

# Bye Bye Gorby

**It was in November 1990 that Gorbachev took his wrong turn and ceased to be a major progressive historical force. This does not by any means deny the significance of what he has achieved so far; indeed, it would probably be too much to expect any individual to go further than he has. There is a limit to what individuals can achieve—even if they are Nobel Laureates.**

The logic of Gorbachev's position required him to work with the existing forces in an attempt to achieve consensus. The need to make compromises with the conservative forces always carried with it the risk of being captured by them. Gorbachev is to be congratulated for pushing the old-style conservatives as far as he did. But ultimately there was always a limit to how far the conservative forces would go, especially when they were renewed by younger forces. It was clear that, at some point, Gorbachev was going to have to make a choice.

Many people, possibly including Gorbachev, had underestimated the political sense of Boris Yeltsin, leader of the democrats. They thought Yeltsin a demagogue who could only succeed in opposition. When Yeltsin was elected chairperson of the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Republic last May, many thought he would expose himself as the charlatan they had always felt him to be. They argued that he would never be able to develop positive policies and would soon be rejected by his disillusioned followers.

That has not happened. Yeltsin has grown in stature. And he is offering an alternative model of state power that more and more thinkers are finding attractive: a confederation of sovereign republics which only cede to the centre those powers which they voluntarily wish to cede.

Many top Gorbachev advisers have gone over to Yeltsin's camp—where they feel that their advice will be heard and acted upon. These include the leading agricultural economist and

president of the co-operative movement, V Tikhonov, and the leading economist and economic reformer Shatalin. Many other leading democrats are in the process of going over to Yeltsin—this may include Alexander Yakovlev and possibly even Edvard Shevardnadze.

Gorbachev's sharp turn to the Right was probably greatly influenced by the recognition of the success of Yeltsin and the realisation that Yeltsin was becoming an increasingly viable threat to Gorbachev's power. It looked last October as if Gorbachev would be prepared to throw in his lot with the democrats and take a mainly ceremonial or diplomatic role equivalent to the Queen of the Commonwealth. But, ultimately, the thought of being queen of a commonwealth dominated by Yeltsin seems to have been too much for Gorbachev and he appears to have decided to defend the powers of the centre at all costs.

Personal factors were certainly not the only ones behind Gorbachev's decision. Other considerations included the increasingly conservative orientation of the economy and the difficulties in launching real economic reforms, growing concern over increased ethnic unrest, increased pressure from the army leadership and other elite groups and general concern about the growth in crime and disorder.

The Supreme Soviet of the USSR is the body through which Gorbachev legally exercises his power. This All-Union parliament is considerably more conservative than the separate republican

parliaments, especially that of the largest—Russian—republic headed by Yeltsin. The reasons for this difference are fairly clear. The deputies of the Congress of Peoples Deputies, who ultimately elect the Union Supreme Soviet, were elected earlier than their republican counterparts, at a time when the general atmosphere in the country was less radical. A third of their number were also made up of unelected representatives of various social organisations which were selected at a time when the Communist Party was the only legal party. Finally, there has been a systematic boycotting of this assembly by the radical Baltic representatives; this is a move which strengthens the more conservative forces. For all these reasons, conservative forces in the All-Union parliament are particularly strong. Recently these conservative forces have combined in the Soyuz or 'Union' group which has been placing considerable pressure on Gorbachev through the threatening statements of its major spokesperson, Colonel Victor Alksniss.

The economic situation is also very disturbing. The latest official Soviet statistics indicate that in 1990 national income fell by 4%, labour productivity by 3% and exports by 12%. The growing budget deficit had been covered by printing money, creating a crisis which has finally been tackled by the draconian and highly unpopular act of withdrawing 50 and 100 rouble notes. While the reformers argue that this disastrous collapse of the economy is a consequence of the old administrative style of running the economy, the conservatives and centralists argue (with some justice) that part of the disruption is a result of the transition process itself.

The scale of ethnic unrest has horrified many; especially horrible have been the bloody disputes between Azerbaijanians and Armenians, the Georgians and Ossetians, and the Moldavians and Gaugaze. The centralists and conservatives explain this in terms of a general decline in law and order, while the democrats often



Gorbachev's back-seat drivers

blame local conservative interests who wish to threaten the reforms, and insensitive policing.

The situation in the Baltic states is somewhat different, since here the ethnic strivings have so far taken on a more political, and less anarchistic and violent, form. Yeltsin has consistently moved to defuse the ethnic conflict here. Immediately after his election he broke Gorbachev's blockade of Lithuania by negotiating a trade treaty between the Lithuanian Republic and the Russian Republic. More recently he has extended the trade treaty to cover political matters and has negotiated certain rights for Russian ethnics in Lithuania. However, he does recommend that they learn Lithuanian.

The position of the army, where there are many different groupings, is very complex. Many regular military leaders seem to be deeply disturbed by the use of troops for policing activities. They had been highly critical of the use of troops in Tbilisi and Baku, even before the recent action in Vilnius and Riga, and they believe that the army should stay out of politics.

The large number of military deputies in the political system naturally have a different attitude. These are the individuals who make up the backbone of the Soyuz group and it was following Gorbachev's stormy five-hour meeting with military deputies last November that Gorbachev took his

first major steps to the Right. Gorbachev reorganised the government and authorised the military to fire on civilians if threatened. The liberal Minister of the Interior, V Bakatin, was sacked and replaced with hardliners B Pugo and General Gromov. Several highly disciplined divisions of paratroops and KGB forces were transferred to Gromov's control in the Ministry of the Interior. And joint military/police patrols were authorised in the cities. It was these and similar moves which led Shevardnadze to resign and warn of the threat to democracy.

However, Gorbachev's collapse before the military hardliners is not complete, and, much to the disgust of the centralists, Gorbachev has failed to endorse their use of violence in the Baltic. Alksniss predictably described Gorbachev as indecisive and called for his removal.

The balance between the military conservatives—who wish to engage actively in politics—and the military democrats—who wish to stay out—is unclear. Gorbachev's position is driving him reluctantly toward the former, while Yeltsin is appealing desperately to the latter.

Finally, the law and order issue has now become the chief policy plank of the centre. It has been the ultimate justification for the military involvement in the Baltic, for the military patrols in Moscow and other cities,

and for increased KGB powers to inspect the accounts of private businesses. The political struggle in the Baltic and the entrepreneurial pursuit of profit are both interpreted by Gorbachev and his new allies as disobeying Union legislation and as breaking the law. Yeltsin, however, sees it differently: he accepts Lithuanian independence and has already passed radical free enterprise legislation in the Russian Republican parliament.

While a case can be made that Gorbachev is still simply engaged in making necessary compromises with conservative forces, the reasoning for such a case looks more and more strained. The problem is that the forces around Gorbachev are becoming increasingly conservative—and it appears Gorbachev is becoming increasingly reliant upon them. More and more of his progressive advisers are coming to the conclusion that the future of democracy in the country would be best served by a clear break with the conservative forces at the centre. Unfortunately Gorbachev appears to be resolved to defend the Union at all costs. It is for this reason that more and more people are concluding that Gorbachev's progressive historic role is finally coming to an end.

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# Mikhail's Baltic Rubicon

*Justas Paleckis* is a member of the Lithuanian parliament and a founding member of the liberal Democratic Labour Party of Lithuania. He was elected in February 1990, one month before Lithuania declared its independence. As deputy chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, he visited Berlin shortly after the Soviet Army's mid-January assault on the Lithuanian television station in Vilnius, which left 15 people dead. He was interviewed by *Paul Hockenos* in February.

Things seem to have quieted down in Lithuania. How would you describe the mood there, some three weeks after the bloodshed?

In Vilnius the situation is still very tense. Although they live with this fear and insecurity, the mood isn't pessimistic. The recent events have radicalised the people. Whereas before there was a good deal of criticism of the [Lithuanian] government and parliament, now both have unprecedented support across the political spectrum.

Before the army's intervention, there were two conflicting positions within parliament over the best course to achieve independence. One camp advocated a step-by-step approach to breaking away from the Soviet Union. Another group backed a much faster, radical track. The second approach is now much more popular. After the bloodshed, the people want to leave the Soviet Union with as little delay as possible.

That's understandable. But is that plausible within the context of the present political scenario in the Soviet Union?

Perhaps when Gorbachev was much stronger, he might have been in a position to give the Baltics their freedom. Now, it's clear, he's completely incapable of this. Nevertheless, on principle we object to the slower route to independence. The people's patience is at an end.

Some critics argue that the rejection of the step-by-step approach has only bolstered reactionary forces, in effect setting back the inde-

pendence drive. Tactically, is full-speed-ahead the best policy?

It's debatable. But the Germans didn't wait years to dismantle the wall piece by piece. Lithuania isn't a power like Germany, nor do we have oilfields like Kuwait, and therefore we receive no great support from the West. We, however, have a right to independence, and how flexibly we pursue that goal will be a critical issue.

Whatever our course, we were bound to run into resistance from conservative corners. Latvia and Estonia, for example, have followed a less radical independence policy, yet their situation is not less precarious than ours.

The treatment of the Polish and Russian minorities in Lithuania over the last year was used as one justification for the army's intervention. How do you see this? Where do the minorities stand?

It's a fact that the Russians especially were unhappy with some of the new measures that parliament had passed. But since the violence erupted, it is clear that the overwhelming majority of both Poles and Russians have thrown their support behind the independence movement. Last week I spoke with some Russian engineers and technicians at a Vilnius factory. They said that nobody, regardless of nationality, could in good conscience condone the army's bloody intervention. They said that Russian lives would also be lost—although in Vilnius only Lithuanians were killed. However, they tend to back the more cautious path to full independence.

Is there any basis to charges of discrimination and human rights violations against the minorities? Have Lithuanian nationalistic measures fuelled animosity among the minorities?

Mistakes were made, although these shouldn't be exaggerated either. Naturally, the new expression of Lithuanian nationalism was felt by the Russians. For the Lithuanians, it was in part a reaction to 50 years of Russian domination over and oppression of the Lithuanian people. Many Russians were bitter about losing their privileged positions.

At the same time, the government also erred in its insensitivity toward the non-Lithuanian peoples. The legislation that made Lithuanian the republic's official language, for example, was unrealistic and perhaps too nationalistic. All Poles and Russians were to learn Lithuanian within 2-3 years. Less than half of the minorities can speak Lithuanian. For the older generations in particular, this as an impossible demand. Secondly, there were also too few radio and TV programs in other languages. The opponents of independence concentrated effectively on this grievance. Lastly, there was far too little preparation work done to assist the minorities, including the Russian military personnel stationed here, with the transition.

In the week preceding the army's assault there were surprisingly big demonstrations, consisting mostly of Russians, against government-backed price rises. Were the protests manipulated?

The demonstrations were spontaneous, but it was difficult to provoke the Poles or the Russians onto the streets. The economic measures were poorly prepared and Lithuanians, too, were angry. The protests were indeed manipulated by the conservative forces that stood behind them.

Both in Latvia and Lithuania the conservative forces that oppose independence consolidated them-

selves within organisations under the name "The Committee to Save the Nation" [CSN]. It was the CSN in both republics that called for the army's intervention. How much support do these groups have? Who comprises their membership?

At the moment, it's unclear exactly who's in their ranks. In Latvia, it's been officially made known that the secretary of the Moscow-loyal Latvian Communist Party is in the Latvian group's leadership. In Lithuania, the organisation included 15 or 16 Russian and some Polish groups that were critical of the Lithuanian government and parliament. But since the intervention, almost all of those groups have distanced themselves from it, strongly condemning both the organisation and the intervention. Only a handful of very conservative, Moscow-oriented elements remain within it.

When you say that the Vilnius events have "radicalised" the Lithuanian population, can one assume that this also means a surge in nationalist sympathies? How would you describe the republic's nationalist parties? What is their relation to democracy?

It appears that radical nationalist groups, such as the League for Lithuanian Freedom, whose support had been very limited, now enjoy much greater backing. I would describe these organisations as Right-oriented, authoritarian and extremely nationalistic.

While almost all political forces are now united behind the fastest possible exit from the Soviet Union, there are some that would sacrifice the process of democratisation for immediate independence. Others, such as myself, favour pursuing both goals simultaneously, even under these very difficult conditions. The policies that affect minorities, for example, must be re-evaluated and the minorities better incorporated into the political process.

One gets the impression that the army was not entirely united on the action in Vilnius. Is there a conflict between the army personnel in the Baltics and the central high command?

I'm not an expert on the Soviet military, but there is no doubt that deep divisions exist within the armed forces. One thing is clear: the soldiers stationed in Lithuania would not open fire on demonstrators. Special non-Lithuanian units were brought in for the job.

This, then, would lend credence to the charge that the command came from above, perhaps from Gorbachev himself...

Yes, my feeling is that general arrangements were okayed by Gorbachev. He gave the army the go-ahead for definite action, although without specific details. I'm afraid that some very inaccurate information found its way to Moscow, information that conditions were ripe for a putsch. I think that this information was planted by reactionary forces intent on pushing through a harder line at any price.

Gorbachev's role in the military action, as well as other recent events have cast serious doubts over the Soviet leader's ability to carry out political and economic reform. Is the reform process at an end?

The chance for real democratic reform is now extremely slim. Two years ago I was very optimistic. Today I believe that only a miracle can save democracy and perestroika.

The only chance is for Gorbachev to make a decisive shift toward democratic reform, that is, toward people like Boris Yeltsin. That, of course, is easier said than done under the present conditions. The conservatives in Moscow can act even more ruthlessly than they have, and will certainly do so if Gorbachev takes that course.

Do you mean a military putsch?

The possibility is very real.

But is this "reform camp" a feasible alternative? Can they push through democratic changes without sparking civil war, economic chaos and ethnic conflict?

Hardly. I don't want to be overly pessimistic, but there would have to be very favourable conditions for them to pull it off. The leaders would have

to be very astute, the economic situation must stabilise, the republics would have to act much more reasonably and there would also have to be strong support from the West. All of these factors must be present.

What are the next steps for the Baltics?

Negotiations with Moscow are the key now. We'll have to see if the central government is still functioning and if it is in a position to make concessions. If not, we'll have to wait and see how things develop in Moscow. Western assistance—diplomatic recognition, admission into international organisations, and so on—is also crucial. Of course, economic aid is also necessary although I'm not sure how realistic that is now.

There is still a lot of sympathy for Gorbachev in the West, especially in Germany. Germany, above all, should not forget that it was the Hitler-Stalin Pact which authorised the Soviet annexation of the Baltic states in 1939. That was the onset of our recent tragic history.

There will be a popular referendum in March on a new union treaty that would open the door to full independence.

That is a Moscow-backed all-Soviet Union opinion poll which would only spell the terms for a new confederation between the republics. We are not voluntarily part of the Soviet Union and we will decide our status in our own way. Lithuania's own referendum in February dealt with another question entirely—whether the majority agreed to a fully independent and democratic Lithuanian state. Almost 90% of the voters backed it. That number wouldn't have been so high a few weeks ago.

What now?

Moscow won't be happy with this result, but it will be a factor abroad, proof of the consensus in Lithuania. It will also rally more support for the Baltics from the democratic forces in the bigger republics. Now those forces are our only hope.

PAUL HOCKENOS is a freelance journalist based in Budapest.

# UnAided

**The 500 or so Australian women known to be HIV positive are the forgotten sufferers in the Aids tragedy. Unlike many gay men, the women have lacked the support of a cohesive, sympathetic and organised community. Frequently they have felt alienated, isolated and stigmatised by erroneous labels.**

"Women with the virus are still thought to be IV drug users or prostitutes," said Sarah, a Melbourne spokesperson for Positive Women, a support group based in several cities. "In fact the women come from incredibly diverse backgrounds."

The very diversity of class, background and education is another obstacle for the women to overcome. Yet the disease has often proved a leveller when women finally come together. The suburban housewife who has never used drugs or cheated on her husband can find a friend in a heroin user.

"It doesn't seem to matter how they became infected; the fact they are infected is what matters," said Amelia Tyler, HIV support officer at the NSW Aids Council.

A lot of women, terrified for their children's well-being, talk to no one but a telephone counsellor or doctor about their predicament. They cannot tell their children, immediate family or closest friends, and they won't attend support meetings lest their secret is revealed. Motivated to protect their children from possible persecution at school, the women's understandable behaviour often serves to isolate them further.

The failure of many general practitioners to diagnose the virus correctly in women is a serious problem. Like many in the community, some doctors are blinded by preconceptions of "Aids victims". Ms Average can present with rampant thrush, nausea, pains in her arms and legs, continual headaches and lethargy, and swollen glands but never be treated for the

virus as such symptoms would indicate.

"She is treated as just a tired, stressed-out woman," said Amelia Tyler.

A lot of women are not correctly diagnosed until they present with opportunistic infections such as meningitis or pneumocystis carinii pneumonia when their immune system is so depleted it is hard for them to build themselves up again.

Diagnosed at an earlier stage, people with HIV can be offered a range of medicines to help prevent pneumonia, herpes and thrush. Some evidence also suggests that the earlier the drug AZT is taken the better.

A survey by the WA Aids Council also highlighted the lack of sensitivity Aids organisations and other health care agencies have shown to women with HIV.

With gay men predominant among the infected, the sick and the dying, it was perhaps not surprising that counsellors and doctors were frequently at sea when they encountered a woman with the virus.

The report said it was important that the Aids Councils, who had the most experience in Aids prevention, widen their jurisdiction to include women. They were a valuable resource but women with HIV saw them as gay organisations, not relevant to their needs.

Women with the virus often face dilemmas which gay men do not experience. For example, childbearing is a critical issue for some women with HIV. Asymptomatic women with the

possibility of a long life, sometimes desperately want to have a child for the same reasons any woman may want to have a child.

Yet doctors and family may be horrified by a woman's 'selfishness' and persuade her the risk of the baby contracting the virus is too high. Pregnant women may be coerced into having an abortion on the basis of misinformation.

Sarah said one woman had an abortion after a doctor told her the baby had an 80% chance of being HIV positive.

Amelia Tyler said that there was a one-in-four chance of a child contracting the virus from an asymptomatic mother. The baby's immune status was unclear until the age of 18 months or so.

"Women are made to feel wicked and guilty if they go ahead with a pregnancy. It's a hell of a big decision women don't take lightly," said Amelia Tyler, "but if they have a healthy baby their lives could be fabulous."

Sarah said women who decided not to have children often suffered pain and grief, and could not tell the truth to many people. As well, if they did not already have a partner, they faced a difficult social life.

"At what stage do you tell a potential partner? It's frightening for a woman to broach the subject because of the assumptions that may be made about her lifestyle," said Sarah.

Some women at last August's 4th National Aids Conference in Canberra felt strongly that women have been overlooked in the Aids prevention and health care campaigns.

It is clear that HIV positive women have been marginalised until recently, given scant recognition for the particular problems and prejudices they face. Sarah, for example, has lived with the virus for nearly seven years

but it is only in the past year that official attention has been paid to women in her situation.

Recently the federal government has allocated funds for several Women and Aids projects, including a grant to the Positive Women group to formulate an information package and a video based on the experiences of women with the virus.

As well, the Social Biology Resource Centre, in Melbourne, is devising two videos for wide distribution which aim to make women more assertive in sexual situations. Based on a lot of fieldwork which shows that even the most assured woman may be passive in bed, the videos will help women learn to negotiate sexual practices.

"A lot of women don't practice safe sex because they don't feel brave enough," said Geraldine Thomson,

co-ordinator of the project. "The most appropriate skills can be taught through assertiveness training."

Few would dispute that women need to be encouraged to carry condoms, and insist they be worn, or to avoid intercourse if condoms are not available.

However, some people question whether singling out women with special programs and campaigns is a good strategy in the fight against Aids. Too much special attention on women may have the effect of placing the responsibility and the guilt on them.

Susan Kippax, associate professor in behavioural sciences at Macquarie University, advised the federal government against enthusiastic participation in the World Health Organisation's Women and Aids Day

last November. "I said, 'hang on, let's direct any campaign to men and women'," she recalls.

It is easy for women to be cast again into the role of controller of men's mythic rampant urge to penetrate. The early condom campaign with its message, "It's not on, if it's not on", was directed at women. Yet to expect women to have power over men in a sexual situation, when they are usually less powerful in every other situation, may be putting women into an impossible bind. Certainly men should not be considered as hopeless and irresponsible and cast aside in any future advertising campaigns. Men, as much as women, need to be educated about heterosexual transmission and convinced to take equal responsibility for practising safe sex.

ADELE HORIN is a journalist with the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

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