

REVIEW

Chris Saunders, a historian, is this year a Mellon mentor at the University of Cape Town.

The Poverty of Ideas: South African Democracy and the Retreat of Intellectuals

The editors of this volume, William Gumede, author of *Thabo Mbeki and the Battle for the Soul of the ANC* (2005) and Leslie Dikeni, a Research Associate at the Department of International Politics at the University of Pretoria, decry what they call the retreat of intellectuals since the advent of democracy in 1994. We all know how in the apartheid years the brave Helen Suzman spoke truth to power and criticised the government of the day.

Gumede and Dikeni detect what they call a 'golden age' in the late 1980s through to 1994 in which there was not only a vibrant civil society but also a culture in which intellectuals spoke out and had some influence on policy-making. After 1994 some intellectuals moved into government while others chose to remain silent rather than criticise the new African National Congress-led government. In the Mbeki years we had a President, called here a philosopher-king, with his own intellectual pretensions but who encouraged the development of an anti-intellectual culture by scorning and casting abuse at intellectual and other critics in his *ANC Today* columns and elsewhere. Now, in a more populist era, Kader Asmal has fallen victim to verbal abuse, while Julius Malema, along with those who should know better, gets away with outrageous comments directed at intellectuals and others. This collection of essays seeks to address what has happened to intellectuals in the new South Africa, and calls for them not to retreat but to be actively engaged and to speak out.

The Poverty of Ideas is an uneven but wide-ranging volume, which is not confined to the post 1994 years. Among its highlights is the chapter by Jeremy Cronin, himself an intellectual now in government, on the young ANC intellectual who in exile wrote, among other things, a book on Mangosuthu Buthelezi entitled *Chief with a Double Agenda*. He wrote under the name Comrade Mzala, and not all will agree with Cronin's conclusion that 'our movement requires tens of thousands of Mzalas, commissars working away in state departments, parastatals, trade unions, branches and communities'. Dan O'Meara writes interestingly about another intellectual-activist who died too young, Harold Wolpe, though not all will agree that Wolpe's published oeuvre was as important as O'Meara suggests. Mandisa Mbali tries to explain in her chapter why Mbeki took his denialist position on HIV/AIDS, while Vishnu Padayachee and Graham Sherbut recount how the influence of academic economists on the making of economic policy shifted in the 1990s, and why they were marginalised as the government moved from the RDP of 1994 to the Gear macroeconomic strategy adopted with so little consultation in June 1996. Among other notable chapters are those on spirituality (Albert Nolan) gender (Shireen Hassim and Helga Jansen-Daugbjerg) and youth (Prishani Naidoo). The contribution by the New York-based scholar Mahmood Mamdani, though entitled 'African intellectuals and identity', wanders from topic to topic and has all too little to say about intellectuals in South Africa. Though some of Jonathan Jansen's chapter was, he tells us, written at 3 am in a hotel room in Chicago, he has a

few good critical points to make about the role of public intellectuals and their relationship to universities.

No-one would surely deny that South African life would be enriched if more public intellectuals were willing to criticise the actions of the government of the day, or that intellectuals can and should play a vital role in the building of a democratic culture. Yet some of the argument presented in this volume is overdrawn, and to the extent that it provides a history of our recent intellectual life it is extremely sketchy. It is hard enough to define or categorise intellectuals, and one has only to think of such people as Rhoda Kadalie and Mamphela Ramphela, or say the lively columns by Eusebius McKaiser in *Business Day*, to realise that not all of them have retreated into silence. A recent academic visitor to the University of Cape Town from London was surprised to find intellectual life in Cape Town so vibrant. There the Wolpe Forum, UCT's Centre for Conflict Resolution and the Helen Suzman Foundation, along with other organisations and such places as the Book Lounge, help to keep intellectual debate alive, and should be given as much support as possible to continue their work. Is it not time, one wonders, for intellectuals to spend less time writing about, and bemoaning, the poverty of ideas, and instead to come up with fresh thinking on the pressing issues of the day? How then to ensure that such thinking feeds into policy remains a challenge. This book raises important issues, even if it does not get as far as one might wish in tackling them.