

# THE AUSTRALIAN

## Our political class lacks moral courage

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Illustration: Eric Lobbecke

Exactly 50 years ago, I spent my birthday protesting against the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. At a co-ordinated time, I believe it was Prague's midnight, a minute of silence was observed in places that circled the globe.

Now, as our own political system sinks ever further into chaos and disrepute, the changes that have swept the world since August 21, 1968, when an army of 250,000 soldiers, 6000 tanks and 800 planes crushed the Prague Spring, are testimony to the grounds for hope — but also a warning of fragility.

After all, the “evil empire”, as Ronald Reagan famously called the Soviet Union, is dead. What has replaced it is messy, unpleasant and at times murderous; but it is not an existential threat, as the USSR was for so long.

As for the Soviet Union's former subject states in eastern Europe, they are, for all their flaws, democracies — an infinitely elastic term, perhaps, but one that imposes real constraints: in the end, it must be the people who decide what is to be done.

That may seem a small thing, but its rarity suggests the opposite — and these states' history would not have inspired confidence in their democratic future.

These were the countries of the interwar “small dictators”: long before Hitler, first Bulgaria, then Poland, Lithuania and Yugoslavia veered into right-wing, semi-authoritarian regimes, as did Hungary; with the notable exception of Czechoslovakia, the other countries of the region soon followed, imposing ever harsher restrictions on Jews and stripping ethnic minorities of citizenship.

As if that were not enough, the communist regimes established in the wake of World War II scarcely prepared the ground for an eventual transition to democracy.

“It is a common mistake,” Hungarian sociologist Elemer Hankiss wrote, “to assume that nothing is simpler than to deprive people of their freedom: one needs only a strong police force — or even a stronger police force, just in case.” In reality, “the task is much more difficult than this” because society's “infinitely complex tissue of interactions” ensures that “human endeavours, when choked here, will always find a detour there”.

Stopping that flow requires “damming every stream into which the aspiration for liberty might turn”. And that is what the communist regimes did, suppressing all forms of independent association and eliminating every right.

No less harmful than the destruction of civil society and the removal of basic liberties was the pervasive climate of distrust the regimes created.

Socialism was, above all, a system of poorly organised shortage. With everything in scarce supply, people could survive only by supplementing their income, usually illegally. The privileged could rob the state; the less privileged had fewer options. “It was difficult for a schoolteacher to find extra hours for tutoring after she had stood in several lines and walked to and from work,” American anthropologist Katherine Verdery noted in her study of Romania in the late 1970s, “or for a secretary to take home the professor's manuscript to type for extra pay”.

“Romanians therefore built up their unofficial earnings not from productive endeavours but from scavenging”, pilfering materials being wasted in factories, offices and collective farms.

As a result, a negative social contract developed in which everyone gained by ignoring the rules, rather than complying with them. And with law-breaking pervasive, the threat of denunciation was ever-present, along with the fear of punishment.

That fear is no longer there. And the scarcity economy has gone, too. Removing the Soviet model's shackles and adopting simple, nearly flat, tax systems, light-handed regulation and prudent macro-economic policies have resulted in unquestionable economic gains. For example, at barely 3 per cent, the Czech Republic has the EU's lowest unemployment rate, while Poland and Hungary face labour shortages, fuelling rapidly rising wages.

But the distrust never evaporated and has been stoked by scandals involving cronyism and corruption.

Under the old regime, any east European, when asked to explain some economic outcome, could readily generate an answer based on what the Communist Party was up to, usually a nasty plot against common folk. All economic events, people presumed, had an agent: the political system and those who ran it.

Today, Verdery found when she returned to the communities she had studied, the same reasoning persisted, but the malevolent agents were a shadowy "other": the Jews, foreigners, ill-defined "mafias".

As conspiracy theories flourish, so do hatred and frustration, corroding what little confidence there is in politics and in public institutions.

There was, however, also another side to the east European experience. Despite waves of repression, dissent never disappeared. And almost immediately after the Soviet tanks ended the Prague Spring, dissent took a new form.

Vaclav Havel, who later served as the president of the Czech Republic, called it "living within the truth": even in a system "immersed in lies", he wrote, "people have to live in authenticity; they have to try to live as if they were free; they have to pit sense against senselessness, creativity against destruction, contents against vacuum".

They must, in other words, bear witness, even if it meant — as it did for Havel and many others — that every day brought a new heartache, a new anxiety, a new and more obnoxious degradation for them and their families.

They may have been a small minority, but their example has not faded, nor has its relevance.

Tomas Masaryk, the great statesman who preserved Czechoslovakia's freedom in the interwar years, put it best when he said that democracy was "the political form of the human ideal"; but precisely for that reason, it must rest on a firm ethical foundation. To use Aristotle's language, it demands "moral courage".

Moral courage is not saintliness, intransigence or the absence of human frailty; it is the genuine commitment to principle, sustained by the willingness to take responsibility for the meaning, and ultimate consequences, of one's actions.

That is what the east European dissidents displayed even as the Soviet tanks rolled in. And that is what Reagan called for when he urged the West to “beware the temptation of pride — of blithely declaring yourselves above it all” and so abstaining “from the struggle between right and wrong, good and evil”.

But where is our moral courage today? When was the last time we saw it in our own public life, rather than overweening ambition, disregard for principle, and the shortsighted pursuit of immediate advantage?

A half-century after the world stood still in outrage, merely to ask the question is to hear the silence resound.