

Glasnost's real meaning

What happens next year in Eastern Europe will probably be the most important signal to the West of the success or failure of Mikhail Gorbachev's reform campaigns.

This was one of the more interesting observations made last weekend at a major conference at the University of Toronto's Centre for Russian and East European Studies.

The conference brought together some of the world's top academic experts on communist and strategic affairs in an attempt to evaluate what changes lie in store for Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Since Eastern Europe still remains the prime arena for East-West strategic rivalry, the conference merits our attention. Some of the more noteworthy points:

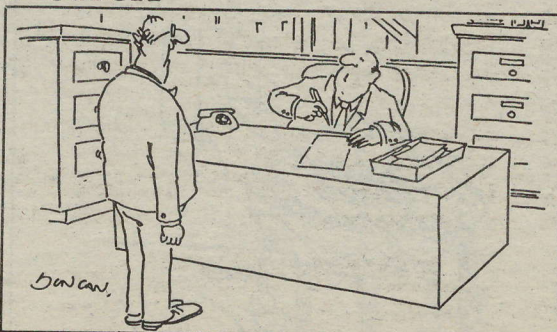
1) Glasnost is a genuine campaign for substantial change in Soviet society. But, most experts agreed, it is a broad-scale attempt to modernize and make more efficient Soviet society, rather than an effort to reshape the USSR's political structure. The Communist party will remain in charge. Glasnost, it was observed, is incorrectly translated in our media as "openness." The better translation is "publicity."

2) We are entering what the brilliant strategist Edward Luttwak calls the "post-nuclear era." Everyone has given up the notion that nuclear arms can ever be used. These weapons have hardly any influence any more on the balance of power; policy has not changed but our mentality has.

We have been "ungrateful" to nuclear weapons, quipped Luttwak, observing that he viewed the time when the theory of massive nuclear retaliation was in vogue as "safe and money-saving." Now we are going into a period when conventional military considerations are once again becoming predominant.

This is bad news for East Europe. When both superpowers relied on nuclear weapons, territory became relatively less important. Classical military concepts like strategic depth seemed obsolete. Now, however, as the day of the tank and gun return, such notions are again valid. East Europe offers strategic depth and early warning to defend the Soviet Union. Moscow will likely become more determined than ever, as nuclear weapons lose

Punch



"These are lean times, Adams, and we all have to cut back a little. Henceforth, nothing in this office will be signed with a flourish."

ERIC MARGOLIS



their importance, to hold on to East Europe.

3) One professor who had spoken with leaders of the African National Congress reported the following fascinating remark: The ANC felt Gorbachev was "a traitor to Marxism-Leninism" because he was relenting on a direct confrontation with the West and was not prepared to energetically pursue wars of "liberation" in Angola, Namibia and Mozambique. Odd indeed to hear the ANC, darlings of Canada's liberal establishment, speaking in such rough and, may I add, revealing terms.

4) East Europe's most reactionary rulers, such as Romania's Ceausescu and Czechoslovakia's Husak, are the same ones who oppose Gorbachev's reforms being exported to their nations. Other nations, like Hungary and Poland, are already well ahead of the Soviet reform campaign.

To most East Europeans the Soviets, once seen as despotic, now appear as attractive reformers, though there remains everywhere a healthy measure of distrust of the Russians. Paradoxically, if other nations accept Soviet reform programs they also thereby accept increased Soviet influence, something all East European states are trying their best to escape.

5) Gorbachev's reforms, and the lessening of the Soviet arm lock on East Europe, presents many serious dangers. Krushchev's reforms in the 1950s released pressures in East Europe that led to uprisings in Poland and Hungary. Many of the scholars at the conference expressed the fear that Gorbachev's reforms might have the same effect today in East Europe. If there is serious trouble in East Europe, Gorbachev loses. The measure of his success or failure could be how he deals with complex, dangerous issue of his European allies.

6) Glasnost is also a threat to the existing order in East Europe. Gorbachev can blame his predecessors for the economic mess that the USSR is now in. But most East European leaders are old men who have been running their nations for many years. If they admit failure, the blame is their own. At the same time, all East European leaders are reluctant to lose the greater independence that they forged for themselves during 1982-1986 when the Soviets were preoccupied by a series of internal succession crises.

7) Conservatives in East Europe, like East Germany's Honnecker, are supported by a strong faction within the party coalition that now backs Gorbachev and which the Soviet leader now fronts. In the words of Dr. Wolfgang Berner, glasnost is a "messy business." While it's not supposed to affect the control of the state by the Communist party, there is always the chance that the whole process will blow out of control.

East Europeans and our own experts are watching with mounting apprehension and fascination.