8. A Summing Up

Where does our excursion into the various aspects of Austrian history, society, economic and political life and foreign relations, leave us?

Austria is not a popular cause at present. For many, Kurt Waldheim is, by association, Austria. For many, his attitude of bland unconcern, of apparent ignorance of what the issue is, his bureaucratic references to merely ‘having done his duty’ represent the quintessential Austrian attitude to her recent past. He is, for too many, the typical Austrian figure, indeed so much so it was argued that the majority elected him and a larger majority still support him. Even his opponents, at least those of a pragmatic stripe such as the present Chancellor Franz Vranitzky, hope that the problem will in time disappear and do not wish it to interfere with Austria’s reputation or with other pressing business for his coalition which includes Waldheim’s party, the ÖVP.

For many Austrians of almost whatever standpoint, the issue has gone on long enough and is largely now only of interest to foreigners. This fact can and has been exploited politically both by the ÖVP and the less cautious FPÖ under Jörg Haider. Yet for those who seek to judge Austria from the outside, those attitudes, so to say, compound the felony. It may well be that the permanent and almost excessive exercise in Vergangenheitsbewältigung that is indulged by the German media, politicians and opinion-formers is no more sincere than the attitude of Austrians towards the past, yet it is so much better public relations. The issue cannot be ignored in any assessment of Austria today.

There is no direct link with the other prongs of criticism launched against Austria. The ‘Austrian Model’ or the ‘Austrian Way’ – so often associated with Bruno Kreisky, but which, in many of its key elements, long preceded him – is declared dead. Dead, because it could only moderate and not reverse the effects of an ongoing long-term world recession. The bar was set very high indeed if that was the realistic criteria by which success was to be judged. For many others, the model could not succeed and was doomed to fail. Indeed, their own political attitudes positively required it to fail. It opposed or denied far too many of the current neo-conservative nostrums: it
believed in a positive rôle for a large state industrial sector; it believed in high public spending; it believed in social engineering, moving forward by consensus and involving the social partners on a broad front of economic policy. It was pragmatic, not doctrinaire. To its critics on both the right and left, almost all these aspects, and above all the pragmatic consensual approach, were far from virtues.

There is, of course, no direct link with Waldheim, yet the subconscious view is that a society built on too much pragmatism and too much compromise is built on moral shifting sands and hence the wine scandal, the Androsch affair and other financial scandals, and indeed the largest scandal of all – Dr Waldheim – are the products of such a society and such a system.

The third prong of the attack is against yet another pillar of the ‘Austrian Model’, her permanent neutrality. In the 1950s, this was seen as a creative and imaginative way out of the impasse in which the talks about the State Treaty had run. However, with Austrian membership of the new European Community being debated, the old question of ‘Is membership compatible with neutrality?’ is being stood on its head and re-posed by high standing personalities in the community such as Leo Tindemans in the form ‘Is neutrality compatible with membership?.’ Neutrality for many is again seen as synonymous with provincialism and lack of principle, as a product of pragmatism and compromise so characteristic of the Austrian system.

Provincialism, pragmatism, compromise, absence of open debate about key political issues, coupled with a weak ethical climate in politics have all been seen as major and unfortunate characteristics of Austrian public life. It is, for example, striking that there are so many political scandals in Austria, involving corruption or misuse of political office. This is striking both because it could suggest that there is a rather low standard of ethics, which is mutually tolerated by the political class, and because it has become such a dominant feature of public debate. Political issues as such have tended to be crowded out. Press and broadcasting media tend to concentrate on personalities and scandals, rather than substantive questions. Certainly, the scandals are serious, but they seem at times an alibi for deeper debate and criticism. Indeed, in the end the constant revelations seem to have a numbing effect on public opinion and undermine the political class as a whole, rather than those specifically guilty. In fact, the welter of scandal, covering a very wide field (such as for example: the cost overruns and corruption in the building of the AKH Hospital in Vienna; the building scandals in Vienna in the 1970s; the tax evasion – and moonlighting as a tax advisor – of former Finance