

The Sun-Herald

The war crimes debate

A 73-year-old ex-Ukrainian, now an Adelaide pensioner, has become the first person to be charged under Australia's war crimes legislation.

Ivan Timofeyevich Polyukhovich was arrested last Friday by officers of the Special Investigation Unit (SIU) of the Commonwealth Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions and charged with nine offences under the War Crimes Act.

The charges allege Polyukhovich murdered 24 people and was connected with the murder of about 850 Jews during World War Two.

The offences allegedly occurred near the villages of Alexandrov and Serniki in the Rovno District of the Ukraine in eastern Europe between August 1941 and May 1943.

The accused man, also known as Ivanechko, migrated to Australia about 42 years ago from Poland.

The moral arguments for prosecution are compelling. The war crimes in Europe were so diabolical that there exists to this day a thirst for justice.

But the legal quandaries are massive. The alleged offences were committed almost half a century ago, in an East European country, during war-time, with no Australians involved.

Both the moral and legal arguments can be met in a very simple way.

If a prima facie case does exist, the accused man should be deported to the scene of the crime to be tried by the laws of that country.

A question of honour

THIS year's Australia Day Honours List is a fitting reminder of the array of talented people who have served their country with such distinction.

Awards of this sort are a practical means of setting the highest standards of conduct and excellence in public life.

In becoming a Member of the Order of Australia, satirist Max Gillies made an important observation about our honours system.

"The gloss is taken off it a bit by the fact that the awards have to be approved by the Queen of England," Mr Gillies said. "It sticks in the throat."

While it appears that it didn't stick in his throat for too long — the republican-minded Mr Gillies pocketed the award — he has raised a telling point.

Australia adopted its own honours system 10 years ago, yet in 1990 the British monarch is still sanctioning the names on our list.

When is this forelock-tugging going to end?

Responsibility for election comment in this issue is taken by David Hickie, Editor, 235 Jones Street, Broadway, Sydney 2007.



Coalition's double blow

THERE are two broad influences which ultimately will decide how the Australian electorate will vote at the next election (which now looks as though it will be in April).

They can be summed up as reality and imagery.

The realities are the hip-pocket things — interest rates, taxes, quality of life, strikes, the unwanted impingement of bureaucracy on daily life and all the little selfish things that can be summed up by the phrase "what's in it for me".

The imagery is largely the accumulated perception of the quality of the competing parties and their leaders — their competence, sincerity, vision.

Until recently, the trend in both these areas seemed to be running against the Labor Government. High interest rates have been biting hard and the gloss had largely disappeared from the image of high competence as the government floundered around with ad hoc policy-making in areas such as Kakadu mining and Kodak rescue packages.

The economic climate was to a great extent overshadowed by the pall of corporate collapse. The Coalition's "Economic Action Plan", which was to form the basis of its election strategy, was generally well-received by the media.

More importantly, perhaps, there was a widespread view that the conservative side of politics was being favoured by the feeling that "it's time" for a change. In other words, the imagery was moving strongly in the Coalition's direction.

This trend has been dealt a severe blow by the events of the past week.

Paul Keating demonstrated his innate political skills early in the week when he either persuaded or nudged the Reserve Bank not merely into agreeing to a cut in interest rates but into doing so with the maximum publicity possible.

Traditionally, the Reserve Bank goes about the business of altering interest rates with bankerly discretion. This time, the fanfare of publicity meant that there is now intense

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public pressure on the trading banks to lower their home loan rates as soon as possible.

If, indeed, the election is in April, the actual cut in these interest rates might not entirely fortuitously occur just before the polling date.

The response of the Opposition to this was inevitably muted — the worst that could be said about the move was that it might have been a week or so premature and that it was carried out with unaccustomed publicity.

Dr Hewson muttered dire doubts about a "deal" between the Government and the banks, but it is hard to see much political advantage in going down that road. Is the Liberal Party going to assume Labor's old mantle of being the scourge of the commercial banks?

Then on Thursday Mr Peter Shack dropped his health bombshell.

Health care in itself is potentially a major issue in any election, but in this case it also raised immediate questions about the potential competence and judgment of the Coalition parties if they got into government.

Once again, the only possible conclusion was that the Opposition parties have become so accustomed to dealing in ideological twaddle that they don't understand the mathematical disciplines of real administration.

Paul Keating, in an interview with the *Australian Financial Review* last week, spoke of the need to understand the "linkages" between government policies.

In this case, he was actually having a go at

his colleague Graham Richardson rather than the Opposition, but the fact remains that this concept of "linkages" could make or break the Peacock-led Coalition.

To say that the financial structure of the Opposition's health plan will be decided after they achieve government is simply tantamount to saying that none of their policy costings and, indeed, none of their policy promises, is believable. They are all subject to change as the cost of the health scheme (whatever it is) bites into the Coalition's Budget.

Health and industrial relations are two of the policy areas where there has been a genuine difference between the Government and the Opposition. Health has now become an unequivocal plus for the Labor Party and the manner in which this occurred can only add to existing doubts about the soundness of Coalition assumptions on industrial relations. Clearly the imagery of the Liberals and Nationals as more credible economic managers than Labor has suffered a blow — but not necessarily a decisive one.

The degree to which State issues affect the voters' view of Federal politics will be a decisive element here. The management debacles which have occurred in Victoria and Western Australia under Labor governments are a heavy burden for the Federal Labor Party to carry into the campaign.

At present, polls suggest that many voters are simply so fed up with the major parties that they are turning to minor parties, particularly the Democrats.

Under our political system, that simply emphasises the importance of preference votes and whether former Labor voters are so disillusioned that they will put the Coalition candidate in second place on the ballot paper rather than the Labor candidate.

That's a fairly debatable proposition: voters who really prefer a Coalition victory will most probably vote directly for their candidate rather than going the roundabout way of relying on preferences.

Meanwhile, the Coalition parties now face the task of explaining to the electorate how a health policy whose components are vague and whose cost is unknown will not affect the integrity of every other policy in their package.

Soviet openness shatters old beliefs

THE turmoil in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe has brought Western television viewers unprecedented insights into life behind what used to be known as the Iron Curtain and numerous blows to old preconceptions.

For example, whatever the rules of the old Bolshevik Soviet Union might have said about private property, it is now abundantly clear that they have been pretty liberal about the ownership of firearms.

The variety of privately-held arms which have turned up before the TV cameras in Armenia and Azerbaijan suggests that the Soviet Union is not far behind the US in offering its citizens "the right to bear arms."

Still unexplained by any TV program I have seen is how gangs in both States had such ready access to heavier weapons such as armoured personnel carriers. Did the gate-keepers of local armouries simply open the doors to roving gangs, were they attacked and over-

whelmed or was there defection to a rebel cause?

The realisation that virtually the entire Red Army is composed of short-term conscripts was also brought home vividly by these pictures.

It revived memories of both Vietnam and Afghanistan where conscript armies were inadequate against dedicated, fanatical foes. It was hardly surprising that the Soviet conscripts were even less enthusiastic about fighting their own countrymen than they were about fighting foreigners.

Whether the indiscriminate destruction in Baku was the result of panicked firing by inexperienced conscripts or deliberate terrorism by KGB professionals hasn't yet emerged, but it probably will, given the new openness in the USSR.

This openness is expressed in some surprising ways. Where did all these smooth-talking, beautifully-groomed, well-dressed, photogenic

Soviet journalists who are suddenly popping up on our television screens come from?

In many cases their comments would have been treason two or three years ago. Yet, it is quite plain that most of them, at least, are not sudden turncoats — they speak with the authority of long knowledge and careful thought.

The simmering discontent and yearning to speak out which must have been pervasive in the Soviet Union for years has suddenly exposed a degree of national self-knowledge which was largely unsuspected in the West.

That there must be a formidable counter-threat to this from the vast body of faithful Stalinists who still exist is obvious. I am one of those who believes that the future peace of the world could depend on Mr Gorbachev's ability to control the increasingly anarchic chain of events he has set off.

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