

Sometimes we use a phrase so often that it loses its sharp particular meaning. For example, what does it mean to have a closed society? What is a free society? Those are not abstract questions. They lie at the root of what distinguishes today's Western democracies from traditional Soviet society. They are at the heart of the curiosity and excitement about changes occurring in the Soviet Union, and the ripple of those changes around the world.

This week's news out of Moscow was about a conflict at a party meeting called to nominate a candidate. Disputes like this are commonplace in Canada but extraordinary and rare in the Soviet Union. Just as it was extraordinary and rare for the Soviet people to witness a no-holds-barred debate on every aspect of Soviet social, political and economic life at last spring's Party Conference. And even more extraordinary has been the unflinching determination with which Mr. Gorbachev and his colleagues have exposed one Stalinist atrocity after another to the glare of history.

Only five years ago, the détente of the 1970s was everywhere in ruins. Soviet troops were in Afghanistan. The Polish government, in order to avoid Soviet invasion, was repressing its own citizens. Soviet SS-20 missiles were being deployed against targets in Western Europe and Asia.

Today, the skies are a lot clearer. The Soviets are leaving Afghanistan, they are destroying their SS-20 missiles and last weekend in Paris they announced their decision to destroy chemical weapon stockpiles. Some of the worst excesses of Stalinist dictatorship are in retreat. As well the Soviets are taking a more constructive role in dampening regional tensions in some quarters.

Those are more than a change in policy. They seem to reflect a deep change in the attitude of a regime towards its people, and certainly they have set loose expectations and practices that would be very difficult to stop or reverse. Whatever the motive, or the momentum, the Soviet Union has moved from the worst features of a closed society in the direction of a more free and open system. Those are developments which Canada should welcome and encourage. But if "perestroika" is the refrain of today's Soviet Union, it is not the whole score.