

Curing the 'Sick' Industries

The high powered body, chaired by the Industries Secretary, has decided to request the government to further defer punitive actions against owners of 'sick' industries in order to give them further time to put their house in order, so to speak. The previous deadline of 30 April — after which the banks and Development Financial Institutions (DFIs) were free to take legal action against industries that did not repay their loans — is now to be extended to 30 June.

The first question that needs to be asked is why upto 30 June? Is it just another of those meaningless extensions only to be extended again? Or has it been well thought out so that the genuine entrepreneurs get the necessary respite that can give them the chance to revamp their industries and get back into a healthy rhythm of production, thereby enabling them to start repayment of their bank loans? The point to be made here clearly is that the period of extension should be a realistic one — three months, now asked for, but if necessary it could be more — but one that does not require to be extended again. We support the plea for extension — whatever be the period — but with a clear understanding that banks and DFIs will be allowed to take legal action after its expiry.

There exists widespread confusion in the public mind as to what constitutes 'sick' industries and what realistic steps the government can take to save the situation. In our view the attitude of both the government and the banks and DFIs, — especially of the latter — should not be one of how to punish or take to task the so called defaulting entrepreneurs, but to help them to overcome the difficulties that have currently rendered them 'sick'. To be able to do so we need, first of all, to separate the wilfully defaulting ones — who are definitely among a handful of cases — from those who are in difficult financial situation in spite of their best efforts. A closer examination of the 'sick' industries will clearly indicate to us which are the ones likely to respond to 'treatment' and the other that are terminally ill and as such beyond remedy. The latter group of 'sick' industries should be done away with in a manner that recovers whatever percentage of the original capital invested.

Government must seriously look into the causes as to why there are such large number of 'sick' industries in Bangladesh. Faulty government policies are often as responsible for industries becoming sick as are the unforeseen market forces, inept management or even dishonest business practices. Unrealistic power rates and their periodic upward revision have known to raise the cost of production of certain industries so as to render them uncompetitive. Extremely high tariff rates on the imported industrial raw materials have often rendered industrial units 'sick'. This policy appears particularly inconsistent with national interest when a far low level of tariff is charged for finished products, putting our industries based on imported industrial raw materials — most of our industries are in this category — at a particular disadvantage.

We must bear in mind that save for a marginal few who have deliberately misused the borrowed bank money, the majority of the people who had set up industries wanted to add to the overall productive capacity of the country. The fact that their ventures have turned 'sick' do not automatically make them guilty of any anti-national activity as some people — a few occupying very powerful and authoritative position — would like to have us believe.

The phenomenon of sick industries is something that goes deep into the structural malaise and policy problems in our country that mitigate against the development of a healthy private industrial sector. Unless we bring about drastic industrial, commercial, financial and related policy reforms, the prospect of our doing away with 'sick' industries permanently, remain doubtful.

Tribute to Sher-e-Bangla

The nation, as usual, observed the 30th anniversary of death of Sher-e-Bangla A K Fazlul Huq yesterday. But paying such ritualistic tributes year after year does hardly any justice to the main purpose i.e., to imbibe the spirit with which he made all the difference in the until-then — and perhaps still now — conventional politics. As a leader his incomparability lies in the fact that he provided the magic touch in the popular politics to bring it to the masses. Fazlul Huq's enduring love for the commonman was reciprocated in equally sustainable terms. Whether in the then undivided Bengal or in the Indian politics, this popular element was not only unique but its practical implications have been — or better said could have been — highly satisfying.

It is precisely for this reason that Sher-e-Bangla stands apart from all the Muslim political leaders of his generation. Some of his achievements in the process have contributed richly not only to the cause of his own community but also to the amelioration of the poor people's lot. Those are the ideals, the lessons he has left behind for us to learn. On this count, ours is a failure that cannot be measured in simple terms. But the approach he made to the less advanced community's education is something novel by any standard. But we simply have misread the lesson and today the outcome is gradually turning for the worst.

Similarly, Sher-e-Bangla had to his credit the most coveted achievement of writing off the farmers' loan. In the context of the small farmer's plight today, we surely need a Fazlul Huq. On both the fronts, the relevance of the ideals and political finesse he so creditably mustered is equally — if not more — overriding. But apart from rhetorics, there is hardly any practical progress. The fact that high-sounding words are not matched by practical measures brings to the fore the weakness of today's leadership. The quality of leadership now suffers from, among others, such a double standard.

Men like Fazlul Huq, therefore, need to be remembered not only for remembrance's sake; but for putting ourselves in the right perspective. And there should be a continuous process to do this job. For, by doing so we know better what we ought to do. Out of several of his outstanding fields of work, let us take up education and agriculture where he virtually revolutionised the relations within. To fittingly pay tribute to this great leader, at least this much we can do to avoid sounding hollow.

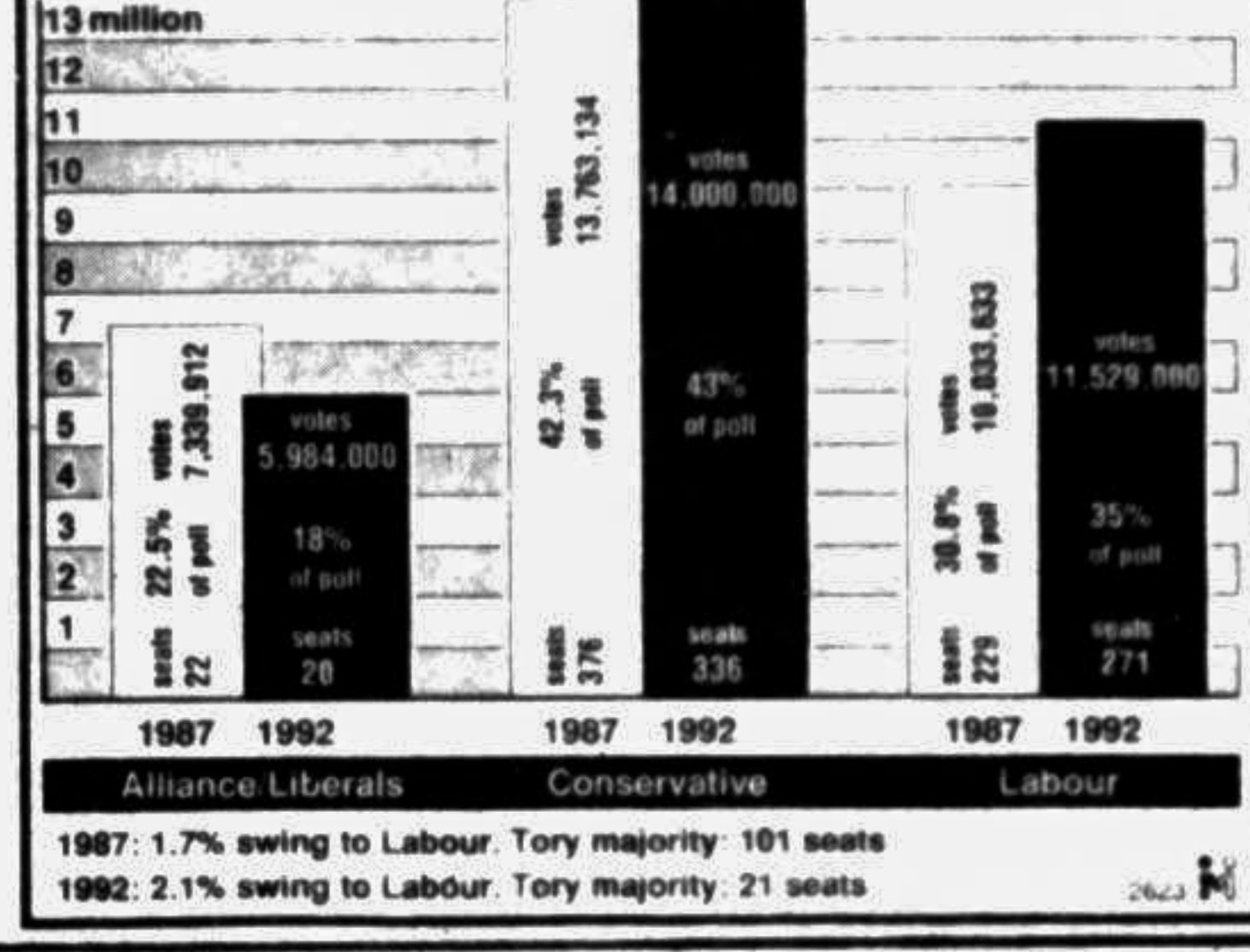
Victorious Major Will Move Britain into Centre Right

Derek Ingram writes from London

When Prime Minister John Major started campaigning on a soapbox in old-fashioned British style an egg smashed across his face and cut his cheek. A few days later election pundits and pollsters all got egg on their faces when Major came back to power with an overall majority. Gemini News Service examines the kind of government Britain can expect for what could be another full five-year term.



How they ended up



Heath — and did not enjoy the rivalry between 10 Downing Street and the Foreign Office that existed when he became Foreign Secretary in the last days of Thatcher.

Major quickly made his mark in summit diplomacy as soon as he became Prime Minister, but he did so much more in tandem with Hurd than did Thatcher.

And he has a feel of the underprivileged that got him off to a good start in his relations with leaders of the developing world. The signs are that he will continue to move away from the strident diplomacy of the Eighties and this will go down particularly well with the Third World.

One of the British ministers most well known in the Third World lost her seat — Lynda Chalker, Minister for Overseas Development. No one was surprised, least of all Chalker herself, because she was hanging on to a majority of 279.

Her predecessor at Overseas Development, Chris Patten, who is chairman of the Tory Party, lost his seat too, but he can bask in the glory of having won the campaign and is bound in due course to be found another seat quite quickly and get back into the Cabinet.

For Major, the battleground

in the mid-Nineties is going to be Europe. He leads a party deeply divided on issues of sovereignty and the programme for a federal Europe. After years of bitter argument over the British role in Europe the subject was barely mentioned throughout the election campaign by either party.

Both parties contain anti-European hardliners they were desperate to prevent from undermining their campaigns. Now these people will come out into the open again and Major will find the subject all the more difficult to handle with a parliamentary majority down from 101 to just 20.

The British want a loose and greatly enlarged European Community that is not to the liking of some member countries nor to the powerful establishment in Brussels led by Jacques Delors.

The fight will start almost immediately in London because Britain takes over the presidency of the Community in July for six months.

The Labour Party now faces a long period of internal argument. Although it slashed the Tory majority, the inquest will be agonising into how it came to lose an election at a time when the economy was in deep recession and the Tories had, on their own admission,

made fundamental mistakes of judgement.

The old Left-Right divisions will re-appear, with the Left questioning the wisdom of the Kinnock strategy of converting Labour into a social democratic party. There is, however, no sign that Britain would have voted for more left-wing policies. The election has reconfirmed the importance of the centre.

It has also swept aside once more arguments for a change in the voting system. The case for moving from first-past-the-post to some form of proportional representation will get little hearing from the Tories, even though once again it has produced a minority government.

As in 1979, 1983 and 1987, little more than 40 per cent of the electorate voted for the winning Conservative Party. The Liberal Democrats got only 20 seats for their 18 per cent.

Nevertheless, despite the charismatic leadership of their leader, Paddy Ashdown, they polled more than a million votes fewer than their predecessors, the Liberal/Social Democratic Party Alliance, did in 1987.

It begins to look as if the only way the Conservative Party is ever to be dislodged is by a Labour-Liberal Alliance. Their collective vote at this election was 17 million — well ahead of the Tory 14 million.

With Labour moving closer in policy to the Liberals this may be a pointer to the political map of Britain in the 21st Century.

DEREK INGRAM in Editor of Gemini News Service.

More Listening, More Acting — Testify Honesty of Purpose

by Kazi Alauddin Ahmed

Promises made to public could only be a short-lived stance to contain the listeners. The superficiality of such promises coming ultimately to surface can still be out-wittingly disastrous. The past decades of our national history is replete with many intriguing instances of our failure to stand by our promises...

filler. Against such a normal backdrop, listening to public grievances by selective precedence appears to me a cruel joke. It applies, both for the seekers and dispenser of justice alike.

No I do not imagine a Hazrat Omer (RA) or a Badshah Harun-Al-Rashid appearing on my mental screen. Nevertheless, I shall express my deep urge to have a real 'surprise' from one who is really capable of giving. Readily, my memories flash back to nearly fifty years. I conjure myself in bed deep in slumber beside my younger brothers, still in tears for a new pair of shoes. I remember I cried for it to my father who, I did not know, could ill-afford to get me one instantly. But he didn't talk, nor did he make any promise. To my bewilderment, I saw the pair looking at me by my pillow glistening in radiance when I woke the next morning. My ever-loving father did indeed bring it for me when I was already traversing my world of dreams asleep. I do even today crave for such a pleasant surprise, perhaps on a different setting.

When I talk of my good old father (who is no more) I can even today figure up how critical he was when he fond any one around him ceaselessly talking. He would readily call the talker a 'garrulous' fellow. In fact, I was then too small to understand the meaning of the word. In later years coming of age I learnt what it meant.

Garrulity to him was a positive menace begetting a lack of wisdom. Today, in my little learning of the modern, scientific management I realize (though could not as yet faithfully practice it myself) that listening and acting more can be far more rewarding than mere talking.

Talking at random breeds expectation in the listeners when big promises punctuate the talking. And at long last, when the promises dished out to the listeners continue unrealized, the expectation turns invariably into frustration. The latter in turn, generates hatred and despite toward the talker and consigns to the cold furnace to prepare itself for a sudden eruption like an apparently dormant volcano.

As a vernacular daily in a recent post-editorial very rightly said that promises made to public could only be a short-lived stance to contain the listeners. The superficiality of such promises coming ultimately to surface can still be out-wittingly disastrous. The past decades of our national history is replete with many intriguing instances of our failure to stand by our promises, to realize our public commitments.

I do not suppose that those who matter, be they in position or in opposition, do not know such a bare truth. Rather, I would say that they are either purposefully or ignorantly playing with such a brand of politics that the

nation is practically tired of. If, what we loudly talk of is what we mean, I do not, or rather, I cannot appreciate the fun of talking so much. Our people do no longer need the so-called motivation to be conscious of their national responsibilities. So they do no more require to be ceremonially harangued at end to make a perpetual mockery of their unchanged fate, they are, where they were.

Yes, I am asking for a difference. The difference that will transform a wordy warfare into a solid, palpable, real welfare. The tragedy is that in every word and act we have an inevitable tinge of political polarisation. We have always our eyes on the people to play with, not our real, tangible achievements to pride with.

If we sincerely believe that we are the people to build our own destiny by the sweat of our brows, if really we want to be respected in the comity of nations, we have got to get rid first of our doubtful expertise in playing second fiddle to the political 'snake charmers'.

The government in power now should draw up both short term and long-term plans on the basis of its existing resources and on the basis of the anticipated resources as far as practicable. Such plans (let me call it master plan) should include all the feasible local plans to be drawn by the local administration, members of the parliament, elite of the locality, social and political

workers of all sheds of opinion.

I shall insist on the inclusion of the last factor because only then the bonafide of our feelings for the people at large shall be put to an acid test. And where there is opposition stronghold, be bold and broad enough to let their MP take the lead. Let him come up with tangible proposals for development of the area he represents. Let him also take the test. His success will be not his alone but also of the government in power for having quite

unhesitatingly permitted a political adversary to lead a development team. I hope the government sees through the ultimate big gain in sharing a plan with the opposition. The benefit thus accruing to the people of the area can be imagined than said.

Whatever you want to do or have in mind to do, try it as silently as possible. Less of talking, more of listening and acting — I have the robust optimism — will eloquently testify to our honesty of purpose. Let us allow our achievements to beat down our egotism, self-adulating, megalomaniac habit of talking only and not listening and acting.

The writer is a management consultant

OPINION

Golam Azam and the Quest for Consensus

Firdous Murshid

We cannot progress if every debate has to start out from first principles, and this is especially so for national debates. There is therefore a very great need to achieve broad agreement about what these first or basic principles should be in the context of our national existence. These principles are unlikely to drop from heaven, and in fact evolve gradually to reflect our social hopes and aspirations. A 'firm' consensus actually did exist, achieved through years of political struggle and social turmoil, leading up to the Liberation War in 1971. These were a commitment to liberal democracy, respect for rule of law and fundamental rights, a secular world view and a commitment to poverty alleviation (as reflected in the word 'socialism' in the 1972 Constitution). Even in 1972 there were the usual detractors from the fringe (the loony left, alienated intellectuals and the quiescent right) who sought to undermine the hard achieved consensus. The mainstream opinion however was firmly in favour of pluralist democracy in a secular Bangladesh. As a party, the banning of Jamaat was a logical consequence, given its violent anti-Bangladesh role in 1971, and was not a negation of our commitment to democracy.

Seeds of discord were rapidly sown however. I have great respect for the Bangabandhu, and my admiration for him is all the more genuine because it is not blind. Notwithstanding the fringe attack on the 'first principles', the first broadside was actually launched by Bangabandhu himself, with the creation of BAKSAL and the one party state. It is not necessary to go into the details of BAKSAL or the circumstances leading up to its declaration to conclude that this was not a popular step, even amongst many of his staunchest supporters. After the assassination of the Bangabandhu, no holds were barred. President Zia allowed the 'defeated forces of 1971' to re-emerge from their holes, and unbanned the Jamaat, and set about destroying whatever else that remained of the earlier consensus that was so painfully achieved: gradual is-

lamisation, introduction of the concept of Bangladesh nationalism (which was never clearly defined), apportioning important political posts to collaborators like Shah Azizur Rahman, to name just a few retrograde steps. Anyone with foresight should have known that the eventual crowning of Golam Azam as Amir of Jamaat was only a matter of time. The surprise is that it actually took so long to materialise!

The build up to the crowning ceremony was impressive. Consider the following facts: (a) There is great controversy surrounding the role of at least two gentlemen in 1971; who now adorn very high positions in the government; (b) candidates for the presidency vied with each other in seeking the blessings of Mr Azam. All the signals emanating from all directions indicated to Jamaat that the much awaited moment had come. Reality however sometimes defies logic. The crowning of Golam Azam was the last straw on a very emaciated camel. We were outraged like never before, with the accumulated horror and disgust of the last decade and a half. But this was the ultimate insult, aimed at the very basis of our nationhood. The consensus of 1971 now lies totally shattered in all its aspects, despite the fragile steps taken towards a pluralist democracy. That the task of reviving the 'spirit of 1971' is having to be performed by non-political persons, speaks volumes about the state of political bankruptcy in the country. None of the political parties can escape blame for their contribution in the resurrection of Golam Azam. The question of the hour is can we re-establish a new consensus, and what elements would such a consensus consist of? This question can no longer be ignored or postponed. I cannot pretend to have any answers, but in my opinion, essential elements would need to include political rehabilitation of the Bangabandhu and banning of fundamentalism. We need to ensure that the Golam Azams of this world are finally politically buried. These are the minimum pre-conditions. Do our politicians have the courage and maturity to arrive at such a consensus?

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

A test case

Sir, The space-deficient US Trade Show in Dhaka was a cooperative venture between US Embassy and agents/subsidiaries of US firms in Bangladesh. The exhibition coordinated to promote US-Bangladesh trade relations especially encouraging prospective American investors in Bangladesh registered better-than-average feedback.

This very important show offered a special opportunity to local entrepreneurs as well as to foreign businessmen to discover potential markets for American goods and services covering banking, computers, consultancy, telecommunications, chemicals, office equipment, transportation services, electronics, etc in response to Bangladesh's open-door policy for foreign investments in her market-oriented economy favouring imports.

US-Bangla economic co-operations have already matured enough to enjoy preferential privileges from both sides as partners for progress, which are evidenced by Bangladeshi exports to USA increased considerably in recent years as

did imports since the establishment of their diplomatic ties. Although the 'show of US products eloquently testifies the strength and breadth of Bangladesh-US economic ties', American commodities are very likely to face stern competitions from Japanese, Korean, and Chinese equivalents in particular over both quality and affordability.

Even with all positive factors for luring foreign enterprises in the hope of subsidising her indebted economy out of trauma fast, should LDC Bangladesh maximise production of domestic goods and services and popularise them in the world markets to achieve higher GNP much more than 'buying tastes' with 'piggybank' foreign exchange?

M Rahman
Zila School Road,
Mymensingh.

Load shedding

Sir, Your editorial on Power Development Board's announcement on load shedding was appropriate and in time. However, you failed to mention

the action the administration should have taken to reduce the suffering of the people by controlled use of power.

PDB has advised the people not to run the industry and the power pumps for agricultural purpose during the peak period between 5 and 10 pm. This advice highlights the inadequacy of intelligence of the authority to decide on an action of critical importance after careful consideration of all factors.

The way the shopping areas are lit up at night gives one the impression that we have no problem with our power sector and puts to shame the illumination of the shopping areas of our more affluent neighbours. In Calcutta, New Delhi and Karachi all the shops are required to close at 8 pm, and heavy fine is imposed for violation, but in our country the shops are open till late at night, and in spite of power shortage the administration makes no effort to close them early, and thus save power. This shows the bankruptcy of the ability of the persons deciding important issues for the country. No wonder we are in a mess.

Instead of keeping the productive sectors like factories and agricultural pumps closed, government should have instructed closure of all the shops in the country at 7.30 pm and allow the mills

and factories to function uninterrupted.

Perhaps in may not be wrong to assume that the shopowners are responsible for a portion of the 'systems loss', in collusion with PDB personnel. By closing the shops at 7.30 pm, two objectives will be achieved: productive sectors will continue to produce, and 'systems loss' will be reduced.

Nome Aligeb
Motiheel, Dhaka.

Salam Sikdar

Sir, I am sure, most of the people in the country, watched on TV the report on Salam Sikdar, a notorious criminal, and acquired a dastardly feeling of what is going on in our country. Most of the heinous drama came to the light, but one thing our BTV authorities dared not focus was the absence of police action, and alleged police connivance with the marauders. I have received reports from people of the area who testified that they had evidence how the Mirpur Police was obliged to hush up the case. Therefore, the Mirpur Police should come out with a public statement denying their hands in this matter.

Now that the culprit has been caught, we want to hear about the follow-up actions too.

Abdul Alim Choudhury
Darus Salam, Dhaka