

HOW TO DO BUSINESS WITH MR GORBACHEV

TIM POWELL



Many were horrified when Mrs Thatcher, following Gorbachev's first visit to the UK shortly before he took power, declared that she could do business with him.¹ The objection was not that one should never in principle do business with Communist leaders. While experienced observers would warn that in the past the Soviets have entered diplomacy not as an alternative to war but as a non-violent strategy in an undeclared cold war (to test their opponent's will-power, to neutralise key strong points of western public opinion etc.), to refuse to talk would be counterproductive. No, the problem was that all we had then had from Gorbachev were generalised declarations of intent rather than actions.

Rightly, critics have pointed out that 'perestroika' and 'glasnost' are fine ideas but that Communists have perverted other fine ideas in the past and Gorbachev, however personable, is most certainly a Communist. Yet whenever qualitative change for the better is introduced in the USSR it must, at least primarily, go under the name of Communism and be portrayed as being in the true Marxist-Leninist tradition. The abstract idea that Communism is a good thing is still so much accepted, even by critics of its implementation, that all reform must spring from an initial reinterpretation of what Communism means.

So the fact that Gorbachev is, and will remain, a member of the CPSU does not mean he is automatically incapable of introducing reforms while simultaneously continuing to proclaim (and believe in) the glories of Communism.

FALSE DAWN OR REAL DAWN?

Because there have been so many false dawns in the history of the Soviet Union (perhaps the most absurd being heralded on the succession of the jazz-loving Andropov)² one is naturally reluctant to believe that this is not just another without exceedingly strong evidence. But the political sky is indisputably lighter now than it has been for decades.

For most westerners-in-the-street the strongest indication of Gorbachev's willingness to reform is, of course, in the area of foreign policy, but there have been substantial internal reforms too. The 1989 elections, though undemocratic, were

the freest since 1917. So it appears that Mrs Thatcher is an excellent judge of character; Mr Gorbachev is a man with whom the West can do serious business.

But the limits of Gorbachev's desire for reform are clear; in the area of internal policy his aims are to strengthen the Soviet economy, to end corruption and (for which credit is due) to reduce the level of human suffering engendered by the present system. Please note, he does not want to destroy the present system. He will only introduce free enterprise, freedom of speech and democratic elections insofar as they are necessary for the progress of the planned programme of restructuring.³

Gorbachev's difficulty, as any knowledgeable Sovietologist could have told him, is that the numerous problems of the Soviet Union are not to be solved simply by firm leadership and encouraging words. They are inherent within the very structure of society and are closely interwoven. To solve one problem Gorbachev must first solve a host of others, and to solve each of these requires tackling yet more. And he must try to do this without upsetting the whole edifice, for it is the complexity of the interlinkage within the colossal structure of the USSR that is keeping the thing together. Already Gorbachev's reforms have encouraged some nationalities to test the strength of the ties binding them to Russia and to Communism.

Gorbachev has certainly recognised that he cannot have reform to order and that to achieve his aims will require all his political skills. He has already, in some respects, gone further than he intended and yet has achieved less than he hoped.

It would be wise to expect caution from Gorbachev, a slowing down of the restructuring, with an accompanying stress on the need for 'public order', 'discipline' and so forth. He needs time, partly to work out how best to reform the system without endangering what he sees as the fundamentals of Communism, and partly to overcome entrenched 'conservative' opposition. But Gorbachev's political platform has been 'perestroika'. While it is now unlikely that he will be toppled by a 'conservative' backlash, were he to try to halt the process he has set in motion his position might be in jeopardy.

Foreign Policy Perspectives No. 13

ISSN 0267 6761

ISBN 1 870614 40 2

An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance, 25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN
www.libertarian.co.uk email: admin@libertarian.co.uk

© 1989: Libertarian Alliance; Tim Powell.

Tim Powell gained his doctorate in Early Medieval History from the University of Birmingham. He is currently Assistant Archivist at the National Cataloguing Unit for the Archives of Contemporary Scientists at the University of Bath.

The views expressed in this publication are those of its author, and not necessarily those of the Libertarian Alliance, its Committee, Advisory Council or subscribers.

Director: Dr Chris R. Tame

Editorial Director: Brian Mickelthwait

Webmaster: Dr Sean Gabb

FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY



PROSPECTS FOR EASTERN EUROPE

The programme of restructuring, despite its obvious limitations, has evoked a rapturous response from many quarters in the West. Ironically this has overshadowed what will prove to be the most significant contribution of Gorbachev to the reform process. In pursuing his programme he has given the peoples of the USSR and Eastern Europe hopes and expectations way beyond what it is reasonable to expect from the present regime. Every day seems to bring fresh evidence of growing discontent in the Soviet Empire and, far more importantly, evidence that people are impatient to take the process of reform into their own hands.

It is not possible to provide a catalogue of such evidence so let me cite just one day's, from the *Independent* of February 21st 1989. On page 10 is a report headlined "Hungary's opposition sets out demands for reform". Demands for reform? Such a heading would have been unthinkable only a few years ago. Other reports in the same issue (not one devoted to the affairs of Eastern Europe) are "Gorbachev visits a Ukraine in turmoil" and "Prague offers talks [with opponents] to ease trial tension".

We have seen what Gorbachev hopes to achieve through restructuring. It is impossible to give a list of the goals of this unofficial reform movement; within it are many groupings. Their aims are often vague, nonsensical, unpleasant, or all three.⁴

This said, most of the more coherently expressed discontent does openly seek the introduction of western political institutions - parliamentary democracy and a greater degree of individual autonomy. These goals can be called freedom, although key aspects of the greater liberty enjoyed in the West such as free enterprise, while more popular than ever, particularly in Eastern Europe, are not yet on most people's agenda.

Ahead one can see ever increasing scope for conflict between official and unofficial processes of reform. A leadership aware of the dangers to the structure of Communist society posed by even limited reforms, yet forced into reform by necessity, is facing a population growing impatient and pushing at the barriers surrounding them. The result is unlikely to be climactic. A more hopeful and realistic outcome is that the unofficial movement will push its way up from the grass roots, taking in more and more people from within the governmental apparatus until it more or less merges with the official, 'Marxist-Leninist', reform programme.

HOW SHOULD THE WEST RESPOND?

What of the western response? At times the West has appeared more bewildered by Gorbachev's reforms than eager to seize the opportunities presented. Certainly all due credit must be given to the progress of 'perestroika' and 'glasnost' and the West must continue to do business with Gorbachev in arms reduction talks. However, this does not prevent the West from also encouraging and building links with those essentially pro-western elements in the Soviet bloc. This must be done not as a short-term tactic to seize the political initiative from Gorbachev, but as a long-term strategy. It is the unofficial reform that will be of most significance in the coming decades and, to be able to take advantage of this (in order to exert an influence on the course taken by the peoples of the Soviet bloc), the West must clearly indicate its support for pro-western groupings in favour of freedom.

This must start now because the West's ability to affect immediate events in the Soviet Empire always has been and always will be limited.

In this indication of support the West has a wide range of options, many fairly low-key but not ineffective. Apart from covert assistance (help with the printing and reproduction of samizdat literature, for example), the West can continue to press the Communist leadership to make specific concessions (not necessarily very important ones) to certain opposition groups and figures, insist visiting western dignitaries are allowed to meet representatives of the pro-western opposition, invite friendly opposition leaders on quasi-official visits and so on.⁵

The aid of this sort that the West rendered to Poland's Solidarity played an important part both in forcing the Jaruzelski regime to accept that the movement could not be ignored, and in ensuring that Solidarity remained firmly aligned with the West. Solidarity is still the exceptional popular opposition movement in the Eastern bloc but will not be so for long.

Needless to say, it is not sufficient for us in the West to rely on our governments to do this of their own accord. Important in the case of Solidarity were the western support groups. In the coming years the cause of freedom in the rest of the Soviet bloc will be advanced if similar groups exist, both to lend direct aid to other pro-western opposition movements and to put their case to western politicians.

The end of Soviet Communism is not yet in sight. Its leaders will not simply decide overnight that Communism has failed and announce the adoption of a civilised form of society. And this is just as well, for it is crucial to the long-term prospects for freedom that the peoples of the Soviet Empire will have to struggle for its attainment, rather than have it handed to them on a plate.

Freedom is demanding; the greater the degree of freedom enjoyed, the greater the demand. Above all it requires that individuals have a sense of self-responsibility, that they are willing to think and act for themselves rather than ask that a State does it for them. This does not come easily to people accustomed to having others tell them what to do and what not to do, where to go and where not to go. The political struggle ahead of the peoples of the Soviet Empire will be a practical education in the nature and requirements of freedom for all involved. As a result they will value that for which they have fought all the more highly, and be far less likely in the future to surrender it to the State.

NOTES

1. "I like Mr Gorbachev; we can do business together", December 1984; he succeeded Chernenko in March 1985.
2. See V. Solovyov and E. Klepikova, *Yuri Andropov* (London, 1984) chapter 10, for an exposure of the attempts to 'market' Andropov as a reformer.
3. M. Gorbachev, *Political Report of the CPSU Central Committee to the 27th Party Congress* (Novosti, Moscow, 1986). Chapter 2 defines "The Strategic Course".
4. With the appearance of the 'Pamyat' movement in the Soviet Union we may even be witnessing the return of the Black Hundreds, a particularly obnoxious pre-Revolutionary organisation, principally dedicated to 'purifying' Mother Russia.
5. When Soviet and East European governments complain of interference in their internal affairs it is quite in order to point out that they are at liberty to invite Mr Kinnock to visit them, to raise the issue of western 'political prisoners' and to chat to Sinn Feiners in Derry.