

Stormy Days Ahead for the European Union

Derek Ingram writes from London

issue as ever. Ministers are openly split.

One day, the No 2 at the Treasury, the ambitious right-winger Michael Portillo is openly questioning, before an audience in Barcelona, the wisdom of taking the fast route to European integration; the next day, his boss, Chancellor of the Exchequer Kenneth Clarke, goes to Bonn and declares his support for Economic and Monetary Union.

The group of Tory MPs known as Euro-sceptics are a minority but implacable and in a parliament with a small and diminishing government majority Major must hang on to their votes.

Nor is the Labour Party as united on Europe as it may have appeared in recent years. Officially it is warmer to the idea of European integration than the Tory government, but a small core of MPs remain cool. If Labour comes to power in two or three years it may have to move as cautiously as Major does now.

When Major blocked Dehaene the French newspaper Figaro remarked: 'De Gaulle was right: Britain is an island which all the tunnels and all the bridges in the world will never succeed in linking to the Continent. We should never have let them join.'

That Britain has been a nuisance in the Union is not in doubt. If France and Germany are to be kept in check, some of the smaller members may increasingly feel that it is a necessary nuisance.

DEREK INGRAM was editor of Gemini News Service for 27 years.

Having taken over the six-month presidency of the European Union, Germany's first task is to find a candidate acceptable to all 12 members to become president of the Commission in Brussels. (Brussels EU summit to choose Commission president July 15) It also has to try to heal wounds caused by the British veto of the Belgian candidate for the job. With German and French elections due within a year, Gemini News Service reports on the political storms facing the Union.

with consequent losses of national sovereignty, seem increasingly irrelevant — at least for the foreseeable future. Yet the lobby for a federal Europe remains strong.

It was fears that Belgian Prime Minister Jean Luc Dehaene was at heart a federalist that led Major to veto his

candidate to succeed Delors as Commission president. Delors has long been anathema to the right wing of the British Conservative Party, having been demonised by Margaret Thatcher when she was prime minister.

The British are glad to see him going but they may not

have yet seen the back of him. He could be the Socialist candidate in the French presidential elections and end up as President of France, although a left-wing victory there would be a surprise.

Major's action in opposing Dehaene, however, has not left him as isolated in Europe as at first had appeared. There was considerable understanding among smaller member countries for his accusation that France and Germany had tried to push through Dehaene without proper consultation with Britain and several others. Holland was unhappy because one of the other two candidates was its outgoing Prime Minister, Ruud Lubbers.

The new right-wing Italian government of Silvio Berlusconi also does not like the idea of a Franco-German axis trying to drive the European Union along. During a fortuitously timed visit to London by Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Martino, the British found they could have a new ally in opposing any dash for a tighter, more centrally directed Europe.

Ever since the end of the Cold War Britain's strong support for enlargement of the European Union has been motivated by a desire to prevent the development of a federal

Europe. In this Britain is succeeding. It is becoming increasingly accepted that the Commission in Brussels has to be reined in. Under Delors it had sometimes seemed to be acting as a sovereign government.

The method of choosing a president — consensus among the 12 governments — is also being questioned. Future presidents may have to be elected by the European Parliament, which is itself elected by the voters of member countries.

It is dawn on the formidable lobby of what have been labelled Euro-fanatics that the variety of cultures making up western Europe cannot easily be driven into unity and derogation of sovereignty without their peoples' consent.

The application of a common foreign policy is also proving difficult. The Union has shown itself impotent in Yugoslavia. There is deep gloom in the capitals of member countries about the situation there and talk of the war dragging on for 20 years. Although EU countries have played an important humanitarian role, they have proved helpless in making peace.

For British Conservatives, Europe remains as complex an

THE 12-nation European Union has entered a year that promises much political turmoil.

At a moment when governments cannot agree who will take over on January 1 from Jacques Delors as president of the European Commission, Germany begins its six-month presidency of the Union. After that, in January, France becomes president.

Lately the two countries have been charged with acting together to drive the Union along a fast lane of their own choosing.

Both are heading for elections. German voters will decide in October whether Helmut Kohl is to remain Chancellor. Then in April-May, while France is holding the European Union presidency, a successor to President Francois Mitterrand will be elected.

In the meantime, British policy over Europe is still deeply dividing John Major's government and party.

All three men increasingly find themselves prisoners of their domestic political situations.

Furthermore, in January the 12 European Union countries could become 16. Austria has already voted Yes to joining, Sweden, Finland and Norway go to the polls later this year.

The accession of these four, with others such as Malta and Cyprus waiting in the wings and pressure mounting for the eventual membership of eastern European countries, means the debate about the real nature of the Union is set to run and run. Arguments about a future federal Europe,

European Union - 12 plus 4



DAVID Webster, the chairman of the Trans-Atlantic Dialogue on European Broadcasting said, "Countries around the world that have recently emerged from authoritarian and totalitarian rule are discovering that a free political society cannot exist without free news media."

The free news media is an indispensable precondition for any democratic society. Press freedom and democracy are not only notions, for the maintenance of democratic order we need free media. "Without democracy freedom of the press cannot be sustained, and without press freedom democracy becomes meaningless," says Joan Benziger, a senior policy maker of USA. "Freedom of opinion and expression, including the right to hold opinion and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas, are fundamental human rights, forming the cornerstone of any democratic pluralistic society. Without such freedom and information flow, there cannot be informed publics to ensure a rule of law, a representative political system, a free and open market economy, or an independent media. In short, they are an integral and essential component in any democracy."

But in Bangladesh do we really have such freedom? The media, specially the broadcasting media are yet to be freed from the government control. Today the Radio and Television are absolutely dominated by the government to serve its own political purpose.

There are no democratic rules or regulation for the

Broadcasting Media: Regulation and Autonomy

by Md Khurshid Alam

Radio and Television. In absence of freedom or autonomy in Radio and Television, the government can manipulate the broadcasting media whimsically. It may be mentioned here that, during the movement against the past autocratic regime, the present ruling party repeatedly vowed to make the government controlled Radio and Television sovereign. But today, instead of giving autonomy to Radio and Television, the government has, however, given permission to telecast CNN and BBC programmes through the BTV channel in the morning and afternoon. But during this period, the conscious group of the people remain preoccupied with their businesses and services, they can seldom enjoy these programmes. Moreover, CNN or BBC has little time or interest to project our social-political cultural scenario, unless anything is very important in their judgement, like any colossal natural calamity or human disaster. Again that is often not liked by us or our administration. The CNN's Babri Mosque episode was censored by the BTV authority. So, what benefit we are getting from BTV or CNN and BBC?

In fact, without autonomy, the Radio and Television cannot attain any credibility in the public eye. Autonomy of Radio and Television is badly needed for the overall welfare of a nation. But it is a matter of sorrow that our Radio and Television could not earn it even after 23 years of inde-

pendence of the country. Still today, we have to depend on Radio service of BBC or VOA to get the "real" news. But are they really "real"? Or can they be more real than what we can make ours if and when they become autonomous? Censoring the news of any opposition political movement or activity is a regular practice in our Radio and Television. The presentation of news by Radio and Television remains as unprofessional as it was in the past autocratic regime. The rallies addressed by the ruling party leaders are treated with extraordinary care in news bulletin while many those of the opposition are just ignored or treated with very lesser care.

For Radio and Television, the problems of autonomy in our country are much more difficult. Because, the government and the politicians are keenly interested to control the broadcasting media. They know how powerful media the Radio and Television are. So, why should not they try to control them? But the people, who believe in real democracy and free flow of information cannot go on tolerating such unethical behaviour of government and aspirant politicians.

So, to protect the broadcasting media from such occupancy there should be some guidelines for regulating the broadcasting, such as:

*Any law to regulate broadcasting should begin by stating

that the purpose of the law is to guarantee free and independent broadcasting, in both the public and the private sectors.

"A law to regulate broadcasting should establish a regulatory body and give it general instruction on its job. Ideally, such a law will leave the details of regulation to the regulatory body, so that an act of the legislature is not necessary whenever there is a need to modify some regulation."

"The job of the regulatory body is to protect the public interest in broadcasting and the independence of broadcasting. It should not become involved in programme content or undertake any form of censorship."

The above guidelines were suggested by the Trans-Atlantic Dialogue on European Broadcasting concerning broadcasting in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. And here is a draft outline of an ideal regulatory law, written by the Trans-Atlantic Dialogue on European Broadcasting:

A Draft Law on the Government's Regulation of Broadcasting

The following are some of the most important points that should be included in any law to regulate broadcasting:

1) The purpose of this law is to ensure the provision of free and editorially independent broadcasting both in the

public and private sectors and to guarantee freedom of information for the people, as stated in the European Declaration of Human Rights, Article 10.

2) Broadcast services should serve public needs in information, culture, education, and entertainment and reflect diversity of opinion. Programme content should respect the diversity of cultures. There is a basic right to communicate in conditions of pluralism and equality of opportunity among democratic groups and political parties.

3) Broadcasters are guaranteed independence from the state. They are licensed and regulated by, and answerable to, an Independent Council for Television, Radio, and Cable (ICTRC).

4) The ICTRC shall be the sole broadcast licensing agency. It shall license both public and private broadcast services, and will set the terms and conditions of such licenses. It will have the power to penalize the broadcaster and, in extreme case, to revoke a license.

5) Licensees shall comply with the relevant international agreements and the national laws on matters such as copyright, obscenity, privacy, and human rights.

6) The ICTRC shall regulate the level of independent production carried by each television licensee so as to encourage diversity of sources of production and a strong independent production sector. The ICTRC should seek actively to

promote domestic television programming.

7) The ICTRC shall arrange a degree of access time for the public and of balanced access for political parties.

8) The ICTRC may set limits to a public licensee's advertising revenues in order to ensure the appropriate balance between the public sector and the private sector.

9) The following entities may not be licensed to broadcast: political parties, local or national governments, advertising agencies, an entities controlled by noncitizens.

10) The ICTRC shall establish a Complaints Committee to deal with individuals who believe they have been unfairly treated in a broadcast and who are not satisfied by the response of the licensee.

11) The ICTRC shall assign to a licensee the appropriate frequency or frequencies reserved for broadcasting according to the Frequency Management Agency (FMA). This agency shall be charged with the fair allocation of the spectrum given under international agreement. The ICTRC shall be given full access to the planning process of the FMA, and the two organisations shall cooperate in developing the most fair and efficient use of the spectrum. The process will be open and public.

Now, to make our Radio and Television autonomous we may follow some of these regulations. If the government is serious about the objective news and views to ensure optimum democracy, it must ensure that the government controlled broadcasting media, first of all are made free.

Breaking Poverty Barrier

The two-day meeting of SAARC finance and planning ministers concluded on Monday on an optimistic note. The optimism stems from the fact that the seven-nation ministers have agreed to establish a common regional mechanism allowing exchange of information on poverty alleviation programmes. It is a welcome sign that the regional policy has for the first time been so pronouncedly marked by a pro-poor bias. Even when the countries of the region are going through a reform process underlined by liberalisation, private-sector initiatives and free market economy, this shift in policy-focus can be considered exceptionally significant. The institutional structure envisioned to be put in place for the purpose is going to be the first step towards changing the mind-set of the governmental set-ups.

For long, politicians, social workers and men in power have made poverty an issue simply because without such a lip-service they feel ill at ease whenever they have to turn to the people for their support. Now that the ministries concerned with placing money for the implementation of any government programmes have got into the business with the avowed aim of reducing poverty in the entire South Asian region, the difference has to be taken note of. In fact, this is the basic of all government efforts. Keeping the majority of the population unfed, underfed and unutilised, no government or nation can expect to prosper.

So the emphasis has shifted, certainly for the better, from the privileged to the underprivileged and the disadvantaged. Viewed in this way, the potential of this meeting cannot be limited in the outcome of just two days' deliberations. But it is important to pursue the course set here with seriousness and determination supported by required mechanisms. The meeting has rightly detected the areas where things call for urgent attention. The rural poor must have access to institutional credits. Fighting poverty is inseparable from investment in social development sectors and rural infrastructure. Without such a base, it is futile to expect that the people will be able to take care of themselves.

By acknowledging the need for such investment, decentralisation of power and participatory planning and ownership of development programmes, the governments of this region moreover have endorsed a long-held view of the Non-government Organisations (NGOs). Indeed the conception of imposing decisions from above needed to be changed much earlier. Now that the attitudinal change has come, we may reasonably expect to see its reflections in policy formulations and even in the more important task of their implementation. But this will require boldness and vision on the part of men in charge of the political system in the region.

The first encounter between the reform programmes and the new concept of turning to the poor may not be pleasant. But experiences so far with big investments and patronage for the big shots have definitely showed the way why we need a change in the situation. Time has come for us to prove that investment in people is paying. Until or unless the recognition that our future lies in such an investment is forthcoming, the regional development or a country's individual record will continue to remain as ever unenviable. Efficient management in the use of resources can release enough funds for investment in the areas now deemed to be important. For much too long the governments in the region have patronised white elephants and fed resources into projects initiated by big defaulters.

There is no doubt that the fate of the 110 crore or so people of the region can be shaped on a common standard and aspiration. The economic co-operation certainly holds the key. In a changed security perception, the defence expenditure can also be reduced for better use in development priorities. But there is one fact that need to be admitted is that time is fast running out for the region.

Head off a Wider Transport Strike

The expectations raised by the new budget for a fall in the prices of some commodities and a cut in the costs of transportation of goods and passengers are being increasingly belied. Apart from the market behaviour not quite falling in steps with an across-the-board tax rebates to allow the consumers a relief in prices, we now have an indefinite road transportation shut-down in the northern region of the country, operative since Monday. Interdistrict commuting has come to a standstill on 72 routes across the country. Commodities are glutted all over and its rebound effect on the prices is easily imagined.

Other modes of transportation are under severe pressure. Tickets are bound to be sold at a premium as the chaotic situation is cashed in on. In the melee who is going to enforce a cut-back on fares that should have followed a drop in the diesel price?

Hazards to public life are cropping up from those who are supposed to cultivate passengers as service-oriented commercial organisations. They are split in the middle by feuding as the fight for physical occupation of terminals and offices and the picketing and counter-picketing for and against a strike continue to endanger civic life. Buses are splintered in attacks with the citizens ducking for safety, as if the high incidence of road accident was not enough of a booby-trap.

The strike in the northern districts has been called by Bangladesh Sarak Paribahan Federation to articulate its five point demands which include recovery of the federation office from the alleged occupation of some local BNP activists, withdrawal of cases termed as "false" against transport workers and introduction of serial system at the Nagarbari ferry ghat. In such cases it is rivalry for toll collection that crosses the mind instantaneously. It is the hiring of outsiders and the use of party clout that we are totally against, no matter what quarters resort to these.

The fight for physical occupation of terminals and offices and the arrogated rights to operate on routes of choice can be checkmated by none other than the designated government authority which is the communications ministry. It has an internal mechanism of sorts communicating with representatives from the apex paribahan bodies, but not really working with it on a solely depoliticised consideration of serving public interest. And, to the paribahan federations our question is: What are your coordination committees for if they cannot wield the right kind of influence on the branch offices?

State Policy Stresses Media's Prime Role in Sri Lankan Polls

Harold Pieris writes from Colombo

Private TV and radio stations now operating here are not permitted to broadcast news

THIS early, Sri Lankan President Dingiri Banda Wijetunge has laid down the guidelines on media coverage of the coming presidential elections in November and declared his government's commitment to press freedom.

The President, who is the standard-bearer of the ruling United National Party (UNP), said: "The media can play a dominant role during elections. All political parties in Sri Lanka are yearning for a free and fair election."

Addressing the chairmen, proprietors and editors of both state and private media, Mr Wijetunge stressed that media's role in ensuring a free and fair election is threefold.

These are: 1) media should feed the people with correct information; 2) it should act in a responsible manner and in the national interest; and 3) it should resort to balanced re-

porting and objective analysis of election issues.

The President also directed the state-owned media "not to disseminate any information or programmes which offend good taste or decency, or is likely to incite crime or lead to public disorder, or offend any racial or religious susceptibility or public feelings."

However, analysts observed that what negates this media policy is the fact that the state owns and dominates major sectors of the print and electronic media. This dominance is reflected in the daily coverage of news and views.

Private TV and radio stations now operating here are not permitted to broadcast news.

With only the State Broadcasting Corporation (SBC) and State TV allowed to air news, Sri Lankans are now turning to the British Broad-

casting Corporation (BBC) or Radio Veritas to know what is really happening in the country, especially in time of crisis.

One private TV station — ETV — is permitted to relay BBC news, except those relating to Sri Lanka.

The government is said to be considering reviewing this media ban.

Considering the monopoly of news enjoyed by the state media, it is not surprising that a host of racy tabloid newspapers have sprung up all over the country. The tabloid press, which is now thriving, has been critical of the government.

Following changes made in the Privileges Act in 1978 by

the UNP government, Parliament can summon, investigate, and punish and editor or journalist based on a complaint made by a Member of Parliament.

Thus, though the Constitution of Sri Lanka guarantees freedom of speech and expression, and freedom of publication, other laws like the Privileges Act could negate these.

Furthermore, the Press Council which, among other things, hears complaints against the media is a body nominated by the government.

The thorny issue of the role of media in national elections has been debated ever since Sri Lanka attained independence in 1948 and elections

became the political arena. At one point in the '50s, the UNP was backed by the giant Lake House Group of Newspapers and the SBC.

However, even in this lopsided situation, the opposition Sri Lanka Freedom Party triumphed at the polls in 1956, 1960 and 1970. This raised the question of whether voters were swayed in any way by the media blitz in favour of one party.

Many analysts feel the Sri Lankan voter, who has been exercising this right since 1930, is mature and can sift facts from propaganda.

Yet, it was bitter election rivalry, which promoted Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike to vest the shares of the Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Ltd and the Lake House Group in the Public Trustee, and then control the company.

The shares of this company, which used to belong to the Wijewardene family, were vested in the Public Trustee, with the intention of selling these later to the public to broaden the base of the company's ownership.

Mrs Bandaranaike did not do this and instead kept the shares under government control. She lost the elections in 1977.

The ruling UNP government, committed to privatization, also did not divest the shares and has been running the company as a government agency for the last 17 years. This has led to a serious indictment of the ruling party's media policy.

It is against this backdrop that one could, thus, appreciate President Wijetunge's recent pronouncements regarding media's role in the coming presidential elections.

— *Depthnews Asia*

To the Editor...

An appreciation

Sir, Kudos for introducing the late City Edition, and publishing results of the Brazil-Holland World Cup match which ended after 3 am.

This is a new trend in local journalism. It reminds me of Calcutta Statesman days when the paper was delivered in our home (in Calcutta) before Fajr prayer. Keep it up!

AZ
Dhaka

To be careful

Sir, In a Muslim majority country, it is quite natural that any comments, remarks or statements going against Islam

will not be tolerated with zest and therefore, agitation against people like Taslima Nasreen, Faiz Ahmed or Ahmed Sharif is inevitable. They may have great contributions towards progressive ideals, but that does not mean that they will do what ever they like hoodwinking people's sentiment. Aggression against them is not the question or act of "anti liberation forces," as quoted by Mr Binoy Barman of Hazeribag, Narayanganj (The Daily Star 24-6-94). I am sure, Mr Binoy is not accusing or blaming every practising Muslim as "Anti-liberation forces" I suppose, one should be more careful in

commenting on sentimental issues.

Salim Ahmed
Azimpur, Dhaka

Smoking isn't a virtue

Sir, I was watching BBC World Service the other day and was rather shocked by the indiscretion of a Bangladeshi writer in a special news report. Before expressing my reservation, I want to make one point clear. I have no problem with that particular writer's views, because, I believe, every citizen has the right to form his or her own religious philosophy. What I

cannot approve of is exploiting pseudo-atheism in the name of progressiveness. I do not understand how a writer who claims herself to be progressive can start her interview with an international news agency by lighting up a cigarette. I think she is old enough to have passed the age when teenager smoke only to look cool. Well, she might say this was a symbolic protest against a society that does not approve a smoking woman. But I do not think this is a responsible and effective way.

After all, smoking is a health hazard and as a writer she does have some moral respon-

sibility not to encourage evil habits. I would request her to smoke in private; not because she is female, but because smoking in public does not make her (or anyone) look more intellectual or cooler.

Taslima is not unrivalled in this; representatives of reputed international media have shown similar shallowness and superficiality in understanding local politics. A couple of months ago, CNN's reporter equated Taslima Nasrin with Salman Rushdie. Anyone who has read Rushdie's *Shame, Midnight's Children*, or any other writing must be surprised at this naive judgement.

Taslima's *Lazza*, from a purely literary perspective, is an extraordinary display of mediocrity. But the government has saved its inevitable demise by putting a ban on it. Rushdie's *Shame*, on the other hand, is a brilliant literary piece depicting the true picture of post-colonial politics in Pakistan. I would request international news agencies (BBC and CNN specially) not to encourage mediocrity in Bangladesh, because the people are already infested with too much of it.

Showkat Ali
198 College Hill Road
Hamilton College, Clinton,
NY 13323