

Fake FF certificate

Penalise perpetrators severely

THE issue of fake freedom fighter certificate has been hogging the media headlines for some time now. Reportedly, another 2367 fake certificates have been cancelled. And that includes those of four secretaries and a joint secretary of the government.

While there has been propensity to produce fake FF certificates since long, the intensity of doing so has increased recently, particularly after the announcement by the government of increase in the service age limit of freedom fighters. And what could be more disgraceful than to see some senior most civil servants resort to fraudulent means to show themselves as freedom fighters.

We are constrained to suggest that the two most respected icons of our history, the Liberation War and the Freedom Fighters have been very grossly defiled through politicisation and corruption of the two. The fake FF certificates by secretaries and the War Heroes Crest fraud are two glaring examples of this.

While these two have been most despicable examples of greed getting the better of our morality, our resentment stems more from the very lackadaisical handling of these two cases by the government. It defies logic that the five public servants should not only continue to hold office despite the fact that their moral turpitude has been proved beyond doubt but that one of them should also be included in the PM's entourage for the New York trip. And it seems that the Crest issue has been forgotten.

We want severe punishment for everyone involved in the two cases of fraud. And that should include those who put their signatures in the fake certificates.

Targeted 1700 schools await nationalisation

Expedite the process

SOME 1700 private primary schools were earmarked a year ago for nationalisation. Sadly enough, the process stagnates. As a result, approximately 8,000 teachers of those schools who ought to be under government payroll have yet to be beneficiaries of it.

Not only have the teachers been taken under MPO but their status too awaits confirmation. According to the standard process, the school, its land including all movable and unmovable resources systematically come under government label.

23,000 private primary schools having been nationalised, understandably in the first phase we do not see why in the second phase, 1700 schools are taking so much time to be nationalised?

However, we pin hope on the assurance of primary and mass education secretary that the process of nationalisation of the said schools will be completed in two months. Only that the time scale leaves out the teachers so far as Eid-ul-Adha is approaching and some payment would have helped them a good deal.

About nationalising private primary schools two important aspects need to be borne in mind. First, after the decision is taken for nationalisation a timeline should be declared and followed. And the second relates to locating the nationalised schools in a way that they are not too proximate to each other so that they can reach out to a larger number of pupils.

Afghanistan deal

EDITORIAL: DAWN (PAKISTAN)

THE election deal secured in Afghanistan by the international community cannot really be called democratic, but at least it has given the country a chance to establish relative peace and stability.

Unhappily, three elections into a new era aspiring towards democracy, the Afghan electoral process remains hostage to back-room deals, powerbrokers and warlords. Without forgetting Pakistan's own struggles with democracy over more than six decades, the most worrying part about the post-2001 Afghan political system is that it does not quite give an impression of being sustainable.

If elections are to be a complete sham -- the winner was announced yesterday by the Independent Election Commission chairman without even sharing a final vote count -- and do not incrementally move towards the goal of transparency and fairness, then surely at some point behind-the-scenes powerbrokers inside Afghanistan may dispense with the façade altogether.

Without belabouring the point, much of Afghanistan's governance travails over the past decade have been because the electoral system was betrayed to install Hamid Karzai as president the first time round and then betrayed a second time as Mr. Karzai turned on his original benefactors to secure more and more power and perks for his political partners and himself.

Of what use is a so-called democratic system if it leads to the most undemocratic of actions? The international community and Afghanistan's power elite have once again sacrificed principle to salvage the veneer of stability and forward movement. Having said that, the experiment to put into effect a national government with both Pakhtun and erstwhile Northern Alliance elements seems to be the only option worth trying.

At least the incoming government team will be led by the two men who Afghans have an overwhelming preference to be ruled by. Quite how president-elect Ashraf Ghani and possibly his number two, incoming chief executive officer Abdullah Abdullah, will get along in office remains to be seen. It is better though to have a peaceful settlement rather than chaos and civil war, as many of Mr. Abdullah's allies have been tacitly threatening.

The big issues that will confront the two men are well known, as is their priority. First, the post-2014 future of the international presence, led by the US, in Afghanistan will have to be quickly settled. Almost as important as residual troops in Afghanistan will be the international community's financial commitments to the country. Second will be a serious push in the peace process with the Afghan Taliban, while ensuring that the Afghan National Security Forces do not cede too much terrain to the former. Third, relations with Pakistan and the problem of a porous border and militant sanctuaries on both sides of it. Fourth, Afghanistan itself, with the incoming government having to prove it can govern better than Mr. Karzai. Together, these factors constitute a towering challenge.

Half-baked digital dreams



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

IN yet another classic case of bungling up what should otherwise have been a very helpful project, the government has expended Tk. 130 crore of tax payers' hard earned cash on "digital" number plates. They may be digital in terms of technology, but since associated systems and equipment have neither been procured nor put into operation, the much-hyped about digitalisation of vehicular number plates is stuck in the mud. As per the lead item in The Daily Star printed on September 22, "the government has been forcing people to buy recto-reflecting number plates and RFID tags for their vehicles under a Tk. 600 crore scheme that does the vehicle owners no good. Owners of cars, buses, minibuses, microbuses, sports utility vehicles, trucks and other large vehicles are charged Tk. 3,652 each while those of motorbikes and three-wheelers like auto-rickshaws have to pay Tk. 1,805 for the tags and the new number plates."

Again, going by what has been published in the report, about 400,000 vehicles have been outfitted with these plates and the primary objective of going "digital" was to help authorities track down stolen vehicles. It was envisaged at the time of project design that the new plates would serve a number of purposes; with visibility up to 40 feet away and working in conjunction with tag reading devices that could read vital information from the plates up to 11 metres away, the installation of such plates, was hoped, would change the way law enforcement would work to crack down on crime involving auto vehicles. The reality has worked out in a different manner altogether. With 12 tag-reading devices in operation in a country that, according to Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA), has more than 2.1 million registered motor vehicles, measuring the effectiveness of those devices is not even worth writing a sentence on. The tags that are drawing so much flak, i.e. Radio Frequency (RFID) tags, do serve all the purposes of identification for purposes beyond law enforcement issues in other countries where the technology has been successfully implemented.

For instance, if we look at the State of California, where a Democrat Senator named Curren Price has championed the cause of digital number plates. Bill # SB 1453 (amended) was moved to add Section 1656.6 to the Vehicle Code that allowed for a host of changes to be brought about. Digital plates under the amended allow authorities [Section 2. Section 1656.6 is added]:

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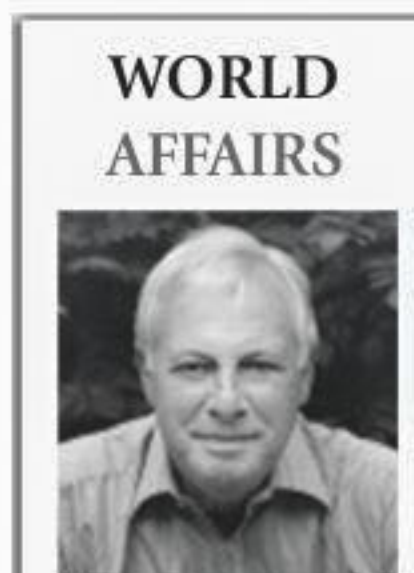
"1656.6. (a) The department may consider the use and development of existing or emerging technologies for the creation of a digital electronic license plate for the purpose of generating revenue for the department and state." The Bill goes on to state how digital plates may be used both as a vehicle identifier and the effects of "the use of the digital electronic license plates on traffic safety, including, in consultation with the Department of California Highway Patrol, a consideration of the on-road safety impacts of digital electronic license plates through on-road testing of these plates authorised by the Department of the California Highway Patrol." The bill adds in detail precisely how each step of the procurement procedure and vendor selection will take place and how costs will be estimated and allocations made; how users will benefit and what corrective measures will be undertaken by the Department for its successful design and implementation.

What the above essentially illustrates is that if we are really serious about change, and that too for the better, the whole issue of digitisation needs to be incorporated into law. Only then can the various bodies involved starting from the ministry of communication, the BRTA and law enforcement agencies can work together to provide a solution for monies expended. These are public funds that have been expended. Tax payers' hard earned money. Not some syndicated loan from financial institutions. Tk. 130 crore may seem a pittance in the eyes of policymakers, but its hard earned money for law abiding citizens, each of whom would certainly like to know where his / her Tk. 3,652 went and why.

As things stand now, the Tk. 600 crore project portrayed as "yet another step towards Digital Bangladesh" is in deep trouble. In the sense that the original idea behind it was to use the technology to check crimes being committed using vehicles, apprehend criminals involved in snatching cars and motorcycles which in turn would be used to commit further crimes. Why do we not see the successful implementation of the project in Bangladesh? There is hardly any coordination between the various government bodies and also the lack of incorporation of a global positioning system (GPS) in the system design does not help matters. It would be helpful for all concerned, including both authorities and the more than 2.1 million owners of vehicles, if the project was better designed and implemented in earnest. Otherwise, we remain "digital" in name and "analogue" in reality and a project initiated in good faith turns into the laughing stock of the country.

The writer is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

Reuniting the United Kingdom



CHRIS PATTEN

IN the end, democracy came to the rescue. The people of Scotland voted by a comfortable margin of about 10% to remain part of the United Kingdom -- not least because of the campaigning of three Labour politicians, Alastair Darling, Gordon Brown, and Jim Murphy. At times, it seemed that the result would be much closer, or even that we British might engineer the dismemberment of our country, which for centuries has brought together four national communities: England, Wales, Northern Ireland, and Scotland. The Scots have been part of the British state for more than 300 years, at the heart of the Protestant, imperial, adventuring, outward-looking culture that forged Britain's identity. Still, that identity has been fractured; I hope not beyond repair. In any case, things will never be quite the same again.

Now, the people of England, Wales, and Northern Ireland -- not rejected, after all -- must behave as well as possible to salvage something workable from the sometimes bitter and divisive arguments. We have to display magnanimity -- a difficult enough virtue to practice at the best of times. Before trying to rise to this challenge, what can we learn from this walk along the cliff edge?

Despite the huge turnout on polling day in Scotland, referendums are a lamentable way of trying to settle big political issues. Those who established and developed parliamentary democracy in Britain knew this very well. Referendums are the favorite device of populists and would-be dictators. One vote on one day subsumes complex matters with one ballot question, which in any event is frequently not the question that many people actually answer. Parliamentary democracies should have nothing to do with them.

In the event, we did not dispose of 300 years of shared experience and common prosperity on one Thursday in September 2014. But there are three reasons why we seemed at times to come so close to that outcome, none of which reflect well on the British political process or, in my view, justify the claim that our future will, and must, be different.

First, while Scottish nationalism has many honorable roots and aspirations, the campaign and its incubation showed a nasty tinge of chauvinism and an occasionally brutish hostility toward pluralism, reflected, for example, in the intimidation of some journalists. Overall, the English took on the role of what philosophers and social scientists call the "other," an alien threatening force, in the pro-independence campaign. The English were every day's villains. Now we have to try to forget all of that.

Second, Britain, like other countries in Europe, is suffering from the rise of angry, populist, anti-enlightenment political forces, fueled by conspiracy theories. In England, the electoral success of the UK Independence Party is one such example. Demagogues stack prejudices atop half-truths, and any attempt to connect discussion with reality is shot through with contemptuous accusations of dishonesty and self-

interest. Responsible political leaders will have to be more aggressive, bold, and vigorous in confronting such interlocutors.

Finally, as far as policy is concerned, we Britons have deluded ourselves to think that our system of government -- increasingly shown to be unrepresentative, inefficient, and over-centralized -- could survive with a little tinkering here and there.

This belief has suited the two main political parties. Labour has sought to avoid a constitutional debate, because any move in the direction of federal institutions requires addressing the party's over-representation in the UK parliament. It is unfair to give ever more power to a Scottish parliament while continuing to give Labour, which controls 41 Scottish constituencies in the House of Commons, disproportionate say over what happens in England.

As for the Conservatives, the party has allowed its belief in the union of the country's constituent parts to foreclose any discussion of how that union can be modernized. If we are to prevent the UK from rattling to pieces, we have to change the way we govern ourselves. The pace that Prime Minister David Cameron has now proposed for this process is breathtaking.

Conservatives held a majority of the seats in Scotland less than 60 years ago. Today, there is one Scottish Conservative MP out of 59 in the UK Parliament, a mark of how the Tories have allowed themselves to be frozen out of some parts of the country.

In some respects, this is the biggest challenge of all to the UK's political culture. Conservatives are losing touch with parts of the country where once they were strong -- not just Scotland, but also cities and the north of England -- and there is a growing disconnect between the party and Britain's increasingly important minority ethnic groups.

Some of the same problems affect Labour. Both big parties will have to address these issues as we start on the long and difficult task of reforming a UK that has lost some of the glue of affinity and solidarity that has held it together for so long.

For some British citizens south of the Scottish border, it will be difficult to act with the goodwill now required to recover from the referendum episode. I do not know how much Alex Salmond, the now-resigned Scottish Nationalist Party leader who pressed for the referendum, is responsible for the surge in his own party's support; but I suspect that he may, alas, have galvanized all too much nationalist sentiment in England.

I heard one commentator claiming that the referendum campaign was "beautiful." Perhaps in the end, we really could "trust the people," and that is an invigorating thought. Let others, who oppose democracy in their own countries, take note. But the campaign did come perilously close at times to being a triumph for un-reason. The challenge now is to figure out how to banish half-truths and big lies from our politics and restore reason and moderation to our divided land.

The writer is the last British Governor of Hong Kong and a former EU commissioner for external affairs, is Chancellor of the University of Oxford.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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"No head above king"

There could have been no better "Commentary" than what has been penned down by Mahfuz Anam, who appropriately reminisced the famous film "The King and I" and quoted "No head above king" while commenting on 'shackling of the judiciary', as the hacking of the press freedom is yet to take place officially.

Hats off to him for his bold and courageous commentary when all hands are frozen and the voices of the people strangled.

The Editor said, "So the only possible "head" above the "king" could have been an independent judiciary which has now to genuflect itself before the mighty executive." "So the love for the 1972 Constitution is a farce and being used to cut the only "head" left that could be above that of the "king."

A F Rahman
One-e-mail

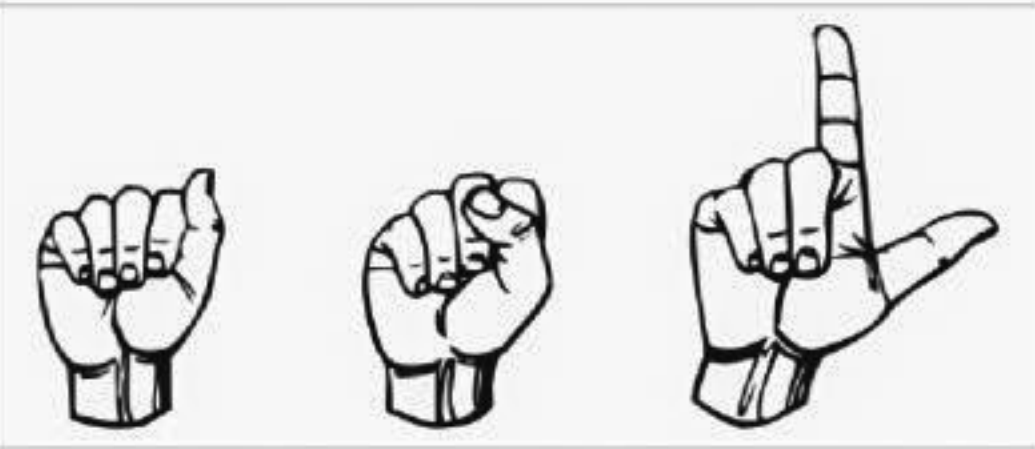
All power to PM

The government has passed the 16th amendment of the constitution for impeachment of Judges at a time when the focus of everyone was on the verdict of Jamaat-e-Islami Naye-e-Ameer Delwar Hossain Sayedee. Actually, this has been done to empower the PM to impeach judges, so that none can protest or utter a word against controversial government. Such aggressive attitude of the government may abolish democracy from Bangladesh. The Awami League led government, consequently, may suffer in the long run and lose people's trust.

Md. Mahsin Alam
One-e-mail

"Giving voice to the voiceless"

This news appeared in The Daily Star of 20th. September, where it said that a Canadian born Bangladeshi IT engineer Tarik Sayeed has made a device to help the mute and deaf people communicate through their sign language. The device, a small, silver and three-inch rectangle, translates hand gestures into text and voice.



It all happened when Tarik saw a girl in a shop who was telling the shopkeeper what she wanted in her sign language but, regrettably, the shopkeeper did not understand her language, and so the girl had to leave the shop without getting what she wanted and with tears in her eyes. This incident upset Tarik very much and he started to think what he could do to help the deaf and mute population. He started a project with two of his friends in Bangladesh and became successful in making a device. Tarik started his own company and he is all set to launch the product in the market. We all hope that Tarik gets the desired results and serves the mute population.

Humayun Hyder
Zikatala, Dhaka

Comments on news report, "178-member team to go with PM," published on September 18, 2014

Anwar Pervaz

178 is not good enough! Better to take the whole nation with her!

Dr. Ahsan Habib

Look at how many people accompany the "elected" leaders of other countries.

Saleh Tanveer

This is a way of rewarding the local underlings at the expense of the taxpayers. Our rulers truly believe that the national exchequer is their own private piggy bank.

"Verdict disappointing" (September 18, 2014)

Dev Saha

Disappointing indeed! However, it is time we moved on with the court's verdict. A lifetime is no less worse than a death sentence. This man had killed our people and aided the enemies and the nation has finally prosecuted the man and convicted him successfully. This is an excellent achievement for the nation.

Roni Rahman

We are absolutely disgusted at the verdict.

"Govt takes food safety seriously" (September 20, 2014)

Nasirullah Mridha salim

We lack food for thought on food safety.