

Media and think-tank can play the honest broker



TWO things have been said about America, one by an American and the other by his neighbour, a Canadian. One veteran US journalist nodded at my description of America being the Sun around which all other planets revolve. It is invincible and lording it over all its surveys. Since he echoed me I took it as his view in the most authentic sense of the term. The other comment is by Laurence J. Peter: "America is a country that doesn't know where it is going but is determined to set a speed

record getting there." The comments have an unmistakable relevance to the current electoral episode in Bangladesh, a new signature tune set to the image of the country! Sheikh Hasina is infallible, all-knowing, all-powerful and the lady of all she surveys! And Bangladesh is truly a country that doesn't know where it is going politically but "is determined to set a speed record getting there."

The tasks facing us are as follows: Removing political uncertainty and defusing political tension through engaging the opposition in a dialogue. It should be solely geared to formulating modalities for a fresh, inclusive election and setting a roadmap for the entire process to be completed, within a reasonable timeframe.

For this to happen ministers are well-advised to stop gloating over continuing for a full term, which some of them are doing curiously on the back of meeting a foreign dignitary. Ah, but he was out to test waters as to the government's intent for fresh election. This amounts to renegeing on words to hold snap election before even the process of engagement with the opposition has begun. After the BNP's stoppage of blockades and shutdowns the government is yet to take steps to set the BNP's jailed leaders at large, a somewhat bleak signal on the radar.

The second step should be to rejuvenate the economy; and the third, to mend fences with the international circles about credibility gaps, suggestions by civil society leaders that find resonance with most thinking people.

The fact that flies us in the face is that the parliament born of January 5 election is set to create an executive with unbridled power and lack of accountability. The cabinet's collective responsibility is undercut by the very composition of the parliament. Besides, the main opposition being outside the parliament would be oriented to streets trying to keep the roads heated, a spectre of violence whereas it could be a rainbow like in Mandela's South Africa.

With token JP opposition at best like in a mock parliament and the principal opposition effectively out of the JS the roles of the media and the civil society have

assumed critical importance. The media, print and electronic, is going to be relied on more than ever before to be having informed judgment on issues of vital national interest. Similarly, the think-tanks should receive increased attention from the government, opposition, NGOs and opinion leaders. The detractors will be quick to debunk the possibility saying both the media and the civil society are divided along political lines. So what if they are -- the quality and relevance of what one says is more important than who says it! Yet, in essence our strong belief is that both media and the civil society have patriotic and responsible people who can and do think independently and keep rational or national interest uppermost in their minds.

Unfortunately, the PM and her colleagues in the past cabinet were selectively allergic to the media and civil society for reasons best known to them. The tenor of a reversal of attitude will have to be set by none other than the prime minister herself. Leave aside the ministers, the PM took a dig at the domestic media while speaking at a press conference in New York in September last year. She 'diagnosed' the media with suffering "from a psychological problem" for only highlighting what she termed the negative side of a story. She attributed the AL-backed candidates' defeat in the five city corporation polls to media's negative campaign. Doesn't it take some of the wind off her sails when she boasted of the government's capacity to hold free and fair election?

She also recently linked a think-tank overture to an extra-constitutional orientation to ride to power and pelf by fluke so to speak.

Hence, some extracts of British Prime Minister David Cameron's recent speech on press freedom carried in *The Mail* (by Tamara Cohen; political analyst) holds a special meaning for the champions of our Westminster-type democracy. His statement is headlined 'The Press is a linchpin of democracy.'

Excerpts: -"Rowdy, tenacious, uncontrollable, sceptical, often uncomfortable for us politicians, British political reporting is deservedly respected around the world for the way it probes, inquires and scrutinises. These things are linchpins of our democracy."
- "By the nature of our jobs, the relationship between politicians and journalists is often a confrontational one."
- "You slag us off, we rage about you, repeat *ad infinitum*."
- "But at the heart of it we are all here because we care about politics and we care about public life."

There is, though, a similar ring tone: The British prime minister addressed the Westminster correspondents' dinner at the House of Common -- held for the first time since 1974, a whopping four decades intervening. Can we take the cue and insist on our prime minister to have regular interactions with the press on matters of national concern?

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Stayin' Alive



Atull in between the battles. But the war is far from over. So, who makes the decisions at each of the two camps? Dream teams? Dreaming teams perhaps. Are they all thinking outside the box? Oh please, it's peons-extraordinary who get their behinds kicked every time they think even outside their cubicles.

But it's far from being all quiet on both the camps. Ideas are flooding in. But remember, we are all PhDs in brown nosing. Ever wonder why it's not just our noses, but our whole bodies are brown?

And the measure of brownie points, Bangladesh style, is the SPM -- Sirs Per Minute. With the boss on the phone, it's a barrage of

"Si r...sir... sir..." with random pauses in between. Good job! You just rated a high score of 23 SPM!

And facing the boss in 3-D? Standing, sweating, eyes to the floor, hands in front of the crotch, like the defenders forming a wall against an indirect free kick.

Look, the boss just needs a simple answer to the sole problem in hand, ok?

"Can we go to Comilla?"

Suggestions pour in:

The nay-sayer: "No we can't -- we don't have a car."

The procrastinator: "If we can go tomorrow, then why waste time now?"

The verbal volley-ball solution: "If one can arrange the trip, let him do it. If no one can do it, how can I do it?"

The high SPM scorer: "Why should you go to Comilla? Comilla will come to you!"

The philosopher solemnly solves the problem by reducing it to the question, "How would Mahatma Gandhi handle this?"

Don't have any answers? Just pace around. You will look busy, trying to solve the problem.

Ladies and gentlemen. Introducing the inner sanctity of the powers-that-be. They are all there by way of possessing excellent communications skills -- the boss will communicate, they will listen. They will not question, but just figure out what the boss wants. And if all hell breaks loose, well, they did start with brain storming -- might as well end with blame storming.

Now, why can't they come up with the Japanese answer? "If one can arrange the trip, I can do it too. If no one can do it, then I MUST do it!"

The answer is simple. *Stayin' Alive!* Better not step on the toes which are attached to the behinds that are to be kissed anyway. Why rock the boat (ok, NO pun intended here -- I do value my freedom!)?

So, let the decisions remain singular. After all, we never say, "We did it." We say, "I did it."

Why then do we have a team at all? Well, we do need fake relationships. Of all the fake relationships, it's really a question of figuring out the best fake relationship. And you live to see another day -- in style. Let all the planets in each solar system revolve around the singular star. Let us not mess with nature's laws. We don't need a supernova. Even the US, the trailblazer of democracy, knows this only too well. They learned the hard way, that to stay lean and thin, one needs to be on a no CARB diet -- no Cheney, Ashcroft, Rumsfeld, Bush and absolutely no Rice.

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For a patient hearing from our European and American friends

SHAFI AHMED

THE headline of *The Daily Star* (TDS) on January 17 reads, 'US wants fresh polls by June.' TDS reports that the US envoy wants the new election to be held by May-June. Two other items published the same day in TDS are relevant. On the first page, a report says that BNP chooses soft line under international pressure. And then Mahfuz Anam warns about the 'danger of too much power in one hand.'

We see that the US envoy is working tirelessly to underline the need for constructive dialogue between the two big political parties to hold free, fair and credible election. So are envoys from a host of European countries, who have repeatedly expressed their concern.

The American ambassador and a significantly large number of European envoys attended a luncheon hosted by BNP. Could the speeches of BNP's external affairs veterans and the possible interaction of the envoys be something significantly new? Possibly not. The government had also sought to present its position, and there the US envoy asked for fresh polls.

I have a humble submission to make, and I beg a patient hearing from our European and American friends. Do you mean that the dialogue should take place only between the two big political parties without other parties? Your statements

so far lead us to think so. Does that not mean that you are taking some arbitrary and judgemental positions? Or that you are only interested in these two groups who have least regard for democratic practice within their organisational setup? Will the dialogue be truly 'inclusive'? Are you friends of the people of Bangladesh or of the two parties?

Well, friends, at this point, what do you expect to come out from any dialogue for holding election by June? Has there been any positive development so far, other than BNP's statement of not using violence in the name of political movement? Friends, do you have anything to put before the two parties as the necessary components of the agenda for discussion? Are you just interested in seeing that people vote and elect some people, be they criminals, terrorists or whosoever? Are you only interested in seeing them fight and win or lose? Shouldn't there be strategic reforms in the RPO for a 'credible' election? We have had experience of the non-party caretaker government system. One of our great writers said that after every 5 years we select 10 angels for 3 months and they preside over the ceremony through which we elect 300 homo sapiens to rule us for 5 years.

Friends, please do not use your powerful offices to force the two parties to quickly select their trusted lieutenants. The basic bone of contention has been the limitless power of the prime minister. Friends, please recommend some terms of reference for the dialogue. Both parties must agree

to curtail the limitless powers of the PM. Have you noticed that Khadeda Zia has never taken up this point? Significantly connected with this is the scope of the office of the president. The president should be allowed some strategic powers, at least in times of crisis, since he also is an elected person. The alternative rule of both Awami League and BNP did not reflect the will of the people. During the last BNP rule, the US National Democratic Institute identified about 1 million fake voters.

We insist on a consensus between the two parties to reconstitute at least three important organisations -- the Election Commission, Anti-Corruption Commission and Public Service Commission -- and they must be allowed full independence. The parties must promise that any call for *hartal* in future will not be coercive, people not supporting it will be allowed to move freely and to work. Any damage done through violence, even by some other group, on the plea of what they call 'programme' has to be compensated by the political party concerned.

My diplomat friends from Europe and US, there exists one fundamentally and terribly critical historical fact that unfortunately cuts the nation into two perpetually conflicting groups. No, not just for fresh polls. In order to ensure social stability and cohesion, BNP must acknowledge that Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib is the architect of the nation. It must truly recognise history and should

not assert that Major Ziaur Rahman proclaimed the independence of Bangladesh. At the same time, Awami League will have to give some credit to Ziaur Rahman by recognising him as the reader of the proclamation of our independence on the radio. This critical, moral and basic issue must be settled once for all.

Both Awami League and BNP must pronounce that they will jointly take measures to allow the religious minorities to vote at their will, and protect them after the polls. The supreme leaders of the parties must vow jointly to the nation through media that whoever loses will spare no time in congratulating the winner. The parties should also agree in black and white that they recognise some issues like education, agriculture, RMG sector, export, international ports and geo-political security of the country as common national concerns. And so, any programme undertaken by the previous government will not be abandoned, and the opposition will be taken into confidence on any major issue in these sectors. They must vow that they will not boycott parliament sessions under any circumstance.

Friends, we do not want any cosmetic or ad-hoc solution. Fresh'n quick poll is not the best answer. Fast food may be delicious but is never healthy.

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QUOTABLE Quote

Any change, even a change for the better, is always accompanied by drawbacks and discomforts.

Arnold Bennett

CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

ACROSS

- Refer to
- Mexican peninsula
- Penalized
- Blow one's top
- Plain silly
- Musical pace
- Stand up for
- Writing tool
- Give off
- Diner activity
- Indulgent
- Corsica or Cuba
- Indy auto
- Wise sayings
- Filming site
- Trample
- Royal address
- Catchall abber.
- Rely
- Diner offerings
- Gave medicine to
- Nepal neighbour
- Pretentiously designed
- Like ocean trenches
- Ham or lamb

DOWN

- Films
- Stuck, figuratively
- Basic belief
- Genesis site
- Wager
- "-- we there yet?"
- Get involved eagerly
- Tack on
- Raul Castro's brother
- Chinese secret society
- Go down
- Pub pints
- Road goo
- Othello's betrayer
- Eminem's music
- Go to
- Century part
- Middy break
- Writer Hemingway
- Lacy nightwear
- Convoy truck
- Fern source
- Dutch cheese
- Tell tales
- Easy victim

Yesterday's answer

SPIN AMASS
PINOT TAMP
INTRO OPART
TAUPEP ZOO
STINKY NOON
ATONEMENT
ROTOR
AMSTERDAM
TIRE STYLED
ARMPTA UNO
MOOSE LAMAS
PUTON SINCE
STOWS LIES

CRYPTOQUOTE 12-19

EBALASII BI URDS BUNRDPXPAP PFXA
OBILRU, XAL PFS DSQRVABPBR RW
PFBI BI PFS ZSVBAABAV RW OBILRU.
-- PFSRLRDS BIXXQ DTZBA

Previous day's Cryptoquote:
This is the first test of a gentleman: his respect for those who can be of no possible value to him.
-- William Lyon Phelps

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

I HATE HAVING TO CARRY THESE HEAVY PACKS ON HIKES. JUST BE HAPPY YOU'RE NOT BEETLE.

HE HAS TO CARRY SARGE'S SNACK PACK.

HENRY by Don Trachte

WHERE IS ELM STREET, YOUNG MAN?

YOU SHOULDN'T POINT - IT ISN'T POLITE!