

Communism is not yet dead

Reports that Marxist-Leninism is dead are exaggerated, even dangerous. Mr Mikhail Gorbachev may be on the way to shedding some of the party's power, but he still needs its help.

MR Mikhail Gorbachev's triumph in the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party last week has been widely taken in the West to mark the end of communism in the old model of Marx and Lenin, but that is a mistake, even a serious miscalculation. What Gorbachev has done is to win grudging approval for the abolition of Article VI of the Soviet Constitution, which guarantees the Soviet Communist Party a "leading role" in the conduct of national affairs. So long as events in the Soviet Union do not move as quickly as they have done in Eastern Europe during the past few months, the Supreme Soviet called for June will no doubt then approve a new constitution. Meanwhile, the Russian Republic will be holding elections early next month at which party candidates at all levels of the administration are likely to take a further drubbing. Yet there are two respects in which none of this implies that communism is dead.

First, the party apparatus remains in being, with its complicated hierarchy of salaried secretaries and officials at whose pinnacle is General Secretary Gorbachev himself. It is natural enough that many of those concerned fear (and thus resist) the ending of their incestuous power, which has enabled them since Lenin's death in 1923 to influence the appointment of public officials of all kinds — and then to determine their behaviour. (The reforms of 1987 requiring laboratory directors and some other officials to be elected by their staffs, of dubious merit and at best cumbersome, were at least a way of taking important positions out of party hands.) The snag now, for reformers like Gorbachev, is that there is no other way by which essential appointments can be made. While the government pretends to run everything, or nearly everything, it needs the party apparatus as a kind of civil service, with all the nepotism and influence-peddling that has become traditional.

Hope

The best hope, for the months ahead, is that the reform-minded members of the party will be able to restrain the worst excesses of the local and regional party chiefs. The greatest danger is that the party, sensing the permanent decline of its power, may seek to exploit the turmoil in the Soviet Union now. Gorbachev has been tormented in the past few months by outbreaks of nationalism in the peripheral republics, but an appeal to Russian nationalism by an influential section of the party would be dangerous

indeed. That is yet another reason for hoping that it will hang together through the difficult transition that lies ahead.

It would also be a grave mistake for outsiders to overlook the temper of Soviet society, at least in its heartland of the Russian Republic. For demographic reasons, there are few among the adult population of the Soviet Union who can recall the years before the revolution in 1917. Stalin's tyranny notwithstanding, patriotism and past illusions of progress have engendered a powerful sense within the Soviet Union that social justice is inseparable from the enlightened practice of Marxist principles. These, from whose ranks the party reformers must come, will be as important to Gorbachev in the next few years (especially months) as the more radical reformers. They will not disappear altogether.

Meanwhile, Gorbachev, or someone of his stature not now in sight, has to make the Soviet Union work as if it were a modern state. The disappearance of Article VI in June will count for little if there is not by then a plan for turning a large chunk of industry and the whole of the farm economy into autonomous entities, free from the shackles of central planning. That does not mean selling off industry or farms to those with the most rubles in their hands, or even forsaking communism for capitalism, but merely that there should be objective mechanisms that decide which enterprises survive and which go out of business. It will be time enough to worry about the long-term future if the next winter can be made less chaotic than that now ending. □

Embryos win rights

The British Embryo Bill has survived the first hurdle, but its unintended consequences remain to be discovered.

PARADOXICALLY, some British researchers are relieved that the prospect of being thrown into jail on account of the research they do has become significantly more certain. The House of Lords last week approved in principle the British government's Embryo Bill, whose most controversial provision (so far) is that research with human embryos should be allowed up to 14 days after fertilization, but only with the approval of a statutory authority yet to be created. Unlicensed research, or any