"It would be an evil if a Catholic nation once again found itself in a situation in which it was governed by a non-Christian parliament. A Catholic's responsibility is to vote for a Catholic, a Christian for a Christian, a Muslim for a Muslim, a Jew for a Jew, a communist for a communist. Let everyone vote according to his conscience."

With these words, Polish Bishop Joseph Michalik addressed the electorate on the eve of his country's first fully free election in October 1991. Six months later, among the debris of the former Solidarity consensus, the polarisation of political forces here is already threatening to turn back the clock on Poland's hard-won democracy. One of the main beneficiaries of the Roman Catholic Church's political resurgence, the Christian National Union (CNU), heads a fragile four-member minority coalition government, at odds within itself and with many Poles over the country's direction.

Paradoxically, the elections that were billed as the epitaph of communism and the inauguration of democracy have seen many of the political and economic reform processes under way grind to a virtual halt. Sixty percent of the electorate stayed at home, and the vote delivered a hopelessly fragmented new parliament of 29 parties, the largest with only 12% of the seats. The climate of chaos, exacerbated by the country's economic tailspin, has led many observers to draw parallels with the 1920s, when democracy succumbed to military dictatorship. Within the Church hierarchy and among its political leadership, such a return to a politics of the past is exactly what they have in mind.

The CNU mixes pseudo-leftist demands for an egalitarian society with calls for Poland's re-evangelisation and the reinstatement of Catholic values. Sensing a shift in the public mood last year, the Catholic conservatives scored big points by branding the government's anti-communist policies 'with that of 'nation' and religious unity. Once in power, the party and its conservative allies predictably had little luck escaping the pressures of the International Monetary Fund. The new 1992-1993 budget has proved to be only a cosmetic departure from that of its liberal predecessor. Economists agree that beyond sloganeering, the populists lack even the basics of a viable economic plan. And, indeed, the Catholic conservatives freely admit, their priorities lie elsewhere.

It is their fundamentalist vision of the Catholic nation—the 'rebirth' of Poland—that gives democrats here the greatest cause for concern. In a major 1992 CNU policy document entitled Polish Matters the party's leaders offer Poles the comforts of 'Christianity, Church, Fatherland and Honour' to soothe the pains of material hardship. The responsibility for Poland's dire situation rests at the feet of its ubiquitous 'enemies': the 'pseudo-tolerant' left (which includes liberals, the "intelligentsia that appropriates the title of intellectuals", the "immoral West" and Brussels' technocrats), Polish Matters makes plain that the political and moral re-education of the youth is today's paramount concern. The young generations, it says, must be morally pure and physically strong. "A true Catholic is not a meek little lamb who easily reaches compromise" it warns.

The CNU's missionary zeal has provoked criticism even from the ranks of its coalition partners and would-be allies. Jerzy Kuleta, head of the rightwing libertarian Realpolitik Union in Cracow, claims that the Christian nationalists "have blantly appropriated the social teachings of the Church. They behave as if they had God's own sanction to use Christianity for their own political purposes". Moderate Christian-democratic voices have protested that the CNU's radical stance could well backfire on the Church. "The shortest road to Poland's de-Christianisation," scoffs Jaroslaw Kacynski, chairman of the coalition-member Centre Alliance, "is through the CNU."

Though officially neutral towards last year's elections, the Polish Episcopate has scarcely managed to conceal its delight at the success of its de facto political wing. CNU candidates captured the support of priests and congregations who sought 'electoral advice' from on high. Following Cardinal Glemp's ambiguous remark that "a Catholic cannot be a member of a party that opposes Christian values", posters appeared in Gdansk and elsewhere listing those parties whose programs concurred with the moral values of the Roman Catholic Church. The liberal Democratic Union, which had wavered on the Church's call to ban abortion, was conspicuously absent from the list, while the neo-fascist and anti-semitic National Faction was included.

The political adventures of the Church, however, may already have provoked a minor backlash. According to recent surveys, Poles see the Church as having unwarranted influence in state policy. The studies underscore the shaky grounds upon which the minority government bases its claim to embody popular will. The CNU itself holds only 49 of the 460 seats in the Sejm (the four-party coalition boasts only 121 in total). Polls also show that public enthusiasm for the party's latest initiative—yet another draft proposal to introduce a total ban on abortion—is rapidly waning.
Many of the newly classified long-term unemployed must be asking whether they will ever work again. The likelihood of finding employment decreases the longer the period spent without a job. Usually the newly unemployed find work fairly quickly while the remainder are likely to experience long periods of unemployment with a declining probability of ever getting out of the rut. But in this recession those retrenched have become, against all their expectations and labouring experience, the new long-term unemployed. The widespread despair is not garnered by the unemployment statistics. April’s figures showed that 30,000 job searchers dropped out of the chase for a job. In economic parlance the labour participation rate fell a fraction. But these disaffected people—the hidden unemployed—are set to crawl out of the woodwork once the employment indicators turn up. We can use the iceberg as a useful metaphor in understanding the significance of the unemployment problem. The visible part does not do justice to what lurks beneath the surface.

The 80s boom showed that when employment growth is strong the labour force participation rate shoots up. Typically a 1% growth in jobs saw a corresponding increase in the participation rate of 0.4%. This is the same as saying that for every ten new jobs created, four led to a fall in hidden unemployment while six resulted in a fall of the recorded unemployed. Consequently the official unemployment rate fell only sluggishly. At the peak of the boom the Australian unemployment rate nestled at 5.9% leaving a hard core of unemployables untouched by economic recovery. We can expect much the same scenario to unfold as the recovery gathers pace.

Much is already being made of the incipient housing recovery. Employment, always a lagging indicator of economic activity, will surely rise. But as young marrieds begin to deck out their newly-constructed homes with furnishings and fittings, our import bill will resume its upward climb. Household effects, from tiles to towel-holders, furniture to fans, are more...