

Towards a More Effective Parliament

If the role of the parliament is indicative of the health of democracy in a country, then in the case of Bangladesh the situation can be said to be steadily improving. With each passing session there are signs of improvements in the quality of debates, feeling of seriousness in approaches to potentially divisive issues and signs of rising confidence in handling the business of the House.

However, the improved health of our parliament hides some basic weaknesses. The foremost among them is the failure of the special committees in resolving any of the major issues entrusted to them. The fact cannot be emphasized enough that the special committees are integral parts of the parliament itself and their failure to make any progress in dealing with those important issues cannot add to the prestige of our supreme legislative body and contribute to the rise of our confidence in its efficacy. Three special parliamentary committees were formed during the last session to look into the three following areas: a) Indemnity (Repeal) Bill, b) campus violence, and c) separating the Judiciary from the Administration. As to the first, the position of the two leading parties, according to the latest reports, have hardened instead of converging towards any joint position. Given the complexity of the issue and the far reaching political implications of it, the failure of the special committee is understandable. The limited success of the committee on campus violence remained so due to the decision by the AL to boycott its sessions. The AL move followed, what the party calls, "BNP's decision to form countrywide anti-terrorism groups solely with their own members". Whatever may be the merit of AL's views, it can in no way be used as an excuse to derail the work of the parliamentary committee. By doing so the AL has contributed to the process of weakening the parliament, a prospect against which they are so vocal. The failure of the third committee — on separation of the judiciary and the administration — to make any headway in their deliberations rests squarely on the shoulder of the government. They should have taken a more active approach which definitely would have produced some positive results.

During the coming session we want to see the parliament grow stronger. We express our unambiguous opposition to the ruling party's tendency to get things done through ordinances first, and come to the parliament later. The case of abolishing the Upazila system through the promulgation of an ordinance amounted to depriving the parliament of its fundamental right of being able to deliberate on important national issues before it is implemented. We also express our considered view against the opposition's oft-repeated threats to take national issues to the 'streets' prior to placing them before the parliament. Now that we have a genuinely representative legislature, no party — be it the ruling or the biggest opposition — should do anything that erodes the centrality of the role of the parliament. If they do so, they will be weakening the very foundation on which their future successes rest. We also expect the leader of the House to make herself more available and ensure, through proper advance planning, the presence of a sizeable leading members of the Treasury Bench whenever the parliament is in session. We expect the session to be constructive and forward-looking, one that will take the nation further ahead in its efforts towards development and strengthening of democracy.

The Puny Lords of the Nights

Man gets intelligent only after the thief has left with his booty. So goes a popular Bengali quip. When it is already the mosquitoes that truly reign over the capital's nights and not the government or any or all of its agencies, the Dhaka City Corporation suddenly seems to have woken up to the need of having a role in the matter. We are none too enthused by this response, however sincere, for the record so far has not ever been encouraging. The city fathers had on numerous occasions made a great hullabaloo over the self-same puny insects that's once the easiest thing to snuff out of being a nuisance. Multi-crore-Taka projects had been drawn up and crores upon crores in actual fact spent on the plea of freeing Dhaka of the menace. Nothing positive has so far resulted. Sadly for us, neither have we been able to learn to live with these pests.

How can we? The 2465 kilometers of drains and hundreds of ditches full of stagnant water — the ideal breeding ground of the mosquito larva — are almost all government property. One can very reasonably say that government is very successfully running vast hatcheries, unlucky for us, of not fishes but mosquitoes. In such a situation — which keeps visiting us every year without fail — one is compelled, as a matter of routine, to recall the services of the one and only inimitable Habibullah Bahar. Although the people of East Bengal, now Bangladesh, very decidedly buried for good the Muslim League as a political entity in the 1954 general election, they never forgot to remember with gratitude this ML minister. Why? For he eliminated the mosquito menace from the city — and possibly from all over the land. He did it so successfully that years after he was gone as a minister, the mosquitoes did not return.

The mosquito explosion bringing in low an endless series of health and other problems and the government's failure to cope with it point unmistakably to a sad fact. The absence of social initiative in the face of even such a supremely manageable challenge. Isn't there in the city clubs and associations and other private bodies who could take it upon themselves to wipe out the menace locally? In this context how one feels for the revival of the Bratachari Movement of Gurusaday Dutta, Qamrul Hassan, the painter, as a disciple of the great man, tried to start the movement afresh but failed because of poor response. Mosquitoes and illiteracy were two of the vowed enemies of the Bratachari which does not apply in the case of the much pampered Boy Scout organisation.

We expect the government to be discomfited by the thought that the nights in Bangladesh belong to the mosquitoes, and do something effectively about it.

TODAY, the words "Structural Adjustment" are on almost everybody's lips. The subject is important because it seems to affect everyone's life. It is also sometimes very difficult to understand but everybody seems to agree that it is more difficult to implement and to live with. What is structural adjustment, how does it work and how come is it important to implement such programmes? This is what I would like to exchange views with you about.

Structural Adjustment is, of course, an attempt to put national economies into some semblance of harmony with the normal workings of market forces. As such, it was the conventional wisdom of the 1980s. And, as we get in the new decade, with the market approach to economic growth in spectacular triumph over the planned economies of Eastern Europe, and their centralized allocation of resources, structural adjustment looks more relevant with each day that passes.

I am not here to reveal any ultimate truth. Frankly, when it comes to structural adjustment, I've got more questions, myself, than answers. What I would like to do, in these remarks, is pose a few of those questions...try to put this difficult topic into perspective (at least the perspective I see it in)...and offer some tentative thoughts on what all of this implies for the people and the agencies working in the cause of development.

THE FIRST QUESTION HAS TO BE: What is structural adjustment? In a field that is relatively new, highly abstract, and wide open to debate, we need all the clarity we can manage.

The World Bank (in its 1987 annual report) defines structural adjustment as "Programmes, policies and institutional change necessary to modify the structure of an economy so that it can restore or maintain its growth, and its ability in its balance of payments, over the medium term."

Bloodless, perhaps, but reasonable enough — why then, does it provoke such strong reaction?

When UNICEF laments the death of half a million children in 1988, due to the slowing down or reversal of development, why do so many people see structural adjustment as a

Structural Adjustment: The Path that Leads Forward

by Emile Gauvreau
High Commissioner of Canada in Bangladesh

A Star Special

prime suspect? Why does Julius Nyerere ask, "Must we starve our children to pay our debts?"

The truth is that we are passing through a most painful stage in the forty-year history of development cooperation. We've abandoned a lot of naive ideas and simplistic theories. We've confirmed the value of several important priorities. And now we have an extremely difficult JUGGLING ACT to do.

We know that global poverty is causing intolerable suffering. We're aware, at last, of the en-

der an immense burden of debt, compounded by high interest rates...when its commodities and raw materials bring only depressed, meagre returns...when resource flows from the industrialized world are so low that, in reality, the flow is in the other direction, from the poor to the rich, to the tune of perhaps \$ 20 billion a year, leaving aside the question of equity in the way

First, there is no set formula for structural adjustment. It is not simply an austerity programme, and if it means cutbacks, they don't necessarily have to be in health and education. True, there are recurring common elements in most of the adjustment programmes that are being carried out. But the point of the whole exercise is not to satisfy some abstract macroeconomic

ties... because when we talk about a nation, we are dealing not with abstract political and economic concepts, but with large numbers of living, breathing human beings. That is the reality of it.

Second, I said that structural adjustment is vital... and that is because I define it not as a mathematical problem to be worked out, but as the various changes that must be made so that a country can move toward realistic economic policies and that have a decent chance of succeeding, and of leading to prosper-

To embark on structural adjustment means carrying out a juggling act, while also taking a leap of faith. As Robert McNamara says, "The costs of adjustment come earlier, the benefits only later on."

vironmental crisis and of the unsustainable burden we are putting on our planet's life support system. We have awakened to the need to invest in human resources. We have even learned that we can no longer go on ignoring and wasting the half of those human resources who are women.

We have to deal with all these priorities, which must be met, at a time when the Third World is staggering un-

der the global marketplace treats the North and South.

And now, on the top of all that, we have this new and rather confusing priority called structural adjustment, which donor countries and agencies insist is of overriding importance.

Well, I agree, it is vital. But maybe we have to stand back from it a bit, in order to see it in context, and in proportion. There are three points I would like to make in this regard.

theory...rather, the goal of each programme is to put the economy of a particular nation on a solid basis.

So, each programme should arise out of specific and unique situation of the country concerned. It should be designed and carried out, not according to some pre-set equation but in the light of the country's own, individual circumstances — its economic problems and weaknesses, but also its political, social and cultural real-

ity.

I think we all realize that — entirely apart from the external factors, massive though they are — there is a great need for reform in the economies of most Third World countries. Despite the progress made in the past few years, there are still self-imposed obstacles to economic progress that need to be removed — parasitism that still drain the treasury, pricing policies that obstruct production, exchange rates that distort trading partners and fiscal framework and tax collection system that deprive governments of essential revenues. These must be corrected — not for ideological reasons, but because they get in the way of development, and stand before the people and a better future.

If we are to be entirely honest, of course, we should freely admit it is not just the Third World that needs structural adjustment... we all do, in one form or another. Most of the industrialized nations suffer from the various ailments we have talked about, notably deficits and debt. Structural adjustment should really be a continuing, universal process by which the economies of the world are reformed, strengthened, and made more healthy, so they can use earth's finite stock of resources more carefully and efficiently as they perform their true function... which is

to meet human needs. And there is a third perspective in which I would hope that we would view this subject. Structural adjustment is high-priority, because I think we have established a consensus that it is an essential prerequisite to a prosperous future. But it is nothing more than a means to an end, and it is only one aspect of life or even of development. Yes, I think that we have to carry it out... because it is one step on the long path to our real goal, which is development that is sustainable — not only economically but environmentally, and culturally as well.

To embark on structural adjustment means carrying out the juggling act that I mentioned earlier, while also taking a leap of faith. As Robert McNamara says, "The costs of adjustment come earlier, the benefits only later on."

In fact, the evidence of success is, so far, very fragmentary. The statistics we must work with are often unreliable and many years behind the events. And the impact of other unrelated factors may be many times bigger in scale, easily masking the effect of adjustment policy. So, in effect, when we lack structural adjustment we are doing that juggling act and taking that leap of faith, while also walking through a maze, blindfolded.

And yet the theory is sound. Common sense tells us that it is futile to try to create healthy projects in sick economies. We have seen plenty of evidence of the human suffering, vast in scale, that results from, for instance, inflation run out of control. And it is clear that, in the long run, the only way to solve poverty is by enabling the poor to become more productive. In the setting of a healthy economy.

To conclude, as you can see, there is no magic answer or solution to economic development. When and if an economy needs to be restructured, it requires a detailed analysis of the situation based on the specificities of the country. It is also very important that governments who decide to implement those difficult and politically dangerous programmes can rely on sufficient external financing. In the end, despite the drawbacks and the complications, we must follow this path, simply because it is the only one that leads forward.



The High Commissioner for Canada (with glasses) signing an aid agreement with Bangladesh.

Philippine Elections Feature Pluralism Overdose

THE Philippines appears at the moment to be suffering from an overdose of pluralism.

So much so that the local press has coined a new word: "presidentables," or prospective candidates for president of the Republic in the national elections scheduled May 11, next.

If one includes the still real possibility that President Corason Aquino and former First Lady Imelda Marcos will also run, there are now an even dozen "presidentables."

This will be the first contest for the country's top government position under the post-dictatorship constitution. That constitution encourages pluralism as opposed to the one-man rule of the deposed president, Ferdinand E. Marcos.

Eight major political parties have registered with the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) thus far. With the deadline for filing certificates of candidacy still a couple of months away, at least two major parties — the 91-year-old Nacionalista Party (NP) and the currently-ruling, Laban ng Demokratikong Pilipino (LDP) may further splinter into various wings.

Three NP candidates, all claiming their respective groups as the legitimate holder of party authority, have each

"expelled" one another for acts allegedly harmful to the party.

One of the NP presidential hopefuls, Senator Juan Ponce Enrile, has offered to withdraw as candidate and challenged the other two to do the same. But the directorate of his group voted to reject Mr Enrile's withdrawal and he kept the door ajar by announcing he would leave his fate to the mercy of the party.

Meanwhile, his NP rivals, Vice President Laurel and business tycoon, Eduardo Cojuangco, were both slated to be nominated unopposed as official candidates of their separate wings of the NP.

All three leaders went through the motion of still trying to reconcile, knowing they would all hang together unless their party is reunited. The latest word was that the Enrile and Cojuangco factions were holding serious reconciliation talks but neither candidate was expected to yield the top billing.

Vice President Laurel's group has petitioned the Supreme Court to inhibit the other two wings from using the name, seal and emblem of the NP. Supporters of Mr Laurel say the VP would run "happen what may." They argue that Laurel deserves a break this time, having given in to Cory Aquino in the name of unity in the 1986 snap elec-

Baldomero T Olivera writes from Manila

Laurel broke with Mrs Aquino later and now heads the opposition party.)

A similar threat of a split is facing the LDP. Many believe that either of the two party candidates, Speaker Ramon Mitra and former Defense Secretary Fidel V. Ramos, would file his candidacy anyway whoever loses in the party convention. Mr Mitra won but Mr Ramos is seeking new political partners outside the LDP.

top Catholic prelate, Jaime Cardinal Sin.

Observers believe Mr Fernan entered the ring a little too late to organise a national field machine, but if it is true he would be supported by the President and the Cardinal, a formidable built-in machine would boost his chances. Moreover, it was noted that certain big businessmen were present at Mr Fernan's initial rally.

The other leading candi-

The elections, it is believed, will be decided on personality. Or worse, it might depend on the size of the campaign kitty of the candidates

The situation among the pro-administration coalition was further muddled when Marcelo Fernan resigned as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court to run for President under yet another party called Union for Progress (UP).

Among those who openly endorsed Fernan's candidacy were prominent people originally identified as key supporters of President Aquino. The President has indicated she would not make her choice public until her birthday Jan. 25 next year, but it is generally believed Mr Fernan enjoys at least the tacit clearance of the President as well as that of the

dates are: Liberal Party (LP) — Senate President Jovito Salonga, Partido ng Demokratikong Pilipino — LABAN (PDP-Laban) — Senator Aquilino Pimentel Jr., Partido ng Masang Pilipino (PMP) — Senator Joseph Estrada, Reform Party — Miriam Defensor Santiago, former Secretary of Agrarian Reform.

It is noteworthy that while Senator Estrada and Mrs Santiago are relative newcomers to national politics, they both surprisingly score well in public opinion polls. Mr Estrada had had a built-in popularity as a movie star while Mrs Santiago appears to have charmed mostly the youth who

comprise more than half the qualified voters in the coming polls.

On top of all this confusion, there persists a belief that dramatic circumstances within the next month or so could lead to a final showdown between the country's top women leaders: President Aquino and former First Lady Imelda Romualdez Marcos.

Although Mrs Aquino has repeatedly said her decision not to seek another term was final, it is an open secret that many influential people, including her brother, Congressman Jose Cojuangco, are urging her to run.

Some say if Mrs Marcos should decide to seek the presidency, Mrs Aquino could be persuaded that only she — the President — has the clout to stop the irrepressible Mrs Marcos from returning to the presidential palace. It is recalled that President Aquino did not want to oppose the late President Marcos in the 1986 snap election but she changed her mind on the 11th hour.

Logically, Mrs Aquino should support whoever may be nominated by the LDP. Brother Jose Cojuangco is the LDP secretary-general and charter founder. But the President herself has never formally joined the LDP and there are talks the hidden scenario pits Mrs Aquino and

Mr Fernan as the eventual administration ticket in May. That scenario appears to have little credibility at this time, however.

Observers believe the intended high-level policy sought by the framers of the 1987 Constitution is not being achieved if one were to judge from the apparent overdose of pluralism in the current electoral campaign.

Almost all the parties espouse motherhood programmes. There are no sharp ideological differences in their platforms. The coming contest, it is believed, will be decided on the basis of the personal popularity of the candidates.

The bigger fear is that in the absence of issues, victory in the coming elections might depend on the size of the campaign kitty of the candidates.

Philippine elections are vulnerable to the corruptive practice of vote buying due to widespread poverty.

Another big problem raised by the current overdose of pluralism is the fear that whoever wins will not enjoy a clear majority mandate. Observers predict that without mass support, the next president will have a difficult time solving the serious problems facing the country today.

— *Depthnews Asia*

To the Editor...

Pen versus sword

Sir, Just contemplate of the paradox that a Dhaka University teacher, in a recent correspondence to the Editor of The Daily Star, has professedly discarded almost as an outmoded, age-worn and inappropriate aphorism, the popular saying, "The pen is mightier than the sword", causing a very little and inappreciable jolt to the gentry. Through our past experiences, we have come to believe that the unending series of disturbances occurring in the educational institutions are not going for any let-up in near future. The firebrand student leaders and activists have subjugated that varsity administration and the teachers community. These authentic authorities of the varsity have been humbled like anything and are virtually the "hostages" in the clutches of these political brand of hoodlums. One no more nurtures the belief that the authorities will ever be able to turn the tide and put a plug to nihilism and antagonism. The teachers and students who live in the close

proximity of threats, intimidation and murder, can scarcely gather courage to take a firm stand against the non-academic activities and gangster manoeuvrings. Fervent request to the leaders of the political parties, irrespective of their ideological inclinations to keep their followers and activists from armed confrontations, have yielded no desired results; rather, the situation worsened due to l-throw-you-all-to-ditch proposition existing in the political circles. Perhaps the political leaders maintain a double standard; they talk against terrorism and at the same time encourage the armed partymen to brush off their political rivals.

Whoever goes to the position of power, the first thing he/she does is encourage partymen to gain he control and dominance on the varsity campus and Mahallas (localities), apparently not by virtue of intellectual or cultural contributions, but by guns and sheer muscle-power. Whatever big promises and hope our politicians try to infuse into our heart, they wither away as soon

as their armed partymen, start firing bullets and brandishing knives. The teachers and general students no more venture to talk of education as something to be valued or, important. The academic activities, therefore, in the campus has turned out to be inconsequential and impotential.

In foreseeable future, we do not see any glimmer of hope for any potential change or, resurrection. Wriggling out of this quagmire of confrontation and anti-academic persuasions will be impossible without the all-out cooperation of the politicians, their protégés and pawns. If these people show a little patriotism to take the troubles of rooting out the hoodlums from their parties as well as from the campus and Mahallas, a congenial atmosphere for education and economic activities will return in no time.

The journalists and writers who are trying to throw spotlight on the definite causes of this tumble-down condition of the educational institutions in particular and the society in

general, deserve praises and congratulations. Their only weapon, the pen has not yet proven as successful as the Patriotic Missiles in hitting the targets, but their search and determination can not be easily extinguished or, undermined. While searching through the annals of history, we come across people who spent time in far worse condition, leapt out of darkness as beams of education and enlightenment reached the blind alleys of despair, desperation and frustration. The conscientious parts of those societies in the long run vanquished the dark forces and showed that darkness is not to remain for eternity. We hope to see one day the mighty pen tames the still unobliging sword and helps to establish peace, justice, love and fellow-feeling as the dominant traits of the society.

Our hope rests on these Samsons who, we believe, will bring down the big temple of distorted values and establish the truth.

Hubert Francis Sarkar
Singhala, Dhaka.

"Chartered ship for Haj"

Sir, We fully endorse the views expressed in the letter under the above caption published in this column of your newspaper on Nov 15, and Dec 26 last urging upon the government to charter foreign passenger ships for ensuing Haj taking place in the 1st week of June, next. Present Haj Policy frustrates the middle and upper middle and upper middle class people of the country because the cost to be incurred for the Haj is beyond their reach. In view of the high cost of air travel, each year many Hajis quotas remain vacant. If the journey is arranged by ship, it will undoubtedly reduce the cost by 40% to 50%. Thus this will come within the reach of a common man. So our neighbouring countries like India, Pakistan and also far off countries Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia etc arrange the journey by ship for the Haj.

Bangladesh has no passenger ship. But if genuine at-

tempt is made well in time it is not at all difficult. To negotiate and Charter foreign passenger ship for ensuing Haj, ample time is still available. Chartered passenger ship are available in China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Spain besides India and Pakistan. Our embassies in the concerned countries, OIC Secretariat particularly Saudi Arabian Government may be contacted for necessary information and negotiation for chartering a passenger ship. Bangladesh is the poorest OIC country with a fast growing population. So it is the duty of the Government to bring Haj costs within the reach of middle and upper middle class people.

Would the Prime Minister, Ministers for Religious Affairs and Shipping kindly take personal initiative to arrange ships for the Hajis during the ensuing pre and post Haj period commencing, respectively in

May, June, next.
Vox Populi