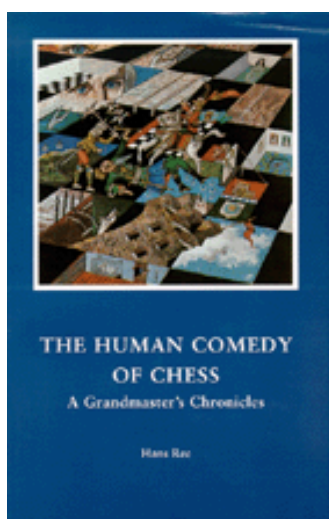




COLUMNISTS

Dutch Treat

Hans Ree

*The Human Comedy
of Chess*

by Hans Ree

Vote Early and Often

This famous American dictum, attributed to leaders as diverse as Lyndon B. Johnson and Al Capone, suggests that election fraud and corruption are unavoidable facts of life that should be taken **that should be taken with an equanimous smile**. This may be true when corruption is one factor among others, sometimes deciding the outcome of an election, but often not. It is quite different when corruption is so endemic that the whole concept of elections, in which contenders are supposed to be judged on their policies and their capability to execute them, becomes meaningless. Such is the case in FIDE.

One would hardly think so, judging by the photos of FIDE's election day in Turin. During the campaigns for the presidential election some bitter words were said and written, but finally harmony seemed to reign. In his speech to the delegates, Bessel Kok stressed the need for change, but he also thanked Kirsan Ilyumzhinov for the courtesy shown to him in Turin. Then came a very short speech by Ilyumzhinov, followed by the voting and the counting. Ilyumzhinov turned out to have won overwhelmingly with 96 against 54 votes. Both Kok and Ilyumzhinov were all smiles and they embraced on the stage.

However, many people came home from the Olympiad with tales belying the show of harmony. Here are a few reactions that were collected by *Schaakmagazine*, the monthly magazine of the Dutch chess federation.

Yvette Nagel (the wife of Yasser Seirawan, who was a member of Bessel Kok's team): "Truly fascinating what happened, this was unreal. At a certain moment, even before the actual voting, pamphlets were distributed saying that Ilyumzhinov had won 87 votes! A woman from Kok's team wanted to distribute something also, but was removed from the hall by Azmaiparashvili's wife, who literally kicked her. Some delegates were only flown in to Turin, they signed and took the same plane back home, it was really scandalous."

Jan Timman: "Intimidation and bribery went much farther than we had expected. People have actually seen banknotes changing hands, but how to prove what the money was for? Bessel Kok will drop out after this adventure, this is sure."

Herman Hamers (former president of the Dutch Chess Federation): "Incredible what happened there. It has little to do with democracy."

Kok's team had seen to it that two of their own men were present at the count of

votes and that voting would be confidential, hoping thereby to limit the efficacy of bribery. It seems that they even searched the voting booths for hidden cameras.

If this is true, they didn't reckon with the powers of modern technology. In his column in *The Guardian*, Nigel Short mentioned one of the 'odd stories generated by the election' which had it that in the privacy of the voting booth some delegates photographed their completed ballot papers to SMS the picture to the right quarters before depositing their votes.

During the campaign Yasser Seirawan wrote that if logic and reason would rule the election, Ilyumzhinov would not get a single vote. Indeed, what could be an honest reason to support him? He is a man who says that he has had conversations with aliens on their space ship and that Saddam Hussein is a fine character deserving the Nobel Peace Prize. As president of Kalmykia one of his first deeds was to abolish the local parliament, and international human rights organisations recognise him as a harsh suppressor of the freedom of the press. Two of his aides confessed to the murder of the journalist Larissa Yudina and were sentenced for it (of course outside Kalmykia). No reputable organisation would touch such a man even with a pole. From our perspective as chess lovers it can be added that during his reign of FIDE the interest of the international media in serious chess contests dropped dramatically.

Recently in *New in Chess*, Timman reminded us of the reason why in 1996 the Dutch chess world lost the VSB tournaments. These fine tournaments had been held for many years to the delight of both chess lovers and executives of the VSB Bank. The last tournament especially, in which Kasparov and Topalov shared first place, was a big success. Apart from the tournaments, the VSB Bank also sponsored a nationwide 'chess in the schools' project which was very popular.

Then in 1996 suddenly all came to an end. VSB's chief executive announced that the company would withdraw from chess, because Ilyumzhinov had announced that the world championship match between Karpov and Kamsky would be held in Saddam's Baghdad. The VSB man said: "You don't have to be a communication expert to realise that sponsoring and carrying across one's image are closely connected." With Ilyumzhinov, chess had become dangerous to the bank's image. Nowadays they are doing a lot for Dutch poetry.

This is only one example, where the reason for ending a fine chess tradition of ten years was explicitly given. There must have been many more occasions when a promising chess initiative was nipped in the bud because of Ilyumzhinov's reputation.

Imagine a commercial sponsor who considers getting involved in chess. The boss doesn't know much about the chessworld and orders an employee to do a quick Google search. Up come FIDE and Ilyumzhinov. Horror! Within seconds the potential sponsor is led away from chess, never to come back to it. This is not a hypothetical case, for Seirawan says that he has witnessed such a situation.

Above I quoted Timman saying that Bessel Kok would certainly stay away from

FIDE in the future. This seems almost self-evident, but some doubt remains. Ilyumzhinov, in an interview with his sycophant Yury Vasiliev, said that Kok had told him that he needed a month's thinking time to consider if he would fulfill a role in FIDE. Seirawan tells it slightly differently, saying that Kok in the post-election euphoria of 'gens una sumus' had asked for a concrete written proposal and promised to answer within a month. Apparently such a written proposal has not yet come.

But if it ever comes, I can think of only one reasonable piece of advice to Bessel Kok, who is a good and honest man who should not be mauled and tainted by the FIDE gang: Don't even think about it!

FIDE politics is an extremely depressing subject, both to be involved in and to write about. I can promise our **Chesscafe** visitors that it will be quite some time before I will return to it.



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