

Two leaders' verbal clash Let parliament be the forum for informed debate

IT has been a long time since the House has witnessed verbal exchanges between the Leader of the House and the Leader of the Opposition. In fact it has been quite sometime that the Leader of the Opposition has attended a parliament session. Nevertheless, it was good to see the two engaged in a debate it augurs well for our parliamentary democracy. These are positive signs and which the members of the parliament must build up on.

However, one wishes that the content of the debate would have been more substantive and articulation more gracious, particularly the riposte from the prime minister in response to her opposite number's criticism of the bill under discussion. We all look up towards the parliament to set standards of impeccable behaviour, well argued debates, and well articulated response to criticisms of policies and plans of the government or the failures of the past or present administration.

As regards the said exchanges, one would wish the arguments contained more substance rather than facile asides that only helped to add rancour to the already rather torrid relationship between the ruling party and the opposition. Aspersions, or making a dig at the opponent, it must be remembered, detract from the quality of the argument and the dignity of the person making the comment, whether that is a backbencher or the leader of the opposition or the leader of the house.

We are also noticing frequent walkouts from parliament sittings by the opposition. While that is a right of the opposition, it must not be forgotten that frequent walkouts may cause it to lose its significance eventually. But walkout is better than boycott which the parliament and the people and democracy would be happy and better off without.

We would hope that the parliament's time would be put to optimal use for the nation. We expect that it would be used to debate important national issues in which criticisms must not be merely for the sake of it but help to point out mistakes and suggest better options to the government. As for the government, it must eschew the habit of dismissing out of hand anything coming from the opposition. The ruling party should have the sagacity to consider the merit of the suggestions from the other side of the floor and vice versa. Only then will parliamentary democracy flourish in Bangladesh in the true sense.

Arresting eve teasers Mete out deterrent punishment

WE welcome the PMO's directive to the police to arrest the eve teasers responsible for a young schoolgirl committing suicide on Saturday in the city's Nandipara area. Stern action is definitely warranted against young men who make it virtually impossible for school and college going girls to attend their classes. The decision to deploy plainclothes at the girls' schools in the city will also bring some relief to the girls and their parents greatly worried about the well-being of their daughters.

The steps taken by the government, in the wake of some girls taking their own lives, should leave little doubt in the public mind that eve teasing is no longer a minor problem. The vulnerability of the young girls who find nobody coming to their rescue when they are surrounded by teasers has actually crossed all limits of tolerance. The latest trend is all the more worrisome as girls have even been assaulted by the teasers. This is something unheard of as beating up a helpless, innocent girl is indeed a despicable act that no-self respecting young man could ever think of in the past. However, such attacks have to be stopped once and for all, if we want to protect the rights of women. It is not enough to give only lip service to their cause.

Obviously, a police solution to an essentially socio-economic problem cannot be sustained on a long-term basis unless the community at large acts in tandem with the law enforcers to address all such issues. These young men, most of them are frustrated having almost nothing to do. They become drug addicts or criminals. This is an ominous development, which must be checked to save the large number of youths from degradation. Society can think of providing sources of healthy entertainment and recreation to them.

Essentially though, arresting the eve teasers and deploying police at the girls' schools should be followed by bringing the real culprits to justice. What's important is deterrent punishment must be meted out to those who harass and oppress girls, so that their lives become safer and their pursuit of education trouble-free.

Two explosions that struck Dhaka city

Yet, no one, no political party, no visionary leader even sat down with a dozen experts to save the capital city from crumbling under the population weight. Everyone was busy taking a slice of Dhaka and then forgetting about it. Today, Dhaka bleeds with over one crore people splitting it apart in the name of development.

SHAHNOOR WAHID

IT is said that two different explosions have struck Dhaka. No, don't be alarmed. This time no militant groups are responsible for the explosions. It is us -- you, me and them who are responsible for this. Let us analyse the factors behind the two explosions one by one. Let us talk about the first explosion. The first one is population explosion. The population of Dhaka city at the moment is well over 1 crore (government agencies might differ, but they cannot come with an exact figure either). It is increasing in a frightening proportion with nearly 3,000 to 5,000 people coming here on a daily basis to settle down permanently.

Those who grew up in this city would say that Dhaka was a beautiful and safe city when its population was around 10 lac. Unbelievable, isn't it! Dhaka was smaller in size and one could literally cover the entire perimeter on a bicycle. With rural poverty increasing, its population rose to 20 lac, but it took a couple of decades for that. Then, after 1971, Dhaka began to expand quite fast when lands on all sides were acquired by the developers

to construct new housing areas. In less than a decade, the population of Dhaka rose to 40 lac. Pressure on the existing roads and alleys, water, sewer and electricity began to mount.

Interestingly, or sadly, the government bigwigs of the day had no clue of what was happening outside their window. They remained busy holding meeting after meeting in airconditioned conference rooms during office hours (late Anwarul Islam Bobby had written a wonderful piece on such meetings at the secretariat in his daily *The Morning Sun* in the early '90s). After the "tiring" and "highly important" meetings in the mornings the bigwigs remained drunk throughout the evenings in some local clubs. While they made attempts to measure poverty line over diluted whiskey, ugly concrete structures and bamboo slums kept on increasing, thereby defacing the once beautiful contour of the city.

By the late '80s Dhaka's population reached 60 lac plus. A multitude of problems began to appear in clusters all over the city. More water-bodies disappeared. More slums dotted the horizons. Still, no authority expressed any concern. Ministers and secretaries never visited

the stinking slums or the alleyways. They all became brown-skinned shahibs speaking English with a bad accent, and at one point even stopped visiting their own ancestral villages. They rather visited DIT and then Rajuk for plots in Gulshan and Baridhara. They had no time to find out the reasons why rural folks were getting poorer by the day and why they were trudged along the highways towards Dhaka.

By the '90s, the population began to go wayward with 80 lac strong elbowing each other for space. Faceless people began to fill up every nook and cranny of the small city, thereby totally altering the demographic character of the old city. Every man of means, coming from various other districts, wanted to own a house in Dhaka. As a result, Dhaka city began to feel the pressure of 8 million people with more than three-fourths not having any water, electricity and sewer facilities. Crime rate began to rise and corruption became an acceptable method to become rich to be able to live in Dhaka. And yet, no one, no political party, no visionary leader even sat down with a dozen experts to save the capital city from crumbling under the population weight. Everyone was busy taking a slice of Dhaka and then forgetting about it. Today, Dhaka bleeds with over one crore people splitting it apart in the name of development.

The second one is automobile explosion. From about 5,000 automobiles in the early sixties, today over 5 lac vehicles (100 times) of every description clog the city from one end to another. In over four decades, only four or five new roads have been added to the existing ones, but that

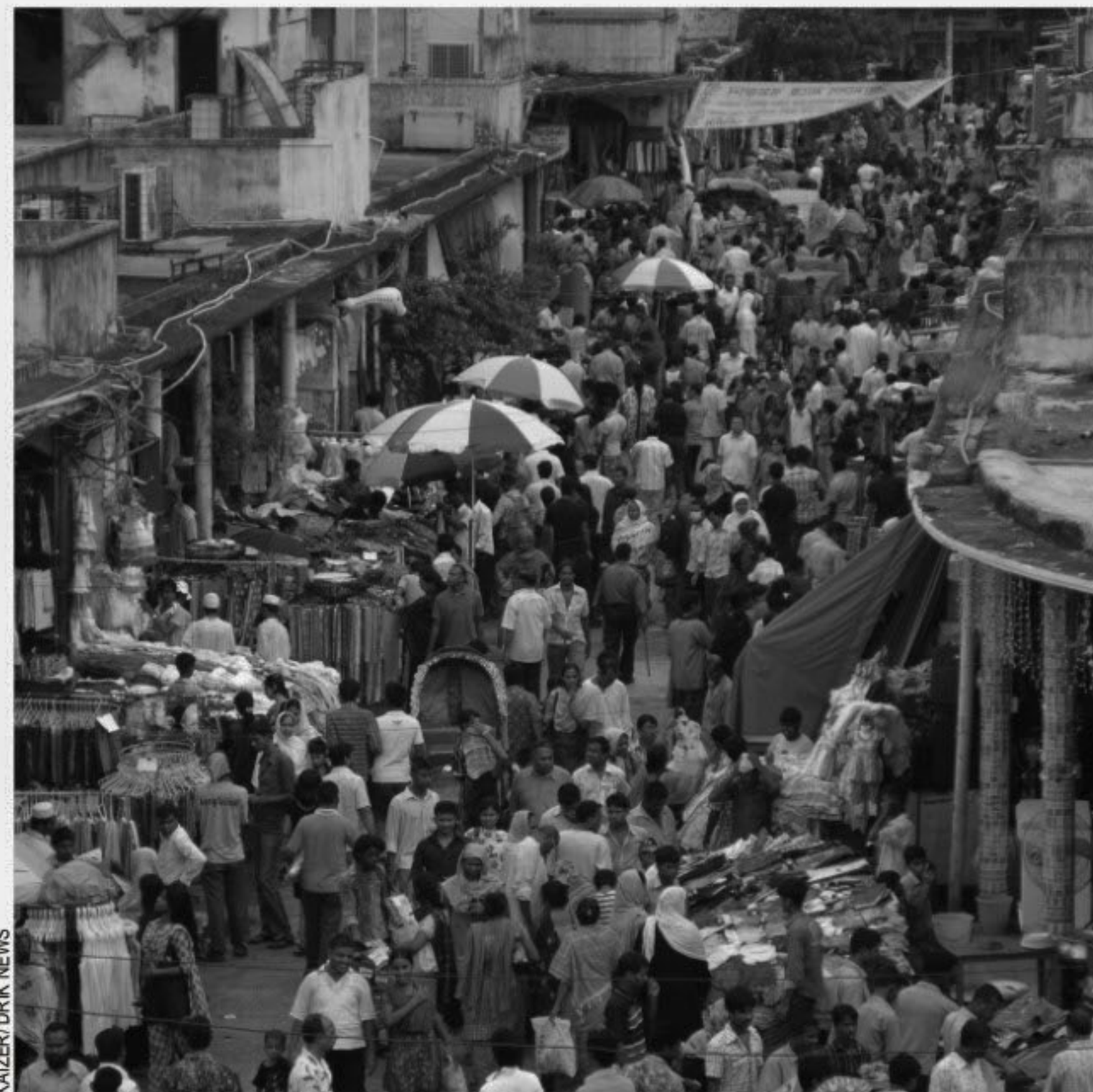
is of no use as traffic congestion continues to rob valuable time and money of the people. There was no planner, no vision, no ability to see what was coming, and no care for the condition of the city infrastructure.

We have been told by the communication minister that there are 80,000 unfit vehicles in the city. Good. Now we want to know what the ministry has done to send those vehicles to the wrecking yard. Do we have wrecking yards really? Every month 2,000 to 3,000 new vehicles hit Dhaka roads but not a single one goes off the roads. Then, pray tell us *manonito jogajog montri*, how do you plan to help ease the traffic congestion? Do you have an Aladdin's lamp?

Please, do not listen to your advisors anymore. They do not travel in private cars and remain stuck on the roads for hours together. They have no idea of the enormity of the situation. We do. So, please listen to us, if you want practical solution of a practical problem. Reduce the number of vehicles on the roads by taking those 80,000 unfit ones off. It's a big number and will help. Create new roads. To do so, don't hesitate if you have to break down dozens of houses or shops. You can always compensate those dozen, two-dozen, three-dozen owners. But, you cannot compensate thousands of motorists who lose valuable time.

Why can't a powerful government take some rogue vehicle owners and drivers by the neck and send them to prison? Politically bad move? Might lose votes? Well then, remain happy with your votes and let us suffer day in and day out. We shall give our answer come voting time.

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A fairer immigration system

That would solve both problems. It would mean immigration was controlled, so the nation and people can benefit. And it would mean that revulsion for racism and xenophobia did not stop us from thinking about what the optimum level of immigration should be.

AZEEM IBRAHIM

I am a second-generation immigrant. My father, born in what was known as British India, originally came to Scotland in the late 1960s in search of opportunity and a better life than he had known back home.

He started working as a bus driver, and later as an electrical engineer, and after a while, he set up a newsagent's in Glasgow. As a kid, I would go into work with him at the shop. So my formative experience was of a Britain seen both through the immigrant eyes of my parents and the sharply anti-immigrant pages of some of the newspapers that we would haul into the shop at dawn each morning.

My experience has been shared by many generations of people in this country. Many of us could not be knee-jerk xenophobes if we tried. To do so would be to argue retrospectively that our preceding generation should never have been allowed the opportunity we have enjoyed. But I think that over the past decade or so, what we have seen from the government is the other extreme. We have been so open to immigrants that we never worried about how many is too many. In fact, to even think there might be a limit to what the country can take in was a taboo.

That is no longer the case. Over the past 12 years, this country has presided over higher levels of immigration than we have seen at any time in our recent history -- 1.6

million people have been granted permanent right of residence. The problem is nobody decided to open the doors so wide. At no point was it deliberate government policy. It happened almost incidentally, as a result of other policies.

Because there was no explicit decision that immigration should be high, there has been minimal debate on how many people we should allow to come to the country. What there has been instead is a debate on how to decide who gets in. The government's big reform has been the Australian-style points system, which gives it greater control over the type of skills that come into the country. But while this debate has given ministers reforms to trumpet, it does not speak to the debate about what the aggregate level of immigration should be.

That has had big effects. First, it has let the most strident voices dominate the debate. The result has been a lowering of the tone. One MP argued with a straight face that he could tell Britain was full because the trains were so crowded. This kind of right-wing demagogic "Britain is full" rhetoric is ugly and wrong, and I believe it does not represent a very large body of opinion in Britain. But it is an opinion we hear loudly in the public debate because there are so few populist voices arguing the benefits of immigration on employment and our economy.

The worst aspect of this is that it has done damage far beyond the immigration

debate itself. It has undermined many people's confidence in politics as a whole. Immigration is an issue that people rightly expect the government to have a stance on. If they do not, or if their stance is inaudible, people feel that they do not know where the leading parties stand.

It is also important, as it is an issue whose effects people encounter day to day. You may go to visit your GP only every so often, you may try to choose a new school only once or twice per child, but you interact with many people from countries to which we have no significant historical ties. Cumulatively, these interactions inform perception of the effect of immigrants on this country. They are fed into chat between neighbours or over dinner tables, and collectively form a political stance, whether conscious or not. That is why immigration is such an incredibly emotive issue, and this is something the mainstream parties do not seem to have understood.

The sense that there is no debate between the main parties on immigration levels has been responsible for the ugly rise of racist parties. The past few years have been an object lesson in the danger of not having an adequate national debate about immigration. The main parties need to spell their moral and political positions more loudly in order to dispel the sense of drift.

In short, I believe immigration must be controlled so the nation and people can benefit. At the moment, our system means immigrants are divided into two parts: those from European Union countries, and those from outside the EU. Those from EU countries can come, but, in practice, this has just increased the number of people coming for a short period and leaving later. This is good for the economy, giving us skills when we need them and flexibility when, as in the recession, those

jobs dry up.

The "points system" applies to immigrants from outside the EU. The more skills you have, and the more those skills are in demand, the more likely you will be to be allowed to migrate to Britain. At the moment, politicians from the Home Office set the criteria for which skills are needed, and so who can come to the country. This leads to the possibility of politicians deciding our immigration rate based on partisan, media-driven concerns.

It is similar to the mid-90s with interest rates: politicians could keep rates low as a pre-election sweetener, even though it might not be right for the economy. In the same way this was solved by giving the Bank of England the power to set interest rates, the solution to the immigration conundrum is for the government to allow the Migration Advisory Committee to set the level of points needed.

They should do so according to three criteria: the needs of the economy, the demand on public services and the desire to keep aggregate numbers below a politically decided maximum.

That would solve both problems. It would mean immigration was controlled, so the nation and people can benefit. And it would mean that revulsion for racism and xenophobia did not stop us from thinking about what the optimum level of immigration should be.

Immigration is good for this country. But uncontrolled immigration is bad for the politics of this country. Here, at least, is one idea to solve it.

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