

THERE ARE signs that at last the persistent reluctance of the Russians to admit that their economic system does not work, is wavering, and it appears that the man mainly responsible for this is Mikhail Gorbachev.

He has decided that the first step towards solving his country's problems is to drag them into the daylight and talk about them, and he is encouraging his own people to join in the discussion. It is also to be hoped that among the first to benefit from this new frankness will be those who have paid with their liberty for openly criticising the government.

In *Living with Glasnost* the authors* give an account of their many interviews with people in all walks of life, and they have also had access to official statistics to an extent which would have been impossible a few years ago.

This opens the doors of the Soviet Union to reveal how its people live, love, work and play, so that we can begin to understand some of their problems and compare them with our own.

In every nation the well-being or otherwise of its people reflects in large measure the success or otherwise of its economic system. To quote from the book: "Article 40 of the Soviet constitution guarantees the right to work the quality of the job offered and minimum wage."

It also guarantees the right to choose one's kind of employment, subject to capacity, education and training. There is also a "right to rest", contained in Article 41, which governs hours of work.

But rights never come without duties, for, as Article 60 lays down, "It is the duty of, and a matter of honour for, every able-bodied citizen of the USSR to work conscientiously in his chosen, socially useful occupation, and strictly to observe labour discipline. Evasion of socially useful work is incompatible with the principles of socialist society."

These are great ideals, as is Marx's concept of the State expecting "from each according to his skill, to each according to his need." But human nature being what it is, self-interest too often insists on overtaking ideals, so that a popular idea prevails that as

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all the wealth of the Soviet Union is produced by the people and therefore belongs to them, then they are morally entitled to help themselves to a little bit of it now and then for personal use.

This idea must have been in the minds of those who drafted the criminal code, whereby offences against the State carry much more severe punishments than offences against the person.

Crimes against the person in Russia (e.g. robbery with violence, burglary) are few compared with those in the West. One reason may be that there is so little worth stealing from the average household: hardly any hi-fi equipment, videos, computers, microwaves and so on, which our own uninvited visitors find so irresistible.

Mr. Gorbachev will have to deal with corruption in the public services, then domestic problems like alcoholism, sexual ignorance and irresponsibility resulting in unacceptably high numbers of abortions and abandoned children, drugs, gang violence and other examples of what some still regard as imported "Western bad habits."

But although it is true we all do wrong and foolish things and our problems appear similar, causes can differ widely; theirs are more likely to be overwork or extreme boredom.

In too many cases both married partners find it necessary to work, often putting in much overtime, in order to subsist. Leisure time is thus drastically curtailed and family life suffers, and this must account for a high divorce rate: 35 to 40%, with consequent serious psychological damage to their

children. (The percentages in the minor states of the Union are much lower).

A little private enterprise has been allowed here and there, and the desire and the will to succeed in business and enjoy the good life are manifest. There is also a thriving black market, particularly in goodies smuggled in from the West - the under-the-counter revolution.

So if only Mr. Gorbachev could see his way to channel this spirit of enterprise into the building industry and establish a system of site value rent (he should find it comparatively easy, there are no land barons to oppose him) he might be well on the way to solving his problem of inadequate and overcrowded housing, and provide an example we may one day care to follow.

But let us not be over-expectant, merely glad that reform has at least begun. In their concluding words, the authors say:

"The fact is that both our societies are seriously afflicted by sickness. Both face huge difficulties, generally of different natures but of equal urgency. And without drifting into a simplistic belief in 'convergence', it is possible to see opportunities for each of us learning something from the other."

"Of one thing, at least, there can be no doubt, if only by looking at the logic of economics, that is the sincerity of the Soviet leaders' wish to throw off the shackles of the past, not only on the domestic scene but also in international relations."

"For, if glasnost is one cornerstone of the perestroika, the removal of the enervating arms burden is another."

* Andrew Wilson and Nina Bachkatov, Harmondsworth: Penguin, £3.99.