

Britain Prepares for the Twenty-first Century

Trade Realities

Trade-led growth is becoming an idle fancy in our peculiar context. Our field situation is clearly adverse for it. A proverbially hospitable nation that we are, we took a plunge in trade liberalisation by withdrawing quantitative restrictions and reducing tariff and non-tariff barriers on imports even before the ink on our signature to the Uruguay Round Agreement of 1994 had dried. Such a headlong dip was it that we did not even care for testing the waters with our trading partners to make sure they were reciprocating our open-door trade terms. As a unilateral waiver of the restrictions, Bangladesh has been a helpless by-stander to a domestic market being continually flooded with foreign goods, especially from neighbouring India.

Resultantly, we have slid sharply downhill in three areas of vital economic interest to the country: local industries are closing down, including units once considered to be the most profitable, exports have been on a decline, and new entrepreneurship is shying away. In short, we have worked ourselves into a position where a whole engine of growth has become a locomotive for regression. Aside from injecting export earnings into the economy, local industries employ people amidst a sea of joblessness. These need to be protected, not with any dose of subsidisation as is customarily believed but by means of a level playing field to allow them to prove their worth. If we ask them to live by competition then we should not be giving a reverse protection to their rivals in the business.

That is the sole point one wishes to make for the sake of fair international trade practices. Bangladesh's trading horizon, however, needn't read so bleak if the WTO-approved compensations are not withheld any longer in her case, or for that matter, that of the other LDCs. They are supposed to get zero tariff access to the developed economies and wider quantitative share in their markets so that their losses on account of trade liberalisation are more than offset.

Industrialised nations better not give an impression that they are grudgingly bracing to give compensations to the LDCs. This crosses the mind when they are raising new issues of labour, environment, social-labelling or eco-labelling by way of serving their business interests in the face of exports from the developing countries.

More Universities?

We welcome the government decision to set up 12 science and technology universities. Discernible here is, at least, a shift in the emphasis on the technical aspect of education rather than the general type. Indeed, the country needs more manpower educated and skilled in the applied science and technological disciplines. But we cannot help sounding a note of caution for two reasons. The first one concerns the emphasis being given on such education at the highest level without adequately making provision for similar education at the secondary or mid-level. Then, our scepticism arises from our track-record in running institutions set up with great fanfare.

Both points need a little elaboration. Given the great number of general graduates and the overall deterioration in education, we need to strengthen the base of our education at the primary level and impart vocational and technical education or training at the intermediate level with a view to developing a skilled manpower resource-base. It is a question of priority between general universities and technical colleges or vocational institutions. We are definitely in favour of the latter.

Then we would like to remind everyone concerned that management of the existing universities has recorded a gradual deterioration along with a discernible fall in the quality of education. So, we cannot help expressing our doubt as to how the new ones will shape and perform.

The university-colleges in particular have run into difficulties in regard to imparting lessons—let alone quality education—in a number of subjects simply because of the dearth of qualified teachers. We do not know if it will be any different for the science and technology universities when so many of them come up together. Our considered opinion is that the investment planned to be made in facilities for higher education would give a better return should it go into creating more of mid-level technical institutions and into upgrading the quality of education at the primary and secondary levels.

Life Expectancy

In terms of life expectancy Bangladesh has gained over the years but still remains at the bottom of the general upswing in the region. The projection for average Bangladesh citizen's life is four years shorter compared to the South Asian standard which is 61 years—just one year less than the developing countries. Of particular significance is the global increase in life expectancy at birth which has gone up from 48 years in 1955 to 65 years in 1995.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) reckons that the global life expectancy has gone up by 4.6 years between 1980 and 1995. We do not know what was our gain during this period. But by our standards, a life expectancy of 56 years is not bad either. Yet it is important that we record the major share of the worldwide gain in life expectancy because the developed nations with an average projection figure of 74 has almost reached the saturation point.

However, one worrying fact is that we, in the developing countries, are acquiring some of the western life styles and vices—a few of them now being rejected in the West itself. We must learn to make our conscious choices in such matters. Because we cannot allow the gains acquired through a series of medical and health services at birth to be cancelled because of diseases caused by unhealthy habits.

Tony Blair, the New Labour Leader, will have to prove his words. It is his challenge as he gets ready to take his country into the twenty-first century.

Tony Blair is the youngest Prime Minister in nearly two hundred years. The scale of his victory has surpassed all previous records—he has a majority of 179 seats. He has taken his party to victory after 18 years in opposition. His coalition has been so secure that the Tories have felt like being hit by a tidal wave. Big names including that of the Foreign Secretary Malcolm Rifkind has fallen by the way side and ambition of new leader for the Tories like Portillo has fallen to dust. The outgoing Prime Minister John Major has saved his seat but resigned his post as Chief of the Conservative Party, thus paving the way for new leadership to emerge. There is bound to be hard fight among the Conservatives, who have managed to retain their seats, for leadership.

A brand new leader entered the 10 Downing Street shortly after it was vacated by John Major. Transition worked like

clock and it was smooth. Nothing of the lengthy transition at the White House.

As I watched the warm, enthusiastic welcome being accorded to the Blair family, in front of 10 Downing Street, I could not help reflecting the grandeur of the occasion when John F. Kennedy took oath as one of the youngest Presidents of the US more than 30 years ago. It was a youthful family, the President, glamorous First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy and three small children entered the White House. After the warmth of the reception and popular welcome Tony Blair, smart wife Cherie and three tiny children entered 10 Downing Street (they may have to move house because of shortage of accommodation at 10 Downing Street). Whereas Jackie was all glamour, Cherie in keeping with the times is a successful lawyer much like Hillary Clinton, the wife of the US President. The noisy and warm scene in front of the 10 Downing Street people of all de-

Tony Blair had fashioned his Old Labour into a New Labour and presented it in a nice package to the public. He had moved his party onto the centre ground.

scription carrying British flags, reminded us that times had changed in Britain and British society had moved with time and entered the media age.

The scale of the defeat of the Conservatives must be attributed to the fact of sheer fatigue of the electorate and their determination to try a new man. More and more the Tories

scale. The Prime Minister John Major managed to stay out of all this and was not smeared. But he failed to project an image of decisive leadership.

This is where Tony Blair presented an image of purposefulness and strength. He had fashioned his Old Labour into a New Labour and presented it in a nice package to the public. He

cation, a pet subject with youth. The New Labour occupies the vast centre ground of British politics. It would be pretty much impossible to move Labour from that solid ground. Labour had a sweeping victory in Scotland, where the Tories have been wiped out. The same is the picture in Wales. For long, the Scots have been clamouring for their place in the sun. For long, England has swept the problem under the carpet. Tony Blair arrives on the scene with a fresh human face. Expectations are running high if only because of the landslide victory. Wales is a minor affair compared to Scotland.

Britain has been wrestling with the problem of Northern Ireland for many decades. Negotiations started during the regime of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. John Major made some attempts to find a solution. Passions still run high on the issue on both sides of the divide. They will need to cool down before serious talks can be engaged. The victory of

two leaders of Sinn Fein, it is hard to foretell how that will affect the negotiations. The British have a time-tested knack for negotiated settlement of disputes and it is to be hoped that their good sense will not fail them in Northern Ireland.

In the brouhaha one subject that has not surfaced is the question of succession to the British Throne. There is an unfinished agenda. The successor to the Throne, Prince Charles, is passionately involved with a lady, whom an average Briton would find hard to accept as the Queen. From time to time, the scandals in the Buckingham Palace have reached proportions almost threatening the British monarchy. How does the young Prime Minister view the goings on inside the hoary Palace?

As Tony Blair holds the reins of power in his young and vigorous hands, the British, above everything else, will expect him to lead the country. This is the meaning of the landslide, which propels him from near obscurity to centre stage of a powerful country and its hardy people.



The Horizon This Week  
Arshad-uz Zaman

while projecting an image of immobility. Nowhere was it more acutely felt than the question of Britain's integration into Europe. The Madcow disease and its inept handling did not exactly make the Tories any more popular. The last straw appeared to be some sex-related scandals, although on a minor

had moved his party onto the centre ground. It must be stated that the process had started with his defeated predecessor Neil Kinnock and Blair simply accelerated the move. Gone were the days of Labour rhetorics on socialism etc. Blair has said precious little on policy matters except laying emphasis on edu-

Does AL Really Want the Government to be Accountable?

by Nurul Kabir

The people voted the AL to power to do things which the BNP had failed to do. The AL had assured the people that they would offer the nation 'a transparent administration—accountable to the people'.

THE first Jatiya Sangsad (JS) of the independent Bangladesh, which also acted as the constituent assembly, did a very good job in terms of devising a mechanism to make the Executive wing of the state accountable to the Parliament. They made it a constitutional obligation for the government to form some JS standing committees, comprising members from both the Treasury and Opposition benches, to look after the expenditure of the government, examine audit reports and so on. Understandably, the objective was to make sure that the Executive branch of the state was accountable to the Legislative branch.

The first Sangsad also adopted the Rules of Procedure of Jatiya Sangsad that included a separate chapter seeking formation of separate standing bodies—once again, comprising legislators belonging to both Treasury and Opposition benches—on various ministries. The responsibilities of these standing committees included looking after day-to-day activities of the ministries, debating on the policies of a ministry among the members concerned, examining the proposed legislations of the ministries and so on.

It is, however, clear enough that the idea behind the formation of the standing bodies was to ensure a total accountability of the different branches of the government to parliament members, in other words—the elected representatives of the people. With the committee system functioning properly, the opposition members of Parliament can also get a scope to play a constructive role in running the affairs of the state. Once the opposition members get a rightful scope to take part in the policy making system of a government, the chances of traditional unhealthy debates

while in power the BNP did not follow what it has been preaching these days. Well, we have no reason to defend the BNP as a political party as such. But here we need to assert a few more points. Number one, the prime responsibility of constituting the standing bodies lies with the ruling party. Number two, it is not a tenable argument that the AL cannot do anything which was not done by the BNP. We possibly do not need to remind our readers of the fact that the AL did not refrain from repealing the Indemnity Act on the ground that the BNP had not done it.

Again, the AL has already decided to appoint non-minister MPs to be chairpersons of the standing bodies on ministries. It is a very good decision, because it would practically enable the legislators to make the ministries accountable to Parliament. Had the AL followed the BNP, it could not have agreed to appoint the non-minister MPs to be the chairpersons of the parliamentary committees. The BNP had failed to meet many of its election pledges during its rule. The people therefore voted the AL to power to do things which the BNP had failed to do. The AL had assured the people that they would offer the nation 'a transparent administration—accountable to the people'. Almost one fifth of its five-year tenure is already gone unaccountable. Any further dilly-dally in constituting the parliamentary bodies on ministries would only prove the AL's reluctance to make its administration accountable to Parliament—in other words, the elected repre-

sentatives of the people. The AL leaders have time and again admitted in the past that the parliamentary bodies are very effective fora for the Opposition to assert its rights in formulating various state policies, and thus turning the parliamentary system into a system of collective governance. Busy talking about a transparent administration, it was only expected from the AL that it succeeded to constitute the committees much earlier than the BNP had.

However, the AL is not ready to give the BNP the membership on the committees in proportion to the party's strength in the parliament. But the BNP demand for proportionate membership on the committees is not illogical even in the light of the record of the fifth Jatiya Sangsad. That time there had been no demand for proportionate membership from the AL side. But it would be an injustice on the BNP not to mention that the 26 per cent of the membership on a total of 35 ministerial committees went to AL. With 92 MPs in the 330 member Parliament, the AL had a strength of 27 per cent. It is, therefore, evident that the BNP distributed the membership of the committees almost proportionately with the respective strengths of the parties, although there had been no such demand from the Awami League.

Again, there is no reason for us to question the AL's sincerity in constituting the committees at the earliest. In October last, the party accepted the BNP proposal for proportionate membership in the committees. But later it staged a back out. Even some very senior leaders of the party refused to accept until last month that the party had officially endorsed the idea. When it was proved that the decision

was really made, the AL leaders have now started asserting that they cannot give in to the proposal. The BNP then asked the ruling party to reject its proposal on the JS floor by voice votes, and constitute the committees quickly, even in whatever manner it wanted. But the AL is yet to make any practical initiative in this regard.

The attitude of some senior AL leaders shown in the said NDI conference was also not very healthy. The conference was designed to discuss on as to how to make the parliamentary committees more effective. With the committees yet to be born, the BNP leaders attending the conference quite naturally addressed the problems of constituting the bodies themselves. But it sparked an altercation, instead of a sound discussion, between the leaders.

While discussing on the ways of making 'parliamentary democracy more effective', the BNP put forward a set of recommendations that included distribution of committee membership on the basis of the parliamentary strength of various parties and groups, election of opposition MPs to head the standing committees like Public Accounts Committee and Committee on Government Assurance, stoppage of the abuse of presidential power to promulgate ordinances, prior approval of the content of international treaty by Jatiya Sangsad before they are signed by the government, constitution of a separate standing committee to evaluate the performance of bureaucracy and so on.

The AL leaders attending the conference expressed their agreement to some of the propositions for the sake of a really effective parliamentary system of governance. But, to

the disappointment of the NDI organisers, the AL refused to agree to sign a set of recommendations prepared on the mutually agreed points', for future consideration of the authorities concerned. The AL leaders, including some influential ministers, opposed the idea on the ground that they have attended the conference on their own—without any authority to sign any recommendation. As a result, the NDI has abandoned the idea of preparing recommendations for further discussion and consideration by the appropriate authorities. They would now prepare a transcript containing the speeches of individual leaders. The parties involved in the conference believe that it was practically a total unproductive one.

However, the NDI held a similar conference in the city in 1993. The AL, the then opposition in parliament, had proposed that the parliamentary bodies should not be headed by the ministers for the sake of real accountability of the ministries. The BNP leaders had admitted that the AL had substance in its arguments, and agreed to incorporate the idea into the set of recommendations. Such political consensus reached through debates of the opposing parties, if not implemented immediately, always leave some persuasive impact especially in terms of influencing even the most obstinate policy maker of a party in the long run.

However, following an amendment to a provision of the Constitution in mid-1975, the original obligation of constituting the committees, at the first sitting of a Parliament is no more in existence. Under the present provision, the committees are to be formed 'as soon as possible' after the constitution of a new Sangsad. But ten months after the election of the seventh parliament, any conscious citizen perhaps preserves the right to doubt the AL's commitment to form and make effective the standing bodies.

To the Editor...

"It is Insulting"  
Sir, With my best compliments, I wish to introduce myself as an ardent reader of your newspaper and especially of articles written by you.

Through this letter, I send my heartfelt appreciation for writing the above captioned article which appeared on the front page of your daily dated April 9, 1997.

Self-respect and self-prestige are attributes which should be cherished by each and every human being as an individual self. Whereas, we at the national level do not seem to feel the sting when it comes to hurting our national prestige.

We, as an independent, sovereign state should not really endure such audacious behaviour from any state, leave alone a private company.

To quote your language: "How does the chief of a private company dare to behave with us in such a manner?" I honestly wish to synchronise my voice in the same time.

This attitude is nothing but taking undue advantage of our tradition of showing the highest respect to foreign guests. But it is high time that we make them realise where to draw the line. We do encourage foreign investment but investment should in no way be interpreted as aid. The chief of Peregrine should be reminded that by opening a bank in our country, he did not do us any unconditional favour. He and his staff are not here to give voluntary welfare service rather, they are operating with the set objective of 'definite profit'.

I on behalf of all country-conscious member of a sovereign state truly resent the insulting attitude and language of Mr Tose 'to our country, to the office of the Head of the Government and to the person of Sheikh Hasina'.

To conclude, I would thank you once again for voicing our feelings, and wish you long and healthy life so that you may inspire us to hold our heads high as good Bangladeshis.

Syeda Nazneen Ferdousi  
House-49, Road-2,  
Mohammad Housing Society  
Mohammadpur, Dhaka-1207

of April 9, 1997. But you are asking the cat to bell itself. Will it work? We do not think so.  
Saikat Hossain  
Green Road, Dhaka-1205

Some unfortunate Bangladeshis

Sir, A well-known flight official of Bangladesh Biman was narrating me about the condition of some of the deported Bangladeshi nationals from Malaysia and Taiwan. Those poor unfortunate Bangladeshis, who must have spent fortunes to land up in Malaysia and Taiwan had been so abruptly and so inhumanly sent back. The flight official was telling me that the ill-fated deportees bore marks of cruel beating and torture at the hands of Malaysian and Taiwanese officials. The mental condition of some of the deportees appeared seriously retarded, a few could hardly walk about or eat and drink. The question is: do they deserve all that cruelty?

The least the Malaysians and Taiwanese officials would have done is to send them back home. Is the primitive and animal-like behaviour justified? We want to make an appeal to the authority concerned to take measures against those responsible for illegally sending our nationals to Malaysia, Taiwan etc. The authority concerned should take up the initiatives to aware the people about it.

Again, we Bangladeshis are subject to extreme racial discrimination in the UK and the USA. On the contrary, we the humble and ever-hospitable Bengalis have always shown respect and honour for all foreigners. But this seems to be taking things the other way round. There are cases of Bengalis being very harshly and severely treated by some foreigners in our own soil. To substantiate my view, I like to mention how I was nastily insulted by a foreigner.

Some time back, I went to call on the Taiwanese national, who owns a housing construction manufacturing unit in Bangladesh. The industry is 100 per cent self-financed. My visit was officially preceded. When I had landed at his chamber, I did what I could to show respect and then smilingly approached: "May I come in sir?" The Taiwanese, who was rolling in a chair, as if in Taipei, just was

not responsive. By his body language I knew that I was not wanted. While I was slowly walking away, I heard a loud voice saying, "How does just anybody come up all the way?"

Anyway, I do agree that we do need foreign entrepreneurs in the country but they should ought to behave well with us Bengalis. After all, we will not stand to tolerate foreigners mistreat us in our own soil.

Shamsuddin Ali  
Kauran Bazar, Dhaka

BTV and credibility

Sir, BTV as an electronic media has almost lost its credibility. It had hit the lowest ebb recently when the entire nation was glued over to Radio to listen ICC Cricket broadcast while BTV missed the whole event. Though BTV has circulated the reasons of their inability, but I am afraid, that has not satisfied the cricket-loving people of the country.

It appears that BTV is basically 'anti-cricket'. This is clearly reflected in the logo of their Sports News telecast everyday. It is ridiculous in a country where the entire nation loves cricket more than any other sport.  
MMK Khan  
Rupsha, Khulna

Parliamentarians

Sir, An MP is first and foremost a parliamentarian and then a politician as she or he ascent to the seat through the party unless one is an independent or partyless. However, most of our parliamentarians are about 40 years of age, active-aggressive businessmen without proper legal social-economic, political background to do justice and respond to their commitment to the people of the constituency she/he belong to.

A parliamentarian needs proper education, training, grooming besides his morality, integrity, sense of commitment, service. Most of these people have come for sheer capital gain and fame, and some construed notion of being powerful. These people have a very causal professional attitude which is apparent from their presence and behaviour in the Parliament.

NHasan  
Tongi, Dhaka

TRIAL OF BOSNIAN WAR CRIMINALS  
Hard to Nab Suspects

by A S M Nurun Nabi

Locating war crimes suspects was easy but finding someone prepared to arrest them was tough. The unarmed UN police force had no power of arrest and the NATO-led peace force had no mandate to hunt these indicted for their alleged roles in Bosnia's war.

WHEN the war ended in Bosnia, the War Crime Trial taking place at the Hague vividly brought home what went on there: Serbian troops carried on a rampage raining down death and destruction on hapless Muslim civilians. For the first time in 50 years, an accused war criminal stood before an international tribunal to enter his plea. He was Dusan Tadic, a Bosnian Serb café owner. Tadic was one of the 74 persons indicted for war crimes in Bosnia who is actually in the tribunal's custody along with six others. His appearance in court signalled that the UN-created International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia was swinging into action.

Chief prosecutor of the tribunal, Richard Goldstone, who earned a reputation for implacability when he investigated violence in South Africa, vowed to go after the leaders who ordered the crimes. He was committed or failed to stop them. According to a report, besides 74 persons indicted by the tribunal, its teams of investigators are continuing working and additional indictments are promised.

Already indicted for war crimes including genocide are such senior figures as Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic, his military commander General Ratko Mladic and Milan Martić, leader of the Croatian Serbs. The Serbian brutalities were on a scale that really numbed our senses. The world learnt a new expression—ethnic cleansing. It simply meant razing the criminal's atrocities on Bosnian Muslims and if possible wipe them off from the face of the earth.

diction and will not cooperate with it, the question is how the accused are to be brought to justice. It was understood that the court was due to start proceedings under a specific rule which is called Rule 61. While there is no provision for trial in absentia, the rule allows something very similar. Prosecutors can present case against the accused and, if the judges find it reasonable, they can "reconfirm" the indictment. They then issue an international arrest warrant which requires UN member-states to take the fugitive into custody, and turn him over to the tribunal. This may not threaten the indictees who remain at home, but it will make international travel risky for them.

Reportedly the court has already started down this road, which it says allows the world to hear "the voices of the victim". Already 15 witnesses were said to have appeared at hearings to testify against Dragan Nikolic, reputedly the Bosnian Serb commander of a detention camp in northeast Bosnia, who was accused of murdering at least eight Muslims and torturing ten others. The witnesses gave horrifying accounts of beatings with clubs, rifles and chains. Nikolic was believed to be at large in Bosnia. The judicial panel in this case ruled that "there are reasonable grounds for believing that Dragan Nikolic committed the offenses," and issued an international arrest warrant.

The prosecutors did not announce their plans in advance, but there was no doubt they would keep going with Rule 61 proceedings against more of the accused war criminals who had been indicted but were not in custody. In due course, they would probably take on Karadzic and Mladic.

Bosnian Serbs have said that they would not extradite their former leaders to the international tribunal to face the war crimes charges. Louise Arbour, a Canadian, has now replaced Richard Goldstone as the chief prosecutor of the UN War Crimes Tribunal in the Hague. The tribunal issued two indictments each against Karadzic and Mladic for allegedly orchestrating massacres of Muslims and other crimes in Bosnia. The two were replaced as leaders last year, because the Dayton peace deal for Bosnia banned indicted war criminals from holding public office, but they are still at large.

Locating war crimes suspects was easy but finding someone prepared to arrest them was tough. The unarmed UN police force had no power of arrest and the NATO-led peace force had no mandate to hunt those indicted for their alleged roles in Bosnia's war. The most famous war crimes suspects follow elaborate security measures to make sure they were not nabbed and carried off to trial. They include Radovan Karadzic and his former military commander Gen Ratko Mladic. International peace administrators are now compiling a list of war crimes suspects with their whereabouts. So far officials have displayed little zeal to embroil any of the 43,000 soldiers of the NATO-led peace force in the war crimes issue. US President Bill Clinton ruled out the use of US troops to hunt down indicted war criminals in Bosnia.

Will the trial at the Hague open the eyes of the international community to the magnitude of the cruelty and murders perpetrated by the Serbian leadership against their own countrymen who happened to be Muslims?