

When even Trump moves to the centre

ANUPAM DEBASIS ROY

Donald Trump's first State of the Union speech as president sounded presidential. On Tuesday night, he sounded more like the Republican candidate who took a combative and aggressive stance to win the election in 2016. Like a true Republican, Trump readily invoked patriotism and the American flag repeatedly in his speech and ended it with a Reaganesque salute to American exceptionalism and exceptional Americans. Looking forward, he laid out his agenda and invoked the ideal of bipartisanship.

He also upheld the time-honoured tradition of remaining vague about the means to achieve his ends. But even though Trump has learned to speak (or to read a script) like a trained politician, the world is not yet ready to listen to him as a politician. Therefore, Trump's speech may come as a heartbreak for many who loved him primarily because of his no-holds-barred comments, primarily because he did not make compromises, primarily because he was not a politician.

But did Trump say enough to convince his admirers that America is already becoming great again? He sure did say a lot. According to William Galston at the Brookings Institution, much of his victory lap on Tuesday night was not misplaced either. The economy is growing vigorously. Wages are finally rising. Corporations are reinvesting in America. The president has achieved



Vice President Mike Pence (L) and Speaker of the House Paul Ryan listen as President Donald Trump gives his State of the Union address in the House Chamber of the Capitol in Washington, DC on January 30, 2018.

conservatives. His speech proved (again) that he has accepted the agendas of the social conservatives—constitutionalist judges, school choice, religious liberty, opposition to abortion—and of economic conservatives—tax cuts and deregulation.

But the fact of the matter is that Trump's base is hardly centrist enough to be swayed by these achievements. The only thing his supporters care too much about is something that he spoke too much about. The only policy programme of no substance he extensively described in his speech was his plan on immigration. The new Trump plan would cut legal immigration and spend about USD 25 billion on border security and a wall. In exchange, the Trump administration has decided to support amnesty and citizenship for an estimated 1.8 million DREAMers.

Unfortunately, few Democrats and independents view the president's proposal as fair because it deals a blow to both legal immigration (a major source of American prosperity) and makes the black hole of public debt even larger. Therefore, if it was Democrat or independent/centre-left support that Trump had sought, his speech missed that target by far.

Instead, it has invited angry reaction from hardcore conservatives. Senator Ted Cruz (Trump's opponent in the Republican primaries) has already claimed that Trump's proposal is inconsistent with his promises. Breitbart News, the right-wing outlet that strongly contributed

to the election of Trump, has already attacked the president for his amnesty proposal and gave him the nickname "Amnesty Don." Heritage Action, the Heritage Foundation's political outreach arm, condemned President Trump's amnesty proposal very harshly in order to maintain its ties to the administration. Using the State of the Union address to reiterate a message that had already disheartened so many of Trump's supporters and well-wishers has only made sure that the groups that primarily rallied for Trump because of his anti-immigration stance will now be disaffected and refrain from voting for him (and his party) in the upcoming elections.

Trump has started to find his footing in the euphemistic vernacular of Washington politics. His speech, in the interest of protecting his base, should have been even heavier on propaganda and sweet talk while keeping the policy cupboard even barer. Trump's base tuned into the speech for reassurance on MAGA but Trump, mistakenly, has given them something extra: a taste of the swamp that they had elected him to drain.

This may become a problem for the entire Republican Party in the upcoming midterm elections. Tuesday's State of the Union address has Democrats more fired up than ever and because of Trump's new centre-right avatar, the Republican Party may lose the wildcard of the swamp anti-establishment "silent majority."

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massive tax cuts, significant deregulation, the confirmation of constitutionalist judges and the repeal of the individual mandate imposed by Obamacare (even though he failed to gut the Act in its entirety). As all presidents presiding over a good economy do, Trump took credit for all the good that is going on even

though he inherited much of it. The factsheets do read that African-American unemployment rate is at a record low of 6.8 percent and its steady decline since 2010 is something Trump could (and did) easily brush under the carpet. He could (and did) also keep silent about the growing deficit that will

exceed USD 1 trillion thanks to his policies. And no matter how hard the opposition tries to expose the dirt, the president simply has a bigger megaphone than them and is well-versed in drowning out his naysayers. That is why I say that Trump's speech would have been successful only if his base was establishment

WORLD WETLANDS DAY

Empowering the haor people

SHEKH FARID

Human beings, by nature, are surprisingly resilient. We fight back against natural disasters, human-induced hazards, economic vulnerabilities, and health shocks and, in the process, we keep learning how to cope with and adapt to these adversities.

But the degree to which one can withstand such adversities varies from person to person, even from community to community, based on their capacity and resources. We use the term "resilience" to refer to such capacity of a system (individual, group, and community) to "bounce back" after coming across hardships.

Today, resilience is widely used from different perspectives both in academic and development discourses. Accordingly, building resilience of people to natural, environmental and other socio-economic hazards has become a key development agenda over the last couple of decades. The United Nations (UN) in its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) incorporated the issue of resilience emphasising on "building the resilience of the poor and those in vulnerable situations and reduce their exposure and vulnerability to climate-related extreme events and other economic, social and environmental shocks and disasters."

Moreover, Bangladesh's 7th Five Year Plan (7FYP) adopted complementary strategies of building resilience of people to climate-related hazards and natural disasters in addition to strategies for economic growth of 7.4 percent.

However, Bangladesh is reportedly at greater risk of natural disasters because of global warming and climate change taking place. The north-eastern haor region of the country is, among other regions, at the receiving end of the adverse impact of that change. The overriding challenge of haor inhabitants is perhaps the fact

While recurrent natural disasters continue to hold the population living in the haor basin back, resilient livelihood may pave a sustainable way forward in the face of such disasters.

that they have limited livelihood options if their existing livelihoods are disrupted by natural calamities. The complexity of this challenge restricts their livelihood options—holding them back from joining the journey towards national progress.

The haor dwellers mainly rely on Boro crops and fishing, while a minority section depends on livestock rearing and small business. Hence, enhancing resilient livelihood of haor dwellers—a livelihood that can sustain its key functions (food, income, poverty reduction, etc.) and absorb the impacts of disasters and shocks without causing major disruption in the day-to-day functions—is their utmost need, in line with the priority of SDGs and 7FYP of Bangladesh.

Four possible interventions can be chalked up to enhance the livelihood resilience of haor dwellers. Firstly, we need to ensure security of the crops cultivated in the area. Early flash flood is a matter of prime concern for these geographically vulnerable areas, disrupting livelihoods every 2-3 years.

Flash floods damage the Boro crop which is the only means of livelihood for most of them.

A number of factors are associated with this. Flash floods take place mainly because of depression-like landform and rainfall runoff from across the border of India. The governance issues pertinent to the construction and repair of the embankment compound this geographical challenge. Last year, the government came up with a solution: the Kabita (money for work) Policy 2017, laying out the details of activities of the embankment projects which are time-bound for the associated committees.

But even after the policy was put into effect, the formation of the committees and starting of the projects have reportedly been delayed. With a

view to ensuring their crop security, strong implementation of the policy is certainly required. Popularising existing short-duration crop variety in the areas, climate-smart vegetable cultivation, bringing kanda—a slightly higher land typically government-owned and unused—into cultivation, and enhancing agricultural research are also needed to ensure resilient livelihoods for the population.

Secondly, when it comes to livelihood resilience, it is necessary to create linkages between wider markets and the haor region which is restricted by geographical isolation, and fragile and inadequate road networks. According to the Master Plan of Haor Area, 11 of the haor upazilas are not yet connected with road networks. During flash floods

and regular inundation, boats are the only means of transport; the situation gets worse when afaal—a type of high wave—takes place during monsoon flooding. The road networks and other communication means need to be improved taking the ecological aspect of the area into account. With the leading role of the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE), commercial livestock rearing needs to be facilitated, especially sheep farming which has high adaptive capacity to the ecology of the region. These people will be keen to start commercial livestock rearing once access to the wider market becomes easier.

Thirdly, the government should encourage private sector investment and small-scale entrepreneurship in these areas. The key may be to pro-

vide the right incentives/leverage, e.g. tax exemption, special investment loan, and legal protection for those willing to invest in the area. The commercial sector will gain momentum if communication infrastructure is developed and skilled human resources are made available. Following BRAC's model of skills development, establishment of vocational institutes and linking the trainees to the employers may be an effective approach for the government and other organisations. In addition to government efforts, NGOs should also come forward with some skills development programmes.

And finally, all of our development agenda should reflect the special needs of the hard-to-reach region. Special allocation for the region in our budget is also essential. On the government's part, the master plan should be implemented with high priority. We expect wider reflection of the master plan in the next FYP. Furthermore, given the socio-economic backwardness and vulnerable ecological set-up, the next FYP should include the haor region in its lists of "lagging regions" and "disaster-prone regions."

While recurrent natural disasters continue to hold the population living in the haor basin back, resilient livelihood may pave a sustainable way forward in the face of such disasters. If our development agenda remains too focused on national growth rate, the lagging regions will stay left behind—with even greater spatial disparity. Unless we are able to create a resilient haor community, achieving the SDGs—the thrust of which is "leaving no one behind"—will remain an unfulfilled aspiration.

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Haor farmers collecting paddies damaged by floods as fodder for their cattle. PHOTO: SHEIKH NASIR

QUOTABLE Quote



AMOS BRONSON ALCOTT
American teacher, writer, philosopher, and reformer

Our bravest and best lessons are not learned through success, but through misadventure.

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER



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