

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 hang-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 problematic 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 plenty 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.

A LREADY 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

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 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?

Granted politics is not reciting or following scriptures. But it does not have to be degraded to the level of hawking. True, the Congress finds it difficult to live up to the Gandhian principle that wrong means will not lead to right results. But it can at least stop justifying the means to attain its ends.

Rao's record from the beginning of his term has been that of strategies to split parties in the opposition. And he has

harmed the Janata Dal the most. By doing so, he has, wittingly or unwittingly, killed a party which had the making of a third force. He even rejected the Janata Dal offer to be a coalition partner first and the Congress constituent later.

Now the electorate has only two all-India parties before it: the Congress and the Bhartiya Janata Party. In a country where the trend of voting has been negative, against the party

ernment. Statistics also reveal that about 28 per cent backwards 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.

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-

He may also be gleeful that the opposition criticism was blunted. But is the governance only a matter of rhetoric? Are there no ethical considerations?

The same moral dilemma of means and ends is at the heart of what the Joint Parliamentary Commission (JPC) has said on the scam. There was a wholesale, deliberate violation of all norms. If economic liberalisation was the end, the means employed could not be justified by any standard. True, the opposition, when in power, did not rectify the mistakes. But never before have the Congress and the opposition parties indicted the same people in one voice, in

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, as 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, then 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 decimate 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

people may take their revenge from Rao, if he is still the leader, as they did from Rajiv Gandhi. Mergers or combinations without principles last as long as they are beneficial to the constituents. Both Rao and Ajit Singh have been too old in the game not to understand it.

Still more basic questions is the fate of observations by parliamentary committees. One can appreciate hesitation in implementing a divided report. But the one on the scam was unanimous and the Congress had 16 out of the 30 members on the committee. If even then no head rolls, why to have the facade of committees at all?

In fact, the opposition should seriously consider the question of associating itself with the parliamentary committee. It may have a highfalutin name but it is only on paper.

People's expectations unnecessarily rise and they begin to await some action against the errant. Even the committee system introduced by the Lok Sabha Speaker is being affected. Take the Dunkel proposals report prepared by the parliamentary committee on commerce. The report was not even considered by the government before it surrendered at Geneva.

If the committees lose credibility, their observations or recommendations will cease to matter. Rao and his party may be happy that they have increased their strength in parliament despite the adverse reaction that the rejection of the scam report has evoked. What they do not realise is that they have devalued both — MPs on the one hand and their considered opinion on the other.

The Refugees who are Luckier than Most

Judith Listowel writes from Budapest

Just being a refugee is bad enough in itself and the lot of most in the world is wretched. Europe is now plagued by large numbers of refugees for the first time since World War Two. More lucky than most are those who have ended up in Hungary. A Gemini News Service correspondent has just visited one of the camps there.

Where Yugoslav refugees are going

The latest figures show there are nearly 1.5 million refugees from the war-torn former Yugoslavia seeking asylum in Europe



Bosnian and Croatian teachers have been found to instruct the 12 to 17 years olds. Two of them now plan to emigrate to

young people in the camp would be bleak.

The 230 smaller children — 30 are newborn — have a delightful day nursery, a large room well stocked with small chairs and tables, toys and fun pictures on the walls. The Hungarian social worker in charge finds a big cultural difference with the Bosnians. They find the women pay little attention to their children and seem not to play with them.

The boys are keen to be educated and to move on to university or technical college, but the girls simply want to marry well — an attitude the mothers encourage. The refugees in six of the nine camps want to go back to their home as soon as possible, but those in the other three smaller ones want to stay and become Hungarians.

In all these camps, the refugees are well fed and clothed and efforts are being made to educate their children, although this is a difficult problem because of the language.

The children of Nagyatad were sent this year for a 10-day summer holiday to Lake Balaton. Funds came from charitable organisations — the Red Cross, the Maltese, the St John and the Szent Gyorgy (Hungarian order) Knights. Private individuals also contributed.

Most of the cloths for grown-ups and children are donated by private individuals. Shoes are usually the main problem. The food is excellent — for lunch, vegetable soup, some days two legs of chicken and spaghetti, and a sweet with sour cream. No one has ever complained about the food.

Bosnian women tend not to mend. If a stocking gets a hole, they throw it away and ask for another pair. Social workers said they were becoming in-

creasingly demanding. Forty refugees, mostly Bosnians with training and experience are now going to Canada. Other refugees replace them, but recently fewer have arrived.

The younger inmates of other big camps are not as lucky as those at Nagyatad because of the lack of Bosnian teachers. Those in the three camps who want to stay in Hungary have learnt Hungarian and their children are going to local schools.

Germany and Austria have closed their borders to refugees, so those who do not want to stay in Hungary have little chance of moving on unless they can get permission to enter Canada or the United States. The fighting in Bosnia-Herzegovina stops and they can return to their native town or village, they will go but find nothing. All their possessions have been destroyed.

The West will then have to start making serious efforts to enable them to start a new life in their homeland.

JUDITH LISTOWEL was the first woman political writer in Hungary. She owned and edited a weekly called East Europe and Soviet Russia from 1944 to 1954.

Measured Success at the United Nations

by Madeleine Albright

BEHIND the headlines about Somalia and Haiti, a larger and ultimately more important drama is beginning to unfold at the United Nations. The frailties of UN peace-keeping are, after all, but a symptom of the United Nations' profound need to "reinvent" itself in order to keep pace with the new global era. Its success or failure will do much to determine whether gains resulting from the end of the Cold War are consolidated or we fall back into old habits of confrontation, albeit in different and unpredictable forms.

Fortunately the United Nations' summer of discontent has been succeeded by the most encouraging General Assembly session in decades. The ideological stubbornness that has historically split the United Nations... split the United Nations along east-west, north-south lines is dissolving and dwindling. Our efforts to endorse UN purposes while pressing for UN reforms are beginning to pay off. And the United Nations is moving in directions that the United States has long wanted it to go. For example:

(1) After decades of Cold War stalemate, the General Assembly agreed to establish a UN high commissioner for human rights. Since the time of Eleanor Roosevelt, the United States has pressed the United Nations to play an active and positive role on human rights. Its members have finally given it a clear mandate to do so.

(2) September's Israeli-PLO peace agreement paved the way for a spirit of relative cooperation on the Middle East — historically the most difficult and divisive subject of discussion at the United Nations. During the fall session, the General Assembly went on record for the first time in support of the Madrid peace process, discrimination against Israel was reduced, and there was broad support for economic and social projects in Gaza and the West Bank.

province of superpowers alone — moved to center stage at the United Nations. With strong US backing, resolutions were approved in support of a comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty, a ban on the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons and a moratorium on the export of anti-personnel land mines.

(4) At US urging, the General Assembly approved in principle the establishment of a high-level UN office with functions similar to those of an American inspector general. This is a vital first step, for poor management is without doubt the Achilles' heel of the United Nations.

(5) The overall UN budget was held to negative real growth, well below the level proposed by the UN Secretariat. Within this hold-the-line budget were significant additional funds for human rights, humanitarian affairs and peace-keeping, all high-priority items for the United States.

(6) The Security Council's determination to isolate "rogue" states paid off in decisions to maintain tough economic sanctions against Iraq and to strengthen those imposed on Libya for sheltering the accused saboteurs of Pan Am 103.

There has also been progress in recent weeks in the area of greatest controversy and complexity — UN peace-keeping. The recognition is widespread that although the success of collective peace-keeping operations is important, the United Nations has tried to do too much too soon. The pace has now slowed. Efforts continue to make UN peace operations militarily credible through better planning, better training, better management, better equipment and more adequate resources.

The United Nations today remains far short of its potential. Much work remains to be done. But my feeling at year's end is that the pendulum has begun to swing in the right direction.

The writer is the US permanent representative to the UN.

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.

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 most probably in March this year.

We are going to appear at the Master's degree final examination in Chittagong University after losing 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 then 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.

Debashish Deb, Debdulal Deb, Sajjat Hosen Jami, Saifuddin Khan Tuhi, 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 poster etc by many ward commissioner can-

didates are pouring in from various parts of the city which are really disturbing and rather vitiating the peaceful atmosphere of the election.

We would request the Election Commission to kindly look into the matter, publicise the election code of conducts through radio, television and public address system and ensure that law, order and impartiality is maintained at all costs during elections.

The forthcoming City Corporation election is a test for all of us as to how we are going to institutionalise and take care of our hard earned democracy.

We would request all concerned including the BNP, AL, other political parties, independent candidates, voters and the city dwellers to use their rightful democratic rights and to exercise their franchise peacefully and judiciously without fear, favour or ill-will towards anybody in the best interest of the country. We are all Bangladeshis first then we support this party or that party, peacefully.

O H Kabir, Dhaka-1203

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

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, aanchangur, Nilphamari, Gaibandha, 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

Security and Exchange Commission

Sir, Security and Exchange Commission (SEC) office has been inaugurated by the Prime Minister at Jiban Bima Bhavan, Motijheel, Dhaka. Both the Prime Minister and the Finance Minister maintained during inaugural 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

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, Maghbaraz, Dhaka

Railway and foreign debt

Sir, Since liberation of the country in 1971, the Asian Development Bank has advanced to Bangladesh Railway 665 million dollars as loan out of which about 35 per cent has been taken away by consultants. Railway has procured stores and materials worth 489 million dollars from the countries designated by ADB. ADB has also given fund for re-trenchment of employees under Golden Handshake Programme.

The Railway is overburdened with foreign debt. Some of the stores and equipment imported by Railway with loan money have been lying unused in port, railway yards and workshops in Parbatipur and Pahartali. Responsibility should be fixed for importing materials which cannot be put to use.

Now Railway should take loan only for construction and assembly of bogies and wagons and overhauling of engines. No loan should be taken for meta-physical projects like infrastructure building, recovery programme or face lifting. Recovery of railway may be brought about by Railway people, but by foreign consultants.

M A Azim, Shantinagar,