

C.O.L.U.M.N

A Formula, Please

I have always held the workings of the Constitutional to be mysterious and subtle, almost automatic, its nature sacrosanct and inviolate. Now, one beholds the daily spectacle of the Constitution being washed, rinsed and hung up in full public view, like so much dirty underwear and no cleaner than before.

This column was written for publication last Friday. Although in the meantime the political situation has changed somewhat, the column has been printed in its original form.

Nothing if not Serious

Shawkat Hussain

WHAT a night of cricket we witnessed last Sunday! Sri Lanka completely outplayed Australia in all aspects of the game: in captaincy, in team spirit, in strategy, in determination, in batting brilliance, in bowling skills and fielding excellence — what else is there? We rejoiced in Sri Lanka's victory as if it were our own; we ourselves have nothing in our own national life to give us any sense of pride or joy. That night, in the pre-sleep delirium that usually follows jubilation, my thoughts were most unconditional: I thought that if Aravinda de Silva were our President he would have known how to bat the country out through the crisis, or our President had a chance to hit a massive six; instead he chose (or was it pre-ordained) to block the ball, remain at the crease at a shameful zero not-out.

What now? Sri Lanka will celebrate for a year or more. But our month of jubilation has passed, and so has the time for levity.

In the morning after, I pondered long and deep. I struggled hard to come up with a formula to surpass all other formulae that have been presented so far. We have had the Jamal formula, the Mustaque formula, the Fazlur Rahman formula and a handful of others that have failed. Then there have been the group of five, the gang of four,

the tireless trio, the dynamic duo. These groups of eminent citizens have parlayed with the President and have all drawn a blank. Success or failure, however, is not so much important; the glory is in the effort, and in the hope that one can at least merit a footnote in the history of the nation's march towards democracy.

But I had failed even before I started. Unlike the many constitutional pundits who are pontificating everyday in the many post-editorials of the nation's newspapers, I have not only not read the Constitution,

I have not even seen it. Let her (or she) who has read it, throw the first stone at me.

I have always held the workings of the Constitutional to be mysterious and subtle, almost automatic, its nature sacrosanct and inviolate. Now, one beholds the daily spectacle of the Constitution being washed, rinsed and hung up in full public view, like so much dirty underwear and no cleaner than before. In the meantime, the nation continues to shoot down the Niagara.

Over a hundred years back Walter Bagehot, author of the

English Constitution had said that the workings of the Constitution do not and need not concern the average Englishman. What characterises him, "the man at the back of the omnibus" is stupidity. Recognize yourself in this characterisation. You and I, the man in the tempo or bys, are supposed to go on with our stupid lives, eating, sleeping, defecating, watching cricket, while our nations' leaders preserve our Parliament and guarantee the conditions for a humdrum daily life.

The stupid multitude, those sitting at the back of the tempo, are supposed to hold the Constitution, the Parliament, the Monarchy and all its trappings in awe, while the business of Government is to be carried on with efficiency and honesty. But something has gone dreadfully wrong. We do not have a monarchy to hold us in thrall and pull the wool over our eyes, but we also do not have a government that can ensure the smooth working of the Constitution.

If stupidity is the characteristic of the man at the back of the omnibus what then is the characteristic of the man in the driver's seat? Blindness, greed, ambition, stubbornness! No wonder then that we seem to be taking the Niagara-plunge with such insouciance.

There is one thing, though, that the stupid man knows that he knows few who voted last February. Surely he is keeping bad company.

Snake Charmer

DONT dupe yourself into believing that only Indian falafels collect snakes the same way you and I make pets of dogs, cats or parakeets.

A villager in Lebanon has a whole cabbode of snakes in his residence in Bturan town, about 10 kilometres north of Tripoli. At last count, some 150 reptiles were covorting in an empty water pool at the back of his house.

Shukri Sirhan, a 40-year-old mechanic, simply loves snakes so much that at any given time, he could be seen playing with no less than 15 of the reptiles, some dangling from his shoulder or coiled around his neck.

His townmates know how obsessed he is with the reptiles. Whenever a snake is seen, Shukri is summoned and the man happily leads a procession of villagers to capture the vermin.

The villager is very mysterious about his avocation. He claims that his father learned the art of snake-catching during World War II from Indian troops stationed here with the British army and that his father passed this hobby on to him.

The snake catching ritual goes like this. When Shukri sports a snake or a snake hole he extends his forerfinger teasingly until the snake bites it. At that instant, Shukri jerks his finger back. The snake is pulled forward still clinging to it. The snake is seized and stuffed in his clothing or around his body.

Though Shukri is angered if he hears of a snake being killed, he himself has been

slippers, would pass many holes, then inexplicably stop, plunge an arm elbow-deep under the sand and pull up a lizard, its head squirming and biting the air.

Others need more care. He usually digs the sand away with a stick, his only weapon. Many of the snakes he catches go to laboratories making snake bite antidotes, but Mr Sirhan himself does not carry the serum along on a hunt. Many of the

second one found its way to our tent and bit me. Ever since, I have been fascinated by these beautiful creations of nature.

Usually, snakes attack only when disturbed or provoked. But then, they are unpredictable; they sometimes attack even if unprovoked.

They have to be kept at a certain temperature as they dehydrate in extreme heat or cold, hibernating and waste away.

A snake carries about 10 cubic centimetres of poison, which can kill from 16 to 18 people. The dangers of the profession might prompt lesser men to search for other work, but they have been part of life in the Sirhan family for several generations. Mr Sirhan's children sometimes climb into cages to get one or two.

In an average year, Mr. Sirhan said, he and his many relatives catch about 100 snakes.

For most Lebanese, the only good snake is a dead one," he said. "I am alone in trying to change their attitude; most people think I'm crazy, though probably harmless."

—Depthnews Asia

asian diary BY ARJUNA



known to eat-it fried in olive oil. He tries hard to get his wife to eat it as well but she refuses. Mrs. Sirhan dislikes snakes. The Sirhan children, however, keep the snakes as pets, and play with them constantly. The family home is litterally decorated with preserved snakes.

Snakes, even after years of scientific research, still remain mysterious creatures. Mr Sirhan, dressed in a flowing blue-grey robe and plastic

reptiles are bought by universities for scientific study. With his seven sons, Shukri hunts throughout Lebanon. Frightened soldiers have often summoned him even late at night to catch snakes that slither into their barracks.

Mr Sirhan recalls an incident: "Twenty years ago, when I was a boy scout, I spent one night in the desert with other scouts. During the day, we found two snakes, killing one of them. During the night, the

F.I.L.M

The Star Trek Phenomenon

Nausher Rahman

"HER life could have been as rich as any woman's if only... if only... With those words Capt James T Kirk of the USS Enterprise ended the last episode of Star Trek on 3 June, 1969. Seven years later on Friday, 17 September, 1976, crowds had gathered at the US Air Force Plant 42 in Palmdale California. The occasion was an important one: The first public appearance of the first Space Shuttle. The band was all set and as the hangar doors slowly opened they start to play, no, not 'The Star Spangled Banner' but the theme music of Star Trek. And as people saw the new shuttle's name, it was the Enterprise. Such has been Star Trek's influence on the real world. The television series that flopped on Prime Time when it was first released in 1966 has since gone on to become one of the most popular and enduring shows in television history. It has left behind a cult following of thousands of people around the world, seven big-budget motion pictures grossing over \$500 million at the box office and three other 'Trek' series. Consider the incredible impact it has had on everybody: the second series Star Trek: The Next Generations ran for seven seasons and became the highest rated US syndicated show in TV history; more than 63 million Star Trek books are in print with more than 30 new titles appearing every year; the official Star Trek fan club in Britain has 18,000 members; the original series is still watched in 75 countries around the world and revenue around 'Trek' related merchandise (ranging from T-shirts, backpacks and lunch boxes to a \$2,200 brass replica of the Enterprise) has topped \$1 Billion.

Now consider the fact the Star Trek was originally a flop! Yes, as unbelievable as it may seem, it's true. The show whose popularity has crossed generations and broken all political and cultural barriers did face cancellation twice in its three season life span. The truth is if it wasn't for Gene Roddenberry's (the shows creator) persistence, Star Trek might never have got off the ground. Right from the start is seemed as if it was destined to never air. Roddenberry originally tried to sell the idea to Desilu Studios which in turn tried to sell it to CBS who declined and aired Lost In Space instead. That was back in 1964, and, by 1966, NBC decided to air it. He himself wrote the original ninety minute pilot episode called 'The Cage' and filmed it starring Leonard Nimoy, as Spock and Jeffrey Hunter as Kirk. NBC rejected it as being too surreal but commissioned a second pilot. This time he assigned Samuel Peeples to rewrite the script, recast William Shatner as Kirk, changed Spock's makeup a bit and shot another pilot. The studio, however, wanted Spock removed but Roddenberry was adamant and fought to keep him. Then on the 8th of September 1966, NBC broadcasted the first episode, 'The Man Trap.' And with that began the Star Trek phenomenon.

The first season was, in fact, a ratings flop. It was so bad, that the studio planned to cancel the programme but Roddenberry managed to convince them otherwise. He hoped that the situation would improve after the second season but he had no such luck. The end of the second season also saw cancellation plans for the show due to another round of disappointing ratings. But what Roddenberry lacked in luck he made up in public rela-



tions and marketing skills. All the time, while filming the two pilots and afterwards, he, unlike any other producer, visited as many science fiction conventions as he possibly could, gave speeches at some sat on panels and socialised with fans and writers at others and gave screenings of both pilot films. He had, in the process, won the support of the science fiction community. And support was what he received in the form of 1 million letters addressed to NBC telling them to continue with Star Trek. Roddenberry had boxed the studio executives into a corner. On one hand, they had innumerable letters in support of the programme and on the other they had its miserable rating; at its peak it was # 52, behind such shows as Mr Terrific and Iron Horse. After much consideration they grudgingly gave the go-ahead for the third, and what was to be the final season, but not without some changes: it was moved to a weak time slot, 10 pm on Fridays, and its budget was cut by \$900 an episode. That was the end of the road and Star Trek was taken of the airwaves, after having utilised, what the studio administration thought was its full potential, they could not have been more wrong because Star Trek: The Motion Picture (and the se-

quels), Star Trek: The Next Generation, Star Trek: The Official Fan Club and all the Star Trek merchandise were yet to come. Reaction to Star Trek came late. It was not until the reruns that people really noticed the show. And when they did they sat up and became addicted. They liked it enough to make Star Trek: The Motion Picture a hit and inspire six sequels (in the last one Kirk dies after passing the baton onto the Next Generation crew). In fact, they liked it so much that Roddenberry decided the time was right for a new series. He wanted to call it Star Trek: Phase II, but when it debuted in 1987, it aired under the name Star Trek: The Next Generation. Fans liked that too and made it the highest rated show in US television history. All of this was possible only because of the fans. What is the driving force behind this motivated bunch of people? Nothing short of Dilithium could power them to the heights they have reached. After all, it is because of them that an encyclopaedia has come out devoted solely to the aliens the crew has encountered; that there are numerous books about the Klingon language, the independent language that has evolved from the series; that there is The Star Trek

Encyclopaedia containing 5000 entries on every planet, gadget, character or concept ever mentioned in the series; The Star Trek Adventure at the Universal Studios theme park has an annual attendance of 5 million people; and that the word 'trekkie' has been added to the State Oxford Dictionary.

These fans make Star Trek conventions week long gala events with turnouts of more than 35000 people. In fact when Gene Roddenberry attended the first convention, held in New York in January 1972, he expected 300 people but found instead 3600 (among them science fiction writer Isaac Asimov), apparently the last 600 of whom were admitted free of charge. It was at its time, the largest science fiction convention ever. The second convention was held the following year and was also in New York. It had an initial audience of 8000 people that eventually grew to 32000. The franchise grew even bigger in 1979 when Dan Madsen started the Star Trek fan club with 15 members. It became 'The Official Star Trek Fan Club' in 1983 and today has 35000 members all around the world. Yet another illustration of its popularity lies in the fact that 53 per cent of the USA consider themselves Star Trek fans.

There are a number of interesting things about the programme that most fans do not know. For example, did you know that:

- * Martin Luther King used to watch it because he felt that Nichelle Nichols (who played Uhura) was a ground breaker not only for being a woman on television, but a black woman during times when blacks were severely repressed.
- * Whoopi Goldberg was inspired by Uhura for all the same reasons.
- * Spock's V-shaped gesture originated from Hebrew priests who used it at religious ceremonies thousands of years ago.
- * Star Trek: The Exhibition is the most heavily attended exhibit ever at The National Air and Space Museum.
- * Roddenberry created the character Chekov after he read a Russian newspaper article complaining about the fact that even though the Russians pioneered space travel, 'the Ugly Americans' do not have a Russian character on the series.
- * To this day nobody knows for sure the secret of its success. All that one can say is that those 3 seasons and 79 episodes were all that Jim, Spock, Bones, Scotty, Uhura, Sulu and Chekov needed to boldly go where no one had gone before...
- * By the way, I'm a third generation loyal trekkie.



'Soldiers and Sandbags'

Many tourists have welcomed the friendly attention of Gambia's "bumsters" but now there is a backlash against the boys on the beaches, with visitors complaining that they feel harassed rather than helped. Rosemary Long of Gemini News Service investigates the disappearing smiles.

TWO elderly Germans stroll along the main coastal highway on The Gambia's tiny tourist belt and are immediately targeted by four Gambian youths, smiling broadly and extending their hands.

"Welcome!" says one. "What country are you from?" says another. "How do you like The Gambia?" says another, shaking hands vigorously with the tongue-tied tourists.

"Let us be your fiends," urges the fourth. It all sounds friendly — but the every-smiling over-eagerness of the young men known as "bumsters" could thwart the Hotels Association's "Back With a Smile" campaign which aims to revive the economically crucial but stricken tourist industry. Tourism shrank by three per cent after the military coup in July 1994.

"I didn't mind the soldiers on the sandbags or the sounds of rocket fire," said one Belgian visitor after last November's attempted counter-coup when a tourist village was the scene of a shootout between rival army factions. "But I hate the bumsters."

The Gambian bumster — apparently a combination of hustler and hustler — is anything between 15 and 25. He is often smartly-dressed, good-looking and charming, although he may equally be attilly-dressed, sad-faced and pathetic in his approach.

He regards "bumsting" as a job in a country with appalling youth unemployment, insufficient schools and no university.

Bumster methodology is to "grab" a tourist with words, smiles and handshakes, walk with them along the beach, offer to take them to the market or to visit an African compound and become their "friend" for the rest of the holiday.

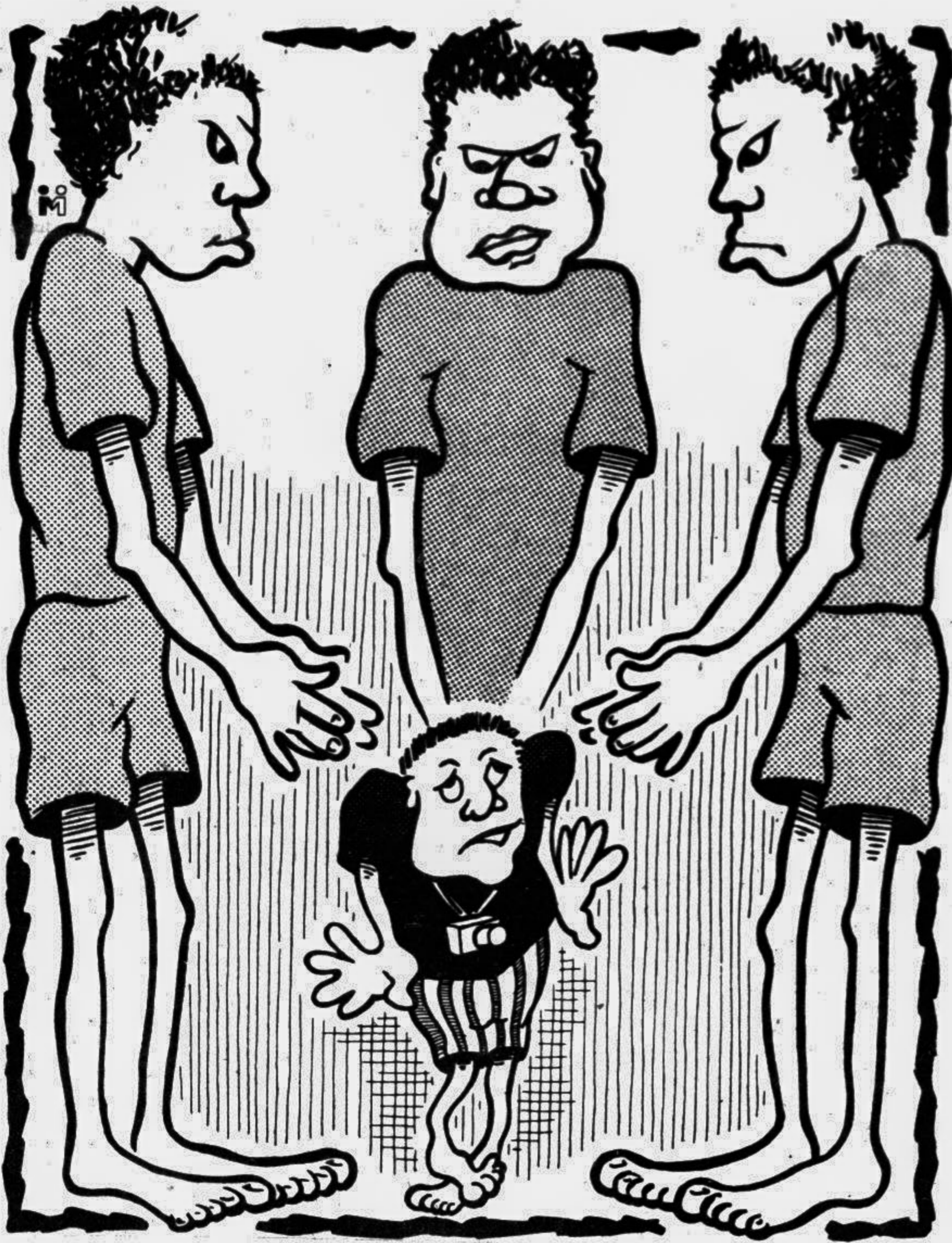
Some visitors become very fond of their "friends," buying bags of rice for their families, subsequently keeping in touch by letter, being met by them at the airport on their next visit.

They shut their minds to the fact that, as soon as they have town homeward, their "friend" will be moving on to another victim.

If he is an appealing articulate youth, he may well support himself and his family with lifts of watches, radios and portable shoes (which he will probably sell), money and food. He will also be taken to restaurants and bars where he will end off any other boys who might approach "his" tourists.

Until a few years ago, the system worked well. Some tourists were glad to have a lad show them where the best places to buy were, how to travel on local bush-taxis and here to see African music in an authentic setting.

And the companionship of the bumster ensured that all the others left you alone. But in the last couple of years the scene has become irritating, even intimidating. "I blame the tourists themselves," says cafe-owner Alan Wilkins, who is married to a local woman. "They want to be friendly, they are afraid of being thought racist. They feel sorry for the boys, who will give them a long spiel (story) about how hungry and poor they are. So they give the chap maybe 50 dalasi. Nothing much



to the tourist, but that's the equivalent of three days wages in The Gambia. Next thing, his friends and brothers hear about it and everyone wants to be a bumster."

Some dream of being taken on holiday to Europe, of being adopted and educated by a white family, or of marrying a foreigner. All these things are known to happen. But the bumsters' dreams are becoming a nightmare for the tourist industry.

A few years ago former President Dawda Jawara's government tried the tough approach, patrolling the beaches with armed police and making any loitering lads do "the monkey dance" (100 squats with arms behind the head) or beating them.

Then the "softly-softly" approach was tried. Bumsters were invited to a seminar attended by hoteliers, restaurant owners, wood-carvers, taxi-drivers and others in the industry.

Some hotels even employed a few, or at least gave them a badge of authorisation as informal tourist guides. Now, every other bumster claims to be a guide.

Military ruler Captain Yahya Jammeh is known to despise the beach boys. In the beginning he ordered that youths should stop hanging around the hotels, but his words went unheeded.

Police amble around the hotel areas, but the common perception is that the bumsters bribe them to leave them alone.

Tourism reports have labelled "the bumster problem" as more damaging to the industry than poor sanitation or roads.

Alkalos (village chiefs) have gathered the youths to warn them not to hustle and beg. Hotel owners have pleaded for the boys to leave their guests alone, and frequently warn guests not to leave the hotel.

Sadly, the days when the tourist could chat cheerfully for a few minutes then say goodbye and be left unmolested seem to have gone. "Ya, you're racist!" the boys may now snarl if rebuffed. For their numbers are higher than ever owing to the dismissal of thousands of hotel staff and the domino effect on services, shops, fisheries and farming, all of which were dependent

on tourism to swallow their products.

Yet the number of tourists has shrunk from 4,000 or 5,000 a week to around 700. Jammeh is losing patience. At a rally he warned all youths who have gone to the tourist areas from the hinterland to go home or be thrown into the backs of trucks and taken home forcibly.

Many tourists who have enjoyed every other aspect of their holiday — such as silver beaches, year-round sun and unique bird-life — have said that they will not return because of the bumsters.

Tourism is a vital currency earner for a country deprived of donor aid pending the promised return to civilian rule in July 1996, and the industry has reason to smile, if only tentatively: Thomsons, the largest tour operator to fly package holidaymakers to The Gambia, is to return in October. Other operators are selling "winter sun" packages.

But after a disastrous season of empty hotels, huge staff layoffs and loss of hard currency, The Gambia's future could depend on getting rid of the bumsters.