

Geoffrey Hosking on the fall and rise of Boris Yeltsin
Saint Boris

He could have been running a power station in Siberia by now, or at best acting as ambassador to Mongolia. Instead he occupies a position which has some claim to be considered the second highest office in the Soviet Union, that of president of the Russian Republic. The unprecedented fall and rise of Boris Yeltsin tells us a lot about the way the country has changed in the last three years.

One must remember that he was first invited to Moscow by none other than Gorbachev, who wanted allies in his campaign against corruption and considered Yeltsin's record in Sverdlovsk promising. In this respect, at least, Yeltsin did not disappoint. He rubbed shoulders on the 6am bus with the workers of the newly built suburb of Strogino, to see how the transport system was working; he stood in queues in butchers' shops, requesting cuts of meat which he knew were being kept under the counter for favoured customers. His methods earned the devoted support of millions of ordinary Muscovites, but also the unyielding hostility of the city's apparatchiks, accustomed to their unrestrained power and their kickbacks from the black economy.

Acting in this way, Yeltsin was using opportunities Gorbachev's reforms had offered, but in a way which Gorbachev in practice found inconvenient. Struggling against corruption was one thing; using the struggle to win public acclaim and then exploiting mass sentiment against all official privilege was quite another. Among his colleagues on the politburo and among the city officials of Moscow Yeltsin's 'going to the people' aroused first mockery and then alarm.

The crisis came at a central committee plenum just before the October Revolution celebrations of 1987, when Yeltsin let out his pent-up feelings about the slow pace of perestroika, the continued spewing forth of fatuous documents and the failure to tackle corruption when its tentacles reached beyond the underworld into the par-

ty hierarchy. This was Gorbachev's vulnerable spot: the point where the attempt to be both Luther and the pope came apart at the seams. If Yeltsin had not resigned from the politburo that day, he would certainly have been pushed out.

Cast into what many still thought of as outer darkness, Yeltsin did not abandon the fight, but began to cultivate the still embryonic 'informal associations': groups of concerned citizens just beginning to seize the opportunities afforded by glasnost and *demokratizatsiya* to campaign on matters of public concern, some of which chimed with Yeltsin's own. As the 'informals' merged and coalesced into popular fronts, he let them organise his campaign in the elections to the Congress of People's Deputies in March 1989 and gained a thumping 90% of the Moscow vote, one of the first signs of earth tremors taking place which were to shake the Soviet political system more severely than any mere anti-corruption campaign.

For the truth is that Yeltsin's descent into popular politics changed him profoundly, at least to judge by his recent speeches. He came to realise that merely utilising authority and public acclaim to attack corruption

would not solve the problems, that it was necessary to remove the source of the corruption by opening the Communist Party to genuine political competition. In the Congress of People's Deputies, he took the lead in establishing an 'Inter-regional Group of Deputies' to act as an informal opposition to the Communist Party's tame nominees and as a kernel for an eventual alternative party in the country at large.

This is where we have to see Yeltsin in broader perspective. It has fallen to him to make manifest possibilities in the Soviet system which have lain dormant since its earliest years, closed off by Lenin and placed under triple lock by Stalin.

Yeltsin has been borne aloft by the Soviets, moribund since 1918 but now revived by their new electoral law. He also comes bearing the banner of the largest of the suppressed nationalities - the Russians.

The Russians have suffered no less from tyranny than any Soviet nation - but with the significant difference that there is no ethnic 'elder brother' who they can blame for their humiliations. (Among the general public, few have been taken in by the mythical target offered by *Pamyat*, the freemasons and Zionists.) For that reason, more even

than among the non-Russians, their anger is directed against the party-state apparatus which has for so long dominated their lives and misappropriated their resources. Since the beginning of this year, a wave of strikes and demonstrations has swept through Russian provinces, with crowds demanding the resignation of local party bosses.

It is this wave which has brought Yeltsin the presidency of the Russian Republic. The question is: can he use

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that mandate fruitfully for the good of the people he represents?

If one examines Yeltsin's political programme, it is really Gorbachevism taken to its logical conclusions. In the last months Gorbachev has recognised in principle the need for a multi-party democracy, a market economy and the recasting of the Soviet Union as a free federation of sovereign national republics; but he seems reluctant and inconsistent in turning those goals into reality. Yeltsin has embraced them with the fervour of the newly converted, and has the public support to implement them. Already he has talked of negotiating a treaty with the breakaway republic of Lithuania as an equal partner.

It would be sensible, then, for these two men to overcome their hearty dislike of each other and to work together. It is time for Gorbachev to welcome Yeltsin as an ally, instead of treating him as a suspicious interloper in the corridors of power. After all, Yeltsin commands the popular mandate which Gorbachev no longer enjoys and which facilitates the task of standing up to the apparatchiks, the secret policemen and other protagonists of 'old thinking'. Gorbachev needs Yeltsin to complete the job he began five years ago.

