The Tribes of Europe

In a recent speech in Pittsburgh, Martin Walker, the London Guardian's US correspondent, pointed to Yugoslavia and described "the tribes of Europe" as the most bloodthirsty, vicious groups on the planet. If allowed, he said, they would plunge us into another world cataclysm.

At the same time, riots were taking place in Brooklyn, New York, after a seven-year-old black boy had been run down by a car driven by a mem­ber of the local Hassidic Jewish community. A travelling Hassidic rabbinical student was stabbed to death in retaliation. It was an extraordinary and tragic rerun of Spike Lee's 1990 film Straight out of Brooklyn, albeit with Hassidic Jews substituting for Italians.

The events of the past weeks in the Soviet Union have also displayed the fragility of unions involving minority peoples. The great quest for the republics of the USSR is to develop a better form of co-operation in which the sovereign rights of citizens, races and communities are upheld. As we move towards a new century in which many federations and states will have to redefine themselves anew, foremost among the issues to be resolved are those involving the recognition of ethnic and racial groups and indigenous peoples.

In the 'Soviet Union' of the future the concept of federation will have to be reinvented. Like Marx and Engels, the founders of the Soviet Union were arch opponents of federalism. Lenin, in turn, advocated not only a unitary state but a unitary world in which humankind came together as a single, supranational proletarian entity. For them, nationalities and republics were an important but temporary obstacle on the road to proletarian solidarity.

Lenin opposed the extreme centralising tendencies of his chief nationalities' theoretician, Stalin. But Lenin's support for federalism was tactical; he saw federalism as a temporary measure that would be supplanted as time went on.

The treatment of ethnic identity and republican ambitions by even the most liberal communists after Stalin has revolved around the illusion that federalism would ultimately be of no significance. There are over 120 ethnic groups in the Soviet Union. Stalin's centralist policies aggravated tensions, creating a seething cauldron of republican, racial and minority grievances that has never been adequately dealt with.

Even Mikhail Gorbachev had some experiences from which he should have learned. In the early period of perestroika he appointed an ethnic Russian, Gennadii Kolbin, as first secretary of the Kazakhstan Communist Party—a decision resulting in riots in Alma Ata in December 1986. The original Gorbachev politburo and secretariat contained only one non-Slav, Eduard Shevardnadze, whose departure in December 1990 was an early warning of the events that have recently taken place. Only in the latter part of 1990 were ethnic and minority representatives—a Kirghiz, a Latvian and an Armenian among them—included in the Presidential Council.

The ascendency of Boris Yeltsin and his immediate demand that a majority of ethnic Russians be appointed to the Union's central cabinet will do nothing to accommodate a more co-operative set of power sharing arrangements.

Most republics have substantial minority populations. They have yet to demonstrate that they are any better than were the federal authorities at respecting minority rights. Georgians, for example, have been as intolerant of their minority Ossetians as Russians have been of Georgians. On top of this, in many cases there is no economic glue to weld minorities and republics together other than through common grievances and opposition to Russia and the union.

In the South Pacific these problems of developing concepts of federation and nationhood that can accommodate the rights of ethnic groups and native peoples seem particularly pertinent. Australia has yet to develop an individual bill of rights. More meaningful treaties and agreements with the native peoples of Australia and New Zealand must also be developed. Papua New Guinea's Bougainville crisis also illustrates that the rights of indigenous people are not well enough protected under the nation state model of parliamentary democracy.

In Fiji, the feudal village chief system has resulted in the suppression of the country's ethnic minority, the overthrow of parliamentary democracy and a crackdown on the parliamentary labour party and trade unions. In the near future, when Colonel Rabuka's rule of force gives way, some compromise between indigenous rights, democracy and individual freedoms will have to be devised.

One of the great lessons of the late 20th century is that people of common racial and ethnic backgrounds seem to perceive themselves as having closer bonds and more in common with each other than those with whom they may be linked ideologically. Or, at least, it should be said race and ethnicity have supplanted political strategy as the basis for ideological meaning. We seem to have passed through an era of political ideology to an era of racial and ethnic solidarity.

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