

LATE RELEASE

Mbeki : Notes from Robben Island

DAVID WELSH reviews
the *Prison Writings of
Govan Mbeki: Learning
from Robben Island*.
David Philip.

As Colin Bundy remarks in his introduction, South Africa has sent many of its finest citizens to gaol. Govan Mbeki received life imprisonment at the Rivonia trial in 1964 and was incarcerated on the island until his release a few years ago.

His book contains a wide variety of essays that were written, copied (often by the most painstaking of means), circulated, and, ultimately, smuggled out of prison. They show that the prisoners did not vegetate during their long years: they kept their minds active through formal and informal study — youngsters who were loathe to accept the discipline of study were cajoled into enrolling for study courses. The island became a university-in-miniature.

Mbeki himself is one of the Grand Old Men of the ANC. Interesting biographical details are presented in Bundy's introduction which provides a valuable context of his background as an activist, and the incredible difficulties under which these writings were produced. Whatever the merits of Mbeki's thoughts (and he is no Gramsci), the value of the book lies in its discussion of various points of the ANC's policies and its strategies, its relationship with the South African Communist Party (which Mbeki joined after 1953) and other political movements. All of this will be valuable grist to the historian's mill.

The essays cover a wide range of issues: there are tributes to Ruth First and Moses Mabida, analyses of the rise of Afrikaner capital, hints on organisation — always with Mbeki's characteristic insistence that the rural areas not be neglected, 'retreaded' (or, rather, sieved through Mbeki's distinctive views) UNISA economic study guides, and internal debates on the exact meaning of the Freedom Charter.

As a whole, the collection lacks coherence but prison is hardly the ideal place for producing polished collections.

Bundy acknowledges that many might disagree with Mbeki's radicalism. Liberals



Blinkered by uncongenial ideology . . .

will find his unreconstructed Marxism-Leninism uncongenial — and former members of the Liberal Party will be annoyed at his mistaken belief that the party 'jet-tisoned' its black members after the enactment of the Political Interference Act in 1967.

The heavy ideological tone of the collection is set by Harry Gwala's (Stalinist) foreword.

Gwala tells us that these essays 'helped lay a foundation for our young comrades who needed to be armed with a correct theory' *Mein Gott!*

Sadly, one of the main conclusions about these writings will be their confirmation of the ideological blinkers that have been so conspicuous a feature of the South African left.