As fate had it, the August coup in the Soviet Union coincided with Pope John Paul’s tour in Hungary. Greeted with their first papal visit of the century, the Magyars had no intention of forfeiting their day in the sun to anyone at all, much less the Russians. The haunting sounds of mediaeval organ hymns echoed through Budapest’s hushed courtyards as the media followed every sacred step of the pontiff’s trip.

That afternoon my way to the swimming pool was blocked by legions of police who had cordoned off Hero’s Square where the Pope was to address the masses later in the day. In the neighbourhood, I stopped by the Soviet embassy to see what was up. The sidewalk outside the grey granite building was crowded with booths selling cotton candy and Papa János Pál II memorabilia. 200,000 Hungarians thronged to hear the Pope in Budapest, but not a single one showed up to protest at the overthrow of the man who opened the way for their country’s democracy.

In fact, there might have been more than a little Schadenfreude in the hearts of the peoples of the former Eastern bloc—a pleasure not unconnected with the Holy Father’s selective blessings. For many Hungarians and Poles, Czechs and Slovaks, Slovenes and Croats, a united Europe implicitly means the restoration of European Christendom. It is a Europe of which Russia and its Orthodox brethren were never members.

But the coup was over as suddenly as it began. As the tanks withdrew from Moscow and workers dismantled the Pope’s towering podium in Hero’s Square, a Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals appeared on track again. No doubt, the popular indignation and protest in the Soviet Union that drove the conservatives from power will John Major and George Bush protest so loudly if armies step in to restore free market law and order? The Soviet crisis also revealed just how close to the surface lies the mentality of the Cold War. Still mired in the East-West logic of the past, Western leaders have woefully neglected the processes of European integration. For 60 hours, as the prospects of a peaceful continental order appeared shattered, the familiar mechanisms of the Cold War were set in motion. Europe’s NATO brass were in their element again, bandying about heavy-handed threats and war scenarios at emergency crisis management sessions.

The CSCE, supposedly the new motor for a united Europe, still plays a distant second fiddle to NATO. For many conservatives, particularly in the US, the CSCE was simply a human rights body for the Cold War, the usefulness of which came to an end with the collapse of communism. The US State Department and its allies in Europe have fought hard—and successfully—to maintain NATO’s priority over European institutions. Only grudgingly did NATO recently agree to tiny concessions for including the European Community (EC) and CSCE in security policy discussion. The threat of a hardline military dictatorship next door also caused the Soviet Union’s western border states.

Europeans are also still closely linked to the Soviet economy. They, as well as Austria, get the vast majority of their oil and gas from Soviet pipelines and still rely heavily on Soviet markets. Further upheavals there—which are almost certain—could have dire implications for the long-promised recovery.

Although the power structures differ from country to country, the military in the weak Eastern European democracies will be key factors for some time. The armed forces in Belgrade and Bucharest are already poised to restore law and order. Strikes are likely to mar the coming winter in Hungary and Poland. But will John Major and George Bush put an abrupt end to plans for an in-depth Gorbachev’s ouster seemed to put an abrupt end to plans for an integrated Europe. Although warnings of the Soviet leader’s imminent downfall had been in the air for years, when the hardliners finally moved, Europe looked on aghast. Nine short months after the 35 participants of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) signed the Paris Charter envisaging a European order based on human rights and democracy, the Cold War appeared on again.

Upon the Soviet leader’s return to power, Western leaders congratulated themselves for uniting against the plotters. The international community, however, bears a large share of the responsibility for the precarious situation throughout Eastern Europe. Their economies in ruin and their states fraught with ethnic tension, the stability of the Soviet Union as well as the central and eastern Europeans has hung by a thread for over a year. The US above all has contributed precious little to aid the East’s painful transition, substituting slogans about freedom and democracy for concrete economic and political initiatives.

The harsh terms of the radical IMF-administered free-market policies have pushed east and central European countries to the brink of collapse. The East has received only a fraction of the aid and investment that it was counting on. Time and again it has been the US that has quashed West European efforts to co-ordinate large-scale aid programs for the East.

From Berlin to Sofia, politicians surely must have reflected on their own fates too as they saw tanks lumber into Red Square. Their economies fare only slightly better than the Soviet Union’s and even optimists see no short-term end to the economic tailspin. The east
to think twice about their own security policies. Although the possibility that Kremlin hardliners would try to ‘take back’ Eastern Europe hardly seemed plausible, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary all secured their borders. At a joint meeting, the three also discussed a co-ordinated response to a mass migration of people fleeing the crackdown. In the future, civil war in the Baltics or Moldavia could well spill over into their neighbours’ backyards.

These scenarios naturally frighten the Central and East Europeans who are now neither members of NATO nor the Warsaw Pact. Rather than try to fend for themselves, thus plummeting their strapped economies even further into debt and jeopardising western security, they are likely to speed up their entry into NATO.

The West’s special status for the central Europeans has simply widened the gap between the three and their Eastern colleagues. the day after the coup, for example, an emergency EC meeting called for accelerated integration of Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia into the community structures. Though laudable in its own right, the move treats Romania and the Balkan states as third class citizens. The two-tier policy in Eastern and Central Europe has left the Balkans as dangerously isolated as the Soviet Union.

The less the Easterners feel part of Europe, the greater the likelihood of more military coups, regional wars and ugly crackdowns. At the moment, Romania is still being punished as a remnant of neo-communism. So fruitless has European diplomacy proved in Yugoslavia, the West has thrown up its hands in despair. Bulgaria has simply been forgotten about, and Europe only wishes that it could forget about Albania.

The instability in Eastern Europe underlines the failure of Western policy. Without far-reaching political and economic co-operation, Europe will not magically integrate itself. Neither in the Soviet Union nor in Central Europe are military solutions the answer to the region’s dilemmas.

Over the last weeks, Europe may have come closer to recognising just how closely intertwined it is—whether its constituents like it or not. The coup in the Soviet Union was a desperate cry for help, and catastrophe was only narrowly, incredibly averted. The international community cannot afford to make the same mistake twice.

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1991 marks the passing of a quarter of a century since the first test at Moruroa and over 100 years of French colonialism in French Polynesia.

Yet French Polynesia was of little consequence to metropolitan officials prior to the decision to use Moruroa as a nuclear test site in the 1950s, when an alternative to Algeria was required. There was then a tightening of control over the colony, including draconian decrees to counteract the rapid growth of the indigenous nationalist movement. It was not until 1977 that Paris granted the local territorial assembly a statute of limited internal self-government and later a statute of internal autonomy which came into being in 1984.

The Pacific testing centre (CEP) had a dramatic and ultimately detrimental impact on economy and society. Initially, the CEP brought apparent prosperity in the form of massive investment in infrastructure, customs revenues, local expenditure and employment; during its first decade of operations, CEP expenditure was more than twice that of the territorial budget. This was accompanied by an influx of some 15,000 French personnel. The rapid drive to recruit Maohi (Polynesian) workers for the CEP was to be one of the main contributors to a spiral of dependency. On many small outer islands the entire male population left to sign up for the high CEP salaries. Consequently, subsistence agriculture and fishing were neglected and never recovered. The uncontrolled urban drift led to overcrowding, high unemployment and sub-standard living conditions around the capital of Papeete.

Increasing economic dependency has been matched by an intense process of cultural assimilation. The migration of French citizens and their intermarriage with the Maohi people is one factor. In addition, the teaching of French language and culture accelerated in the 1960s. Finally, the shift by many Maohi from a rural subsistence lifestyle to that of urban wage earners produced a preference for Western consumer goods and entertainment at the expense of traditional forms of kinship and cultural pursuits. This policy of Francoisation contrasted with the segregation practised in New Caledonia which saw Kanaks placed on reserves far from the economic and political centre of Noumea. This partly explains the relative unity of the Kanak nationalists today compared with the smaller and more fragmented Maohi independence movement.

Given the legacy of the CEP and the colonial relationship with France, a party challenging the French presence might be expected to gain widespread support. However, in the elections in March this year the two pro-independence and anti-nuclear parties, Tavini and la Mana, garnered a total of merely four seats in the 41-seat assembly, while the established conservative parties, Tahoeraa and Ai's Api, obtained 18 and five seats respectively.

Part of the apparent failure of the pro-independence parties can be attributed to the skewed electoral system which gives disproportionate power to outer island voters. The established conservative parties, particularly Tahoeraa, have been conscious of this important electoral
factor and have gone to great lengths to cultivate support from the outer islands. The comparatively young and urban based pro-independence parties are disadvantaged by financial, transport and communications obstacles in their attempt to reach the outer island electorate. Another electoral law favouring the larger parties is that which eliminates all candidates whose lists obtain less than 5% of the votes cast in any of the five constituencies. Tahoeraa gained 18 of the 41 seats with only 31.5% of ballots cast. In effect, candidates challenging the established parties received a total of 27.4% of the votes but only acquired four seats.

There is much popular sympathy for the anti-nuclear platform of Tavini and la Mana. Nevertheless, it is clear that the pro-independence parties do alienate some sections of the electorate for whom independence poses economic uncertainties, including the level of assistance France would be prepared to provide. In this way the territory's economic dependency, albeit a financial burden to France, ensures widespread acquiescence to an ongoing French presence and, by extension, the CEP. One factor which could sway popular opinion towards the 'independistes' is concern about the imminent integration of Europe—French Polynesia is constitutionally still a part of France. There are widespread fears that unrestricted European immigration to the territory would have a devastating impact on local society.

External influences aside, the conservative government of Gaston Flosse elected in March is already in trouble as it struggles to deal with a budgetary crisis inherited from the previous government. The initial response was to instigate a sharp increase in indirect taxes. This precipitated protests in the form of blockades around the capital in June and July which culminated in riots. The conflict was only resolved as a result of intervention by the French High Commissioner who promised French financial assistance in place of the proposed tax increases. Industrial action and riots were major factors leading to the downfall of Flosse and his government in 1987. And Flosse is still awaiting a verdict on the last of several corruption charges laid against him. The case will be heard in December 1991 and, if convicted, Flosse faces being barred from office, a fine, and up to two years in prison.

Electoral politics in French Polynesia, now as in the past, is primarily governed by the appeal of charismatic leadership, patron-client relations and municipal loyalties. It is no coincidence that four of the five parties in the territorial assembly are led by mayors of the largest municipalities in the territory. The rate of incumbency for mayors and territorial representatives is very high. Debate over policy is not a feature of election campaigns because the majority of parties have broadly similar socio-economic programs. The mainstream parties lack clearly-defined ideologies and cannot be distinguished on this basis. Political expediency remains the determining factor in shaping government coalitions rather than any attempt to be ideologically consistent.

However, the past decade has also witnessed a gradual but significant reclamation of politics and culture by the Maohi people. This is most evident with regard to the increasing rejection of the French language. Tahitian became an official language in 1980 and has since acquired dominance in the political arena. For political leaders to be successful they must now be able to deliver eloquent speeches in Tahitian and political parties have all adopted Tahitian names. Tahitian language radio stations have been established in many municipalities. A radical Maohi theologian has created great controversy with an interpretation of the Bible which integrates the Christian message with Maohi identity. In the arts and the preservation of traditional monuments the Maohi cultural revival has also made its mark.

Finally, the hitherto taboo issue of indigenous land rights has become a legitimate subject for public debate. The renewed pride in Maohi history and culture emanating from the church and other social movements is already evident in the political arena, particularly in the Tavini party. The logical extension of the budding Maohi nationalism is to further question the existing relationship with France. This process is, for the present, being obstructed within the territory by those who fear the economic ramifications of such a move, and by France because it sees no alternative site for nuclear tests.

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In September the Labor Caucus ruled on the amount of foreign equity the government would allow in the bidding for the John Fairfax newspaper group. The decision restricted bidders to 20% foreign ownership by shareholding, but allowed for greater foreign equity by other means. It was widely criticised in the media — most prominently by the Centre Left's Senator Chris Schacht — as favouring the bid of the Conrad Black/Kerry Packer syndicate. The Left's John Langmore proposed the controversial motion, which was supported by most of the Left. ALR's Mike Ticher spoke to John Langmore about the decision, and the controversy.

The Left has always been opposed to foreign investment in newspapers; why do you think they voted for your motion in this instance?

Well, my motion was aimed at achieving exactly that — the restriction of foreign ownership. It's been entirely misrepresented by Chris Schacht. The motion is in two parts. What it says is firstly that the government should prefer complete Australian ownership of all major media, and secondly, that in any case, an absolute upper limit of 20% of foreign ownership should be set.

So why do you think he has read a completely contrary interpretation into it?

I think he misunderstands the motion. He believes it allows what lay people are calling 'quasi-equity', which carries some degree of control, to be raised outside the 20% limit — but in fact that's quite specifically excluded by the motion. What it's intended to say is that foreign equity and financial instruments that give some degree of control up to 20%, can be allowed, but beyond that they can't be allowed.

How tenable is that argument that you can have foreign capital without any control at all? Presumably the money can always be withdrawn.

No, I don't think so. If a bank lends money for a period, and signs a contract, then it hasn't got the capacity to withdraw it. We're talking about borrowing, not something akin to shares. It's really a question of loans rather than non-voting shares or quasi-equity.

Do you think it's a fair perception that this motion is motivated not solely by a desire for more diversity but also as being antagonistic towards the Australian Independent Newspapers bid?

Absolutely not. The motion is simply designed to set a framework for the limit to which foreign investment would be allowed in any major media. It doesn't attempt to differentiate between bidders, except in so far as there's a foreign involvement in them. To the extent that it can be seen to favour anyone, clearly it favours AIN, because it's wholly Australian-owned, and that's what the motion says the government should prefer, but it doesn't rule out the O'Reilly bid, and it wouldn't rule out the Black/Packer bid if they brought it within those guidelines. The interpretation that the motion favours Packer is simply mischievous. It is neither the intention nor the substance of the resolution. In any case, because of this alleged misunderstanding, we will be presenting a more detailed motion to make crystal clear what it is that we're proposing.

Kim Beazley was quoted as disparaging the AIN group bid as being from the "uptown Melbourne establishment". Implicit in this view would seem to be the assumption that financial control is tantamount to some measure of editorial influence. Would you agree with that?

Well, it's true that is implied by some of the alleged remarks made by Beazley, but the fact is that AIN have agreed to sign a charter of editorial independence. The degree of co-operation they've exhibited with Fairfax journalists, particularly the Friends of Fairfax, suggests that they wouldn't interfere. Who knows what would
happen after they gained ownership, but those are the signals they’re throwing out at present.

Wouldn’t you agree that editorial independence is at least of equal importance as where the money comes from?

Sure. All this motion was trying to do was clarify, and set guidelines for, the extent to which foreign investment would be allowed. It was motivated by the fact that there had been some talk a few days previously about increasing the extent of foreign ownership beyond 20% to 25%, 30% or even more. It seemed to me very important to have on the record a motion that clearly and definitely expressed a caucus view that foreign investment beyond 20% would not be permitted. The figure of 20% simply derives from the broadcasting limits, and the general argument that consistency across the media is desirable seems warranted. The figure itself is arbitrary of course, but 20% has already been set for broadcasting, so it may as well be set for print media as well.

This government doesn’t have a good track record on media regulation. If Black/Packer won the bid for Fairfax it would seem to have succeeded in achieving the worst of all possible worlds, in terms of both diversity (because of Packer’s broadcasting interests) and foreign ownership.

I certainly believe that the decision to allow News Limited to take over the Herald and Weekly Times was one of the worst decisions the government has made in the whole of the last eight and a half years, because it’s allowed a quite unprecedented level of concentration of media ownership — unprecedented in Australia and unparalleled in any other Western country at any time. And that must mean that our democracy is in a very unhealthy state, because with that degree of concentration there is inevitably a narrowing of the range of ideas and information that are circulating in the community. You only have to compare our press with that in Britain or the United States or Canada to see the relative lack of diversity here.

Of course it would be an absolute disgrace and a disaster if the Black/Packer bid won. But remember their bid still has to be tested against the cross-media ownership rules. The whole point of the amendment to the Broadcasting Act introduced into Parliament in September is to strengthen and clarify those rules, so that the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal will have clearer guidelines as to how it should assess cross-media ownership.

Is it a fundamentally contradictory aim to be attempting to facilitate both diversity and purely domestic ownership at one and the same time?

Absolutely not. Australia is awash with funds looking for profitable places to be located. The superannuation funds are going to have hundreds of billions of dollars to invest over the rest of the decade. There are plenty of entrepreneurs here, and plenty of journalists who would love to be involved in the management of the press. Clearly, the highest priority is to have greater diversity, but I don’t see any reason why we should not seek both greater diversity and Australian ownership at the same time.

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