

# FOCUS

## The Growing Consensus of British Politics

by Chris Moncrieff

For a party which has cosied up to its enemy and which may be privy to a limited number of state secrets will feel inhibited about berating the Government in public.

THE House of Commons is constructed like a cockpit. In theory, glare at each other across the Chamber. The place is purpose-built for confrontation. Even the terminology used is warlike. The two opposing sides are said to be two sword-lengths apart, conjuring up visions of political debate boiling up into a physical and bloody clash of arms.

But despite all this, and all the imagery of battle, and all the furore that sometimes overwhelms the Commons, the fact remains that Westminster flourishes largely through a sophisticated system of nods and winks, of bargaining and of deals being struck between even the most bitter of political opponents.

It is consensus politics which not only keeps the system going but which also oils the works. Otherwise the whole machinery could splutter, stall and seize up altogether. This goes on right from the most momentous decisions a Government may take, down to the minutiae and trivia of life at Westminster.

Politicians of all complexions and on all extremes of the spectrum know that the system can only work if compromises are struck with the enemy and agreements reached — but generally well out of the public gaze.

**Smoke and Fury**  
Much of this — though not all of it — is undetected from outside. It cannot be spotted amid the smoke and fury of the public clashes in the Chamber of the Commons itself. The most obvious example of that in recent years is the offer made by Prime Minister Tony Blair, and

eagerly accepted by Liberal Democrat leader Paddy Ashdown, for some Liberal Democrats to be included on a key Cabinet Committee.

This move puts Paddy Ashdown's fingernails — although not much more — on the levers of power. But it gives him and his party a sense of power, which is what is important. The cynics say (and they could be right) that this has been done merely to isolate the already beleaguered Conservatives at Westminster and also to blunt the Liberal Democrats' ability to attack the Government when they think fit.

For a party which has cosied up to its enemy and which may be privy to a limited number of state secrets will feel inhibited about berating the Government in public. But whatever the truth of the matter, this is an example of political opponents, who fought each other into the ground at the hustings, realising that fraternising brings advantages to both sides.

How all that is viewed, however, by the poor infantry, the party workers who sweated blood during and before the election campaign is not, of course, even considered. The House of Commons even employs someone — the present incumbent is a man called Murdo McLean — who liaises between the two main whips offices, whichever party is in power.

When you hear in the Commons the words, "this is being arranged through the usual channels", the "usual channels" are Murdo McLean. It means that warring parties, which fight each other hammer and tongs in public, are secretly conniving with each other for their mutual convenience.

What they are actually doing

is making life bearable for each other. There are occasions — but they are extremely rare — when a Bill, for instance, is too utterly controversial to brook the idea of any kind of cooperation between sides.

Even then, when life becomes too intolerable, there may be a reluctant meeting of opposing minds to ease an impossible situation. The things that are discussed include the timing of divisions, so that MPs know unofficially what time they need to be in the Chamber, the length of time the Opposition would like to spend on specific parts of the Bill, and how late that night they want to sit.

This prevents Bills, whether contentious or not, projecting the Commons into a state of chaos and giving the green light to an unreasonable Opposition exploiting Parliamentary rules for the benefit of nobody.

It means that voices of dissent get a fair but not excessive hearing. And it brings rationality and logic to what could otherwise become an uncontrollable shambles. There is another area, too, where MPs, otherwise hostile to each other, reach personal agreement on a basis which prevents them having to stay all night and every night in the House of Commons, bereft of sleep.

It is called "pairing" and it is a system by which, for instance, a Conservative MP has a regular "pair" who is a Labour MP. They agree with each other — subject to the endorsement of the whips — both to miss specific votes, so that their absence cancels each other out.

although officially neither Tory nor Labour whips' offices recognise such an arrangement, they nevertheless accept that it

goes on, and do nothing to stamp it out. Indeed, they connive at it by agreeing or otherwise to a "pairing" arrangement.

### Constant Accord

One area where consensus is to be found in the current British Parliament, and has been so for a quarter or a century, irrespective of which party is in power, is over the question of Northern Ireland. Since the troubles reignited in the late 1960s, there has been constant accord on the main issues between Labour and Conservatives, although there has been bickering on some of the lesser issues. It would send out all the wrong signals if Westminster was itself at war on the best way of dealing with the problem. Similarly, there will always be this kind of coalition, if not formal, in situations like the Falklands Conflict or the Gulf War when British troops are fighting.

But it is on the trivia of Parliamentary life as well, that consensus plays an important role. There are all sorts of all-party clubs, like for instance chess, bridge, cricket, football, stamp-collecting, indeed almost every occupation under the sun, where political partisanship plays no role whatsoever. The doors are open to everybody!

In one recent example of non-confrontational politics, the former Conservative Heritage Minister David Mellor, who lost his seat in the May General Election, was named as the chairman of the new Football Task Force.

His job will include tackling ticket over-pricing, improving access to grounds for the disabled and cracking down on

racism.

It was a move by Mr Blair that went down well with soccer fans. The Football Supporters' Association cited Mr Mellor's genuine passion for the sport as a keen Chelsea Football Club fan — as well as his track record as a capable Westminster insider.

Mr Mellor has warm relations with both the Prime Minister and Sports Minister Tony Banks, another staunch Chelsea fan, who will also sit on the task force. Similarly, there are many all-party committees which are run on amicable, non-sectarian lines which flourish at Westminster. Usually, there is rarely any friction with the all-party committees when they go abroad on fact-finding missions.

Life would be intolerable if the hurly-burly of political warfare, as seen in the Chamber of the Commons, was allowed to spill over into all aspects of Westminster life. Even so many people believe life is like that at Westminster. And they were truly surprised at the occasion when John Major (as Prime Minister) had his two arch enemies, Tony Blair and Paddy Ashdown, publicly in fits of laughter when he told them a story about his sunburnt goldfish.

Outside Westminster, people did not think such camaraderie was possible. It is not only possible, but essential to avoid the whole edifice from collapse. —LPS

The writer is British Sky Television political commentator and former Chief Political Correspondent of the Press Association

## Literacy for Development

by Abu Imran

There is no alternative to education if we want all round progress and improved quality of life of the people.

UNDERSCORING the need for literacy, since literacy and development go hand in hand, September 8 has been marked as the international literacy day. All over the world, this day is observed in a befitting manner, particularly in the under-developed world where the need is more than anywhere else. Keeping in line with the tradition, Bangladesh too observed it yesterday and has already under-taken suitable programme, primarily to create awareness among the masses. This may help attain the target of education for all (EFA) by the year 2005. This may help to improve the pace of development since the more the people, are educated the better is their quality of life. A comparison with the developed west or Japan may not serve our purpose, since we may not be able to compete with them, but comparative figures of some indicators of a few neighbouring countries, as given below may help us understand the fact.

Criteria Indicator	Bangladesh	India	Pakistan	S.Lanka	Malaysia	Thailand	Indonesia
GDP	4.7%	7%	6.1%	5.6%	8%	8.5%	8.1%
Population	124m	943.7m	133.2 m	18.2m	20.6 m	61.4 m	197.6m
Pop. growthrate	2.2%	2.1%	2.9%	1.2%	2.4%	1.5%	1.6%
Foreign debt	14.8 b	85.2 b	26.1 b	6.4b	27.1b	62.1b	100b
Life Expectancy	56 yrs	61 yrs	62 yrs	72 yrs	72 yrs	69 yrs	63 yrs
Literacy	38.1%	52.1%	35.7%	89.3%	89.3%	93.8%	84.4%
Urban population	21%	27%	35%	22%	47%	36%	34%

(Figures taken from a paper read at BCS Admn. Academy seminar held on 5.6.97)

From the above figure it may now be clear that there is no alternative to education if we mean all round progress and improved quality of life of the people. But how to do it may be the million dollar question since we lack resources to face the challenging task. The answer to this may be that whatever re-

sources we have, we have to maximise its use and tap the un-harnessed opportunities. This could be possible by political commitment, government support, NGOs' and people's cooperation.

Some of the programmes taken by the government like non-formal education programme, stipend for girl students, education for the ex-garment child workers etc. are laudable ones. But much more is needed to be done for which efforts of almost all people could be required and as said before, existing resources — men, money and material — are to be maximised. By this it's meant that the existing educational institutions are to be strengthened since here not much money is needed. For instance, schools/colleges can run double shift or the premises be used in the evening for adult literacy or for the working people. Some of the teachers there could be utilized by giving some extra remuneration or un-employed educated youths could be used for teaching the vast

used for education purpose are the mosques which can be organised in line with Maktab based education. Maktab, which is one way or the other mosque based education, has been in use for centuries, where generally children are educated. But all mosques have not been used. There are around 200,000 mosques. Almost all mosques have an in-built system of being equipped with infrastructure and resource persons i.e. there are some form of structures and Imams (the men leading prayers) and muazins (the men responsible for calling azan and helping the Imams) who are normally educated people.

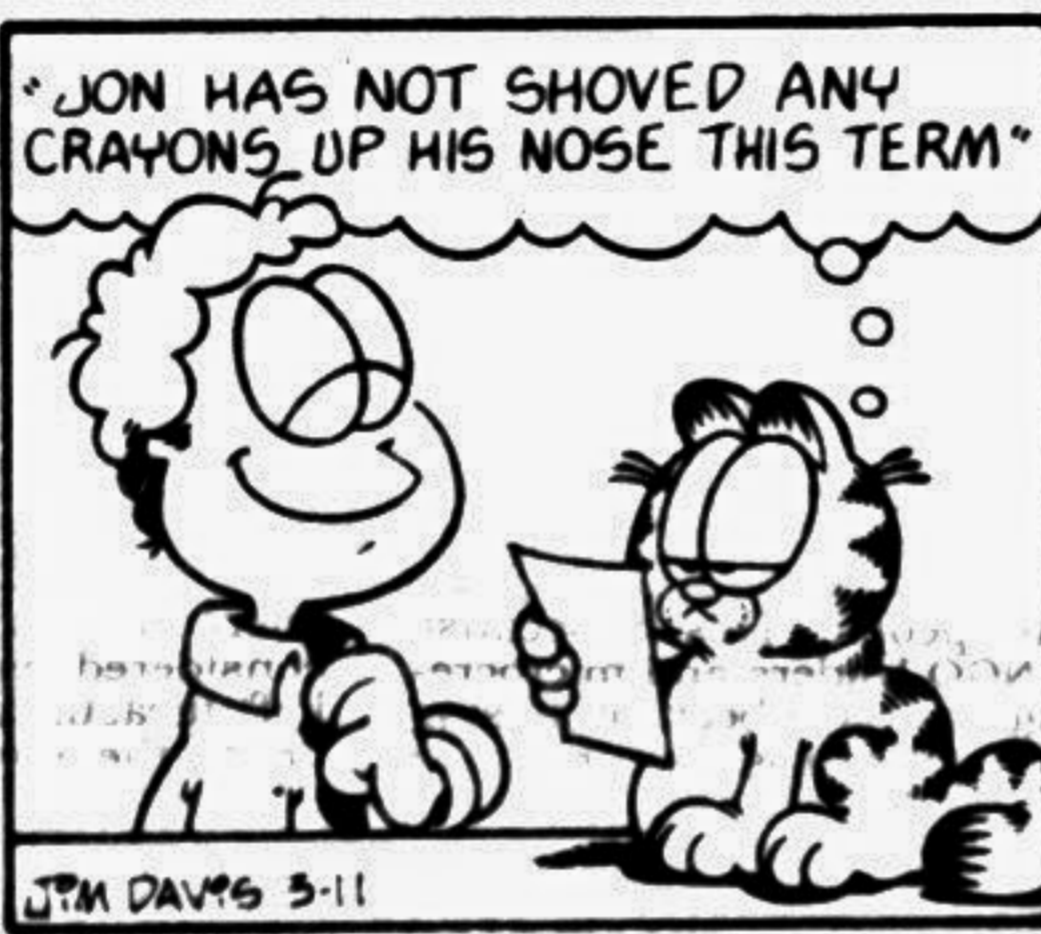
Now let it be presumed that all mosques are not developed evenly and many lack proper facilities particularly the ones in the poor areas. Then at least 50 per cent i.e. nearly 100,000 mosques make good number to bring them under education programme by giving some incentives both to the Imams/muazins and the chil-

majority of the un-lettered or half educated people. Similarly, local clubs, and local leaders also at union and village levels can be motivated to form education squads to help proliferate literacy.

One of the most important and effective institutions that has been ignored or partially

used for education purpose are the mosques which can be organised in line with Maktab based education. Maktab, which is one way or the other mosque based education, has been in use for centuries, where generally children are educated. But all mosques have not been used. There are around 200,000 mosques. Almost all mosques have an in-built system of being equipped with infrastructure and resource persons i.e. there are some form of structures and Imams (the men leading prayers) and muazins (the men responsible for calling azan and helping the Imams) who are normally educated people.

## Garfield®



## James Bond



## by Jim Davis



WHEN Rachel Carson published her seminal work *Silent Spring* in 1962, the West suddenly woke up to the results of ecological crisis that may result from increasing dependence on unsafe chemical agents. Carson died of cancer afterwards, and often the birth of the US government's Federal agency known as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is attributed to this whole episode.

In the United States, environmental groups (including NGOs), and even the Federal government's EPA are occasionally at odds with various companies and interest groups on issues related to natural resources depletion and human-induced pollution. Similar trends are visible in Europe.

For example, very recently, British Petroleum (BP) sued the environmental group Greenpeace for BP's losses incurred due to Greenpeace's confrontational activities. Bangladesh, as a comparatively new country, has yet to develop a strong industrial base (with the garment and shrimp sectors often beset with various problems); and our agriculture is prone to natural disasters almost every year.

Under the circumstances, the government seems to be greatly dependent on various multinational companies, NGOs, and donor agencies, and

## The Ecological Crush

by Sarwat Chowdhury

The arsenic problem, which is not yet visible in the capital city, has become serious in the other parts of the country. Some experts blame this problem on the use of ground water, others on the use of chemical agents.

mutual cooperation among these various groups remains extremely necessary. In our tiny country, various human-induced ecological problems seem to be getting critical day by day. The air quality in various cities, especially in Dhaka, has become quite unbearable with the daily emission of noxious fumes from two-stroke engine vehicles (baby-taxis) among other sources. Young children are particularly vulnerable to such polluted air which causes various complications including respiratory problems.

The arsenic problem, which is not yet visible in the capital city, has become serious in the other parts of the country. Some experts blame this prob-

lem on the use of ground water, others on the use of chemical agents. However, we do seem to be on the verge of a quick remedy. In addition to these slowly emerging but dangerous ecological problems, recently we experienced a sudden and colossal ecological disaster at the Magurchara gasfield accident.

Even though we are, by no means a very techno-based industrial country, our man-made ecological problems seem to be just as harmful. As a predominantly rural country (with a low literacy rate), most of our citizens are unaware of the consequences of such problems, and become easy victims. Obviously, they lack any means of

voicing their opinion (if they do not know what's going on, how can they express their concerns or make suggestions amenable to their life-styles?)

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), various corporations and donor agencies have proven to be a forceful ally of the government in keeping the country's population problem in control — with various activities such as publicity campaigns, dissemination of information, training the right people, in addition to assisting the government in funding such activities. Our ecological problems are just as urgent, and it may not be a bad idea to engage all these forces together to come up with a holistic policy of mutual cooperation.

While faced with ecological crises, we cannot afford to take on a confrontational attitude as often seen in the West. Instead, we need to get all the groups involved: those who can help us solve the problems directly, and those who may have been proven to bear the responsibility to help the country out.

As we strive to establish ourselves as a strong nation, we cannot forget the significance of "unity" and "mutual respect for all" just as we cannot ignore the long-term effects of natural and human-induced problems including the vital ones like the arsenic crush.

## Metropolitan



US Ambassador to Bangladesh John C. Holzman called on Finance Minister SAMS Kibria at his office yesterday. —PID photo

## Weather

### Moderate rain likely

Moderately heavy fall is likely at places over Chittagong and Sylhet divisions in the next 12 hours till 6 pm today, reports UNB.

Met Office also forecast light to moderate rain or thunder-shower accompanied by temporary gusty wind at many places over Chittagong, Barisal, Khulna and Sylhet divisions and at a few places over Dhaka and Rajshahi divisions.

Day temperature may remain nearly unchanged during the period across the country.

The sun sets today at 6:08 pm and rises tomorrow at 5:43 am.

City/Town	Temperature		Humidity	
	Max	Min	Morning	Evening
Dhaka	30.8	25.0	82	80
Chittagong	31.9	24.6	77	77
Rajshahi	31.2	25.7	93	81
Khulna	27.8	23.8	100	83
Barisal	29.5	23.6	100	80

## New transport service launched

Home Minister Rafiqul Islam inaugurated a new transport service, 'Maxy Human Hoiler' at a ceremony held at the Golap Shah Mazar premises in the city yesterday, reports BSS.

Nitol Motors Ltd and Zahid Motors Ltd have jointly launched the service.

Addressing the ceremony Rafiqul Islam said the new service will ease transport problem and help reduce traffic jams in the city.

He said introduction of such transport services would bring speed in city life and would make the movement of people cost effective.

The minister called upon the unemployed youths to take the opportunity of purchasing Maxy cabs, having 14 seats each, in instalments for solving their employment problem.

## Hasina in BBC interview

### Ganges Water Treaty not a failure

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has said that as a result of speedy decisions, her government remained active and vibrant in administering the country and resolving its problems. "My government took certain steps which were simultaneously appreciated and criticised," the Prime Minister said in an interview with the BBC, broadcast on Friday, reports BSS.

The Prime Minister said the people will judge the successes and failures of her 14-month old government. She said people's expectations were heightened at the very outset of the long-term agreement with India on the sharing of the Ganges water.

Referring to the allegations that the agreement completely failed in the first year of its operation, the Prime Minister said the criticism came from those who were in power for five years but took no initiative to resolve the issue.

Hasina firmly stated that, "We have at least succeeded in establishing our rightful share of the Ganges water," adding that the agreement has the scope to resolve any problem that might arise through negotiations. Therefore, she maintained, it cannot be described as a failure.

The Prime Minister said as a result of the water sharing agreement, "We are now in a position to go for a Ganges barrage and once the barrage is built, we will have no water problem." She said it could not be said the treaty has totally failed and it is also not true that people did not get any water during the dry season.

Hasina said the Ganges-Kabardak Project has become

operative, resulting in good harvests thanks to the treaty.

The Prime Minister said whatever be the controversy surrounding the agreement, scientists are of the opinion that as a result of withdrawal of waters from the sources in northern India, the Farakka itself is getting less water.

She said temporary difficulties crop up due to natural factors, and added, to resolve the problem "We also going to build the Ganga barrage. Once it is completed, we won't have to rely on the mercy of others."

### BGMEA criticised

By Staff Correspondent  
National Garments Workers-Employees Coordinating Council yesterday expressed its resentment at the silence of BGMEA over the issue of paying grants to the workers affected by the fire at Navole Garments at Mohakhali in the city on Saturday.

Nine organisations of garments workers at an emergency meeting also urged the owner of the garments factory to pay Tk three lakh to the wards of the dead workers and Tk one lakh to the injured workers, says a press release.

The leaders of NGWECC alleged that the provisions of the Factories Act were not being followed in the garments factories of their poverty. The garments owners are oppressing the poor people of the country in a feudal way, they said.

They termed the BGMEA an organisation for protecting the interests of the owners of garments factories.

Referring to the problems of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the Prime Minister said her government took prompt decision to resolve the long standing problem. "Instead of assisting us in resolving the issue, the opposition kept itself busy to make the problem complicated and also to incite the people," she added.

The Prime Minister denied the opposition allegation that the government would extend support to India in its efforts to contain rebellion by separatists in the north-east in exchange for the resolution of the Chittagong Hill Tracts problem. She said no such discussions were held with India.

Hasina wanted to know how the leader of the opposition could instigate the people of another country by stating that a liberation war is being waged in north-east India. She wondered whether the leader of the opposition has the political maturity to understand the implications of such a statement.

The Prime Minister made it clear that the Special Powers Act will continue, adding that the country could not be run without it. She denied having changed her mind on the matter and stated that it was not one of the election pledges of the party.

Hasina said, "We spoke of repealing 'black laws' and have done so with the Indemnity Act, which was a black law. "She added that the leader of the opposition was on record, while in power, as having said that she cannot rule the country without that law (Special Powers Act). "I have said before and am saying now, we have never used it in the past nor would do so in future for political reasons," she told the interviewer.



Health Minister Salauddin Yusuf addressing the inaugural of a TFIPP orientation workshop at a city hotel on Sunday.

## Kim Jong Il greeted

President Shahabuddin Ahmed yesterday felicitated Kim Jong Il, Chairman of the National Defence Commission of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) on the founding anniversary of his country, reports BSS.

In a message, the President said the existing friendship and cooperation between the two countries would be further strengthened in the years to come.

In a separate message Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina felicitated Kim Jong Il, on the founding anniversary of his country.

## Workshop on TFIPP held

By Staff Correspondent  
An orientation workshop on 'Thana Functional Improvement Pilot Project' (TFIPP) for members of parliament of the project districts was held in the city on Sunday, says a press release.

Inaugurating the workshop at a city hotel Health and Family Welfare Minister Salauddin Yusuf said, "The Thana Functional Improvement Pilot Project (TFIPP) is a good example of how best we can manage the thana health system through bottom-up planning."

TFIPP, a European Union funded government project, is being implemented with a view to ensuring provision of improved health care services to the rural people in six districts of the country.

During the working session of the workshop, the MPs identified the problems of present health system and made some proposals in this regard.

## Obituary

Shamsuddin Ahmed Chowdhury, former accounts officer of AGB, died yesterday at the Holy Family Hospital in the city.

He was 65, says a press release.