

EMPTY SHELVES AND EMPTY MONEY

*In the Soviet Union's most difficult hour, paralysis
overwhelms the government.*

BY MICHAEL BRYANS

AFTER AN AUTUMN OF INCESSANT RAIN in Moscow, and equally endless wrangling over competing approaches to economic recovery – a period that could fairly be dubbed the “battle of the plans,” Shatalin, Ryzhkov, the grand compromise – the Soviet parliament and Mr. Gorbachev’s government finally agreed on one of them. But calling what they have to do a “plan” is misleading. The Soviet Union is in uncharted waters, its peoples inventing a new political economy for themselves and beginning from somewhere we have never been.

It is not an experiment they are taking part in voluntarily, and like the Irish joke about the lost man who asks a local farmer how to get to Dublin, and the farmer replies, “Lad, if you want to get there, this is a poor place to start from” – Soviets, or Russians as many Soviets who are Russian prefer to call themselves, must start from where they are.

Moscow air is thick with the population’s depression and apprehended misery, but there are those who have more objective ways of gauging the public mood. Uri Levada is a sociologist by profession, attached to the new centre for public opinion studies which has its offices on a side street not far from the famous GUM department store – a place now eerily devoid of goods and shoppers.

SOVIET PUBLIC OPINION POLLING IS NOT THE high art it has become in the West; methods and results are often criticized by Western pollsters as suspect. However, the striking trends in popular opinion revealed by Levada and his colleagues would overwhelm even a large statistical margin of error. The losers in this survey – governments, politicians and optimism of any kind – aren’t even close.

Pulling a hand-drawn chart down from the wall displaying the September polling results, he points to the lines which show that people’s expectation for the future has slipped yet again. Only ten percent think things will get better and over fifty percent, and rising fast, expect life in the USSR to get worse. Positive expectations ticked up briefly in the spring

after Gorbachev’s accession to the presidency, but have been in a long steep dive since May after his prime minister predicted rising prices for basic foods and other staples.

Levada continued with more gloomy statistics: fifteen percent, and rising, anticipate civil war or a coup d’état; only seven percent of the population believe their life to be better since Gorbachev’s rise to power in 1985, and two out of three think life is worse. And as an aside, he adds that Gorbachev’s personal popularity has dwindled from over fifty percent at the end of last year down to less than thirty percent in July.

ALONG WITH ALL THE OTHER SHORTAGES, Russians seem to have run out of faith. Modern economies run on it – faith that the currency in one’s hands will in one year be worth more or less as much as it is today, faith that not everyone who has money deposited at your bank will attempt to withdraw it the same day you do. It is the essential bargain citizens make with the future that allows for savings, investment and all the things that make up a prosperous, civilized life. It is a shell game that everyone, but most of all a nation’s institutions, has a duty to keep going.

And it is here in the figure of Gorbachev, and the behaviour of his all-Union government, that there lies a great puzzle: why do they seem to be doing nothing about the mounting political chaos and economic misery that surrounds them? It is a puzzle because Gorbachev and his advisors have demonstrated masterful political agility and humanity for over five years. Yet in what is arguably the USSR’s most difficult hour – the country’s leaders openly acknowledge that economic collapse at this point will almost certainly mean the demise of the place we call the USSR – paralysis and sheer fecklessness appear to have gripped the centre.

Gorbachev’s first act under the emergency powers given him by parliament in late September was a Presidential Decree ordering state enterprises to fulfil production quotas under the five year plan, and then to draft – yet

again – university students into vegetable picking for part of their first semester. These edicts were greeted by Muscovites I met with open derision – deck chair rearranging of the most desperate kind.

Another explanation for the paralysis, which finds fertile ground in the very active rumour mill, is that the existing government ministries, which have little stake in real reform, are engaged in active sabotage of Gorbachev’s and others’ efforts. In early October *Izvestia* ran an investigative piece about the ever growing shortage of meat in Moscow shops. It seems that in an effort to obtain more meat, the state procurement agency responsible decided it would increase prices paid to state farms. The rub was that the agency announced its intentions three months in advance of the actual price rise. The result – as any first year economics student could have predicted – was that the already pitiful meat supply vanished altogether. State farms, quite sensibly from their perspective, stopped slaughtering meat to wait for the new prices. The food ministry had finally discovered the microeconomic power of price signals – sort of.

Question: was this an example of an inept state enterprise experiment or deliberate sabotage by a recalcitrant bureaucracy? Answer: it is impossible to prove, and, in any case, as one person expert in the ways of Soviet bureaucracy put it, the central planners don’t need to conspire actively against economic reform. All they have to do is sit on their hands and say, “you can’t do this without us.”

THE EXASPERATION AND GENUINE DISAPPOINTMENT with Gorbachev’s regime runs deep within the intellectual and expert community – the kind of people governments at every level will need on their side if the country is to have a chance at a stable future. Sociologist Levada was only one of several observers of the Soviet political and economic state of mind who told me that the central government under Gorbachev, and his widely disliked prime minister, Nikolai Ryzhkov, was becoming more feeble as the weeks passed. The sense is not one of recrimination, but more a sad realization that a once admired man is no longer in the game, for