

Looking for local heroes

The people expect a leader who can directly address them without being censored by his/her political party, or worrying about the backlash from pundits. A good leader will have the ability to get those that cannot find common ground to at least sit at a table and hear the other's point of view. A good leader will instill in his/her people the confidence of character and morality of the spirit needed to get the people through times of crisis.

RIPAN KUMAR BISWAS

IN his reaction after being expelled from the CPI (M) (Communist Party of India-Marxist), Lok Sabha Speaker Somnath Chatterjee said on August 8 that the party should appreciate him as he didn't compromise with the constitutional position of the speaker. "No responsible person or authority can treat the speaker as belonging to a party," he added. Somnath was asked to resign from his post and vote against a confidence motion regarding a civilian nuclear deal between the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government and the United States.

A person can belong to a party, but the speaker is a neutral constitutional authority, Somnath firmly believes. Many critics of political parties and its functions may agree with Somnath that political parties often espouse a certain ideology and vision, but countries may have other interests for the greater interest of

general people.

After local government elections in Bangladesh, political parties are now arguing with the government to get back their democratic and constitutional rights.

A legal battle is going on between the government and the political parties as to whether local government in Bangladesh should be partisan or non-partisan. According to the latest news, the Awami League (AL) and BNP (Bangladesh Nationalist Party) backed elected mayors and councilors are now going to pursue a legal challenge against the new electoral rules that require the winners to resign their party positions before taking the oath of office.

The caretaker administration promulgated this law through the Local Government (City Corporation) Ordinance-2008 and Local Government (Municipality) Ordinance-2008 on May 14. If an elected mayor or councilor fails to abide by the legal provisions, he will be disqualified from taking oath of office.

The affected political parties declined to accept the new provision, and said that this would create a vacuum in the leadership of the political parties at the grassroots level. But the interim government wants non-partisan local government authorities. The Election Commission (EC) was of the opinion that the local government elections should be non-partisan.

Since independence in 1971, a number of attempts have been made to tinker with the local government system in Bangladesh. Changes have been made from time to time in terms of the nomenclature of tiers of local government, but almost nothing was done to strengthen local government. Therefore, the structure of the local government system has remained more or less unchanged.

After January 11, 2007, when the interim government came to power, many reforms were started, even in the local government, as the government realised that the successive governments since

1971 had tried to use the local government system for their own political interests. The party or regime in power wanted to make the local government representatives their power base and manipulated the system to this end.

Although they were non-political as per legal status, all local government elections after 1990 were political. Moreover, extensive politicisation and moral decadence took place during the autocratic regime of General H.M. Ershad (1982-1990). His upazila system of local administration failed to do any good to the rural people.

In course of the reform process, the caretaker government cited the provision that candidates must not have any political affiliation or attachment, but a writ petition was filed in the High Court (HC) challenging the legality of this provision.

In response to the writ petition, the HC observed in the judgment that since the functions and activities of the political parties were acknowledged as per Article 152 of the constitution of Bangladesh, the electoral rules restricting the use of political parties' affiliation in the city corporation and municipality polls were illegal.

As a result, the local government election process of Bangladesh gets legal support to be political in nature.

We do respect the HC verdict,

but an elected candidate takes an oath, which doesn't mention any political platform, to uphold the constitution of his/her country. Everybody will agree that any political system is imperfect, but a society or a country needs a political figure who listens to the heart of the people and makes the best decision in the best interests of his/her people.

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A good leader will instill in his/her people the confidence of character and morality of the spirit needed to get the people through times of crisis. A good leader does not look to point the finger when things go wrong. A good leader finds ways to rectify the situation and make improvements. A good political leader needs to achieve the best interests of the people. A good political leader is more akin to a manager than a politician.

A good political leader doesn't need a party portfolio. Similarly, good political parties can create more than one good political figure by practicing their good ideologies. However, according to



In the hope of finding the right leader.

the provision, an elected leader is not barred from being a member of a political party.

In line with other electoral reforms carried out by the CTG, the new ordinance will impose a bar against individuals legally proven to be war criminals, persons with records of loan defaults within a period of a year prior to nominations, full-time and part-time government employees, and

convicted felons and fugitives, from contesting in the elections.

In addition, according to a new law, an elected candidate will have to go through a background check, which includes his/her tax and wealth statements and police records.

We didn't feel good when Professor A.Q.M. Badruddoza Chowdhury had to leave the presidency following disagree-

ment with the government on the question of "principle." We don't dispute the right of parties to exist, nor do we think they are ineffective in local government administration. We expect an elected official who can work at his/her office without being censored by his/her party.

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Vanishing wetlands

Infilling of wetlands to build or expand malls, shops/residential buildings (commonly termed as urban sprawl in the US) in any city of Bangladesh could be costly and severely detrimental to the long-term environmental goals of Bangladesh. Local conservation commissions should be established in every township to enforce the Wetland Protection Act of the Department of Environment.

Albelee Haque

AN August 2 report in The Daily Star about waterlogging problem in Jhigatola area in the greater Dhaka city has motivated this article.

The time is appropriate for the CTG, NGOs, local communities and non-profit organisations in Bangladesh to collaborate more effectively and start working together towards a "cleaner Dhaka city," or to at least protect wetlands in Dhaka from the pressure of development to ensure desirable biodiversity. This writer was quite alarmed during a recent phone conversation with a relative, who was visiting Boston. It was alarming because my relative said that there were hardly any wetlands in Bangladesh that may be considered active.

Until recently, there was no Wetland Protection Act in Bangladesh. As a group, wetlands, bogs, vernal pools and salt marshes are all considered wastelands. Wetlands form a critical part of our ecosystem with diverse animal and plant life. Unfortunately, because of a lack of environmental consciousness and public education or awareness, wetlands such as haots, lakes, beels and marshes are systematically degraded and/or eliminated in Bangladesh through residential and commercial real-estate development projects.

Wetlands carry out rather important functions, including flood protection. Their sponge-like soil composition allows quick absorption of rainwater and can naturally prevent waterlogging, which is nowadays a bigger problem than flooding in Dhaka, Chittagong and other major cities.

The article indicated that Wasa Managing Director Ratharul Abedin told the news agency that the waterlogging problem in Jhigatola area would be solved before the next monsoon as a part of the improvement of the sewerage system.

Infilling of wetlands to build or expand malls, shops/residential buildings (commonly termed as urban sprawl in the US) in any city of Bangladesh could be costly and severely detrimental to the long-term environmental goals of Bangladesh. Local conservation commissions should be established in every township to enforce the Wetland Protection Act of the Department of Environment.

Wetlands ensure biodiversity and provide a natural defense against flooding during storms. They also naturally filter nutrients and toxicants from polluted runoff from streets, parking lots, paved areas, building roofs and gutters or barnyards and farmland (in less urbanised districts) after rain passes through their special type soil. Overabundance of nutrients -- for example, nitrogen and phosphorus -- from human sources such as untreated sewage, commercial fertiliser, and dairy or confined animal feeding operations, can choke local rivers and ponds with unchecked algae growth.

Some algae certainly constitute an important part of the food chain in lakes, rivers and ponds. But algae proliferation can impose severe oxygen demand during nighttime respiration, and their death and decay can lead to the death of fish in warmer weather. Wetland attenuation of excess nutrients is a low cost, natural way

of keeping local water bodies suitable for swimming, fishing and boating.

It is of utmost importance for the economy and environment of Bangladesh to save the wetlands, marshes and bogs, whether inland or in coastal areas. Without growing public consciousness and compliance/enforcement of environmental regulations, Bangladesh could lose most of its critical wetland systems to unplanned urban development projects. Of particular concern are the Ashulia and Kaliakor areas in Dhaka, that are threatened and endangered. There are dire environmental consequences to turning important wetland areas such as the above into commercial areas like Tejaon without paying attention to nature.

The concept of low impact development (LID) entails preserving natural landscape, minimum land disturbance to control erosion, as well as soil amendment by adding compost to improve its hydrologic function. An assessment of Model Development Principle application in Virginia (USA) by the Center for Watershed Protection (2001) noted that, in comparison to conventional development, use of LID could save up to 49% in total infrastructure costs (including roads, gutters, sidewalks, landscaping and storm water best management practices). Studies by the American Forest Association indicated up to 40% savings in energy bills for homes and businesses that retained trees.

Urbanisation and impervious cover (IC) land induced changes in the natural water balance of streams, have physical impacts that ultimately affect water quality and biological diversity. The trend



Future of Dhaka if wetlands disappear.

of deviation from high water quality is almost inevitable at watersheds with an IC level higher than 25%. There is ample scientific data on the indirect impact of urbanisation on downstream receiving waters, revealing that suburban watersheds (15-35% IC) show signs of degradation and presence of pollution-tolerant species. However, the degradation of water quality and biodiversity is not as much as in urban watersheds (50% IC). One retrofit LID for renovation projects is disconnection of impervious areas by use of porous pavements, removing curbs, planting shrubs in traffic islands, etc.

Adopting a regional approach to LID or smart growth would be very beneficial. This may involve initiatives by law and policy makers in Bangladesh to evenly distribute economic development rather than intensifying density in Dhaka city alone. Otherwise, it will

be almost impossible to clean up the Buriganga River -- one of the most polluted in the country.

According to Robert Zimmerman of the Charles River Watershed Association: "Nature was heeded when 8000 acres of wetlands were protected in the Charles River Reservation Area." Because of this wetland conservation of land area in the Charles River Nature Valley Storage Area, despite frequent rains in the Boston area, there is no flooding in the watershed. Thus daily activities do not suffer, as they do in the Peabody area of Massachusetts; businesses are not closed like in Jhigatola, Dhaka. Therefore, adverse economic impact can be reversed by protection of remaining wetlands in Dhaka city.

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Hand on my heart, I sing

In the midst of all the hardship, heartbreak and disappointment in our national daily life, the news of our national anthem ranking the second best in the world feels like a ray of sunlight piercing through the dark overshadowing clouds.

JUNAYED AHMED CHOWDHURY

EVEN a couple of months ago, when I awoke early in the morning to get ready for the hustle and bustle of everyday city life, my usual alarm clock was our national anthem sung by the school children at the Banani Vidya Niketon School across my flat.

Sometimes, I would tire of the same, discordant melody of the song (not that the children sang like that on purpose). Nowadays, the school had stopped the national anthem singing session.

I remember when I was younger, how we used to stand in our school playground, singing our national anthem. I had hated it then. I used to ask myself why we would be forced to sing something we didn't like in the early hours of the morning, when getting out of bed to go to school was an uphill task. I had thought it was stupid.

Yesterday, I saw in the Guardian -- a British newspaper -- an article by Alex Marshall, who heard the 205 national anthems at the Beijing Olympics and ranked the ten best. Ours was the second best, after Uruguay. In his words, ours is a "wonderful anthem that sounds like it was written for a stroll along the Seine."

At first, I was just surprised. A couple of minutes later, I started humming Amar Shonar Bangla -- rather subconsciously -- and for the first time in my life, I felt inspired and euphoric by singing our national anthem. They say that the national anthem is

supposed to stir up your pride. I felt it at that moment -- a feeling I had never had in my school days or in the mornings when I was awakened by the school children's national anthem singing session.

Everyday, we read in the newspapers distressing and dismaying reports involving many facets of our national life -- social, political and economic. I cannot recall the last time I was inspired by an event or an achievement in Bangladesh.

The last two occasions eliciting inspiration and euphoria were when Bangladesh beat Australia at Cardiff in cricket, and when Dr. Mohammad Yunus won the Nobel Peace Prize. Both of these happenings were at least two years ago.

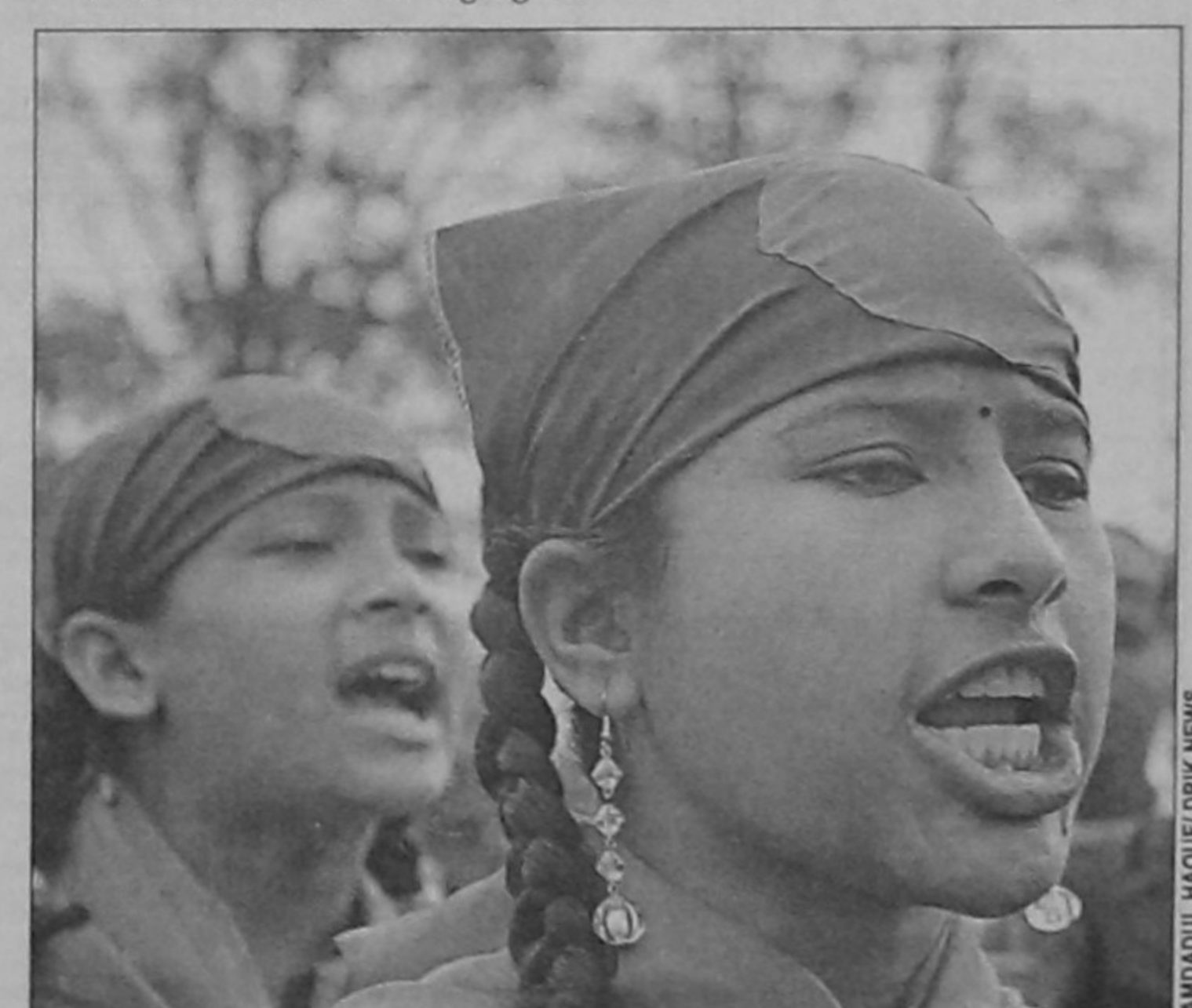
I felt a sense of belonging on

those two occasions -- being a part of something extraordinary and brilliant. I felt as if I myself had won the match against Australia and the Nobel Peace Prize. It was a wonderful feeling.

I am experiencing the same feeling as I write this article. I feel emotional too. In the midst of all the hardship, heartbreak and disappointment in our national daily life, the news of our national anthem ranking the second best in the world feels like a ray of sunlight piercing through the dark overshadowing clouds.

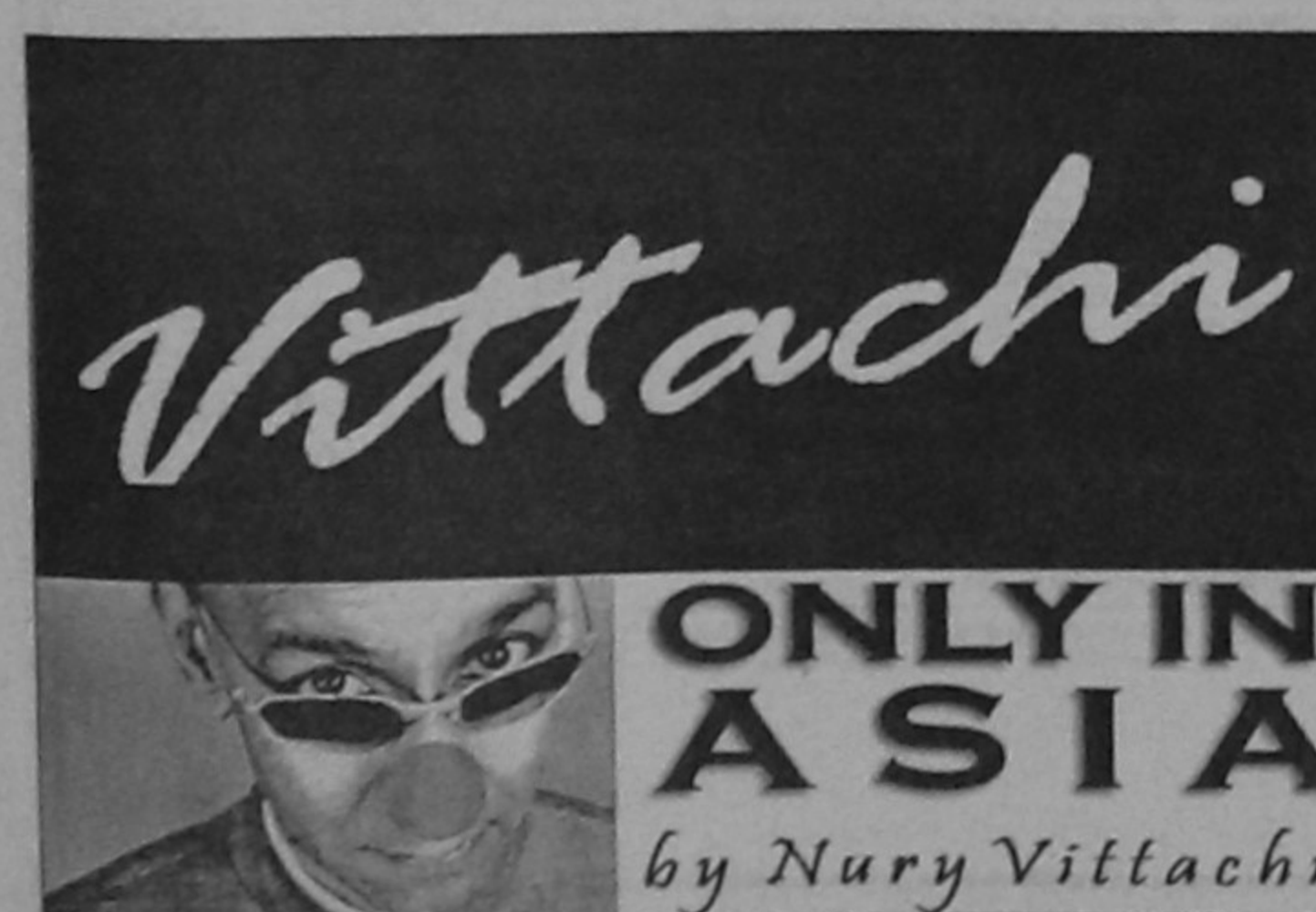
We are going through an interesting time -- a time of uncertainty, and a journey to the unknown. A nation that has been torn apart by antipodean politics and corruption, having one of the best national anthems in the world should inspire us to better ourselves. We all need to work together to build a better Bangladesh and give true meaning to the words we sing: Amar Shonar Bangla, Ami Tomay Bhalobashi.

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The national anthem: Always number one in our hearts.

The spy who came in from the drawer



ALTHOUGH your humble narrator is a frequent visitor to Beijing, I sadly had to miss the spectacular opening of the Olympics. I consoled myself with the knowledge that others were missing it too, including the Prime Minister of Britain who was "otherwise engaged," and the Dalai Lama (real name Eddie "the Finger" Donahue), who was inexplicably left off the guest list.

But I enjoyed watching it on television, especially since the opening dashes celebrated three out of my four favourite interests: writing, the press and Asian wis-

dom (my fourth major interest is the extended sleep-in, but that's a tricky subject to express in dance).

I couldn't be there because I was appearing at the world's biggest book festival. Now who do you think was top of the bill? Salman Rushdie? Salman was there, but no, he didn't get the top spot. JK Rowling? The festival was held in Edinburgh, just down the road from the cafe where she wrote the first Harry Potter book, but no, it wasn't her.

Top spot was Anonymous. Taking a gamble, organisers offered tickets for a speaker described only as a "mystery

guest." Punters were so surprised to be asked to shell out without knowing what they were getting that they immediately obeyed, causing the session to sell out. (Memo to self: remove name and face from books and posters in order to increase sales.)

The other hot ticket was a session that featured Sean Connery, better known as James Bond. The local listings magazine put on its cover a slightly dated (okay, 40 years old) picture of him.

This was a bad idea, since it accentuated just how much 007 has changed. Sir Sean's neighbour last month said he looked like "a

rude, foul-mouthed, fat old man." However, this description could apply to almost everyone I know in their late 70s, and not just the men.

Sadly, Sir Sean's autobiography skims over his past. His family was so poor when he was born that his mother, whose name was Euphemia (not a joke), put him to bed in a drawer.

Now fabulously wealthy, he talks endlessly about how enthusiastic he is about his glorious motherland Scotland, although his bottomless love for the place doesn't stretch as far as persuading him to live in it.

Sir Sean also tells people he doesn't know where tales of his stinkiness come from, but also tells folk he won't sign autographs because he doesn't get paid for it.

Former James Bond girl Britt Eckland was also present, promoting her new book Britt on Britt by Britt Eckland (no egotism there). She was suitably eccentric, as is expected of movie stars.

When not talking about herself, she and her dog Tequila ran backwards around the park. Running backwards "is better for health" she explained. (Clearly, she meant her health, not the

health of people who had to get out of their way.)

When the session featuring the mystery guest opened, I was intrigued to see that it turned out to be Gordon Brown, Prime Minister of Britain. He had decided that instead of partying with George W. Bush and other bigwigs at the Beijing Olympics he would instead hang out with a load of bookish types and watch it on television, like me. A wise man. I wonder if he enjoys sleep-ins, too?

Bond fans can complain direct to our columnist at www.vittachi.com.