Stalin lives, and is running the NHS

A doctor friend who came from Poland in the mid-1980s, before the fall of communism, decries me for ‘champagne socialism’. Last summer she gave me a book to prove her point: Iron Curtain: the Crushing of Eastern Europe by Anne Applebaum.1 I approached its 500 pages warily.

I was surprised, by page 16, on the day before my annual appraisal, to find my own feelings reflected:

‘...many have tried to describe what it feels like to endure the disintegration of one’s entire civilization, to watch the buildings and landscapes of one’s childhood collapse, to understand that the moral world of one’s parents and teachers no longer exists and that one’s respected national leaders have failed.’

Appraisal began with an educational and supportive focus, but is now linked to revalidation. Its tone has changed from, ‘Perhaps you might consider ...’ to ‘You’re not doing well enough’. However friendly my appraisers have seemed, and despite their insistence that our discussions are understood very well that the people they were dealing with could be made to feel uncertain, uneasy and even guilty about their lives.’

Governments seem to regard doctors — especially GPs, with their (now nominal) independent contractor status — in the same way as the Bolsheviks regarded the kulaks (landowning peasants, created from the emancipated serfs by the reforms of Stolypin, who hoped that their new freedom and wealth were going to make them loyal to the tsar). Kulaks were seen as enemies of the revolution and were purged and persecuted by Stalin when resisting the collectivisation of their farms.

GPs have valued their independence but have given it up bit by bit by accommodating and taking the rewards offered for cooperation with government policy. Some believe in changes that are introduced, others quietly acquiesce, while others grumble, knowing that GPs have no power unless they stand together. The latter are equivalent to those Applebaum refers to as ‘losers’ in the Soviet workplace:

‘...teachers and intellectuals with a prevaricating sensibility, older skilled workers, young people who would not or could not conform.’

The Red Army, ‘liberating’ eastern Europe from the Nazis, disregarded socialist and even communist partisans who welcomed their arrival. Only ‘Moscow communists’ were trusted; others might be reactionary or fascist sympathisers. Some communists in Poland, Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, who had thought they were on the same side, found themselves in the gulag. GPs [who thought they were the good guys] face despondency, lower earnings, more complaints, and the burden of revalidation, but the comparison may still seem extreme. Nevertheless, ‘reforming’ central control (equivalent to the ‘liberating’ Red Army) wields power without our having right to appeal.

Big Brother is, undoubtedly, watching us. Our computers warn us if a patient’s blood pressure exceeds a recommended limit by a single point or a medication review is a day overdue. The Care Quality Commission will, according to myths already spreading, require evidence that curtains and waiting-room toys (if any are allowed) are cleaned regularly and in the right way. At my last appraisal I was chastised for having failed to acquire a certificate (even though I had attended the course) and warned that next year things would not be so easy.

GPs can, alas, be bribed to conform. Cashing in on clinics and fundholding in the early 1990s and abandoning 24-hour responsibility ... showed willingness to take the buck and sell the birthright, losing the moral high ground.’

REFERENCES
