

Bottomline is Issue-specific Consensus

An autonomous Privatisation Board is to now handle the government's troubled disinvestment programme. Simultaneously, it would seem that the policy hangs up to privatise industrial sickness accompanying the disinvestable public sector units, is being shed — thanks to the hammering of the point by the Chamber leaders. In other words, the government is taking recourse to both organisational and policy-wise re-adjustments to breathe some life into the privatisation drive.

The policy part is extremely important for the fact that a warped theoretical basis has a way of predisposing an economic programme to failure regardless of the best of intent or good organisational preparations behind it. The whole privatisation scheme was conceived with the conventional thinking that only mismanaged and loss-making public sector units deserved to be made over to the private sector. The British success with the private sector corporate giants' takeover of a few losing industrial or services behemoths during Margaret Thatcher's Prime Ministership might have worked at the back of our minds. Even otherwise though this has been the in-thing insofar as reducing over-governance in the economic field went — elsewhere. But the idea sounds borrowed for us in that the private enterprises in the advanced economies are well-developed and capable of handling even problematical industrial undertakings. By contrast, we have largely a first generation of private sector entrepreneurs not quite the type raring to have a go at it.

That's why they need stimulation, even a skill update which, hopefully, would be forthcoming from the World Bank-funded technical assistance project. Their need for cheer seems to have been addressed to an extent. Their dread of entertaining sickness as they took on the messed up public sector undertakings should be somewhat gone. The new entrepreneurs need not now retain all employees of the made-over units. The minimum bid money has also been lowered to 2.5 per cent of the quoted value.

All this is only going part of the way since most people have found the units to be overvalued — disproportionately so, in relation to the losses these were making. The freshly empowered Privatisation Board should make a difference there. It can now act professionally while analysing the accounts, re-structuring the debts, and setting economic prices to the units. The board has now been placed under a high-powered, compact council committee in the Cabinet Division from what used to be a part of the Planning Ministry. Its decisions had to be okayed by the loosely-knit ECNEC. Now that it has gained nearness to the PM, it falls on her to encourage independence of the board. She can also make the line ministries do their parts better.

But all of these may be cancelled out if trade union resistance is unabated in the industries being privatised. The idea of making sale offers to workers' cooperatives may be there but bigger the undertaking remoter gets their possibility of buying it up for the price-tag. This aspect of workers' participation, where possible, merits consideration.

Essentially, however, an issue-specific consensus between the government and the opposition can and should be reached at the parliamentary committee level to ensure effective industrial management in the country under our very compelling circumstances. Since we have failed to forge a general consensus on priority national issues, can we not at least have issue-specific consensus?

Ingrained System Loss

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's instructions to launch a special drive for reducing system loss of the Power Development Board (PDB) and the Dhaka Electricity Supply Authority (DESA), if anything, reflect the seriousness of the problem. The overriding need for doing away with an unreasonable rate of system loss has long been insisted upon by the World Bank which at one point went so far as to tie up the issue with its loan disbursement to the Energy Sector. In fact, the creation of DESA was a result of the WB's insistence. During the first two or three months after its creation, DESA really showed a glimmer of hope by registering a fall of about four per cent in its system loss. Then it failed to record any further improvement and by now might very well have fallen back to where it was.

The prime minister's somewhat belated concern might be a reaction to this PDB or DESA predicament. Whether the directive she gave, while presiding over a three-hour review meeting on the progress of the Annual Development Programme (1993-94) projects under the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources, will give the power generating authorities the required push is what really matters. If past experiences are any guide, admonition, verbal instructions, appeal etc fall mostly on deaf ears. No exhortation can bring about the desired results unless the problems are looked in the face and practical measures taken for their solution.

In case of the power system loss, appeals and instructions have been aplenty but the villains have never been taken by the scruff. It is time someone did this unpleasant job. And to our mind there is none more qualified than the premier herself to be demanding on this, specially when she has voiced her concern about the issue. In the past we have categorically mentioned that an 11 per cent system loss is a reasonable limit — this can at best be 13 or 14 per cent or brought down to nine to 10. Beyond the maximum limit whatever percentage goes unaccounted for is simply pilferage.

Now let this be recorded that without willful collusion of the PDB or DESA employees — mostly at the monitoring and supervisory levels — the consumers cannot steal electricity. There is no point looking for the villain elsewhere outside the system. An explanation for as high a system loss as 36 or 40 per cent must come from nowhere other than the distributing authority. If it fails to bring its house in order, it should be taken to task for the failure. There is no second option. The prime minister, interested as she is in bringing about improvement in the system, must give an ultimatum, a time-frame within which the PDB and DESA will have to reorganise themselves and rise up to the task. Inefficiency cannot be paid for. If the prime minister means business she must ensure that her instructions are carried out to the hilt. Otherwise these might go down as rhetorical creating in the process a credibility gap for her government.

ALREADY one month old in the latter half of his term, Prime Minister Narasimha Rao has every reason to be pleased with himself. He did not have an absolute majority in the Lok Sabha but has it now, 266 out of 528 members. The bank securities scam, which looked like rocking his boat, has turned out to be a mere bad dream.

But were he to total the cost, not all tangible, he would realise that he has lost. The majority he has assembled has been the result of a series of bargaining and buying. In the last monsoon session of parliament, he needed seven members to survive the vote of no-confidence. He managed it but what was traded for their support is a seedy story that is still being told and retold.

There is nothing altruistic about Ajit Singh's induction in the Congress. It is not that he has suddenly awakened to the party's policies. It is that the prime minister this time made an offer, which the anxious Ajit Singh was looking for long.

That Rao has now 10 more members of Ajit Singh in the till goes without saying. Legally also, the group's merger with the Congress does not invite the anti-corruption measure. The law says that if members crossing the floor constitute one-third or more of a party's strength in a house, they are not considered defectors.

The Congress can justifiably say that it has not violated the legislation in letter. But what about the spirit? A candidate is elected on a party's poll plank. If after victory he joins another party, he violates the confidence that the electorate had reposed in him at the time of voting.

When Ajit Singh and his

In a world where growing numbers of refugees endure unending misery there is, in one corner of Europe, a different story to report. It is in Hungary, which has half a million unemployed people out of a population 10.5 million.

Despite that, the government has settled refugees, mainly from the war-torn Balkans, in nine well-run camps while 35,000 others are being cared for in private homes or are privately cared for.

Since the imposition of the Treaty of Trianon in 1920 dismembered Hungary of two-thirds of its territory and population, Hungary is a small country. Its refugees are mainly from Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia, Albania, Macedonia and Transylvania, that is today part of Romania.

The largest camp is in Nagyatad, only 35 miles from the Croatia border. There 85 per cent of the 1,700 inmates are Bosnian. The refugees are housed in barracks no longer usable because under peace treaties the Hungarians are not allowed to keep soldiers within 30 kilometres of their borders.

In the three-storey building, some families have a separate room. In cases where the fathers' whereabouts are unknown, 10 to 12 mothers and children may be in one large room. Showers are available and, although the adults do not seem so keen on them, the children ask for one every day.

In a nearby village, 11

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.

BCS test schedule

Sir, The result of preliminary test of 15th BCS was published in 8th December. From the paper carrying the result we also came to know that the written test of BCS would be held mostly in March this year.

We are going to appear at the Master's degree final examination in Chittagong University after loosing eight years of our life. Saying this I want to stress that we are on the point of exceeding the Govt service age limit. Our Master's examination, according to the given schedule, will continue up to the last week of March 1994.

If the BCS written test is also held in March 1994 we will be completely unable to participate in such a significant competition. Many of us may not be eligible for the next BCS because of age.

Therefore our earnest request to the PSC authority is to consider the schedule to be extended at least up to the end of April 1994.

Debadish Deb, Debdulal Deb, Sajid Hosen Jamil, Saifuddin Khan Tuhin Chittagong University

City Corporation elections

Sir, While we are expecting free, fair and impartial polls in the City Corporation, reports of allegations and counter allegations of breach of election code of conducts like lavish expenditure of money for electioneering, reckless wall writing and posterizing etc by many ward commissioners can

effective if the offices are allowed to function properly. At present everything has become Dhaka centred. As a result Dhaka has become very much crowded. In order to decentralise power we can create more divisions can give this administrative unit more power to shift the centre from Dhaka. We can also create one administrative unit at the union level that will help development programme at grassroots level. The economic activities at village level will be increased, and migration to city will be decreased.

The people of Lalmonirhat, Kurigram, Thakurgaon, Rangpur, and Dinajpur have been demanding for establishment of an administrative divisional headquarter in Rangpur for the last few years, as the present divisional headquarter is situated at a far away place having no easy communication with other districts. The claim of the people of the area is genuine and has got reasons to be accepted.

Mahbubul Haque Chowdhury Kalabagan, Dhaka

City Corporation elections

Sir, The people of greater Sylhet district are demanding for establishment of a divisional headquarter in Sylhet. The people of other greater districts too are demanding such divisional headquarters in their districts.

Now the divisional offices have got limited administrative power. This body of administration can be made appropriately

dividend during the past seven years at a stretch.

In the above backdrop let the SEC do something concrete for the investors in Magura Paper Mill, M/S Therapeutics and a host of such other public limited companies.

Sadiq Alee

Maghazar, Dhaka

Security and Exchange Commission

Sir, Security and Exchange Commission (SEC) office has been inaugurated by the Prime Minister at Jibon Bima Bhaban, Motijheel, Dhaka. Both the Prime Minister and the Finance Minister maintained during their speeches that one of the prime objectives of SEC is to look after the interests of small investors in shares and debentures besides development of capital market in the country. Unfortunately, Magura Paper Mill, a joint venture of China and Bangladesh, has failed to pay debenture interests during the past two years at a stretch. M/S Therapeutics, a public limited company, failed to pay any

M A Azim

Shantinagar

Why not Rangpur?

Sir, The people of greater Sylhet district are demanding for establishment of a divisional headquarter in Sylhet. The people of other greater districts too are demanding such divisional headquarters in their districts.

Now the divisional offices have got limited administrative power. This body of administration can be made appropriately

dividend during the past seven years at a stretch.

In the above backdrop let the SEC do something concrete for the investors in Magura Paper Mill, M/S Therapeutics and a host of such other public limited companies.

Sadiq Alee

Maghazar, Dhaka

Security and Exchange Commission

Sir, Security and Exchange Commission (SEC) office has been inaugurated by the Prime Minister at Jibon Bima Bhaban, Motijheel, Dhaka. Both the Prime Minister and the Finance Minister maintained during their speeches that one of the prime objectives of SEC is to look after the interests of small investors in shares and debentures besides development of capital market in the country. Unfortunately, Magura Paper Mill, a joint venture of China and Bangladesh, has failed to pay debenture interests during the past two years at a stretch. M/S Therapeutics, a public limited company, failed to pay any

M A Azim

Shantinagar

Why not Rangpur?

Sir, The people of greater Sylhet district are demanding for establishment of a divisional headquarter in Sylhet. The people of other greater districts too are demanding such divisional headquarters in their districts.

Now the divisional offices have got limited administrative power. This body of administration can be made appropriately

Rao Kills Third Force

Rao does not come out unscathed because he was a party to the circuitous route that the Ajit Singh group took to bypass the anti-defection law. Being the prime minister, he has more clout and more goodies to distribute. But should the parliamentary system of governance be reduced to horse trading is the question?

supporters bolted the Janata Dal, on whose ticket they had contested the last Lok Sabha election, saying that the party had failed to live up to its programme, they had a point, however flimsy. Their claim that they represented the real Janata Dal had some credibility so long as they constituted an independent group and sat separately in the Lok Sabha. But by joining the Congress, they have only confirmed the fears that the constitution of a separate group was the first lap of their journey towards the Congress.

Rao had the best opportunity to extract the system out of corrupt and illegal practices in which it was stuck. His reputation would have sky-rocketed if he had chastised ministers and officials. But for the sake of the party or otherwise (he is in charge of fertilisers ministry, has also been indicted) he has jettisoned the fundamental values of a democratic society.

With the tarnished image of the Congress, following the scam, the BJP will fatten itself on the government's lack of action.

Rao's bad dream may haunt him for the rest of his term. He may feel satisfied that he has foiled any punishment.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

in power, it is not an enviable choice to face. Janata Dal leader V P Singh, whatever the shape of his party or his leadership, has a point when he argues that the country must have a third party because the increasing disappointment with the Congress can turn the people to the BJP if they have no other option.

Although ousted from power in Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, the BJP has done well votewise. It has secured 33 per cent, nearly two per cent more, in UP and close to 43 per cent in Himachal Pradesh where the Congress has formed the gov-

ernment. Statistics also reveal that about 28 per cent back-wards polled in favour of the BJP in Uttar Pradesh, reducing the Congress support to 15 per cent.

With the tarnished image of the Congress, following the scam, the BJP will fatten itself on the government's lack of action. Rao's bad dream may haunt him for the rest of his term. He may feel satisfied that he has foiled any punishment.

The Congress should have learnt a lesson from the JPC report on the Bofors gun scandal.

The committee, now headed by B Shankaranand, now indicted, covered up the kickbacks from the deal and exonerated Rajiv Gandhi, then prime minister.

But the scandal resurfaced during the 1989 election and reduced the Congress strength from 420-odd members to less than one third. The party will further go down in the people's estimate if Rao ever allows names of the beneficiaries to come out because the involvement of Rajiv Gandhi would be proved beyond doubt.

If the issue of corruption, regarding Bofors gun could decide the Congress at that time, the present contrived strength of the party will be to no avail.

The scam is bound to be an issue in the next elections and

the same report. Shouldn't we make some beginning some day to punish the guilty?

Rao had the best opportunity to extract the system out of corrupt and illegal practices in which it was stuck. His reputation would have sky-rocketed if he had chastised ministers and officials. But for the sake of the party or otherwise (he is in charge of fertilisers ministry, has also been indicted) he has jettisoned the fundamental values of a democratic society.

The Congress should have learnt a lesson from the JPC report on the Bofors gun scandal.

The committee, now headed by B Shankaranand, now indicted, covered up the kickbacks from the deal and exonerated Rajiv Gandhi, then prime minister.

But the scandal resurfaced during the 1989 election and reduced the Congress strength from 420-odd members to less than one third. The party will further go down in the people's estimate if Rao ever allows names of the beneficiaries to come out because the involvement of Rajiv Gandhi would be proved beyond doubt.

If the issue of corruption, regarding Bofors gun could decide the Congress at that time, the present contrived strength of the party will be to no avail.

The scam is bound to be an issue in the next elections and

the same report. Shouldn't we make some beginning some day to punish the guilty?

Rao had the best opportunity to extract the system out of corrupt and illegal practices in which it was stuck. His reputation would have sky-rocketed if he had chastised ministers and officials. But for the sake of the party or otherwise (he is in charge of fertilisers ministry, has also been indicted) he has jettisoned the fundamental values of a democratic society.

The Congress should have learnt a lesson from the JPC report on the Bofors gun scandal.

The committee, now headed by B Shankaranand, now indicted, covered up the kickbacks from the deal and exonerated Rajiv Gandhi, then prime minister.

But the scandal resurfaced during the 1989 election and reduced the Congress strength from 420-odd members to less than one third. The party will further go down in the people's estimate if Rao ever allows names of the beneficiaries to come out because the involvement of Rajiv Gandhi would be proved beyond doubt.

If the issue of corruption, regarding Bofors gun could decide the Congress at that time, the present contrived strength of the party will be to no avail.

The scam is bound to be an issue in the next elections and

the same report. Shouldn't we make some beginning some day to punish the guilty?

Rao had the best opportunity to extract the system out of corrupt and illegal practices in which it was stuck. His reputation would have sky-rocketed if he had chastised ministers and officials. But for the sake of the party or otherwise (he is in charge of fertilisers ministry, has also been indicted) he has jettisoned the fundamental values of a democratic society.