

## **CAPTAINS OF INDUSTRY ABSOLVED FROM GUILT ?**

"Cicero and the fall of the Roman Republic", written by J.L. Strachan-Davidson, M.A., Fellow of Balliol College, Oxford, published by G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York and London, has recorded the following prognosis on the then society, in an address made by Cicero, as far back as 80 B.C.

"Men of wisdom, men endowed with the place and the power which you occupy, are bound to apply the appropriate remedies to the disease of which the State is sickening. There is no one of you but knows well, that the Roman people, which formerly had the reputation of being most placable towards its enemies, labours to-day under the curse of cruelty to its own children."

"Remove this cruelty from the State, gentlemen of the jury; suffer it no longer to work its pleasure in this Commonwealth. It is a vice which is mischievous, not only in that it has swept off so many of our fellow-citizens under every circumstance of horror, but likewise because by the daily spectacle of painful sights it has made the tenderest hearts callous to the sense of pity. For when each hour we see or hear of some fresh atrocity, even though nature has made us mild of mood, familiarity with dreadful deeds plucks all feelings of humanity from our minds."

"Was it for this that the nobility aroused itself and won back the State at the point of the sword ? Was it in order that the menials and lackeys of the great should be able to harry the goods and the honour of us and you alike ?"

## **PLIGHT OF OUR COUNTRY**

Would not these profound words, articulated ardently with great fervour by Cicero, well over 2000 years ago, poignantly be apt and pointedly relevant to the dire straits and abyss, that our country has been plunged into today ? Could it not be so similarly asserted, that the disease of our State today is sickening, as Cicero had described then, labouring under the curse of cruelty to the children of our very country, with so many of our fellow citizens swept off under every circumstance of horror ?

Ironically, as a people, are we not renowned, with reputation of being the most hospitable and friendly, on the contrary, to those, who are foreigners to our country ? Have we not, for well over a decade now, seen and witnessed regular spectacles of painful sights and heard of daily atrocities and dreadful deeds, plucking all feelings of humanity from our minds, making the tenderest hearts callous to the sense of pity ?

As Cicero had posed then, over 2000 years back, was it for all this, that the nobility of our country aroused itself in 1948 to win back the independence of the State ? Was it in order that, menials and lackeys, now described as henchmen and cronies of those in political power, should harry or pillage and plunder the wealth and the honour of our country ?

## INITIATIVE BY THE PRIVATE SECTOR



Lalith Kotelawala

Ken Balendran

Representative leaders of the chambers of trade, commerce and industry have now awoken and sprung into action to take an initiative to endeavour to heal the sickening plight of the State. No doubt quite laudable. By such public initiative on their part, do they not admit, without any reservation, whatsoever, that the country today is in a perilous and sickening plight, with the economy rapidly sliding precipitously towards dire straits?

Is it not such very alarming economic considerations, that directly have a bearing on their business empires, that have primarily motivated the representatives of the chambers of trade, commerce and industry to take such initiative, whilst having been quite comfortable, complacent and indifferent, to the national crises for well over a decade now?

It would no doubt be poignantly pertinent to ponder, as to whether not such initiative would have also sprung into lightening action, had there been compulsory conscription, encompassing the off-springs of the upper echelons of the business world, to wage this internal war, that many cry for, but where, the economically unemancipated poor are only mobilised to the battlefield, invariably out of economic compulsions?

## COLOSSAL COSTS FOR DESTRUCTION

According to Central Bank sources, the cost of the military offensive to wage this internal war in our country, from the time the People's Alliance government assumed office is reckoned to be over Rupees 200 billion, including the budgetary provision for the year 1999. In terms of the economic parameters that pertain to our country, would this not be a colossal burden on and catastrophic to the economic and social emancipation and development of the people of our country ?

Just to afford a gauge of this colossal level of expenditure of over Rupees 200 billion, on an unproductive and destructive offensive, with the sacrifice of limb and life of thousands of youth of our country, one has to compare such level of expenditure, with the reckoned levels of

expenditure on some productive economic infrastructure projects, that would contribute towards the socio-economic development of our country.

For example, the Katunayake Expressway could be reckoned to cost around Rupees 15 billion. The cost of electrification of the railways from Colombo to Kochchikade, Colombo to Veyangoda and Colombo to Kalutara would also be reckoned to be in the region of about Rupees 15 billion. The cost of a 50 megawatt diesel power generation plant would be in the region of about Rupees 4 billion. Ironically, even a payment of a monthly allowance of Rupees 5000/- to each of the 30,000 unemployed graduates would amount to only Rupees 1.8 billion per year.

What enormous socio-economic development would our country have achieved and our people benefited, had the expenditure of over Rupees 200 billion been wisely invested in productive economic infrastructure development and social infrastructure improvement projects, to uplift the economic and social conditions of the people of our country ? As Cicero had articulated then, what a compounded sickening malignancy in society would it be, when it is even speculated, that there is considerable loss, wastage, leakage and commissions on this expenditure of over Rupees 200 billion ?

In the words of Cicero – " Was it for this that the nobility aroused itself and won back the State at the point of the sword ? Was it in order that the menials and lackeys of the great should be able to harry the goods and the honour of us and you alike ?"

### **PRIVATE SECTOR IRRESPONSIBILITY ?**

Whilst the representatives of the chambers of trade, commerce and industry have now sprung into lively action ringing the alarm bells, ironically have not some of them from the business world, been the very persons, who to please the government's political leaders, have publicly praised and sung hosannas on the budgets presented to Parliament, wherein such colossal expenditure had been allocated for an internal war ? Surely, as men of business, they ought to have known the economic repercussions and the consequences to our country by such considerable levels of expenditure on a destructive offensive, at the cost of neglect of, not only the development of economic infrastructure, but also the improvement of social infrastructure. In such circumstances, are they also not responsible parties for the present perilous plight of the country ?

In addition, whilst such internal war operation was being waged, did not members of the chambers of trade, commerce and industry, join the band wagon of investment promotion missions abroad, courting familiarity with political leaders, to espouse eloquently on the lucrative opportunities for investments into our country, completely oblivious and immune to the ground reality, that our country itself was gripped by an internal war and was on a perilous downward economic path.

Ironically, such investment promotion missions with the grandeur of pomp and pageantry were to South-East Asian countries, where short while thereafter, the economies crashed due to economic mismanagement, primarily caused by the intertwining of the business world with political leaders, precipitating the cancerous menace of corruption. Conditions not too different to what Cicero had adverted to over 2000 years ago ! How were those, who conceptualised large investments from those countries, blind to the ground realities, that have devastated the

economics of those countries, with political leaders hounded by the impoverished people in some instances ?

### **IS NOT CORRUPTION A MAJOR ISSUE ?**

World Bank President, James D. Wolfensohn, focused upon the cancerous growth of corruption as an impediment to development, underscoring the grave need for transparency and admonished governments, that if there is corruption that the Bank would black ball projects, stressing that elimination of corruption has to be started at the highest levels of authority, and that it needs to be cured at the top or that it will not be cured at all ! This was consequent to a Harvard University research that revealed that corruption was a major issue causing concern to voters. Argentinean Judge, Adolfo Bagnasco's, crusade against corruption had been reported to be a popular one in Argentina, where polls have shown that corruption was one of the public's biggest worries. Was it not the same phenomenon in South-East Asian countries ?

In our country too, fighting corruption for the greater good of society was a pivotal issue in the 1994 elections, consequent to which, legislation to deal with corruption was enacted unanimously in Parliament in October 1994. Why is it, that the agenda itemised by the representatives of the chambers of trade, commerce and industry has no place for such important issue of dealing with corruption, that had been the one and only thing agreed upon on a bi-partisan basis, for the greater good of society and the effective implementation of which, has now got stifled and stymied ? In comparison with the issues on the agenda, is not the dealing with corruption a vital necessity to be addressed in the national interest ? Or is it that, some are compromised by special favours obtained from the government and fear inquisitions by Presidential Commissions ?

Broadly 10 issues have been identified by the representatives of the chambers of trade, commerce and industry, as a national agenda, to be addressed on a bipartisan political basis, to arrest the downward slide on the precipitous perilous path the country is presently on, and to endeavour to economically develop the country. This plan of action presumably and necessarily has to be for the economic and social upliftment of the down trodden people of this country, and not merely for the benefit and the protection of the interests of the coterie of the upper echelons of the business world.

### **NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE OF AGENDA**

Could the representatives of the chambers of trade, commerce and industry honestly commit and dedicate themselves to the achievement of such national goals and objectives ? On the basis of their own track record to date, would they stand vindicated on this score, where national development to uplift the economic plight of the people of our country is of paramount importance, to surmount the very issues that have been itemised, as a national agenda ? On the contrary, have not their insensitiveness and indifference, and the political patronage and lobby for private gain and profit, caused and precipitated some of the very issues, that they themselves have now identified, as critical issues to save the nation ? The issues identified being –

1. "The effective resolution of the North East conflict;"
2. "Ensuring that there is no discrimination. Ensuring equality for all Sri Lankan citizens irrespective of race gender political affiliations, religion etc.,"
3. "Ensure personal security and peace for all Sri Lankans;"
4. "Introduce the use of English as a link language and legislate for English to also be an official language;"
5. "Ensure the power and independence of the Public Service Commission, Judicial Services Commission and the Police Service;"
6. "Ensure that white/green papers are published prior to legislation for open public debate on all important national issues;"
7. "Agree to a set of common policy criteria which would remain unchanged for a minimum term of 15 years unless otherwise agreed to by both Government and Opposition thus ensuring the continuity of policy with regard to the following:
  - a) Agriculture
  - b) Industry
  - c) Trade and Commerce "
8. "To introduce reforms in labour laws and practice to conform to current business needs. Specific areas requiring urgent attention are –
  - a) Labour market flexibility
  - b) Reduction in the number of holidays
  - c) Equality of rights and obligations of both employees and employers, and
  - d) Linking remuneration to productivity "
9. "To support and implement the adoption of required educational reforms", and
10. "Formulate and implement National Economic Plans in consultation with the chambers of commerce and industry, employers' organisations and trade associations."

### **SOLVING A PROBLEM**

To solve any problem, it is elementary that one must first understand it, and further identify not only the causes that have precipitated such problem, but also, as to who had been responsible for such causes. It would only stand to logical reason, that those responsible for having caused the problem, would be the least competent, let alone to solve the problem, but even to understand it !

Would it not be the naked truth, that those at the helm of affairs of the People's Alliance government, that assumed office promising to solve all such problems have failed to do so, now compelling the business community to intervene in desperation ? What have been the real causes for such failure and ought they not be identified ? After being in office of governing our country

for over 4 years now, would not those at the helm of the People's Alliance government be responsible for the present perilous plight of the country ?

Would the representatives of chambers of trade, commerce and industry, who have sprung into action in the glowing limelight, have the courage 'to bite the bullet as it were' and hold the political leaders of this government responsible for their actions and inactions, that have resulted in the present perilous plight of the country ? If not, how could one pragmatically and in a business like manner set about resolving the 10 broad and other issues that have been identified.

*- Published in The Sunday Leader on 1.11.1998 by Nihal Sri Ameresekere under the pseudonym 'Bismark'*