

The reality of reform

by Jacob Katsman

Last week in Moscow, Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney told the CBC's Barbara Frum that he asked Raisa Gorbachev at a private luncheon what Mikhail's mother thought of her son being general secretary and president of the Soviet Union. Raisa responded, "Gorbachev's mother thinks her son is not getting enough credit for the work he is doing." "I should get her in touch with my mother," Mulroney said.

Enough or not enough credit, Mikhail Gorbachev has revolutionized the Western perception of the Soviet Union through his unscrupulous reforms. To most Canadians today, Russian words like perestroika and glasnost are no longer foreign and are easily translated as restructuring and openness. But what is really meant by these high sounding words is often unclear.

Two weeks ago, York's Association of Economic Students presented a panel of prominent York professors specializing in the history, economy and politics of the Soviet Union to discuss the successes and failures of Gorbachev and his reforms. Excalibur attended the discussion and later interviewed the members of the panel about the implied meaning of glasnost and perestroika and the substance behind the reforms.

Glasnost was not a common word in the Russian vocabulary before 1985. Soviet freedom of speech, was repressed before Gorbachev's time and Soviets thought twice before criticizing the government or telling any political jokes.

What Gorbachev did with *glasnost* is say to the Soviet people, "OK, before you could not criticize the government and now you can; before you could not hold public demonstrations antagonizing the communist party, now you can; before the Soviet media was censored by the state, now it has limited freedom to print previously controversial material."

Glasnost has enjoyed considerable success in the short three years of its existence, but it has also created new problems which may eventually outweigh the benefits of the reform itself. To the Soviet people, *glasnost* means that before Gorbachev they were afraid to criticize the government's running of the economy and under *glasnost* they are no longer afraid. But aside from now being able to talk about their problems and hardships, nothing has changed for the average Soviet on the streets of Moscow. There are still food shortages and the lines for toilet paper are not getting any shorter.

"Talk is cheap," said York history professor, Orest Subtelny. "It is easier to talk about the problems than to correct them."

Subtelny, whose specialty is Soviet nationalities, said that Gorbachev has no experience with the nationalities issue and was taken by surprise when republics like Latvia, Estonia, Armenia and other ethnic republics took the word *glasnost* literally, taking to the streets in unprecedented numbers.

Soviet press attache for the news agency Novosti, Andrei Stulov, said, "The Soviet Union now has 15 Quebecs." Gorbachev may need something like 15 Meech Lake Accords to put his empire back together. Subtelny said he feels that the Soviet Union can no longer be

centralized; and Gorbachev will have to negotiate a deal with the fractured republics.

Gorbachev's openness reform succeeded in many ways but brought handicaps which are currently having a negative effect on Soviet society. The freedom of speech which came with *glasnost* brought various underground groups which were previously banned by the state to the surface into the open. The anti-semitic organization, *Pamyat*, meaning remembrance, is one of such groups which is currently creating tensions between the nationalities. A Russian nationalist organization, *Pamyat*, in its manifesto, blames the Jews and other non-Russian nationalities for Soviet economic discontent.

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As much as Gorbachev can claim success for *glasnost*, "he can not claim success for *perestroika*," said York economics professor Henryk Flakierski. "General economic indicators show that *perestroika* has not worked. The supply of consumer goods has not increased; the budget deficit has not been reduced; there has been no economic growth; and the quantity and quality of goods did not improve," Flakierski added.

Flakierski explained that the reason *perestroika* has failed so far is because the reforms have not gone far enough. Flakierski feels that in order for the reforms to succeed, a genuine market needs to be created. Prices must be freely established by the market and competition must exist between industries. There has to be a danger of bankruptcy and a flexible allocation of labour.

"Gorbachev faces objective and subjective difficulties," added Flakierski. Most of Soviet industry is monopolized and there are little incentives for workers to improve their efficiency. The banking system is slow and unreliable.

The same goes for telecommunications. The legal system is about 20 years out of date, and all these factors intimidate Western businessmen thinking of co-operating with Soviets on joint venture programmes.

Sara Ginaite, York professor of social and political science, said, "The old system is destroyed and the new one is not yet created." Ginaite explained that Gorbachev has two years in which to improve the economic situation if he is to maintain his grip on power.

From recent reports it is evident that Soviets have lost confidence in Gorbachev. But is there an alternative?

"The most prominent candidate was Boris Yeltsin, but he lost his authority during his trip to the U.S.," said Ginaite. Yeltsin does not have a plan or a programme on which he can run against Gorbachev. Yeltsin has said that he agrees with Gorbachev's strategies but not with his methods. "Yeltsin does not seem to me as a persona that can defeat Gorbachev," added Ginaite.

York economist, Ruvin Gekker said, "Gorbachev wasted a lot of time in implementing his reforms and he will likely be deposed. . . . To survive, Gorbachev needs support from all the essential centrist groups. The support he is not getting. The conservatives are pushing back from one side and the liberal radicals from the other."

Gekker said, "The New Economic Policy (NEP) of the 1920s is a bible for Gorbachev. With *perestroika* he is trying to imitate NEP but he is reluctant to introduce all of the reforms because of conservative opposition. . . . For example, under *perestroika* a Soviet citizen can now engage in private enterprise, but only after normal working hours. Also, private enterprises can only employ family members. These are only some of the restrictions," added Gekker.

Gekker said that he agrees with Yeltsin's views on the probable future of Gorbachev and the Soviet economy. "We've got one year; then we are on the road to catastrophe," said Yeltsin. Ginaite, however, does not think that Gorbachev can be easily deposed. "It is difficult to remove the general secretary and the president of the Soviet Union," said Ginaite.

The question of whether Gorbachev will succeed as a leader is not as important as whether Gorbachevism will survive. It is important to note that Gorbachev came to power at a time when change was mandatory. He is the youngest general secretary in the history of the Soviet Union and the most well educated one. With *glasnost's* spill-over into Eastern Europe it is safe to say that it is almost impossible to turn back the clock and return to the old ways of repression. As professor Flakierski put it, "You can make an omelette out of eggs, but it is impossible to make eggs out of an omelette."

