Lech Walesa is still Poland's best hope, argues John Lloyd.

It is easy to see Lech Walesa as a bull in a china shop: easy to shake the head and say, well, a great man no doubt, place in history secure, well deserved the Nobel, but fading now (hasn't he got stout?), resents being given a back seat by the people he thinks he created, trying to secure a comeback by demagogic methods.

You would have much cause for so saying. He is a vain, explosive and frequently incoherent public figure. He sits up in Gdansk, on the Baltic, and expects important people to come there to pay him court - including foreign presidents, like Vaclav Havel.

In early July, he commanded the presence of Solidarity MPs at the Gdansk Lenin shipyard to meet the workers, telling them that "this is what made you". Himself burdened or blessed with relative wealth, huge influence and world superstar status, he blasts the harassed government ministers for losing touch with the masses.

A clear case, it seems, of an inability to cope with the new rules of the democratic game. But wait a moment: take a closer view.

Walesa has formed a grouping, a kind of proto-party, called Centre Alliance. It is itself rather incoherent, but it seems to be largely dedicated to pressing for a more rapid pace of economic reform, especially privatisation, for national elections to be held soon - perhaps the spring of next year - and for the remaining communists in high government posts to be sacked. In the politics of personality which inevitably prevail when there is a movement and no parties, it is being seen as simply Walesa's election vehicle. And, of course, it is that too.

But it is forcing an examination of the crazy structure which Poland's historic compromise of a year ago has bequeathed to the country. After the roundtable talks between Solidarity and the communist government last spring, elections were allowed for only one third of the seats in the Sejm, the lower parliamentary house; the senate had free elections. Result: all the open seats bar one went to Solidarity; the agreement which was designed to keep the communists in power collapsed for lack of any sort of legitimacy; the formula, 'Their president, our prime minister', thought up by Michnik, was adopted and Tadeusz Mazowiecki, a long-time ally and adviser of Walesa, was created premier while General Jaruzelski, the suppressor of Solidarity, remained president, more or less explicitly to reassure the Soviets.

It is quite clear, of course, that the government is Solidarity-led, but the governing structure is opaque, it lacks, still, a clear mandate. Only full elections could provide such an underpinning to democracy; solving nothing in themselves (as they have not anywhere in Eastern Europe these past months) they could provide the bedrock on which a solution could be found.

In particular, Solidarity itself has outgrown its great mission. Its trade union wing, now probably smaller than the once-official communist union confederation OPZZ, is hamstrung trying to defend a government which has dramatically lowered living standards. Its neoliberal wing is increasingly at war with its social-democratic wing, much of which has now left it. Legislation is bogged down interminably, as various factions and interests seek to dilute and compromise.

The 'Polish shock therapy' associated with Dr Leszek Balcerowicz, the deputy prime minister and finance minister, has had some real successes - in bringing down inflation, in stabilising and hardening the currency, even in stimulating an unexpected export boom.

What is urgently needed, increasingly so as other Comecon economies like East Germany and Hungary gallop down the restructuring road, are micro-level improvements in the enterprises. But the stasis on the political level shields managers from the consequences of the macro-level reforms.

This china shop needs a bull, and the only available one is Walesa. He is rude, rough and changeable. But that he is - almost self-consciously - a man of the people is unquestioned. He is not, to be sure, an intellectual, but his instincts appear liberal and he knows that any attempt to re-establish the pre-war autocracy would lose him and his country the support of the all-important West.

Much of the anguish surrounding his actions has been that of old friends, comrades in struggle, in imprisonment and in triumph, falling out in power. There is a whiff of the tragic about that, but it is not full-blown tragedy - Henry IV, after all, does not rank with Lear or Hamlet: Falstaff was a necessary sacrifice for the emergence of Henry V, hammer of the French. So may it be with the emergence of Lech Walesa, president of democratic Poland. We must hope so.