

Decency and Politics

The Prime Minister's presence at the Leader of the Opposition's Iftar party and the sense of joyful camaraderie that it radiated among the numerous luminaries present on the occasion can be portentous of very many good things to happen to our national affairs.

There will be no shortage of people taking pleasure in researching into who of the two spurned the other's political overtures garbed in bon homie, and how many times. But that would be downright mean and would certainly detract from the good thing it really was on the afternoon of March 5.

The nation simply cannot move with two horses drawing the cart into opposite directions. If the perennial SKOP thing has to be settled to the satisfaction of all the parties or the unending eruptions in the academic institutions have to be curbed for good, both the parties and their leaders must find some ground of convergence.

A Charming Message

A group of school-going teenagers in Kathmandu have passed on a charming message to Princess Diana: "Please do not get a divorce from Prince Charles."

The visiting member of the British royalty, currently separated from her husband, got this touching plea on Thursday when she was touring the institution to open a new girls' dormitory.

The teenagers were polite enough to convey their unexpected message, not directly, but through their teacher, just in accordance with the traditional Asian custom. In any case, it was too delicate a subject to be brought up with the Princess without going through the proper channel.

Press reports say that these Nepalese school children had several reasons for opposing a possible divorce of the Princess from the heir to the British Throne. As one teenager put it, "It would have been better if she had come to the school with her two children and her husband. In Nepal, we always look to the Royal members as a family."

Fair enough. However, one teenager goes after Prince Charles.

It is a young boy. Not surprisingly, he finds the visiting Princess "glamorous and charming" and that's why Charles "is having a complex about that," which is "the main reason for their unhappiness."

Despite these divergences, with these teenagers making their points with surprising precociousness, the consensus is simply this: No divorce please.

Whether Diana shrugs off these advices and Charles reads about them only in a brief report which he treats with no more than a casual interest, these Nepalese school children have spoken on the subject with more sincerity and honesty than what we find in the sickening press coverage of the Di-Charles marital problems in the United Kingdom and, more recently, in Australia.

FOREIGN RELATIONS

Do We Have a Clear Sense of Direction?

N EARLY two years have elapsed since the fall of Ershad's autocratic regime. The whole world greeted the restoration of democracy in Bangladesh and the people of Bangladesh danced in the streets in joy to celebrate their victory.

Let us take up the field of our foreign relations. I would be the first one to recognize at the very outset that it is often not possible to list foreign policy successes. Conduct of a country's foreign relations is a complex and continuing process. In a world full of frictions, conflicts and uncertainties, it may be a success just to stay out of trouble.

I have no doubt that our diplomats both at home and abroad are most hard working, and given the opportunities and leadership, they can perform well. But has the government been able to give a sense of direction to our foreign policy? I have followed the matter closely, at least for the last one year, and the list of successes is rather modest.

Second, we got elected to some of the elective bodies of the UN. The actual impact of membership of these bodies on our interests is limited, at best.

Third, our bilateral relations with a few countries seem to have improved. In particular, our ties with Pakistan have certainly been strengthened.

Our diplomats, I am sure, are trying their best but success depends largely on quality of leadership in policy formulation and guidance. For example, a lot of hard work was put in by the Foreign Office officials in preparation for the SAARC Summit but all this proved fruitless because of failure of political direction.

The Prime Minister visited the United States but we do not know what was exactly achieved. The Prime Minister also attended the Non-Aligned summit in Jakarta and addressed an FAO conference in Rome. I am not aware of anything that she said or did there that made a mark in these conferences.

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- 1. The Rohingya refugee problem still remains unresolved. 2. Our relation with India, a major factor in our external relations, according to the admission of our Foreign Minister, is "chilly". 3. The western countries, who have provided us with much needed economic assistance and who have stood by us in times of national calamities, are reportedly unhappy with us due to the alleged use of "coercion" in sending back the Rohingya refugees.

ON THE RECORD

by Shah AMS Kibria
The mistake made in clause 11 of the joint communiqué with India threatens us with the prospect of further pressure for push-in across the border in the future. Despite two attempts, the government has failed to hold the seventh SAARC summit. The first postponement, in all fairness, was due to an event beyond the government's control but the second one was mainly due to the inept handling of the issue.

Canada's Mulroney Bows out — to a Woman PM?

Clyde Sanger writes from Ottawa

Despite several foreign affairs successes, Brian Mulroney, the Canadian Prime Minister, suffered for years with one of the lowest popularity ratings of any Western leader. The announcement that he will step down this summer is likely to boost the strength of his Conservative party, and creates an opportunity for a complete makeover of Canadian politics.

Potential successors



Campbell No Red Tory

He failed when the complicated proposals in the Charlottetown Accord were rejected in a national referendum in October 1992. The respect he won for his quiet nature and transparent honesty hardly compensated for the lack of success in solving Canada's constitutional riddle.



McDougall Seasoned in foreign affairs

Brian Mulroney was a more successful prime minister and, while not the intellectual equal of his Liberal predecessor from Quebec, Pierre Trudeau, he gained as much praise abroad, among other heads of government in Europe, the Commonwealth and La Francophonie.

perhaps too forcefully for the taste of Robert Mugabe. He managed to keep the respect of western European leaders while extricating Canadian troops from NATO service in Germany.

Two years later, the two leaders signed the US-Canada Free Trade agreement, and Canadian eyes have been smiling about it at all. As many as 350,000 manufacturing jobs have disappeared with plant closures of factories relocating south of the border as tariffs were reduced.

Mulroney was also worn down by trying to demolish the

separatist movement in Quebec. Stung by the defection of a close Cabinet friend, Lucien Bouchard, who formed the secessionist Bloc Quebecois, he was frustrated by the failure of two provincial legislatures to ratify the 1990 Meech Lake Accord which Quebec had accepted.

In interviews after his resignation Mulroney dwelt bitterly on this setback, and put the blame on Clyde Wells for going back on a promise to put the accord to a vote. Premier Wells replied curtly, "He is rewriting history."

A Conservative leadership convention will take place in mid-June, and at present the favourite to succeed Mulroney is the defence minister Kim Campbell. If she wins, she will be Canada's first woman prime minister. Other prospects include Trade Minister Michael Wilson, External Affairs Minister Barbara McDougall, and Environment Minister Jean Charest.

Wilson, 55, has the support of the Toronto business community, but his association with the GST and the Free Trade Agreement may prove to be a handicap with some voters. McDougall, 56, former vice-president of a securities firm, has also served as Minister of State for Finance.

Charest, the youngest cabinet member at 34, is a Quebecois and a rising star in the party.

At 45, Campbell seems to belong to another generation than Mulroney and Clark. Unusually for a native British Columbian, she speaks excellent French.

Before training as a lawyer, she studied at the London School of Economics with a focus on political change in the Soviet Union. She and her lawyer sister learned self-reliance as teenagers, when her mother left home to work on boats in the West Indies and the Mediterranean.

She spent two years as a Social Credit backbencher in the British Columbia legislature before winning a federal seat in the 1988 election. So she is no 'Red Tory', although in three years as federal justice minister she was respected for her progressive legislation and her thoroughness.

She is an intelligent and thoughtful speaker, and is not afraid to shock some people. This was made clear when, for a portrait in book on Canadian women, she posed bare-shouldered holding her legal robes in front of her. "It's wonderful to be a source of humour," was her way of defusing the controversy that followed.

However a win for her is far from certain. There will be half-a-dozen plausible candidates, and the 3,000 delegates at the convention are likely to be on the more conservative, and less progressive, wing of the party. — GEMINI NEWS

Clyde Sanger has worked as a journalist in Britain, Africa and at the United Nations. He is with the North-South Institute in Ottawa.

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.

Religion-based politics

Sir, While, for the most part, I've been inclined to ignore the seemingly endless platitudes of your most favoured correspondent, Mr M Zahidul Haque, preferring instead to let him brighten up my day with his royal 'we's', I cannot allow him to go unanswerd on his letter on the subject of religion-based politics. After the havoc wreaked by the Shibir both in Chittagong and Rajshahi, his depiction of fundamentalists as a bunch of peaceniks is more than I can swallow.

Mr Haque would be well advised therefore not to emulate the ostrich. Instead, he should visit these madrasahs where young children of ten and twelve are being taught how to use the bow and arrow — presumably not to despatch messages of peace. Shaf Rahman Chor Komlapur, Paridpur

Installation of kidney stone crushing machine

Sir, Surgical operation for removing kidney stones was quite common till a few years ago. But after invention of kidney stone crushing machine (Lithotripter) most of the patients prefer to crush the kidney stones instead of undergoing a major operation which involves lot of hazards. Since there is no such facility in Bangladesh, wealthy patients are going to India, Bangkok, Singapore etc for the purpose. In the process the country is losing lot of valuable foreign exchange. The avoid this, and to have an essential facility installed, the government imported a Lithotripter for PG Hospital quite some time ago. But for some mysterious reasons this is still lying idle. It is alleged that surgeons are reluctant to get the equipment installed because they will lose lot of patients for operation and face loss of income. If it is so and if they are so much influential that they can further delay the installation of the equipment, it is suggested that it may be installed either in Diabetic Hospital or in CMH so that the facility is made available somewhere in the country. It is apprehended that the machine might rust and lose its efficacy if the installation is delayed further. Will the Ministry of Health look into it? Saleh Ahmed Chowdhury Dhaka Cant

more than one reason. Dr Mahathir Mohammad, Prime Minister of Malaysia, since assuming power had been trying to reform the royalty along more democratic lines. The King of Malaysia is an oddity among the world's royalties, being selected from their number for a five-year reign by the country's nine Sultans, and they, in fact, provide a formidable board of governors for Malaysia. Considering the powerful vested interest like royalty, in his long-drawn 'battle' Dr Mahathir has now won the 'decisive round' in stripping the royalties of their traditional immunity from legal prosecution. Dr Mahathir has undoubtedly scaled great heights in his bid to conform the royalty to the democratic polity — seemingly an irreconcilable divide. The reason for his success is fairly obvious. His stature apart, this was largely possible because of the strength that democracy alone can provide, and Malaysia is that rarity in South-east Asia, a genuine democracy. May we hope that our Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia, who is also similarly empowered, would not lag behind in overcoming the hurdles that still stare at the face of the nation, particularly in the economic sphere. The case of a potential investor from Malaysia referred to in Mr Ali's despatch is hugely disturbing, particularly when Dr Mahathir is making sincere gestures for lifting our lowly economy. One only hopes that the rignarole of our bureaucracy which inhibits foreign investors are ended before long, in national interest. Syed Badrul Haque Lalmita, Dhaka

Democracy power Sir, The recent despatches of Mr S M Ali daintined Kualalumpur were illuminating and relevant in our context for