

Our man in Moscow?

Watching the Communist party Central Committee vote to begin giving up its monopoly on power, I can't help but be reminded of that marvellous film, *The Manchurian Candidate*, in which an American is brainwashed into a helpless tool by the fiendish communists and then almost gets to be the U.S. president.

When you think about it, Mikhail Gorbachev couldn't be doing a better job for the West if he were a deep, deep CIA mole — a sort of "Langley Candidate." Of course, he's not, but George Bush and his White House staff are holding their breath and staying quiet as mice for fear that one wrong word might put the kibosh on all the marvellous things going on in turbulent Moscow.

As this column has been observing, it was only a matter of time before the second Russian Revolution hit Moscow. One had only to go to Pushkin Square and see demonstrators waving czarist battle flags or Ukrainian and Lithuanian banners to understand that a multi-party system was already operating in the USSR in everything but name.

Now that the Central Committee has approved the elimination of Article 6, which granted the party its political monopoly, it seems highly likely that the full 5,000-member Party Congress will endorse the change when it meets this summer.

This is a force-10 political earthquake with far wider implications than many foreigners understand. By formally renouncing its "vanguard" role and monopoly on power, the party is admitting that its 73-year total domination of Russia and its empire is over. The most probable next step is that the badly fractured party will soon split — but more about this on Sunday.

Yesterday's momentous vote to abrogate Article 6 concerns much more than just party politics. It's about the absolute, totalitarian control exercised by the party over every aspect of Soviet society. For example:

All of the USSR's scarce housing is doled out by the party. Russians live in their parent's small two-bedroom apartments until marriage. Then, they go on a waiting list for a apartment. After three or four years, if they're lucky and good communists, the party will allocate them a flat. If

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they're not good communists, they're stuck with mom and dad. Divorce and you give up your flat.

The party decides where you work and when you get promoted. Admission to schools is another party prerogative. Getting into top universities depends on party connections. Knowing the right party people will gain you admission to the not-so-bad hospitals where inept doctors and nurses don't kill you right away.

Vacation time and the new marvel of foreign travel also depend on being in the party's good books. Perhaps most important for average Russians, party members get first crack at supplies of food and consumer goods. The top 200,000 fat-cats in the 20-million strong party have their own private, well-stocked stores.

Lesser communists get special allocations of food and consumer items through their work places or neighborhood committees. The rest of the proletariat must forage through dimly lit, filthy food stores where lumps of frozen fish are considered a miraculous discovery.

If you're a good communist, or have the right connections, you get toilet paper, soap and cigarettes. If not ...

The armed forces are controlled by the party, which approves all promotions. The same for universities and research institutes. And so on through all the levels and byways of Soviet society. The key that unlocks — or locks — all doors is the party.

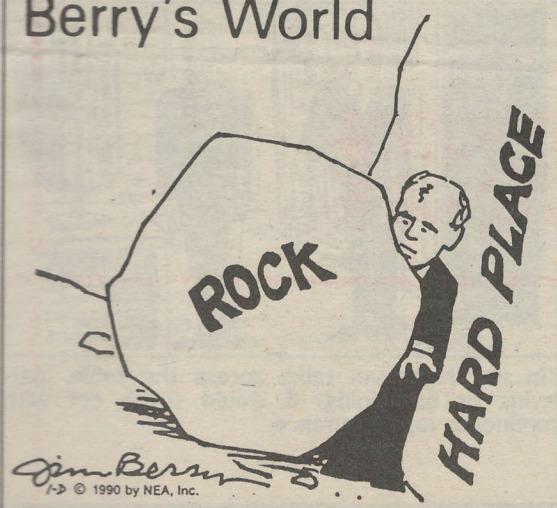
It has been this web of influence that has kept the party in power in the post-Stalinist years — the invisible chains of totalitarianism. Each node of party power, whether a factory supervisor in Omsk or a school administrator in Kazan, long ago became a fossilized callus that has produced crippling arthritis throughout the entire Soviet economy and society. And each node was run by a little Stalin who dispensed jobs and favors or ruined anyone who did not toe the line.

All this, hope Gorbachev and his men, will begin to change when Article 6 is finally removed from the constitution. Doing so clearly entails enormous risks, but, as Gorby long ago concluded, it was the only way to de-fossilize Soviet society. Neither persuasion nor gentle pressure has worked over the past five years.

As the economy went from bad to catastrophic, many Russians began calling for a return to the good old days of Stalin and Brezhnev when there was food in the stores and discipline in the streets. Party conservatives heard this and dug in their heels, waiting for Gorbachev to fall.

This week Gorbachev struck back and, like the legendary Russian hero Ilya Muromets, unleashed a mighty whirlwind on Old Mother Russia that may just sweep away "the dead souls" of the old Communist party for good.

Berry's World



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