

The viceroy rules, OK? Not everyone thinks so

Jul 24th 2003

From The Economist print edition

Bosnia is being run like 19th-century India. Too like, some say

CAN the natives be trusted to run their own country? Do they even want to? Almost eight years after the end of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, a paper from a Berlin think-tank, the European Stability Initiative (ESI) has caused a hoo-ha there with its characterisation of today's Bosnia as a European "raj", as the British describe their imperial rule in India.

Under the Dayton Accord that ended the war in Bosnia in 1995, the 15 trustee nations of that accord appointed a "high representative" to oversee its implementation. Bosnia was divided into two entities: a Serbian one, and one for Croats and Muslims, or as they are now officially known, Bosniaks. For several years, Bosnia remained deeply unstable: fighting stopped, but there was little other progress towards normality. Gradually, in an attempt to move ahead, the high representative was granted-by those who appointed him, not the Bosnians-more and more power.

Under today's holder of that office, Paddy Ashdown, a former leader of Britain's Liberal Democrats, "the Bosnian protectorate", says the ESI, "echoes the liberal imperialism of the past." To the institute, the way it is run has "more than superficial" affinities with the British raj in 19th-century India.

Certainly Lord Ashdown and his predecessors have increasingly often sacked inept or corrupt officials, indeed elected politicians. They have forced through reforms in the judiciary, the economy and the media. They have set up a customs service that works. But are these powers still necessary? No, says the ESI.

Gerald Knaus, its Austrian director, says that, above all, Bosnia suffers from an image problem: to outsiders-and a good many Bosnians-it is a corrupt place, prey to organised criminals, and, thanks to its complex machinery of government, virtually impossible to govern. In contrast, says Mr Knaus, it is really a success. "There is no threat from outside, it has free and fair elections, it is peaceful and has relatively little crime." Refugees are returning home, and many who stay away do so not because of fear or difficulties in getting their property back, but for economic reasons. The real problem, says Mr Knaus, is a moribund economy, with 25-40% unemployment; but this should be tackled by Bosnia's elected leaders, not a foreign viceroy.

Much of the liberal press in Sarajevo, which initially supported the increased powers of the high representative, has given sympathetic coverage to the ESI report. Most of Bosnia's politicians have been curiously quiet; maybe the problems, economic ones especially, are so large that they would rather someone else took responsibility for them. Indeed this week it was revealed that Bosnia's state institutions were over budget by a quarter in the past six months.

Lord Ashdown has reacted furiously. British rule in India, he says (erroneously), existed to extract India's wealth for Britain's benefit. In contrast, the international

community has poured euro17 billion (\$19 billion) into Bosnia since its war ended- and, he may well think, though he did not say it, so much has been stolen or squandered that those who put up the money can well claim a lot of control over what happens to it. Anyway, he says, more and more tasks are being handed over to Bosnian leaders, even if they are not yet ready to take full control.

Whether that thrills their fellow-citizens one can doubt. Polls show that most Bosnians think little either of their own politicians or of many of the foreigners who help govern them. They also show that two-thirds of young people would like to emigrate. Still, many think that, on balance, they would sooner have a benevolent despot to push through change than have their own leaders in full control. "On their own", says Tihomir Loza, a Bosnian analyst, "our politicians would do nothing. They're mostly colourless, mid-ranking, shady businessmen."