

A good beginning, but...

Deputy speaker issue casts a shadow

WE watched a lively first session of the ninth parliament, dignified change of guard in the speakership, and a decent speech by the president that did not go out of the way to denigrate the previous government, which has been the norm. The newly elected MPs, many of them new faces in parliament, applauded the goings on quite enthusiastically. It was for the first time since 1991 that we had such a fully participated, vibrant first session of parliament.

The leader of the house Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina deserves a round of plaudits for her mature handling of the occasion. And we must also commend opposition leader Begum Khaleda Zia for showing her constructive mood on day one, at least up to the walkout.

It was a good beginning. However, the ruling grand alliance's decision not to go by its pre-election pledge of giving the position of deputy speaker to the opposition cast a shadow on the proceedings. We feel it was absolutely unnecessary and also that the Awami League has done itself a great disservice by changing its posture on the issue.

It is not known why the promised position was not delivered to the BNP-led opposition and what thought weighed so heavily in the minds of ruling party decision makers while backpedaling on it.

We were taken by surprise at the suggestion that a new position of deputy speaker would have to be created to meet constitutional requirements. But that was certainly not the initial public understanding.

A deputy speaker from the opposition would have presided over the parliamentary proceedings only when the speaker were absent, and one wonders how many times he would have got this chance. Yet, the ruling alliance could not rise above partisan thinking -- a poor beginning for the ninth parliament. Politically speaking, the BNP's getting the position would not mean much but refusing to go by a prior announcement could really diminish the grand alliance's credibility.

The indiscreet decision of not sticking to its commitment could cost the grand alliance more than the BNP. It is not an instance of fulfilling the high expectations of people generated by the elections.

Farewell Mr. Sircar

You leave a bad legacy

MR. Jamiruddin Sircar has relinquished his duty as the Speaker. We would like to wish him good health and a happy future with the hope that he would be able to acquit himself better in his new calling, whatever that might be, than he had done as the Speaker of the eighth parliament.

When we look back on his role as the facilitator of the parliament's business, the presiding officer of the legislature, we are constrained to say that history will not be kind to him. It is a matter of regret that he was unable to rise above his partisan identity and act impartially as the Speaker of the House.

We cannot but find his statement, made to the parliament before handing over the gavel to the new incumbent, that success of the parliament is the success of democracy and democratic government, and his exhortation that the new speaker and his deputy be impartial in discharging their duties, rather ironic. Mr. Sircar wants others to live up to the very standards that he himself had dismally failed to live up to. We find his assertion that he had allotted more time to the opposition rather amusing. The facts speak differently.

We wonder whether one can truly say that the last parliament was a functional and successful one. On the contrary, by making the opposition ineffective in the parliament by denying it the space to perform as an effective opposition, the legislature was made virtually unproductive. He forgot the very essence of his role, that of a referee not a player.

Mr. Sircar had failed to reach out to the opposition and did very little, if at all, to gain their confidence. He did not allow a single bill from the opposition during the five years of the parliament. It boggles our mind to think that he did not find any of the bills that the opposition wanted to bring to the floor of the House worthy of his consideration. This is a record that will perhaps remain unsurpassed in the annals of legislative history.

His partisan character was never more blatantly demonstrated than when he refused to allow discussion on the 21 August grenade blast. This was a matter of grave national importance, and no one with an ounce of love for the country would have seen the matter through a partisan eye. Moreover, he repeatedly thwarted efforts to allow discussion on important national issues like price hike, Katsat etc, thus preventing people's concerns to be brought to the floor of the house whose task it is to debate issues of public suffering.

We regret to say that he even failed to uphold the sanctity of his office by misusing his protocol during the last election and by undertaking trips abroad that could have been avoided. He didn't think twice before appointing persons of his constituency to different posts in the parliament disregarding the norms.

We would like to repose our faith in the new Speaker of the House, and contrary to what Mr. Sircar suggests to the new Speaker, that he tread his path, we would hope that Mr. Abdul Hamid would work to restore the image of the Chair, and make parliament more effective.

Religious schools can be modern too

But that is not all. The shocking (!) news is, these West Bengal madrasas admit Hindu or Christian students too! Shocking for some, I guess. While non-Muslim students have to learn Muslim history, Muslim students also have to learn Hindu, Christian and Buddhist religious history. And there is no clash there! No doubt, such curriculum is helping in strengthening the inter-religion bond in society.

SHAHNOOR WAHID

TODAY'S subject is modernism and religion, and how we perceive and handle the two in this country. Can the two live in the same room as room-mates? Or should they treat one another as perennial enemies? The subject is complex and demands greater insight.

Some quotable quotes that have been immortalised by some great men in history can help us acquire that insight we may lack. As one will go deeper to discern the meaning of these words one will never cease to be in awe. Now, let us see what these great men had said decades ago about their concept of religion.

Albert Einstein had the following two views to offer: "My religion consists of a humble admiration of the illimitable superior spirit who reveals himself in the slight details we are able to perceive with our frail and feeble mind." Elsewhere, he bracketed religion and science within clever words that continue to amaze thinkers today for their profundity. He said: "Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind."

Now, coming back to Bangladesh, we think there are many hazy spots as far as

these two are concerned. These hazy spots are creating conflicts and slicing our society into many fragments. Many of us cannot decide or determine what we want to be -- a modern man or a religious man. We suffer from an inner conflict -- a clash of concerns -- but there can be no conceivable clash between modernism and religion.

One can be religious and at the same time a modern man. There is no universal dress code to follow to identify one with any particular religion. There is no universal hairstyle to follow. There is no universal food item to consume to prove one's level of piety as a member of a particular religion. In fact dress, hairstyle or food habits are determined by one's socio-economic and cultural background.

Therefore, a religious man following certain habits or codes cannot and must not coerce others to abide by his standards. His standards are not followed by the pious people of the same religion in other countries. Muslims, Hindus, Christians and Buddhists in Bangladesh dress and cook in ways that differ in many ways from what Muslims, Hindus, Christians and Buddhists do in other countries.

There is no clash between modernism

and religion in Bangladesh in broader terms. If we look around in our society we will see both a modern man and a religious man using modern gadgets like air-conditioned cars, room air-coolers, cellular phones, computers etc., to the best of his advantage. A modern man wearing a three-piece suit to dinner may be a religious person inside, who says his prayers at home or in a mosque or church or temple. He does not have to wear any special kind of dress or headgear, or move in a group to have a conspicuous identity as a religious person.

There is a wrong notion among many Muslim religious people that if they go for modern, science-based education they will become too modern or progressive, and that will clash with their religious beliefs and practice. These men send their sons and daughters to madrasas where more emphasis is given on religious curricula, ignoring mathematics and science education. When madrasa students find maths and science subjects tougher compared to religious curricula they slowly drift towards the latter and become totally madrasa-educated pupils.

In Bangladesh, thousands of madrasa students are graduating every year with little or no knowledge of modern-day science subjects. They also learn very little about Bangladesh because in many madrasas, hoisting of Bangladesh flag or singing the National Anthem is discouraged or even prohibited. And despite the government ordinance, madrasas still do not give appointment to women teachers.

But things are quite the opposite in West Bengal and other Indian states. In West Bengal, for example, madrasas follow the Board curricula alongside madrasa curricula, and students sit for examinations similar to our S.S.C and H.S.C. These students

are coming out with brilliant results, competing with students of high-profile schools and colleges and finally entering universities to study economics, social sciences, business administration, or entering medical college or engineering college for higher studies. Many madrasa students of West Bengal have snatched highest positions in their version of S.S.C. and H.S.C. examinations.

But that is not all. The shocking (!) news is, these West Bengal madrasas admit Hindu or Christian students too! Shocking for some, I guess. While non-Muslim students have to learn Muslim history, Muslim students also have to learn Hindu, Christian and Buddhist religious history. And there is no clash there! No doubt, such curriculum is helping in strengthening the inter-religion bond in society. A very recent report says that the Bihar government is going to distribute bicycles among madrasa-going girls so that they do not have walk miles. Imagine, the level of tolerance prevailing in the Muslim community in Bihar for girls!

The bottom line is, can we have a secular, modern madrasa curricula that will teach students how to respect people belonging to other religions, or even their own people who do not follow their dress code or headgear code? The modern curricula would give equal emphasis on science subjects so that madrasa students would be able to meet the demands of the science and technology driven world. They must have to learn to cope in the 21st century, and that cannot be done by following any obsolete curricula designed by some motivated people. The madrasa students must not be brainwashed to become cadres of some political parties and be cannon fodder.

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Break bread, not bones

After the First World War, the old and the young discovered that an entire generation in-between had been decimated, wiped out. Do we need to break each other's arms before we can shake hands?

F.S. AJAZUDDIN

THOSE whom the gods wish to destroy, they first make extremists; those who cannot wait become suicide-bombers. What is it that motivates young men anywhere to choose death as a career? It cannot be the prospect of celestial virgins. How can a Muslim martyr be sure that when he does reach the gates of a communal Paradise, he is not rewarded with a pious Roman Catholic nun?

Is the fatal lure religion? Perhaps, but that presumes that the terrorist is either illiterate about the warnings in his faith against taking human life or selective in his application of them.

Can he be "brainwashed" to such a degree that even when he is beyond the pale of physical control or influence, he remains an unthinking robot, capable of functioning only in a linear sequence of pre-programming?

Whoever has dedicated himself to

perverting the minds of others, whoever has arrogated to himself the power of deciding when someone else will die, whoever has taken euthanasia out of the hospital ward and into the streets has, in a macabre sense, succeeded. By deciding when any one of us could die, he has negated our right to live.

Had this been only at the individual level, it would have been bad. For it to be conducted when numbers become meaningless is reprehensible. When it can impact the foreign policies of nations, it is dangerous beyond contemplation.

The increasing intensity of the rhetoric against Pakistan in India appears to be drowning out saner voices, in both countries, that whisper caution and mature restraint. Those with an ear for history will recall a war fought on behalf of a colonial master we later expelled from our homeland, against a distant enemy in Europe -- Kaiser Wilhelm II's Germany -- whom we never knew.

A.J.P Taylor's moving account of the First World War -- the war to end all wars -- reminds us of the tsunami that engulfed Europe in 1914. He describes "the paradox that men were passionately engaged in the war and hated it at the same time."

Why then did they embark on such an enterprise? He explains: "Each country fought ostensibly to defend itself, yet sought to conquer and to make great gains. The statesmen were overwhelmed by the magnitude of events. The generals were overwhelmed also. Mass, they believed, was the secret of victory. The mass they evoked was beyond their control. All fumbled more or less helplessly. They were pilots without a chart..."

And what, after four years of carnage and the most appalling wastage of human life, was the outcome? The disarmament of Imperial Germany, punitive reparations, regional dominance by France, and Germany's subsequent resurrection as the Third Reich.

Could there be some sunburned Dr. Strangelove holed in some office in New Delhi's secretariat who is considering a definitive attack on Pakistan as a military option, the final solution to the simmering South Asian problem? Does he have an equally diligent counterpart in Islamabad plotting retaliatory designs against India?

One hopes not, if only because, should such an option be exercised by either side, the results would be horrendous. What could be India's objectives? Disarmament of the Pakistan army? Yes, but already tried in 1971, without much success. Neutering of the ISI? Yes, provided one could go deep enough to do a military root canal. Vivisection of Pakistan into pliant sub-states that would be large enough only for friendly matches against Nepal and Bhutan? A real possibility, but hardly a practical one, for 170 million Muslims in however many pieces would be as ungovernable as when they were one.

And for Pakistan? Could Pakistan's lances do anything more than create the smallest dent in India's armour? Could it establish a naval blockade of India with nearly the same success that India could manage on Pakistan's vulnerable southern coastline? Could it exercise the nuclear option and prevent any fallout on its own territory and on its own population?

After the First World War, the old and the young discovered that an entire generation in-between had been decimated, wiped out. Do we need to break each other's arms before we can shake hands?

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Obama's big-picture problem

Obama's pragmatic liberalism risks blurring execution with intention, means with ends. It is either up to the commonweal to provide a minimum income to retired people, to offer health insurance to everybody and to increase income equality -- or it isn't.

JASON WEISBERG

AN Inaugural Address is a new president's best opportunity to put forward a vision of government. In 1965, Lyndon B. Johnson proposed an expansion of the federal role to counter economic and racial injustice. "In a land of great wealth, families must not live in hopeless poverty," he declared.

In 1981, Ronald Reagan called for a rollback of Johnson's Great Society. "It is time to check and reverse the growth of government, which shows signs of having grown beyond the consent of the governed."

Reagan didn't really make the federal government smaller, but he did check its growth. Every president since has searched for some way to tackle problems without making government bigger.

In 1989, George H.W. Bush exhorted voluntarism, or as he put it, "a thousand points of light." In 1993, Bill Clinton proposed a new social compact in which government would "offer more opportunity to all and demand responsibility from all." In 2001, George W. Bush reprised his father's theme of altruism, noting that "compassion is the work of a nation, not just a government."

In 2009, looking out over the largest

crowd ever assembled in Washington, D.C., Barack Obama framed the issue in terms of simple efficacy. "The question we ask today is not whether our government is too big or too small, but whether it works -- whether it helps families find jobs at a decent wage, care they can afford, a retirement that is dignified," he said. "Where the answer is yes, we intend to move forward. Where the answer is no, programs will end."

This view is in keeping with Obama's non-ideological approach to politics. It came across as an expression of our new president's unsentimental good sense.

Yet on rereading the speech the next day, that passage seemed insufficient as a governing philosophy. "Whatever works" is less a vision of the public sector's proper role than a placeholder for someone who has yet to figure out what he thinks that role should be.

Obama's pragmatic liberalism risks blurring execution with intention, means with ends. It is either up to the commonweal to provide a minimum income to retired people, to offer health insurance to everybody and to increase income equality -- or it isn't.

Most liberals would say these are legitimate responsibilities of govern-

ment. Most conservatives would argue they aren't. On income security for the elderly, we've had a social consensus since the New Deal. On health care, a consensus may be emerging after decades of national ambivalence.

When it comes to growing income inequality, there is no consensus. But Obama must decide what government's goals are before considering the subordinate questions of what works and how much we can afford.

Obama's vagueness comes at a moment when clarity is needed. Our government is about to become bigger, more powerful and more expensive in order to deal with a sprawling economic crisis. Washington will take on responsibilities it hasn't shouldered in 75 years, such as directly alleviating unemployment and perhaps nationalising banks.

Many who would ordinarily reject such interventions on principle can justify them as misery relief, Keynesian stimulus or emergency management. But some see in the expansion something further-reaching -- a redefinition of the government's relationship to markets transcending the current crisis.

A president facing this situation needs to know what's temporary and what's permanent, if only because of the tendency for the one to become the other. Urgent measures are liable to stick around long after the precipitating emergency has passed.

There aren't many American homes left without electricity, but we retain a renamed version of the Rural Electrification Administration, a program created by Franklin Roosevelt as part of

the New Deal. The Tennessee Valley Authority, created in 1933 to modernize a region of the country still afflicted by malaria, remains with us as well. Expanding government is easy, shrinking it nearly impossible.

On the broader question of what Washington should do, Obama remains hard to read. He inclines simultaneously toward activist government and limited government, which is a tension, though not a contradiction.

He favours universal health coverage, but without government taking direct responsibility for it. He is poised to propose cutbacks in our most expensive entitlement programs to ensure their survival. Language elsewhere in his Inaugural Address suggests that he sees government as a guarantor of opportunity rather than a provider of benefits, more Clinton's way than LBJ's.

But as he navigates the crisis, Obama would do well to figure out what he thinks about the fundamental question of government's responsibilities. He might begin by pondering some words of his role model, Abraham Lincoln, who in 1854 wrote, "The legitimate object of government is to do for the people what needs to be done, but which they can not, by individual effort, do at all, or do so well, for themselves." Obama's test of practicality comes after Lincoln's test of principle.

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