

COLIN EGLIN, M.P., foreign affairs spokesman for the Democratic party, visited the Soviet Union in September — just weeks after hardliners had failed in their bid to oust Mikhail Gorbachev from the presidency. The visit has led to his drawing parallels between the Soviet and the South African attempts at

reform. He concludes that the Soviet and East European governments formed non-racial Soviet governments composed of ethnic groups that are not identified with the majority of the population which the majority of the population would be forced to live with.

## MESSAGE FROM MOSCOW

FOR ANYONE who has lived through an era when Communism was one of the world's most pervasive ideologies, and the USSR one of the world's most powerful nations visiting Moscow in September 1991, a couple of weeks after the abortive coup, was like entering a world of political make-believe.

Outside the formidable KGB buildings in the centre of Moscow stands the stone pedestal from which the statue of Felix Dzerzhinsky, Lenin's colleague who led the 'Red Terror' during the Communist revolution, was toppled by the people of Moscow. The pedestal is daubed with derisive slogans. A white, blue and red Russian flag flies where Felix once stood.

In the Old Square, not far from the Kremlin, the building of the once all-powerful Central Committee of the Communist Party stands empty, bolted and barred.

Inside the ancient walls of the Kremlin, the modern building that once housed the Supreme Soviet, stands as a monument to a central Soviet parliament that has dissolved itself in favour of a coordinating council consisting of representatives of sovereign states.

The Red Army is being cut down in size.

The KGB is being brought under civilian control.

The activities of the Communist Party have been suspended by decree of the Russian Government.

However, what remains as a legacy from the Communist past — and as a reminder of the failure of the Communist economic system — are the endless number of queues formed by thousands upon thousands of Muscovites hoping

desperately to be able to purchase a few basic household necessities. They queue for bread, for milk, for meat, for eggs, for cheese, for tobacco, for a length of cloth.

They queue up outside closed doors in the hope that when these eventually open those first in line will be able to buy some much needed goods.

Having seen the dreary endless queues in Moscow I would have thought that the entrepreneurial spirit of the Muscovites had been crushed. But, having gained an insight into the size and scope of the alternative 'grey' market that is developing, I have come to realize that not even 70 years of repressive communist ideology and restrictive autocratic bureaucracy can destroy that spirit entirely.

Paradoxically, it is this freedom of the human spirit, partially released by Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of perestroika, that has proved to be Gorbachev's undoing.

But as Larry Elliott of the Guardian wrote at the height of the coup of 20 August 1991, "Gorbachev's fate was sealed not by the machinations behind the Kremlin walls, but in the lengthening queues for bread, meat and butter."

There was Gorbachev being held in a holiday dacha in the Crimea. Stabbed in the back by the very men that he had appointed to assist him. Deserted by his Ministers and his colleagues on the Central Committee. Abandoned by a Supreme Soviet that simply failed to meet. And, alienated from the ordinary people. Ironically he was dependent upon the courage and combativeness of his arch rival, Boris Yeltsin who



Flashback to the failed coup attempt: A Soviet taken by the Natal Society Library's principal in Moscow at the time attending an

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# SCOW



Colin Eglon with former Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze at the opening of a photographic exhibition on the life of the late President John Kennedy.

defied coup leaders and demanded the return of Gorbachev to Moscow.

How is it that Mikhail Gorbachev the philosopher-statesman who over the past six years succeeded in ending the cold war and changing the nature of international relationships should find himself in such a parlous political situation in his own country?

From the time when he first announced his perestroika policy in April 1985, Gorbachev was faced with a tactical problem — one which left him with the worst, and not the best, of two worlds.

Mikhail Gorbachev was essentially a party man, as opposed to a people's man. He aimed to bring about reform using the Party as his power base. This compelled him to take the Party, and in particular the Party diehards, into account.

His technique was to make progress by manipulating the Party and its personnel from inside the system rather than giving a lead to the people from outside.

His plans for economic reform were bold enough to upset the diehards, yet too timid to please the market reformers. His attitude towards the structure of the Soviet Union, the issue which precipitated the coup, was sufficiently pragmatic to evoke a hostile reaction from those in Moscow who believed in centralised power, yet too conservative to satisfy the mounting emotions of the individual states. His stance on the three Baltic states was neither tough enough to satisfy the party establishment, nor flexible enough to enjoy popular support.

In the end Gorbachev was caught up in the crossfire between the Party diehards who wanted to strengthen the authority of the Party and the democrats led by Yeltsin who wanted to harness the power of the people.

The coup of 19 August turned out to be totally counter-productive. Designed to restrict the reforming moves of Gorbachev, it succeeded in promoting the reformist policies of Yeltsin. Designed to strengthen the hold of the Communist Party and its Central Committee, it achieved the disintegration of the Communist Party and the dissolution of its Central Committee. Designed to keep the Soviet Union intact under a strong central government, it led to the break up of the Soviet Union and the emasculation of its Central Government.

Amidst the many question marks that hang over the future of the USSR two clear trends are developing.

The first is, that for some time to come, effective political power will flow from the centre towards the constituent republics — and especially towards the Russian Federation with its vast natural resources and its 165 million people. Gorbachev, or whoever replaces him, will be able to act as a coordinator and facilitator of inter-state functions for so long as the states need or want him to do so.

The second is that the process of reform towards a market economy will be accelerated — the so-called Shatalin plan for this to be achieved in 500 days is waiting to be implemented. However, there is no easy cure.

The Soviet's economy is in a sorry state. Buildings are in a state of disrepair. Machinery and plants are outdated. The infrastructure required for conducting modern business operations does not exist. Added to this, too many people after generations of Communist rule lack the initiative, the drive and the thrust that is required to make a market economy work.

Are there lessons to be learned from the lengthening queues in Moscow? Or from the political humiliation of



et tank in a Moscow square. The picture was  
 ipal librarian, John Morrison, who was in  
 international library conference.

**From Page Eleven**

Gorbachev? Or from the rise of Boris Yeltsin?

Certainly, there are.

The first is that an economic system that is fashioned by ideologies and managed by bureaucrats, and which by its very nature suppresses the creative, initiating, enterprising spirit of the individual, will end up destroying not only the economy, but the political system which was designed to make it function. The Soviet economy has been brought to the brink of disaster not only by the contradictions that are inherent in Communism as an economic system, but by the destructive and stultifying effect of the ever-growing army of bureaucrats who are an integral part of a managed economic system.

The second is that a process of reform that is of a fundamental nature, once commenced, must be followed through

comprehensively and purposefully to a logical conclusion.

Comprehensively means more than following through in the economic, the political and the social fields. It means more than reforming policies and parties. It means taking the process of reform to the people, so that they become part of the process and thereby become the base on which the new structures are built.

Purposefully involves a quality and style of leadership. Nothing is more destructive to the reform process than vascillation or indeciveness on the part of those who lead it.

The third is more of a question than a lesson, yet the very question may contain the components of a lesson.

Can a political party which for generations has been the advocate of a repressive ideology and the administrator of an authoritarian regime itself, be the agent for ensuring that fundamental



**A queue for tobacco**

reform away from that repression and authoritarianism is followed through to its logical conclusion?

Can people who have been oppressed, be liberated by their former oppressors? Must the oppressed people themselves not become the driving force that is necessary to take the liberating process to its conclusion?

The recent history of the USSR has shown that, given the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev, the Communist Party could initiate a process of reform. But equally the recent history of the USSR, and indeed that of the countries of Eastern Europe, has shown that the process of reform could not be completed, or at the very least not be seen to have been completed, as long as a Communist Party — reformed or otherwise — remained in control of the levers of power.

Here in South Africa the National Party has shown that, under the leadership of President F.W. de Klerk, it has been able to initiate the process of reform. The question is: "Can the National Party, with its past of apartheid and minority domination — and with the main functionaries and administrators still in place — be the agent for taking the process of reform to a non-racial democratic South Africa to its logical conclusion?"

"Indeed, will the process of liberation from apartheid be perceived to be complete as long as a National Party government is in power?"

Based on a Soviet and East European experience the answer to both of these questions is 'no'. Their experiences indicate that a transformed non-racial democratic South Africa will require a government composed of political parties that are not identified with the past from which the majority of South Africans want to be freed.

Is the process of fundamental reform in South Africa going to prove to be different, and in a sense unique? The months and years that lie just ahead will tell. ●



**A queue for bread**



**A queue for milk and eggs**