

POLAND

Looking forward apprehensively

Warsaw

NAIVE expectations that people's spirits would permanently have been lifted by the election of last June, and by the formation of a government in which *Solidarity* is in a majority, are quickly dispelled: people look glum, and often talk as if they were. There are several explanations.

Nine months is a long time in quickly changing Eastern Europe, the euphoria of *Solidarity's* election victory has been followed by the *Solidarity*-led government's deliberately engineered economic squeeze and nobody knows what the future holds. The economic reforms are an acknowledged gamble. The political

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Population: 37.8 million
Area: 312,683 sq. km
Per capita GNP: \$2,070
Higher education: Eleven universities and 81 other institutes. Total no. of students: 343,400.



future is in doubt: will *Solidarity* hang together? (Farmers and trade unionists have less in common now than a few months ago.) Will a political party that began life as a kind of trade union be able to stomach, let alone administer, the unemployment that economic reform

must eventually bring? And what will be the future course of relations with the Soviet Union?

Part of the trouble is that Poland has seen countless new dawns — not just liberation from the tsars in 1920, but the more recent phenomenon that each newly elected party leader would promise change, and would then renege. Poland would no doubt be even more apprehensive now if the past winter had not been unseasonably warm.

Meanwhile, the government is in a hurry. The speculation is that it is working towards another election about a year from now. The old Communist Party is still entrenched in a substantial minority of parliamentary seats, while the government is essentially a coalition of *Solidarity* and what used to be the Communist Party, members of which occupy the ministries of defence and interior as of right. This is part of the price Poland had to pay for being first with revolution, but the radicals look for electoral legitimacy.

Two educational reform bills were read for the first time in the Lower House of the Sejm (parliament) on 23 March, and may be law a few days from now. One will

Head start: the democratic reforms started by Lech Walesa and *Solidarity* gave Poland impetus for reform. (AP.)

IMAGE UNAVAILABLE FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS

supporters are some who believe that the reforms being introduced are insufficiently thorough, not to say radical, and may even be unworkable. And there is the fear that the new statute book will be uncomfortably permanent.

The sense of unease is everywhere coloured by the economic problems, from which there is no obvious escape. The causes are straightforward. The government has determined that Poland's future rests on normal economic relations with Western Europe, with the consequence that the larger part of its economy must be run on market lines. Already, for example, to ensure that agricultural exports keep flowing to the West, Poland has had to promise (the European Community in this case) that what it sells will not be subsidized.

The short-term discomforts are plain. The biggest step in that direction was the decree that, from 1 January, many prices would be calculated independently and many subsidies abolished. The immediate consequence was that average retail prices, for services as well as goods, increased by 79 per cent between last December and January. (The average increase of food prices over the month was 86 per cent.) But salaries, on average, increased by only a third at the beginning of the year, with the result that people's purchasing power declined by a quarter. Personal hardship is commonplace.

February's inflation, although lower, has tightened the screw still further. But by mid-March, the government was claiming success for its plan to give the economy a short sharp shock — the prices of many commodities had begun to fall as

ACADEMIC LIFE

Academics turn to government

Warsaw

THE most conspicuous contribution of Poland's academic establishment to the post-revolutionary period is that it has provided the small army of people who now run most of the government. The new law on the organization of science in Poland, for example, is the responsibility of Dr Stefan Amsterdamski, until a few months ago an academic lawyer at the University of Warsaw.

Dr Janusz L. Grzelak, now Deputy Minister of Higher Education, is similarly a psychologist saddled with ministerial responsibilities who reckons that his excellent spoken English was polished by a year spent in the Netherlands in 1986. (He regrets that it was not necessary to learn Dutch.) He is proud to have been a thorn in the flesh of the previous government during Martial Law, among other things by editing a monthly subversive journal.

Grzelak considers it part of Poland's strength that 70 per cent of its active scientists work in universities, and that many of them have been able to remain active in research. The practice of concentrating not simply support for, but the direction of, research in the Academy of Sciences has

not been followed as closely here as elsewhere in Eastern Europe.

The new education law will help, not least by its restoration of autonomy, by the removal of the influence of the Communist Party on the appointment of academics and even the selection of students and by the requirement that university posts should in future be filled by open competition. Nepotism will not be as easily sustained as in the past, while the old rigid hierarchy of progression up the academic ladder has been enormously simplified.

But there are problems. The new law gives equal status to 117 institutions of higher education, some of which are specialized schools, conservatoires and even a small school of theatre design, for example, while others have a more general pattern of education but "do not deserve the name" of universities. But Grzelak resists the view of some academics that the new arrangements will mean that there are too many people competing for the same research support.

But of one thing, Grzelak is certain. Will there be enough money to run the system now being designed successfully? "I can tell you right now. No!"

J.M.