



Irena Maryniak

## Goodbye Solidarity ...

... and Welcome to Poland's New Breed Democrats

Irena Maryniak describes Poland's new breed of democrats as europhobic, catholic-backed, warm and xenophobic, glowing from their unexpected triumph at the polls.

In Warsaw, everybody remembers August. Not the tedious, pre-election August 2001, but August 1980 when shipyard workers were on strike and Poland was alive with protest, social resistance and fresh ideas. It was the month the embattled communist government conceded the right to form independent trade unions and – though no one could have anticipated it at the time – opened the way for the collapse of communist regimes throughout central and eastern Europe. Within weeks, 80% of the workforce had left official unions and joined the "independent, self-governing" union, *Solidarnosc*. People found it was possible to organise themselves outside the party state and create a restrained but autonomous civil society, while maintaining the façade of being, still, subject to Soviet hegemony.

It was an absurd scenario that exploited contradictions inherent in Polish communism, helped prevent a bloodbath and expressed in a cautious, controlled way a tradition of frustrated patriotism, public anger, a common long-term purpose – independence – and a new sense of togetherness. For Solidarity was far more than a trade union, or even a social and political movement, it was an expression of feeling and intent that found resonance in every corner of the country: "we *shall* do it our way". With this came the discovery of social unity and the possibility of free speech, a sweeping religious revival (churches were packed), euphoria, laughter, jokes and flowers in the street. The country was high. And there were two leaders: a charismatic, straight-talking electrician, Lech Walesa and, astonishingly, miraculously, a Pope who proclaimed the importance of non-conformity and human rights.

That feeling is gone now. In time (after martial law introduced by General Wojciech Jaruzelski, arrests, then an amnesty and, in 1989, a "Round Table" settlement with the communists and the relegalisation of Solidarity) the electrician proved himself a bumptious and authoritarian president; the Pope one of the most retrograde figures in recent church history. And the economic "transformation" launched by Solidarity turned industrial workers into its main victims.

Yet until September 2001, the word *Solidarnosc* still carried enough weight to warrant its presence in politics. Poland was governed by a coalition government – Solidarity Electoral Action (AWS) – awkwardly made up of

right-wing anti-Europeans and a minority of liberal democrats from Freedom Union (UW). The only thing they had in common was their background in the Solidarity movement. In September – a year after the liberals had left the coalition and two months after a budget deficit totalling 11% of state revenue had been announced – voters gave the coalition a spectacular vote of no confidence. Former communists, now social democrats, were returned along with five other groupings, four of which had never been in parliament. Solidarity was out.

It was not a successful campaign: 63% of the electorate said they were bored and only 46% turned out. The winning Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) failed to gain a majority and formed another uncomfortable coalition with the Peasant Party (PSL). Extremist groups picked up 14% of the vote. Despite an institutionally more democratic Poland, disappointment and alienation have come into their own: 16% of the population is jobless (the figure could rise to 20% within months), poverty is up, corruption widespread and discourse between politicians and voters non-existent. The sense of anxiety and betrayal is overwhelming. Liberals and free marketeers complain that Solidarity failed its calling as a reform movement, turned populist and interfered with market reforms and privatisation. Trade union activists say that Solidarity politicians betrayed the people by implementing cuts in public spending too harshly and privatising without ensuring that everyone had a place in the new system. Everyone is blaming everyone else because there isn't much in Polish politics that wasn't once associated with Solidarity: its ethos percolated the social fabric of the country. Today, even former communists – that most moderate, "stabilising" political force in Polish democracy – do not oppose the principle of reform Solidarity initiated.

Part of the problem has been building up a syntax to accommodate the daily contradictions of a democratic lifestyle. Communist newspeak couldn't do it, but nor could the moralistic rhetoric of the Solidarity movement which smoothed over linguistic and social differences between the educated elite (the intelligentsia) and everyone else by presenting politics as a battle: "Good and True" versus "Evil and False". This was, of course, the language of the Catholic Church. It offered Solidarity a protective umbrella and an ideological platform, defended its individual members and encouraged dialogue with communists on the grounds of shared humanity and a common tradition. It was an uncompromising language, allowing for "charity" and "forgiveness" but bound by its own glaring moral clarity and unprepared to address issues not central to its conflict with a militantly atheist state.

In the 1990s, as Solidarity clung to its myth, refusing to admit that the battle for democracy and capitalism was over (though millions had already left the union) there was a real sense in which limitations imposed by its vocabulary could not allow public discourse seriously to address new and urgent issues: the status of social minorities and discriminated groups, anti-Semitism, racism and hate speech. As journalist Konstanty Gebert points out, the transition from the language of communism to the language of nationalism is easily made: "It is us versus them, inclusion versus exclusion; and violence is a legitimate way of achieving previously ideological and now national goals".

Post-communist politics and the transfer of state resources to the private sector left the door wide open for improbity, and issues of political ethics and MPs immunity from prosecution now occupy an inordinate amount of parliamentary time. This has given people ample excuse to fall back on the moralistic vocabulary they feel comfortable with, while ignoring a more insidious,

xenophobic rhetoric which has crept into some areas of mainstream politics and the media. If incitement to hate is tolerated, or tacitly approved, it becomes acceptable for political parties to do deals with extremist groups in order to bolster their vote. Anti-fascist activist Rafal Pankowski says the Peasant Party (PSL) now in coalition with the social democrats has branches collaborating with the far right National Party (SN). In Szczecin PSL candidates included the Polish translator of UK Nazi David Myatt's work. The pro-European centre-right Civic Platform (PO), which came in second after SLD in the election, is in coalition with the Real Politics Union (UPR) which publishes the often anti-Semitic weekly *Najwyzszy Czas*.

This is not to underestimate the disabling effect of the corrupt political culture that developed under the Solidarity government. But the probity issue is confused by a deeply embedded tradition of giving presents in return for, or in anticipation of, a good turn. A recent poll conducted by the Institute of Public Affairs in Warsaw showed that 22% of the population don't understand what "corruption" means. Under communism – because of bureaucratic constrictions and a public contempt for communist "legality" – you fiddled the system to get things done. People behaved as the state demanded when they had no option but resisted whenever there was a loophole. They called it doing things "to the left" (*na lewo*). The law was an ass.

Today the deputy chair of the Justice Commission is accused of falsifying documents to visit her son in prison, where he's doing time for robbery. An MP from the previous government is known to have fled the country on the last day of his parliamentary immunity. The leader of the radical Self-Defence farmers union (*Samoobrona*), Andrzej Lepper, has 200 court cases pending. On 29 November 2001 he was sacked from his post as parliamentary deputy speaker for unparliamentary conduct, publicly supporting legal infringements and insulting the foreign minister. His parting speech alleged that fellow MPs had taken bribes and that elites were ignoring the plight of ordinary people.

When I visited Lepper in his parliamentary office at the tail end of a long day (he must be the most interviewed MP in office) he was unembarrassed by a question about his style of protest politics. Before the election he gained notoriety with skilfully choreographed protests against the repayment of credits given to small farmers like himself. Over the past ten years his union has blocked roads, occupied buildings and thrown manure at public officials. "If the law works against people and generally accepted notions of legality then it isn't law. The only thing to do is to break it for the sake of the majority. Most people don't realise that democracy gives them power and choice. They don't use it. There's too much talk about democracy – people can see it's only for elites. Only 5% of the population have made any money out of it at the expense of all the others. People have had enough." Lepper claimed that support for his party is up from the 10% he got in the election to 15%. That would make *Samoobrona* the second most popular political grouping in the country.

The sense of injustice which has radicalised the electorate is connected with the effect of the internationally applauded "Balcerowicz plan" introduced in the early 1990s. This stabilised the economy but put millions out of work. It is also to do with resentment that people who did best out of it were the same privileged ruling class (*nomenklatura*) who had it so good under communism, and with a feeling that the injustices of the past have once again been forgotten. Today, 89% of people who dominate the economy were in management under communism and the country's deputy public prosecutor is

the man who, under martial law, put legendary Solidarity leader and present Freedom Union chair, Wladyslaw Frasyniuk, in jail. The 1989 Round Table agreement drew a line under everything the communists did. There would be no justice, no reparation.

It was ever thus: imperial partition (1772–1918), a Nazi occupation (6 million dead), Yalta (the country given over to Stalin), communism and so on. If there is no justice, what is law? Poles ask. *Whose* law? Prussian, Russian, Austrian? Nazi? Soviet–communist? And now New European? A globalist plutocratic elite's? When did *we* ever decide?

Antoni Macierewicz is smoothly bearded, hugely polite and would look terrific cast as Ivan Karamazov. He is the League of Polish Families (LPR) MP for Warsaw and considers Poles "trusting if not naïve" and too easily lead by their western allies. "The agreement that Generals Kiszczak and Jaruzelski would never be punished created an ambivalence in politics, and this was presented as something approved by Europe. We don't reject the EU, we've been part of Europe for 1,000 years, but the Europe we're being presented with now has the face of Jaruzelski."

LPR is the most far right group in parliament. It has 38 MPs and was formed just three months before the election. It has been compared to Jean Marie Le Pen's *Front National*: its politicians and publications play on latent insecurity and paranoia, xenophobia, frustration, a sense of loss of control and desire for order. ("What annoys me most about Warsaw," Macierewicz confided, handing me my coat, "is the mess." )

No one has any doubt about the key to LPR's success. It was supported by *Radio Maryja*, Poland's most popular Catholic radio station run by the Redemptorist Fathers in Torun. Its director, Fr Tadeusz Rydzyk, takes a spectacularly isolationist view of Poland's international position, has often given airtime to anti–Semitic views including Holocaust revisionism, and makes allegations against a "globalist mafia" including, variously: liberals, Jews, Masons, journalists and foreigners. No one knows who he is or where he gets his money and he doesn't give interviews to outsiders. The episcopate likes to distance itself from him and, last year, the staunchly conservatist Primate, Cardinal Glemp, issued *Radio Maryja* with a formal reproof.

The problem is that as well as being subversive and anachronistic, *Radio Maryja* has been a highly successful innovator. It was the first interactive radio station in Poland and gave live airing to the voices of the silent millions in the countryside, the jobless, the excluded and the elderly. "Occasionally you may hear something troubling," Polish Episcopal Conference spokesman, Fr Adam Schultz, said, "but it also serves to democratise. Media standards are very uniform; some issues and points of view aren't given a voice. Over the past five years there's been no public discussion on EU accession, for example."

This is true. Public information broadcasts on Europe are shown before 7am at weekends when, as Andrzej Lepper put it, "A peasant is in the cowshed, the chicken–run or the pigsty and townspeople are asleep." Debate has been negligible. *Radio Maryja* gave eurosceptics an airing and they now account for 50% of the electorate. Warsaw's Institute for Public Affairs has warned that the 2003 referendum could well turn out in their favour.

Moral, political and social fragmentation has provoked a fundamentalist panic reflected in the rhetoric of many political groups. Lepper's *Samoobrona* is the

most extreme and least transparent. "Poland doesn't have a democracy," Lepper told me. "Economically, financially it has anarchy. It needs a democratic dictatorship: no excesses, just tough law. A dictatorship of the law." Views like this have sent liberal journalists scurrying to their desks. There are fears that Lepper could one day surface as the Polish answer to Belarusian president Aleksandr Lukashenka.

The right, heavily divided but accounting for 35% of votes, also argues that the need for a strong state is paramount. "The main problem is a weak executive, institutional incompetence and an inability to implement law," says Jan Rokita, deputy leader of Citizen's Platform (slick, pragmatic professional: *Forza Italia* minus Berlusconi). Rokita wants a "smaller, cheaper, more brutal, firm, hard state, with rigorous laws, rigorously applied". "There is an anarchic quality in Polish democracy," he added. "It's always been there. It'll probably stay that way."

He was referring, presumably, to a tradition of pre-partition Polish parliamentary politics that goes back to the seventeenth-century Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. It was a sprawling, unruly set-up in which nobles gathered for rowdy meetings, elected their kings and where any bill could be thrown out on the basis of a single vote – the "liberum veto". Because of this, and the nobility's traditional motto "Poland lives by unruly", there is even now an assumption that any indigenous Polish democracy is by its nature "anarchic" and demands rationalisation.

In a country where, demographically, the potential workforce is increasing all the time; where two-thirds of workers have been made redundant in the past decade; and where only the church seems to care, people are looking for quick solutions. The *Samoobrona* office in central Warsaw has a poster on the wall: "Whoever said capitalism was the only alternative?" Signed: John Paul II. Andrzej Lepper knows how to spread himself. And he blames everything on one man: the architect of Poland's economic reforms and former Freedom Union leader, Leszek Balcerowicz.

"Extremists who point to 'the guilty' convince," Maciej Jankowski, former head of the Warsaw Solidarity Trade Union said. "People want to know why they're unhappy and they want to know now." Veteran Solidarity activists like Jacek Kuron despair. "I thought capitalism was like an engine: you just started it up," he said in a television broadcast in March 2001. "I was wrong. I did my best to ease the transition but I blame myself that we chose this way at all." In the big, empty office of the once powerful and respected Freedom Union, Wladyslaw Frasyniuk talked bitterly about the two Solidarities, past and present: "It was a trade union in which the word *Solidarnosc* meant that the strong helped the weak. That's all over. It became a different organisation which didn't engage the more enlightened sector of the community. Now it's a union in which people are out for what they can get."

Kuron and Frasyniuk are both worker-intellectuals, products of early *Solidarnosc*. But the traditional social divide between "the intelligentsia" and "the people" dies hard. It tore Solidarity apart in 1990. Not only is there no language of democratic discourse in Poland, there is little notion of the possibility of serious conversation between the 93% of the population who don't have a higher education and the 7% who do. No lubricant middle class exists. Teachers and academics barely survive on their salaries and small business have gone bust. The potentially upwardly mobile – Andrzej Lepper's people – have been economically blocked.

There is a force out there, the discontented and the threatened say, it is the communists, the liberals, the masons, the Judaeo–Brussels conspiracy, the globalist mafia. But the real issue is anxiety over greater impoverishment and another loss of sovereignty: losing the right to decide. Distinguished sociologist and former Solidarity activist Jadwiga Staniszkis argues that economically and politically Poles are hostage to the interests of European and global institutions, as well as vestiges of communism. "Early on in the transformation, while new institutions were being formed, Poland accepted the rationale of being at the far end of the market. We don't have full capitalism because the world doesn't need it. Responsibilities of state are spread over many levels: decisions come for the EU, the OECD, the WTO. Each of these levels of decision–making has its own rationale. We should really be thinking in terms of creating the kinds of institutions Germany built after World War II – that's where we are in terms of development – but we accepted solutions which are rational at another level. We have accumulation mechanisms and consumers, but no producers; privatisation took place on the basis of takeovers, there was no investment. The basic choices were presented as the only available choices – which they weren't – not as political choices. Decisions were taken neither consciously nor openly. There was no public discussion. Today we are trying to rationalise what, in terms of *this* state and economy, is irrational. That has undermined the logic of political discourse and limited the role of politics.

"Whether they are EU candidates or not, after 11 September, post–communist countries face a strict integration of executive and judicial agencies, policing and fiscal services. These services will be integrated as a buffer. The EU will impose its own discipline for defence, access to data etc. In that sense we are already part of the European organism. I don't think democracies will survive. They'll be pure packaging. It'll be Bismarck's vision: integrated executive agencies, a federation of bureaucracies, limited sovereignty (unavoidable given that law is sovereign) and a civil society in social terms, with politics as an insignificant appendage."

Other voices, extremist ones, are expressing the same anxiety in terms that are crude, often vicious and potentially dangerous. The electorate is hearing them. If communism was a facade, a stage set, a Potemkin village, who would be surprised if democracy turned out to be the same? Many people in this brusque, warm, garrulous, anxious and irritable country fear they may have barely more control over their lives than they did under communism or 140 years of imperial partition. And it's a serious preoccupation. Whose democracy is it anyway?

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