

SOPHISTRY IN SOFIA.

Politicians generally expect to be believed. It is, after all their *raison d'être* that what they say and what they do should at least be seen to be one and the same thing. When John Major stands up in the House of Commons we on the whole instinctively believe that there is a kernel of truth in what he says, or that at least he believes so, even if some of the details may get distorted along the way. That is after all the basis of a parliamentary democracy, that we do not get lied to often enough to undermine our belief that parliament represents a plurality of sincerely held views.

In the countries of Eastern Europe, however, decades of communism and institutional falsehood have bred an entrenched scepticism about the motives of politicians, even, or perhaps especially, democratic politicians. Those brief flickerings of idealism that preceded the various revolutions allowed leaders such as Vaclav Havel and Lech Walesa to command popular respect in a way that few of their predecessors could. However, the grinding realities of the free-market economy have long since put paid to that and it is a rare politician east of the old Berlin Wall today who can stand up and expect to be instantly credible to the majority of his audience.

It is not that there is no interest in politics, on the contrary divining the true intent of elected representatives here in Sofia at least, is a national sport to which eleven daily papers and a vast popular rumour mill devote themselves, but that everyone believes politicians constitutionally incapable of truth. The result is that any political announcement, however minor, is followed by a firestorm of speculation and gossip, in which any number of people will take you aside and, between bouts of head shaking about the parlous state of the country, give you the 'true' version of events.

On relatively minor domestic issues such a process could be viewed, except to the people involved, as a relatively harmless amusement, but the ramifications

of its application to a major national or international issue complicate debate irredeemably.

One such issue, one that dominates any discussion of Bulgarian foreign policy, is the thorny problem of Macedonia. Since Bulgarian independence in 1886, its foreign policy has been shaped by the belief that Macedonia is historically and politically part of Bulgaria. Kaiser Wilhelm and Hitler used its acquisition as bait to drag Bulgaria into both World Wars on the German side and the communists expended much effort in a propaganda war to try and prise Macedonia away from Tito's Yugoslavia.

In 1993, Prime Minister Philip Dimitrov, pressured by Germany to recognise the existence of an independent Macedonia, only grudgingly accepted the new country's statehood but crucially not its nationhood. As it happens Dimitrov's unwillingness to agree to Germany's request was probably not for once unfeigned, he knew that this is the one and only subject on which his view, had he refused to recognise Macedonia, would be at one with the majority of his countrymen. With the exception of a vocal but powerless Macedonian minority in the south-west, most Bulgarians view Macedonia as no more than a de facto Bulgarian province. Dimitrov, however, was faced with the mighty economic power of Germany. Thus, stuck between a rock and hard place, he opted for what he thought was the softer landing of the nicely turned diplomatic phrase which might please both sides. He should have known better.

In one of Bulgaria's more turbulent phases, one of his most illustrious predecessors, Aleksandr Stamboliisky, was assassinated for just the merest suggestion that Macedonia might go its own way. Although Dimitrov was never in any physical danger, the torrent of retribution that subsequently poured down upon the poor man's head was such that might have cowed even Mrs. Thatcher at her combative best.

Newspapers brought out special editions, a normally complaisant Bulgarian television devoted whole evenings to emotional studio discussions of the issue

and even the President, Zhelu Zhelev, whose role is usually more decorative than useful, was moved to disagree with his prime minister. Ordinary Bulgarians, among whom the political joke is an art form, had a field day, mostly along the lines that Dimitrov had managed to do with one phrase what the might of the German armies never could in two world wars.

Inevitably, within hours of the Dimitrov announcement, the rumour-mill was working overtime. The street-cafes of Sofia were full of huddled, whispered conversations and the bar at the Sheraton Hotel, what one diplomatic wag calls 'Bulgaria's alternative parliament', was thronged with self-important looking men in earnest discussion about the latest theories of Dimitrov's real motives.

Bulgaria's neighbours, Greece and Serbia, meanwhile looked on appalled, both at the Dimitrov's government's decision to recognise Macedonia, which they objected to on the grounds that an independent Macedonia impinged on their sovereignty, and at the maelstrom of speculation that the Bulgarian government seemed unable to put a lid on, which raised dark possibilities about Bulgarian motives.

One might think that the political process might be seriously hampered by such mistrust but, here in Sofia at least, politicians and the media have learnt to use it to their advantage. Unable to advance a policy by what we could consider normal means, a newspaper article, a pamphlet or a speech, politicians have taken to endorsing rumours to put forward a policy position.

To take one small but ugly example, the death in April 1993 of President Zhelu Zhelev's daughter, Yordanka Zheleva, in the Presidential villa at Boyana just outside Sofia. According to most measured press reports, Jordana, a student, committed suicide in the swimming pool because of the pressure of being the President's daughter, a tragedy that most western newspaper readers would greet with respectful sympathy. Not so, however, in the conspiratorial boiling pot that is Bulgaria. Within days a startling number of theories were circulating. A sample of the front runners amply illustrates current political concerns in Bulgaria. First and perhaps the most popular is that she was killed by

the communists to halt the pace of reform (advanced by the more vociferous right-wing elements of the UDF), second the Mafia ditto (from the more vociferous left-wing elements of the socialist party), third that she did in fact kill herself because of an unhappy love affair and a cruel unfeeling father (Zhelev's enemies, both in his own party and in the socialist party) and finally a grand conspiracy theory, whose details are too complex to go into here, that centres around the coincidence that the daughter of the now imprisoned communist leader, Todor Zhivkov, died in mysterious circumstances in the same villa in the same swimming pool (anyone not mentioned so far, not including Macedonian activists who think any one of the above is yet another attempt to deprive them of their homeland).

You might take the view, as I do, that the anodyne uniformity of the British party system makes truly representative policy-making impossible. Or you might take the view, as I also do, that the opposite, the often brutal bravura of Bulgarian politics, is not conducive to rational policy making in a responsible democracy. We would both have to remind ourselves though that Bulgaria and countries like it are in transit from one political system to another, while Britain is...., well, it is what it is. I hope that when the Bulgarians finally arrive at a mature system, some of that bravura and passion remains. I wouldn't know what to talk about to the neighbours otherwise.

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