grind of simply struggling to

survive – rocketing food prices, surging inflation and ever-rising unemployment.

Food prices, the lack of jobs and foreigners' ability to get jobs South Africans "should" get – through better education, willingness to work for lower wages – feature high on participants' explanations for taking part in "chasing away the foreigners", whom they accuse of "stealing our liberation".

The precise trigger for the first attacks in Alexandra is unknown and may always be (despite persistent rumours of retaliation to an attack on two of "our women").

What is clear is that in many areas the objective quickly became the grabbing of both accommodation and goods, and the focus of the violence expanded to include minority-language South Africans – Shangaans particularly (the predominant language in southern Mozambique, but mother tongue to hundreds of thousands of South Africans), Vendas (exclusively South African, but only in the far north), and first-language speakers of Sotho, Pedi and Tswana.

But the KwaZulu connection should not be overstated: it may have served to feed resentments and anger in the special circumstances prevailing in Alexandra, but the explosions of violence in the North West province and in the Western Cape, the Free State and Eastern Cape, with few Zulu-speakers demonstrate clearly that "third force" explanations (IFP militants were characterised in 1992-1994 as "the third force") are inadequate.

Both the thousands of ordinary South Africans who risked life and property

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**Mbeki will be remembered as the president who obstructed the campaign to bring Aids under control in South Africa, who allowed Mugabe to steal two elections – and may yet help him steal a third – and who has created a tinderbox of unfulfilled expectation and frustrated hope from the nation he inherited from Mandela**

to hide or protect their foreign neighbours, and the multi-lingual character of the gangs who confronted police who tried to stop the slaughter, paints a non-tribal picture: both the murderous frustration and the decency that restricted its spread were South Africans, apparently indistinguishable..

What does this say of the legacy of Mbeki, the would-be moderniser of the Dark Continent?

He has transformed the country of surging hope he inherited into one of barely suppressed anger and frustration – fury at policies that punish poor people for their poverty and reward the rich for their wealth; at policies that offer delivery then snatch it away as grateful hands reach out to receive it.

Mbeki will be remembered as the president who obstructed the campaign to bring Aids under control in South Africa, who allowed Mugabe to steal two elections – and may yet help him steal a third – and who has created a tinderbox of unfulfilled expectation and frustrated hope from the nation he inherited from Mandela.

Sadly, his successor will inherit, along with the inhibitions of a looming global depression and galloping oil and food inflation, a country characterised more by frustrated hopes and resentment than by optimism and tolerance. And, thanks to Mbeki, he will have more to do to put things right, and less to do it with. **CT**

*Joe Steelman is the nom de plume of a former South African anti-apartheid activist now in the commercial sector whose professional position prevents writing in his own name.*

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