



MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT



PETER GOLDRING

In early November, Foreign Affairs Critic Stockwell Day, invited to be an observer of the presidential election of Ukraine, was unable to attend, and asked if I would participate in his absence. I became a reporter/observer, sponsored by the Ukraine Election Transparency and Monitoring Project of the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies of the University of Alberta, supported in part with CIDA funding in 1996.

The November presidential election to replace outgoing President Leonid Kuchma was between former Prime Minister Victor Yushchenko and Prime Minister Victor Yanukovich. Yushchenko had originally been appointed Prime Minister by President Kuchma, but he had subsequently fallen from favour and been removed. Yanukovich was later appointed Prime Minister by Kuchma and was his preferred successor. Yushchenko favoured closer ties between Ukraine and the west, while Yanukovich favoured maintaining strong ties with Russia. All these factors – old rivalries, plus distinct differences in visions for the future of Ukraine – were harbingers of discord which negatively impacted on the electoral process. Ukraine, as an emerging democracy, has only

become independent in 1991, following centuries of dominance by other countries and later Communist rule. The return of civil society and democratic institutions is not an overnight process but rather a long term strategic vision needing aid from the international community and the Ukrainian people. For democracy to flourish we must maintain a long-term vision, focusing on institution building, development, trade, and a free press—only when all aspects of the society become open and accountable can a truly democratic culture emerge.



Member of Parliament Peter Goldring in Independence Square in Kiev, Ukraine on November 22, 2004, as demonstrators gather to protest the election results.

As an election observer, I volunteered to serve at difficult locations, such as a prison or military base and I was taken to a prison, located approximately 1 ½ hours by car east of Odessa, to a remand centre with approximately 750 inmates, many of whom had been charged with violent crimes, including murder. In Ukraine, as in Canada, remand centre prisoners

not yet convicted of crimes have a right to vote. It was here that I personally observed outright electoral fraud. Previous to the establishment of the polling area, I observed and photographed five spare ballot boxes which were stored, unsealed and without distinctive num-



bers or other identification, in a side room. During the official voting period, I observed one man who entered the storage room and who brought into the voting area an opened, unsealed ballot box. The moment he saw me watching him, he quickly put the box in a corner, under a coat. Then another person jammed a bulky envelope filled with paper ballots under the coat. I took a picture of the envelope and ballot box, together under the coat, as well as the sheepish conspirator.

After leaving the prison, I travelled by car to Odessa and then by air to Kiev, to further observe electoral processes at a high school just outside the city. Here, with two Canadian TV media groups in attendance, the process of voting was virtually flawless, in distinct contrast to observations of myself and many others in more remote locations.

Despite what many, including myself, considered to be widespread fraud in the November 21 election, Victor Yanukovich was declared by the Ukrainian Election Commission to have won the election. The reaction of the Ukrainian people in and around Kiev was both spontaneous and astounding. Within hours, thousands and then hundreds of thousands massed in Kiev's Independence Square. Yushchenko's supporters were determined to remain in the square for as long as it would take to return to them their stolen vote. Hundreds of tents were erected and a large and extremely

well-organized tent city evolved, complete with portable toilets and regular garbage pickup. The area around Kiev immediately resembled an armed camp, with military troops sitting in vehicles in a high state of readiness. The troops made a show of force in Kiev, through surrounding the Central Electoral Commission offices with riot tanks.

The day after the election, while observers began to leave the country, the Canadian Embassy in Kiev sent out a letter advising that all Canadians should consider leaving, due to the tenseness of the situation. I believed that I was going to be a witness to an impor-

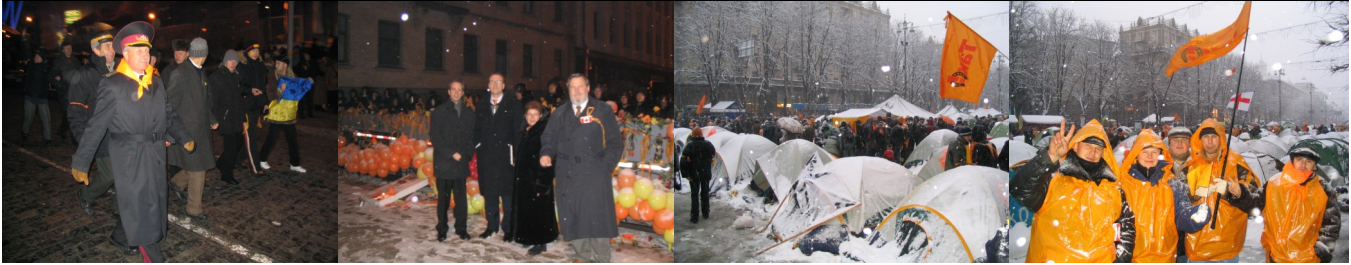
tant historical event and decided to remain in Ukraine, twice delaying my departure and staying a total of ten additional days, obtaining incredible first-hand impressions of the protest, its resolution attempts and regularly reporting my observations to the Canadian media. The outside world had to know that Ukrainians were standing up for their democratic rights of 1 vote per voter.

My activities apparently were unwelcome in certain quarters, as evidenced late one afternoon, when I returned to my hotel room from Independence Square, sat down at the room's telephone desk, in bare feet, and felt something wet. I was shocked to look down and discover that my foot was covered with blood. I thought that I might have injured myself unwittingly while out observing the protest, and that the



Ukraine Member of Parliament Ihor Ostash, Deputy Chairman of the Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee meeting with Peter Goldring in Ukraine's Parliament.





bleeding had been numbed by the cold. I was wrong; the blood readily washed off. I then went back to where my foot had been and found a pool of very fresh blood on the carpet. Obviously, someone had been in my room and apparently was trying to send me a message. One's immediate reaction might be to call hotel security or room service for cleaners, though it seemed to me that this was the action expected of me. I might then be removed from Ukraine, based on supposed threats to my security. I decided to say nothing, cleaned up the blood and continued my work with international media, through whom I called for the election to be declared a fraud. Three days later, I received an unsolicited and anonymously sent bowl of fruit and a bottle of champagne. Despite widespread concerns given Yushchenko's reported poisoning, I ate the fruit and drank 1/3 of the bottle of champagne, and left the remains for whomever to clearly see that if intimidation was the goal that it doesn't always work.

Mid-week, I worked my way through the crowds to the Parliament Buildings. While one hundred thousand demonstrators surrounded the parliamentary buildings and were restricting access, I finally pushed my way through to the door and was granted entry by a Ukrainian Member of Parliament, Ihor Ostash, Deputy Chairman of the Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee. Inside, I witnessed the parliamen-

tary proceedings and discussed issues with various other members of the Ukrainian parliament. Upon leaving, I asked for guidance to the best exit and was immediately escorted by a casually dressed man. Immediately out of sight of all others, he swung around and produced 8 x 10 fax photos of what he explained were Russian soldiers in Ukrainian uniforms. "Please tell Canada!" he exclaimed. Secret service agents, undercover police, intrigue and whatever seemingly abounded day and night in Ukraine, in far too many instances to be imagined.

The next day, I was asked quite unexpectedly to address the crowd in Independence Square. While certainly I had not come to Ukraine to support any one party or candidate, due to the widespread belief that the November 21 election had been compromised and that the determined, unrelenting standoff which had resulted was potentially a catalyst for volatile intervention, I considered it my duty to speak to the demonstrators. In addressing the crowd at Independence Square, my main message, through the interpreter, was that "Canadians now know that your vote was stolen from you and Canada is with you", in support of fair and democratic elections. The crowd roared its approval. I was told afterwards that I had been speaking before a crowd of an estimated 400,000 to 500,000 people, with 2 million more demonstrators at various locations throughout Kiev.



Member of Parliament Peter Goldring with Ukrainian Member of Parliament who was badly beaten by supporters of an opposing candidate.

Despite constant rumours of an impending military action to clear the demonstrators from Independence Square, and despite the rumours of plans on the part of one side to intentionally provoke the other as a pretext to larger interventions, the protests remained admirably peaceful. It seemed that, as each day passed, Ukrainians were developing an appreciation that their struggle for full and fair democracy was gaining incredible, favourable world attention.

On November 30th, my final day in Kiev a pivotal act took place in the Ukrainian parliament, with the passage of a resounding non-confidence vote against the government. This ushered in a display of goodwill shared by both candidates, who publicly met, agreed to hold a

repeat election and end of the blockade of government buildings. At 9:00 in the evening, I was in my hotel room, debating whether to pack and leave or stay longer, when explosions were heard from the general direction of Independence Square. When I looked out my window, I saw smoke was rising in the sky. My heart sank for a moment as I immediately thought that the soldiers had finally moved in with tear gas to clear the demonstrators. Then more explosions! This time I could see that they were fireworks, explosions of joy, relief, and hope for the future. The days change of events were noisily being celebrated with exploding fireworks now lighting the skies over Independence Square, visible from my hotel room window. There was no more any thought of staying longer. I could now go home.

**Update:** The ten days of intense revolutionary tension was at an end. The next day, the Ukraine Supreme Court simply confirmed the obvious and formally called for a repeat election on December 26<sup>th</sup>. Democracy and peaceful revolution had won the day in Ukraine.

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*This brochure series is intended to highlight special issues that Member of Parliament, Peter Goldring, has been involved in. If you wish to comment, please take a moment to fill out the survey below, write or call to the address above.*

**Your Opinion Matters...**

**Question #1** Should Canada specialize in international election monitoring and do more to support and emerging democracies?

Yes       No

**Question #2** Should Canada delegate a parliamentary specifically to do more to develop a special economic and political association with Ukraine?

Yes       No

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_  
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