



Andrei Sakharov

New Wind From The East

The January meeting of the central committee of the Soviet Communist Party was undoubtedly an event of historic significance. To an even greater extent than the congress last year, it served to underline the radical nature of the break with the past which the Gorbachev leadership represents.

The meeting was unusual from the outset. Breaking with past practice, its topic, policy for the appointment and renewal of leading party and government personnel, was announced several months in advance. In the event Gorbachev's speech ranged more widely. Its central theme was the need to extend and deepen socialist democracy, above all by strengthening the role of elections in the party, Soviets and social organisations.

From his report it is clear that Gorbachev regards this as absolutely essential, not only for the general reason that socialism is unthinkable without democracy, but also because he is now convinced that the far-reaching changes urgently required in Soviet society cannot be realised without much greater popular participation in the political life of the country.

The most intractable obstacle to change has been identified as the Soviet 'civil ser-

vice': the bureaucratic apparatus of government and also of the party. Instead of being democratically accountable, these vast executive leviathans pursue their own departmental interests and to a considerable extent determine policy.

Gorbachev reminded central committee members of Lenin's words that 'the apparatus exists for policy, and not policy for the apparatus'. The party leadership is evidently aware that pressure from above is not sufficient to galvanise the apparatus into action; it must now be supplemented by more vigorous popular pressure from below. As Gorbachev declared in his concluding speech 'we need democracy like air.'

Other highlights of the plenum include a renewed commitment to *glasnost*, or openness in the provision of information (although that this still has limits is underlined by the fact that only Gorbachev's speeches were published; we know nothing of the contributions of the 33 other speakers), a declaration of intent to enhance the legal protection of the rights of individual citizens, and a call for greater involvement of women and 'non-party comrades' in positions of responsibility.

Looking to the future, it was revealed that the next central committee meeting will be devoted to economic reform, to be followed next year by a party conference to discuss more fully measures for further democratisation. (A conference of the party can decide issues of policy, but unlike a congress, cannot elect a new central committee. The last occasion one was held was 1941).

Since the January plenum the pace of change has quickened. Without waiting for new legislation, workforce meetings have begun to elect new factory directors. A new draft law on the industrial enterprise envisages that directors will have to face re-election every five years; middle-management and foremen every two or three years.

Discussion of new electoral

procedures for the Soviets is now underway, with much support for a multiple-candidate system as practised in Hungary. In the Kemerovo region of Siberia a party district secretary has been appointed for the first time by a contested election with a secret ballot.

Some prisoners convicted of anti-state activities have been released and the rehabilitation of Sakharov has continued, but the manner in which street demonstrations have been broken up suggests high-level political uncertainty as to where the limits on democratisation should be set.

The cultural thaw has progressed further with the appearance of a sharply anti-Stalin poem by Tvardovsky, unpublished in his lifetime, and the announcement of the forthcoming publication of Pasternak's *Dr Zhivago*. The provision of statistics continues to improve and following a vigorous plea in *Pravda* by the well-known sociologist Tatyana Zaslavskaya, may soon extend to such topics as crime, the suicide rate and income differentials.

Inevitably when pent-up forces are released negative tendencies also emerge. At times the anti-bureaucratic rhetoric is disturbingly reminiscent of the 1930s: a recent letter in *Pravda* went so far as to characterise the unwillingness of administrators to accept change as 'sabotage'.

In the year of the 70th anniversary of the revolution, the Soviet Union is experiencing a political renewal unprecedented in decades. The struggle of the new with the old is becoming a dramatic contradictory process, the eventual outcome of which is difficult to predict. The recent events in China show how easily a reform movement can be put into reverse, and provide a salutary warning to the supporters of change in the USSR. We can only hope that the momentum of renewal will be maintained to permit a genuine reformation of Soviet socialism. •

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