

## TALKING POLLS AND BEYOND

# 'People have no reason to have trust in the major political parties'

Eminent educationist and author, **Prof. Serajul Islam Choudhury** was born on June 23 in 1936, in Dhaka. He did his matriculation from St Gregory's High School in 1950 and passed from Notre Dame College in 1952. He obtained his Honours and MA in English Literature from Dhaka University in 1955 and 1956. He obtained his PhD degree from University of Leicester in UK. He also studied in University of Leeds in UK. He joined the Department of English of Dhaka University as a lecturer in 1957 and retired in 2002, and was conferred the Emeritus Professor of Dhaka University. **Wasim Bin Habib** took the interview.

How do you evaluate the existing situation?

The present situation is uncertain; indeed, seen from the common man's point of view, the situation has turned increasingly difficult, and has now become almost unbearable. Prices of commodities and daily essentials have gone up, unemployment is on the rise and investment has declined. During the last 20 months nothing has improved apart from law and order. In many areas things have become worse than before. Do you have any confusion over the next parliamentary elections even after the announcement of the detailed schedule?

No, I don't have any confusion about the next parliamentary elections. It will be held, but there is a great deal of anxiety about the nature of the election. This is because the government has been shifting from its position, and it has no accountability to the public. There is a lack of public trust in the conduct of the present government.

Political parties are demanding lifting of emergency ahead of polls. Do you see need for emergency anymore?

No, I don't see any need for emergency to continue. As for the elections, emergency is likely to be detrimental rather than helpful, because its continuation would create a sense of unease among the public and the politicians.

How do you evaluate the proposed meeting between Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia?

I am not inclined to believe that anything substantial would be gained by such a meeting. We have had dialogues in the past; most of them have been ineffective,

some even counter-productive. During the last days of the British Raj, there had been many dramatic dialogues between the political parties and the government; the result was the tragic partition of the sub-continent.

The Yahiya-Mujib dialogue ended up in the war of liberation. There was the dialogue between the secretaries of BNP and Awami League and the outcome has been the emergency. I do not see anything positive in the meeting of the two ladies.

Do you think political parties will resume "blame game" and reject election results if they lose in the polls?

I don't think that there has been any basic change in the attitudes of the political parties. Therefore, it is only likely that they would resume the "blame game" and refuse to accept the elections result, if they fail to get elected.

Do you think the 1/11 changeover has brought any realisation for the politicians? Did they learn any lesson from the 1/11?

We should all be happy and breathe a sigh of relief to see that the political parties have learnt from their experiences of the emergency. But one cannot be hopeful about it as the parties have their own character and culture, which are difficult for them to change.

How do you evaluate the reform measures undertaken by the caretaker government in the last 20 months?

Most of the reform measures have failed. The government has certainly changed its positions, both openly and internally. During the last 20 months nothing has improved apart from law and order.

Are there any positive reforms of the

government?

The voter list, I think, has been a positive achievement.

What is your view about administrative reform brought by this government?

There have been promotions of government officers; but I don't think much of a change has taken place.

Please comment on the anti-corruption drive.

The anti-corruption drive was one of the declared and much-publicised objectives of the government. There have been spectacular arrests and disappearances. But on the whole, the drive has failed. We are told that although corruption has become less visible now it has continued to thrive instead of falling.

What mistakes has the government made?

The greatest mistake the government has made is the overstretching of its ambition. Its responsibility was simple; it was expected to hold a fair, transparent and credible election with a view to handing over power to an elected government. Instead, it took up many responsibilities for which it had neither the capacity nor the preparation.

What about the demands of Awami League (AL) and BNP over allowing the convicted and the bill and loan defaulters to contest election?

If such persons are nominated, the public will be disappointed.

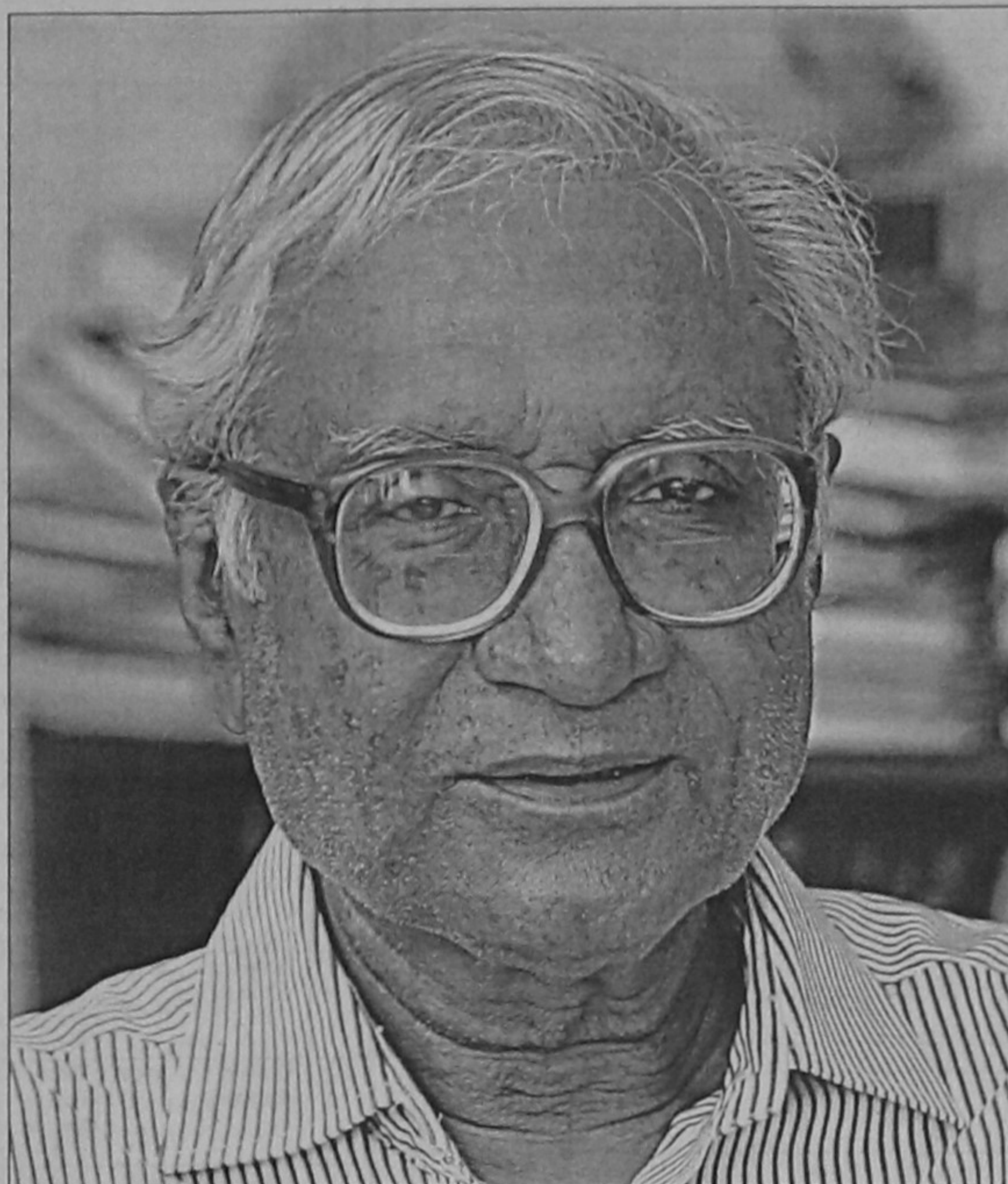
Political parties are demanding deferral of upazila elections. Should they be deferred?

There is no reason why the upazila elections should be held hurriedly and simultaneously with the general elections. These are two very different elections in character and should be kept apart, particularly so because one should not be allowed to influence the other.

How do you evaluate the recent activities of the Election Commission?

The Election Commission should have kept itself confined to the task of holding an election in the shortest possible time - going beyond has been a mistake.

Do you believe the Representation of the People Order (RPO) 2008 will be able to bring changes in the political culture? No, I am not a believer in changes imposed from above. The political parties will change only if effective public pressure is brought to bear upon them. And the only way open for public opin-



Prof. Serajul Islam Choudhury

ion to express itself is the general election. The cure of the shortcomings of a democratic system does not lie in the suppression of democracy; on the contrary, it lies in having more democracy.

Do you support the EC's decision on front or associate organisations of political parties?

I don't think this question of front and associate organisations is of much importance. What is important is to see to it that these bodies function properly and do not go against the public interest. And for this, proper leadership within the parties themselves is needed. Reforms of political parties must come from within and cannot be forced from outside.

Do you think a congenial atmosphere for election is prevailing in the country?

It is essential to have a general election, as there is no alternative to elections in a parliamentary system. Whatever the condition may be, the election must be held according to schedule. A perfect

atmosphere is a dream. Hopefully, the prevailing atmosphere will improve if the government acts prudently.

Should political parties nominate those convicted?

No, they should not. It would be a great disappointment for the public to see the convicts nominated.

Do you support the caretaker government system?

No, I don't. On the contrary, I think that the caretaker government system has been a matter of dishonour for the political parties. In devising this bureaucratic form of government, the political parties have admitted that they cannot be trusted with the conducting of a general election, and yet, if elected, they would like to run all the affairs of the country for five long years.

On the face of it, this looks curious; but this indeed is the philosophy underlying the caretaker system. The extension of the tenure of the present caretaker government beyond the stipulated

three months has brought neither good nor honour to our country. Incidentally, I think that the five-year period is too long for a government to continue; it should be reduced to four years.

What measures are required to eliminate politics of conflict, doubt and hatred?

People have no reason to have trust in the major political parties. These parties have failed the public, and their politics is unlikely to change for the better. What we urgently need is an alternative political movement aiming at realisation of the objectives of the War of Liberation. The objectives were clearly to bring about a radically democratic transformation in the state and society. The patriotic and democratic forces in the country should come together to bring into being people's own political party to achieve such a transformation.

This is certainly a very difficult task, but it has to be done if we want to have peace and prosperity in the country. People are sick and tired of the electoral alliances, what they want to see is a party capable of ensuring equality of rights and opportunities for all, decentralisation of power and rule by elected representatives in all spheres, together with the guaranteeing of fundamental human rights.

What measure should the Election Commission take about the religion-based politics and political parties?

Religion-based political parties have no right to function in a state that was established after discarding the religion-based two-nation theory of Pakistan. We would expect the EC to disqualify these parties from taking part in the general elections.

What is your prediction about the post-election situation in the country?

There is no doubt that one of the two big alliances will win, and the other, as usual, will take politics to the streets rather than to the Assembly. We would expect the media to play a positive role in creating public awareness about the necessity of keeping parliamentary politics within the parliament.

The government in power should be tolerant and dignified, and the opposition would do well to set up a shadow cabinet for examining the activities to the government and keeping public opinion informed of the governmental failures.

## Obama's perceived foreign policy

It can be assumed from his speeches that issues relating to Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Syria and Pakistan will receive highest consideration in his foreign policy. At the initial stage of his regime not much change can be expected in the case of other countries, except Russia and China.

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

HERE are two main currents of diplomatic theory: the theory of the military and political caste and the other a more bourgeois conception. The former tends towards power-politics and is concerned with national prestige, status, precedence, and glamour. The latter tends towards profit-politics, and is mainly preoccupied with appeasement, conciliation, compromise and credit. These tendencies frequently overlap. It is the differences between these two tendencies that throw a clearer light on the development of diplomacy.

In US foreign policy, overlapping of the above two theories can be easily identified. When USSR attacked Afghanistan the US very strongly supported the followers of Osama-bin-Laden. The same Laden groups were considered top terrorists when they attacked Iraq and Afghanistan. The US supported General Noriega to enable him to control Panama Canal and make money from narcotic trade. Later on, the US captured Noriega.

The slogan in Obama's election campaign was "we need change." With the victory of Obama we are expecting a better world. Congratulating him, Iranian President Mahmoud

Ahamadinejad said that Obama would be able to put the real interest of people as well as equity and justice ahead and above the insatiable demands of a selfish and unworthy minority. Obama said that he would respond appropriately to the letter.

Millions of homeless Palestinians have been suffering for over sixty years due to the Palestine conflict. These people hope to be benefited from Obama. With regard to Afghanistan and Iraq, it is expected that the president-elect will closely examine the recommendations of Centrecom Commander General David Petraeus.

Amidst so many congratulations, it is surprising that Obama was not congratulated by Russian President Dmitry Medvedev. Instead, the Russian president warned that Russia would deploy short-range missiles in its Baltic enclave of Kaliningrad (bordering Poland). He further announced cancellation of plans to withdraw three intercontinental ballistic missile

regiments from western Russia by 2010. In sounding the US a note of caution, he stated that the days of US supremacy after the disintegration of USSR were over. Some analysts consider the warning as reflection of Russia's current economic crisis (due to fall in price of crude oil from \$147/barrel to around \$55/barrel) and high rate of inflation (may reach 15% end next month).

President Bush is going to handover the office in about seventy days (20/01/09) with a number of serious problems to be faced both in the domestic and the international fronts. In the domestic front, the economy is sliding into a deep depression (loss of jobs may reach 1.44 million by end 2008, over 6 million Americans are unemployed and rate of unemployment may reach 6% by February 2009).

Barak Obama has already shown his capability. Though American national security and foreign policy goals are

not determined by bipartisan political consideration, Obama has already announced formation of a national security team consisting of some prominent Republican members. Obama should focus on domestic economic issues more than issues of foreign policy. He must give close attention to issues like unemployment and curtailment of expenditure in Iraq and Afghanistan. Persuading Israel and the Middle-Eastern countries to develop better understanding is also needed.

Obama's first priority is to pull the US out from the current economic crisis. His foreign policy will, therefore, be formulated considering the interest of the domestic economy. However, it can be assumed from his speeches that issues relating to Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Syria and Pakistan will receive highest consideration in his foreign policy. At the initial stage of his regime not much change can be expected in the case of other countries, except

Russia and China.

Obama appears to be concentrating on opening doors of opportunity for the young ones, restoring prosperity, and promoting the cause of peace. Whether the US will choose to tilt toward profit-politics diplomacy or continue to follow the policy of power-politics only time will tell.

A few words about the probable impact of his foreign policy need be mentioned. Obama has repeatedly stated that he would unilaterally cross the border into Pakistan to fight the terrorists. This is shocking and awe inspiring. Such move may tear up the very fabric of the sub-continent. Recent attacks well inside the Pakistan border, causing a good number of deaths and injuries, is a clear disrespect of national borders. Obama needs to look back to his own words that wars should be fought on reason and not on passion.

A.B.M.S. Zahur is a former joint secretary.

## Math for beginners

NURY VITTACHI

YOU don't have to be brilliant at math to be a business person or even an accountant, they say. ANYONE can do it. This claim is insightful, reassuring, and completely wrong.

People who say this have NO IDEA about the terror people feel when confronted by such a thing as A Number.

I bought ten things costing \$2 each at a shop about three weeks ago. Ten times two? Whoah! This was way too complex a calculation for the shop assistant to do in her head.

Ignoring the \$20 note I was thrusting at her, she used the cash register, punching in the number "two" ten times over.

She lost count halfway and had to start again. And even then she got it wrong. (Employers in the retail industry like to put people like this in charge of their money, for reasons of sentimentality, a

Latin word meaning "insanity.")

Not that I am claiming to be a mathematical genius.

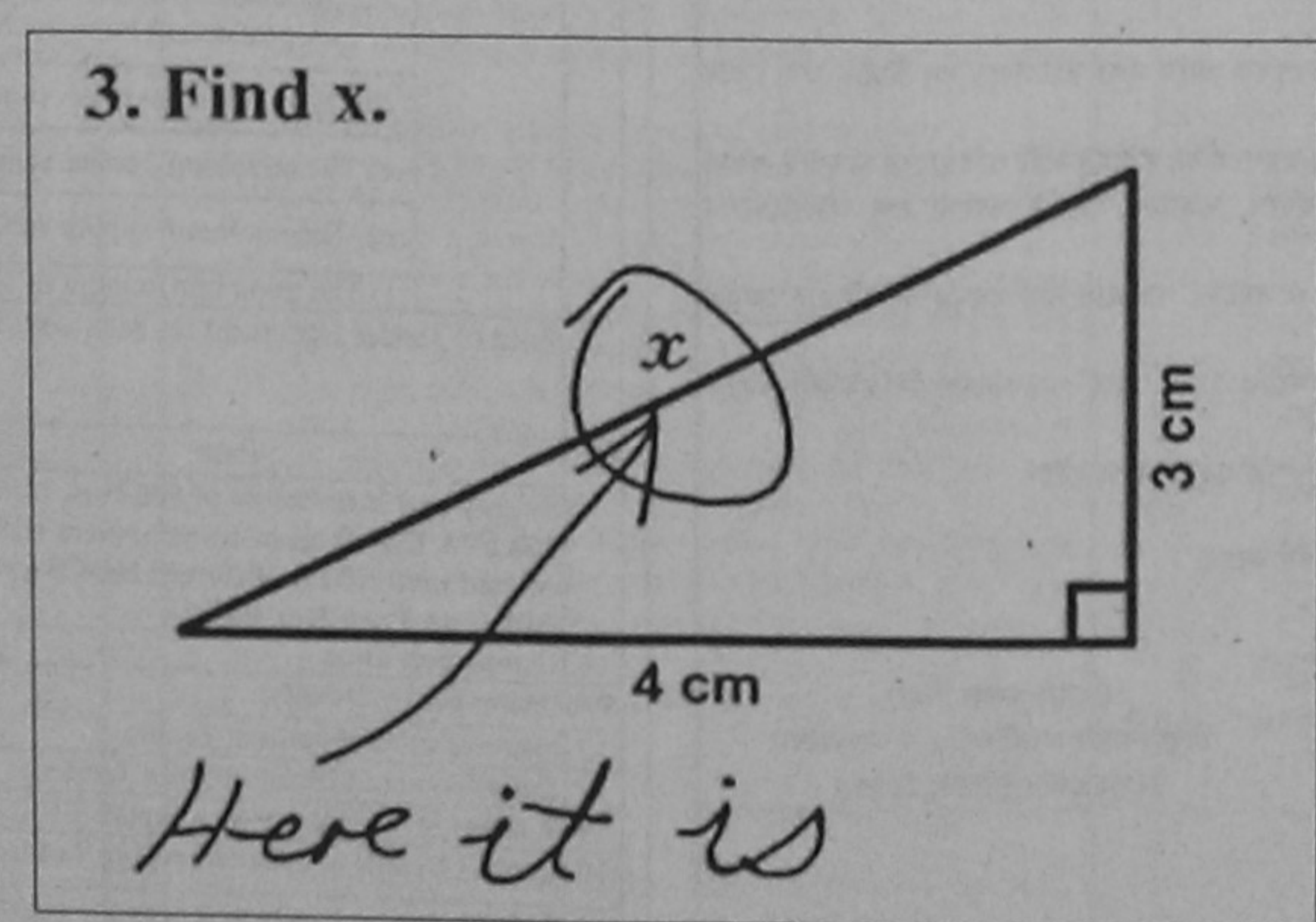
Last Tuesday, I was called to help my son with his homework. It was SO tough. I had to look up the terms in the dictionary.

"If all the angles are acute the triangle is said to be acutangular, or oxygonous," the book said. "A strophoid is an algebraic curve of the third degree."

But of course.

This left me thinking: What level of ability does the average person have? Do you, dear reader, know what your acutangular oxygonous strophoids are and play with them happily all day? Or are you more like my shop assistant, who has a single-figure IQ?

To do some research, and to fill up space in this column, I took my children's Junior Dictionary of Mathematical Terms (it was grade six, meant for 10-year-olds) to the place where I do most of my



research: the bar. I read out the terms in the book and asked folk at the bar what they thought they meant.

Hypotenuse: A big, fat animal that lives in the rivers of Africa.

Equilateral: A line that runs around

the middle of the world.

Octagon: Eight-legged creature of the sea.

Algebra: An Iraqi television network.

Obtuse angle: An angle which is slow-witted and unhelpful.

Acute triangle: Not suitable for publication in a family publication.

Prime Number: Valuable car license plate.

Pythagorean Theorem: A type of snake.

Radius: Ancient Roman transistor radio.

Additive inverse: Something food manufacturers slip into packaged foods because they are all trying to kill us.

Bisect: A man or woman who is attracted to both men and women.

Common Denominator: An Arnold Schwarzenegger movie.

Pi: Abbreviation for a pastry item containing meat, popular with Australians.

Polyhedron: A girls' name.

Trapezoid: A soulless circus performer.

Rational Number: A number that talks sense, as opposed to an irrational number, which is a number that talks like George W. Bush when he's ad-libbing.

Tessellation: A girls' name.

X and Y Axes: A store selling forestry implements.

I was interested to learn from one well-educated listener at the bar about the mathematical habits of the !kung bushmen of the Kalahari desert in Africa.

They have a delightfully simple system of mathematics. Their word for "ten" is "two-and-two-and-two-and-two-and-two." It's brilliantly logical, he said.

But my mind was on other things. Now I know where the staff at my local shop come from.

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