

This is an effort of almost unimaginable proportions. For any leader, anywhere. For we are not talking here about tinkering. We are talking about massive, structural change across the board - in all sectors and in all walks of life. And we are talking about changes in attitude and spirit as well as the concrete components of a society.

But this task is even more difficult for a Soviet leader.

The Soviet Union is a society of immense potential wealth - a massive territory, a large population, a storehouse of resources. But it is a society drained of spirit; an economy bereft of initiative; a populace deprived of freedom and driven to conform.

Not only does Mr. Gorbachev have to reform his society; he must teach his people to want reform: to replace complacency with initiative; conformity with variety; defeatism with optimism; and collectivism with individualism.

What is Mikhail Gorbachev up to and why?

In my view he has discovered a simple but profound truth: the Soviet system of the past has not worked, will not work and cannot work. It has failed, and failed miserably.

He also realizes that to change it requires more than a slogan, an adjusted 5-year plan, a special Party Congress or plenum.

It requires a revolution.

And so we have elections. For the first time, millions of Soviet citizens freely voting for multiple candidates. Real election platforms; candidate debates; differences of view. And the results? Reformers elected. A fired Politburo member, Boris Yeltsin, swept to victory in a landslide. And the old guard rejected in many areas through an extraordinary act: the crossing off of their names by a majority of the voters, even when they were the only candidate. A Canadian politician trembles at the thought.

Of course, this is not a Western democracy. The Communist Party still rules. The limits remain severe. The flower has barely shown buds.

But it is a beginning, a spring. And an important beginning at that, for once given the opportunity to express their views, the people are difficult to humble.