

Government machine

Why the party calls the shots

MANY anti-communists in the West say that they would forgive the Soviet Union everything were it not a one-party state; only the Communist Party participates in elections. But the genteel sentiment that the system might be changed from within if the Communist Party were defeated at the ballot-box entirely mistakes the significance of the October Revolution, whose 70th anniversary is next week.

Remember the slogan "dictatorship of the proletariat"? How could it be assured that this hard-fought principle would continue to obtain if parties hostile to the principle were able to win power? Exactly similar fears of constitutional subversion have, from time to time, been used to justify the banning of communist parties in the United States.

Even so, people from the West must repeatedly remind themselves of this reason for the unfamiliarity of the Soviet system of government. The Communist Party (the "party" in what follows) is the inheritor of the revolution. Organized locally, regionally and centrally in a manner that exactly parallels the organization of local and national government, the party determines policy and monitors its implementation by the organs of government at all levels.

At the national level, the crucial organ of the party is the Central Committee. Its 300-odd members are elected every five years by the regionally representative party congress. Its staff of officials is the day-to-day monitor of the work of government and other public institutions (such as national newspapers and state-owned factories).

The executive committee of the Central Committee is the Politburo, whose 13 full members are inevitably powerful people. (One was retired last year.) It is natural that the general secretary of the party, now Mr Mikhail Gorbachev, while nominally first among equals on the Politburo, should be the dominant political figure in the Soviet Union: he controls the party machinery.

Local and regional party secretaries enjoy a similar kind of power within their own spheres of influence, and may exercise it arbitrarily or even corruptly. These are the grounds on which the senior party officials of the Asian republic of Kazakhstan were replaced, earlier this year, by people nominated from Moscow.

Part of the objective of Mr Gorbachev's proposals in 1986 that there should be a choice of candidates in the election of local and regional party officials (by party members) is meant to weaken entrenched power at these levels in the hierarchy. His proposals for the 'democratization' of public enterprises, allowing workers in

state-owned factories to elect their directors, would similarly ensure that local party organs do not have undue influence of appointments.

While the party and its organs are the repositories of political power, they have no legislative or administrative competence. At the national level that rests with the Supreme Soviet and the Council of Ministries (with a prime minister and too many ministers) respectively. Plainly the system would not work at all if certain key ministers (those responsible for foreign affairs and defence, in particular) were not also members of the Politburo.

The Supreme Soviet is a scrutineer of government legislation much as is the House of Lords in Britain. This machinery of government is mirrored in the arrangements at regional and local levels; ordinary people who are not party members have a vote for the membership of the local soviet, and are also now to be offered a choice of candidates.

Both the Academy of Sciences of the USSR (directly dependent on the Council of Ministers) and its analogues in the fifteen republics have traditionally been jealous of their distinctive procedures. Academicians and their officers are elected by the membership in secret ballot. Those seeking to be members or corres-

ponding members of the academies may apply for vacancies in particular disciplinary divisions, but may also be nominated by the membership.

In principle, neither academicians nor academy officials, institute directors for example, need be members of the party, but practical considerations argue otherwise. First, party membership constitutes a kind of character reference. Second, a person with executive responsibility such as an institute director might well find himself at odds with his local party organization over policy were he not in a position to influence party opinion — though the other side of that coin is the risk of becoming a prisoner of unwelcome local party prejudices.

There is no doubt of the party's obtrusiveness even in administrative matters. In Leningrad, for example, the party takes the view that no institute scientist should make more than one extended visit overseas in any year. But party membership, increasingly a privilege, extends to only 10 per cent of the adult population.

There is nothing in what Mr Gorbachev has been saying in the past two-and-a-half years to suggest that he has doubts that the party should be supreme. *Perestroika* is about making government more efficient and the party more democratic. But it could emerge that the influence of the party on public (and even private) life could be modified without being accused of betraying the revolution. □

Press freedom

Glasnost may be only paper-thin

A FREE press is a remarkable thing. Most governments do not put up with the trouble of allowing one. The Soviet government just now is somewhere in between, recognizing that public discussion of important issues may be an indispensable curb on the entrenched power of local and regional party bosses, but still unsure how far *glasnost* should be allowed to go. Time will tell.

In the narrow sense, *glasnost* is an experiment being conducted jointly by the Soviet government and the Soviet press. The censors, who have kept their jobs, still see everything about to be published, but comment only if matters of 'national security' (whatever they may be) arise. The general press is still trying empirically to find out where to draw the line, which makes its exercise of its new freedom

tentative and cautious. In retrospect, *glasnost* may be a consequence of the accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power station in April last year; 280 million citizens (not to mention neighbours) had to be reassured. In August that year, Mr Igor Yakovlev was appointed editor of *Moscow News*, a weekly previously put out through Intourist hotels to help tourists decide how to fill their time.

Moscow News is now a very different tabloid, bursting at the seams with political matters. Sales of the Russian-language edition (on Tuesdays) bump up against the ceiling of 250,000 copies supposedly set by the capacity of *Moscow Pravda's* presses. Exact translations appear in half-a-dozen other languages on Thursdays. Its partner as the spearhead of *glasnost* is the