

ALICE IN WINTER WONDERLAND



ALICE MAHON is no shrinking violet. She is the principled and outspoken MP for Halifax. She is also a close friend who went to Moscow to monitor the Russian elections in December and who, as part of this visit, came face to face with the ultra-nationalist-fascist leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. Zhirinovskiy is currently scaring the hell of eastern Europeans as much as he scares the hell out of western Europe. So he has called on the Bulgarian people to up and replace their president with someone more to his liking; made announcements against Romania, the Baltic States, Finland and Turkey; demanded the return of Alaska and the re-creation of the Soviet Union.

On being denied a visa to enter Germany, he has said that the rebuff could lead to a new world war and the complete traction of Germany. The man would be rrying even if he weren't the leader of largest party in the Russian parliament, Zhirinovskiy is no fool and as Alice found strike with Russian population already disillusioned by the chaos that

'free market forces' has brought to their society. To those without jobs or hope of housing, he talks of bringing a sense of pride back into being Russian. He talks of Russian jobs for Russian people. He describes the west as thieves who come to plunder Russian assets - closing down factories, cutting back services, spawning an unprecedented crime wave which spirals out of control. He blames foreigners and regards Jews and Moslems with even-handed contempt. Other regional minorities fare little better. All are part of the gift of chaos that the west has brought to Russia.

Let me pause and turn the clock back a minute. When much of Britain went into celebrations over the collapse of the Soviet Union, I made few friends by cautioning: "You'll be sorry."

This was not in misguided defence of Soviet bureaucracy or the KGB, more out of a belief that if communism were not succeeded by democratic socialism then it would be followed by a nationalist or fascist dictatorship.

When Yeltsin was hailed by the western press as the champion of free market economics and the saviour of Mother Russia, I was no more popular in describing him as a self-seeking thug: And when Yeltsin demanded support for the sweeping constitutional powers he wanted to give himself as president, there were few of us who joined Alice Mahon when she warned that it would be giving him constitutional powers that Hitler could only dream of.

Small wonder that Zhirinovskiy was one of the few politicians who backed the change — he expects to inherit these powers after beating Yeltsin in the 1995 presidential elections; to use this as the platform for a new wave of nuclear weapons building; and a declared willingness to sell these weapons to anyone with the money to buy them. This scenario is not inevitable, but it does need to be treated seriously.

When the observers were in Moscow they witnessed some frightening changes. You can now get a flat by paying someone to murder the sitting tenant. Pensioners are particularly cheap and particularly vulnerable. They live in daily fear of the gangs who rule the streets and run the rackets. The fabric of civilised life has been torn apart before their eyes. The police acknowledge the problems but seem pow-

erless to halt them. They are not helped by the west's insistence that privatisation will solve everything and that monetarist economic disciplines are needed to shake the cobwebs out of the old Soviet system. We play into Zhirinovskiy's hands.

The real debate that is taking place in Russia is not about privatisation. Russians know that they don't have the money to buy up the industries we force them to sell off. They know that the end of central planning has meant no planning at all; that \$25 billion worth of Russian assets have simply been allowed to be syphoned out of the country into tax havens waiting for the real collapse to take place.

If we want to avoid this happening (and if only out of pure selfishness we ought to) then there are several stark realities we should face up to. The most serious alternative to Zhirinovskiy is not Yeltsin, But someone who will emerge from the combined ranks of the Communist Party, the Agrarian Party and the Women of Russia. It will be a challenge that comes from somewhere well to the left of Yeltsin's free-marketizing reforms. This may sit uneasily alongside John Major's view of the world, but he had better understand that it is his (and our) best chance of a peaceful and stable democracy emerging in Russia.

We need to tell the world bank, the IMF and the European Bank of Reconstruction that it is more important to the Russians that they can feed and clothe themselves than that they produce for export. If we don't want their weapons being bought by terrorists and tin-pot dictators then the west should buy them and destroy them. It will pay us to ensure that Russian people stay in work — building houses, restoring railways, staffing schools and hospitals, beginning to clean up their own environment.

If we can find ways of doing this alongside Russian people then the prospect of them seeing outsiders as 'the enemy' diminishes rapidly. It is a solution which comes not through military threat but through a different way of seeing the troubled world in which we live.

There are millions of Russians who want to build a more open, democratic society to live in. Most wish to do so within the civilised (and civilising) framework of meeting common needs and making common provision for each other that they have grown up in. It is an area we may have much to learn in. Zhirinovskiy is neither a freak nor alone. You can find him, or people like him, all over Europe and beyond. And if he/they appear ugly and frightening, it is because we are. Fascists draw their following out of the wells of despair — from people stripped of hope, of dignity, of the chance of feeding themselves and housing their children. That is where our view of economics is taking countries around our borders.

You don't need to have been able to see this, with Alice, through the looking-glass of the Russian elections. All you need is to look at where it took us when the world forced Germany down the same path during the 1920s and '30s. It is a path my parents' generation swore we would never go down again. How soon we seem to forget.