

No Faith in Democracy

WHEN OUR LEADING spokesmen lose faith in the capacity of the political system to meet its obligations, we know that the world is at a dangerous crossroad.

Jean-Claude Paye, secretary general of the 24-nation Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, confessed on Sept.30 that the US and European models of economic life have failed to sustain growth and employment. He was speaking to the Council of Europe's parliament in Strasbourg.

A similar pessimism now rules in the stratospheric layers of the world's financial system. In Washington DC, the managing director of the IMF implicitly agrees that there is something seriously wrong, for he now wants all nations to tie their policies into a uniform straitjacket.

To speak the unspeakable is unforgivable in a civil servant - unless it is the prelude to a proposal for fruitful dialogue about serious change; change that can encompass new ideas which, based on popular consensus, can reasonably direct society towards its goals. Alas, there are no statesmen among the current crop of politicians, which means that leadership will sooner or later have to come out of the wilderness.

IF WE ARE to make headway, the very language that we use will have to be refashioned to suit the new needs. Take the concept of democracy. It is an institution that most politicians would not dare to challenge, for fear of the electoral price they would have to pay. And yet, democracy - that public process in which people peacefully resolve conflicts over competing rights of access over limited resources - has been severely discredited.

What are people to make of the statement of Senator Patrick Leahy, chairman of the Senate subcommittee handling foreign aid? In earmarking \$2.5bn for Russia, he said that "It is in our best interest to put our faith and hope in democracy in Russia. I think that the United States and the free world ought to hang in there with a person that is clearly the most committed to democracy and market reform of all the people now operating in Russia."

He was speaking as President Yeltsin's armoured vehicles were laying siege to the White House, Moscow's Parliament. Stalin was a democrat. Hitler claimed the mantle, as well. So did Mussolini, et al. Come on...

FROM Japan and South Korea, in the east, to Italy and the Brussels-based institutions of the European Common Market, in the West, the stench of corruption in High Places has led to an uproar that leaves no one in any doubt: it is not possible for so many politicians to be taking bribes, and stealing from the public purse, without there being

something seriously wrong with the very system itself.

The starting point for analysing the problem is the essential dishonesty of the politician himself. By that, I mean that men and women who would otherwise not dream of lying, or bending the truth, do so when they get up to address a crowd of prospective voters. Why do they lie? There are two broad reasons.

First, they lie because they are arrogant; they do not trust the people to make the correct choice, in the national interest. Second, they lie because the votes are necessary to gain control over the public purse.

And so governments come and go, but nothing changes; the politicians lie, and the people find that their only option is to seek refuge in inertia - they stay away from the voting booth at elections.

OCCASIONALLY, the camouflage is destroyed. That has just happened in Britain.

Premier John Major and his Conservative Party resist the idea of reforming the voting system, on the grounds that proportional representation would lead to backroom horsetrading, and coalition governments for which people were not able to vote at the time of the election.

This studiously ignores the fact that modern political parties are, de facto, coalitions of interests. They may call themselves "Conservative", but that label encompasses belief systems from rightwing fascism to left-wing "liberalism". So to oppose a fairer system of voting, which would incorporate everyone's views into the democratic process, is not only spurious; it's a bare-faced lie.

The Tories, to whip up the necessary votes in support of Mr Major's Bill on Maastricht - which would diminish British sovereignty, by extending the EEC's control over UK laws - had to do some horse-trading of their own.

- Ulster politicians were brought into the fold with promises of new rights. They would not have received these benefits, but for their ability to hold the government to ransom in the division lobbies. The Tory Party is now a coalition of Conservatives and Ulster Unionists.

- To weaken resistance to the Bill within the Tory ranks, the rebels had to be given powers to write the next election manifesto: the Tory Party is now a coalition of Conservatives/Ulster Unionists/anti-Maastricht rebels.

Politics, today, wherever you look in the world, is not about principles or philosophy. It's a barefaced quest for power, to gain access to the money of taxpayers. It's called rent-seeking; sometimes overt, other times covert. But either way, the people pay.

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