Don’t let the door hit you....

October 13, 2008 By Paul Dalton

With most Americans focused on the election and the economy, a truly historic victory in the battle against HIV may have been overlooked: South Africa is free of Mbeki and Company.

Mbeki is one of the greatest disappointments in my life. I spent much of the 1980s as an anti-apartheid activist. While most of the world looked to Nelson Mandela as their symbol of this struggle mine were Steven Biko and Umkhonto We Sizwe , or Spear of the Nation, the ANC?s armed wing, led by Thabo Mbeki.

When Mbeki took power in South Africa and began his flirtation with HIV denialism, I was shocked, but trusted that his intellect would rule out- that he would see the grave error of his ways and correct course.

That never happened. Instead, while his young nation was grappling with the worst of the pandemic, he appointed Manto Tshabalala-Msimang as health minister, who claimed anti HIV drugs were poison and that we could be treated instead with garlic, beetroot, African potato, lemon and olive oil.

The Republic of South Africa has borne the brunt of AIDS. There are over 5 million people living with the virus by most estimated. It is also one of the most economically and technologically advanced countries on the continent, and could have marshaled its considerable resources to tackle the problem of AIDS head on.

The consequences of their dance with denial have been profound. Years and lives have been lost, and more will surely perish as the new powers in SA struggle to do undo the damage.

When Mbeki was ousted in an intramural power play, all eyes were on the new President, who had declared he would keep most of Mbeki?s ministers in power. Surely not Manto. Surely not.

Quickly word came that she had been demoted, stripped or her power over the Health ministry. Barbra Hogan was named to the post, and with her appointment came a renewed hope for the fight against HIV in South Africa.

Change is on its way. ?We know HIV is the cause of AIDS,? she stated in a high profile speech. That simple statement, long overdue, heralds the hope of a new day in South Africa.

This is a great victory for people with HIV. No longer are denialists holding the reigns of state power. Now scientists working in South Africa don?t need to fear the vengeful hand of their leaders for saying that HIV causes AIDS. No longer will efforts to expand the availability of ARVs be hamstrung by a hostile regime.

A new era is beginning in South Africa. While they face perhaps the toughest challenge in this pandemic, at least the powers that be are on the right side. It is a good thing.

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