

OMITTED FROM AGENDA

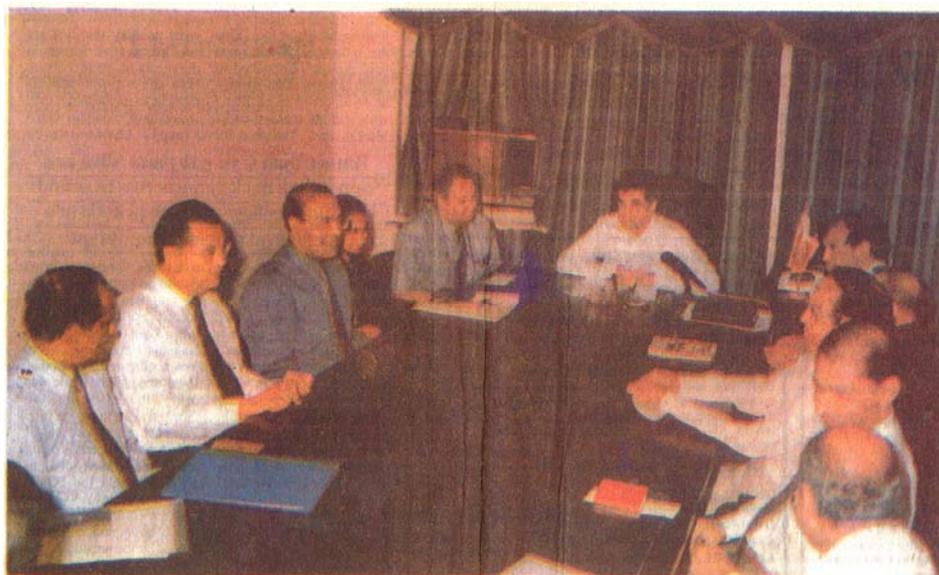
Pointing out certain pertinent and cogent issues, the unprecedented initiative and move by the representatives of the chambers of trade, commerce and industry, to endeavour to bring about a political consensus, in approaching the resolution on a bi-partisan basis, of an itemised agenda for national development had been focused upon.

One of the main issues of national importance, that of dealing with the cancerous menace of corruption, a real impediment to national development and the socio-economic emancipation of the people of our country, significantly had found no place in such national agenda, drawn up by those representatives of the private sector, who have professed to have come forward in the very national interest of our country. Ironically, this is the only issue on which, bi-partisan agreement had been reached and legislation unanimously enacted in Parliament over 4 years ago and the permanent commission to investigate allegations of bribery or corruption established.

The opposition United National Party is now alleging, that the government has deliberately stifled and stymied the efforts that were so set in motion to deal with corruption in terms of the law so enacted, whilst the very commissioners, themselves, complaining that their efforts were stultified and scuttled.

To develop mutual trust and confidence in proceeding on a bi-partisan basis, ought not this only national issue, that had been agreed upon on a bi-partisan basis, have been itemised by the private sector in its national agenda, to ensure its efficacious implementation, in the context of the thrust of the allegation made in this regard by the UNP opposition, who extended support and co-operation voting for such anti-corruption legislation, to establish the permanent commission to investigate allegations of bribery or corruption ?

On the other hand, in conformity with real national interests, ought not a responsible private sector have taken cognisance of this vital issue of corruption, which in no uncertain terms, had featured prominently on the election platform of the People's Alliance at the 1994 general and presidential elections, as a major national issue that had to be addressed and dealt with as a priority. Was it not in accordance therewith, that the PA government, heralded as its first piece of legislation, the enactment of the anti-corruption laws on October 5, 1994, no sooner the PA was elected to the office of government at the elections on August 16, 1994 ?



Private sector representatives meeting with UNP leader Ranil Wickremasinghe: Issue of corruption not in the agenda — why?

CORRUPTION – BI-PARTISAN CONSENSUS

The importance of dealing with scourge of the cancerous menace of corruption was amply borne out by the statements articulated to Parliament by the Justice Minister, G.L. Peiris in presenting such anti-corruption legislation on October 5, 1994; vide Hansard – "Apart from the financial implications, there is also the question of an overweening sense of cynicism, discerning discriminating thinking people in our country have expressed profound dissatisfaction with the extent to which corruption and bribery have taken root in our country. If this spirit of cynicism is not addressed there is definite danger to the stability and tranquility of political and social institution in our country. That is why the Government was convinced that there should be a vigorous response to the issues of bribery and corruption."

Undisputedly, upholding the importance of this vital national issue and bowing to public opinion thereon, the opposition leader, Ranil Wickremasinghe readily and willingly supported the anti-corruption legislation, that was enacted by the PA government in October 1994, obviously in acknowledgement of the paramount importance of dealing with corruption, as a national issue of the highest priority, devoid of political affiliation and partisanship.

The leader of the opposition, Ranil Wickremasinghe in unambiguous terms stated to Parliament on October 5, 1994 in supporting such anti-corruption legislation thus; vide Hansard – "In fact, the whole question of bribery and corruption raises many fundamental questions in a democratic society. We have all got to recognize that corruption is a cancer of democracy, as one of the biggest problems that we face, when elected representatives and officials of the Government, who are also public servants – when their decisions are effected not by matters of political consideration, but by pecuniary gains and financial gains." The UNP leader, Ranil Wickremasinghe consequently promised to the nation, 'a new vision and a new deal'.

Given such a scenario of the undisputed national importance placed on the issue of corruption, it is exceedingly difficult to comprehend, as to how the bi-partisan issue of dealing with corruption, which is now a bone of contention by the opposition UNP, had found no place at all, in the itemised agenda drawn up by the representatives of the chambers of trade, commerce and industry, as critical issues of paramount importance to save the nation ?

Justice Minister, G.L. Peiris had identified corruption as having taken root in our country and as a definite danger to the stability and tranquility of social and political institutions of our country. The UNP leader, Ranil Wickremasinghe, a former Prime Minister, had identified corruption as a cancer of democracy and one of the biggest problems that our country faces today.

Is it that those representatives of the chambers of trade, commerce and industry, who have come forward, ironically in the national interest, are unconcerned of and/or blind to this acknowledged vital national issue of corruption, notwithstanding, not only the concerns expressed both by the government and the opposition, but also the admonitions made by the World Bank and the experiences recently witnessed in South-East Asia and elsewhere ? If so, how would national interest be served ?

LIAM FOX BI-PARTISAN AGREEMENT

Perhaps, it is such experience of the futility of extending, in the national interest, bi-partisan support to the PA government, that in the context of the agenda forwarded by the delegation of the representatives of the chambers of trade, commerce and industry, particularly in relation to the prioritised issue of the effective resolution of the North-East conflict, that the UNP leader, Ranil Wickremasinghe drew their attention to the already existing written bi-partisan agreement, specifically in relation to such issue of resolution of the North-East conflict. The bi-partisan agreement being the Liam Fox agreement, that he, as the leader of the UNP, had signed with President Chandrika Bandaranike Kumaratunga, brought about by the Foreign Minister, Lakshman Kadirgamar.

The message from the UNP leader, Ranil Wickremasinghe, to the delegation of the representatives of the chambers of trade, commerce and industry, no doubt, was unambiguously clear, in that, in fact, there already was a written agreement to endeavour to resolve the North-East conflict on a bi-partisan basis between the UNP and the PA government. One cannot fathom, as to how those of the private sector, who had drawn up such national agenda for the resolution of the North-East conflict on a political bi-partisan basis, had lost sight of the fact, that an agreement to endeavour to resolve the North-East conflict on a bi-partisan basis, in fact, had subsisted for some time now.

Is this not even more surprising, given the fact that the representatives of the chambers of trade, commerce and industry had already readily agreed to defer all other items of the national agenda that they had drawn up and to proceed with the resolution of the North-East conflict, the first item of the agenda, as a priority ? How is it and why is it, that President Kumaratunga, who met the delegation of the representatives of the chambers of trade, commerce and industry, who had come forward to push for a political bi-partisan approach to endeavour to resolve to North-East conflict, had apparently not dealt with the Liam Fox bi-partisan agreement that was already in place ? If she had done so, would the delegation, who met the UNP leader, Ranil Wickremasinghe have been caught flat footed on the matter of the Liam Fox agreement ?

Surely, should not those, who went in delegation particularly to push for a bi-partisan approach to endeavour to resolve the North-East conflict, ought to have done their home work, as it were, and posed the pertinent and cogent question to President Kumaratunga, as to what progress had been made in terms of the Liam Fox bi-partisan agreement, that had been specifically entered into to endeavour to resolve the North-East conflict on a bi-partisan basis ? Did they not pose such very pertinent question to President Kumaratunga ? If so, why ? After all, it is the government in power that has to take the initiative in terms of the Liam Fox bi-partisan agreement, that was brought about by the Foreign Minister, Lakshman Kadirgamar.

In the given circumstances, ought not the representatives of the chambers of trade, commerce and industry, clarify from the Foreign Minister, Lakshman Kadirgamar, the architect of the Liam Fox bi-partisan agreement, as to what progress has been made thereunder and if not, why ? One is constrained to pose the cogent question, as to whether the drama enacted by the Liam Fox bi-partisan agreement was for mere cosmetic public effect, and whether such bi-partisan agreement is now a dead letter ?

NORTH-EAST CONFLICT

Though item 1 of the national agenda drawn up by the representatives of the chambers of trade, commerce and industry i.e. – " 1. The effective resolution of the North-East conflict", – has been prioritised, as the foremost issue to be endeavoured to be resolved, would not items 2, 3 and 4 of such national agenda, also be related and/or inter-dependent to the effective resolution of the North-East conflict ? The items 2, 3 and 4 of such national agenda being;

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"

It was pointed out, that to solve any problem, it is elementary that one must first understand it and further, identify not only the causes that had precipitated such problem, but also determine, as to who had been responsible therefor, and that it would stand to logical reason, that those responsible for having caused the problem, would be the least competent to solve the problem or even to understand it.

In the national and public interest, will bring into focus various facets, to create a public awareness of the complexities involved, whilst leaving it to the public of our country, to draw their own conclusions, as well as to pragmatically contribute, without any fear or favour, towards the endeavours to resolving the North-East conflict, which no doubt, is the biggest obstacle to national development and the socio-economic emancipation of the people of our country, tragically at this moment of threshold into the 21st century.

The contemporary world today witnesses several international efforts in the pursuance of the resolution of racial or ethnic conflicts to achieve peace in various parts of the world. Hence, there are numerous instances, that one can draw a wealth of experience from, rather than inventing the wheel, as it were. In all such instances, one characteristic feature is that such efforts to resolve racial or ethnic conflicts to achieve peace, are sustainedly pursued seriously on a committed and professional basis, invariably away from the public glare, until resolution is reached, to prevent the scuttling by extremists, of such reconciliation and peace efforts. Efforts to resolve racial or ethnic conflicts to achieve peace is highly professionalised today.

NEGOTIATIONS MIS-HANDLED ?

An ad-hoc or lackadaisical approach, obviously could not and would not achieve the desired goals of resolution of racial or ethnic conflicts and the achievement of peace. The PA government was given an overwhelming endorsement and mandate by the people of our country to pursue the resolution of the North-East conflict and to achieve peace that was promised. The intervention by the private sector and the PA government's enthusiastic and all embracing response thereto, in no uncertain terms, underscores the tragic failure to have achieved the resolution of the North-East conflict and the promised peace for the people, whilst the internal war efforts have escalated aggravating security concerns.

Prior to identifying some of the causes, that may have led to the racial or ethnic conflict, referred to as the North-East conflict, ought not one review and take stock of the efforts, that have been made to date, particularly by the PA government, to endeavour to resolve the North-East conflict and achieve peace, in the context of the overwhelming endorsement and mandate, that had been given by the people of our country to the PA government to achieve such very objectives that they, themselves, had promised to achieve, as major planks on their election platform ?

In response to such overwhelming endorsement and mandate, were the peace negotiations initiated in 1994 by the PA government professionally handled on a sustained and committed basis, whereas the peace promised round the corner, as it were, turned out to be a mere dream ? Several billions of rupees have been incurred and thousands of people have been mobilised to prosecute the North-East internal war efforts. In contrast, what has been the investment and how many people had been mobilised, to dedicatedly and committedly pursue on a sustained basis, the peace negotiations ? Or, were such peace negotiations handled on an ad-hoc and lackadaisical basis ?

Were the handpicked negotiators, who were despatched to the North with much enthusiasm, publicity and fanfare, professionally expertised in negotiation of such racial or ethnic conflict resolution ? Were they even experienced in the crafty art of politics, particularly in the context of pursuit of a political solution ? How familiar were they with the North-East ground realities ? How often had they ever visited the North ? Ought they not have been exposed to some of the international experiences in racial or ethnic conflict resolution and the finalisation of peace packages with a political solution ? Are these not some of the cogent questions that ought to be addressed dispassionately ?

Had those who embarked on peace negotiations, critically examined and studied the complexities of the multi-faceted issues, that are involved in the North-East conflict and developed a strategy to pursue peace negotiations, prior to having embarked on such missions to the North with such enthusiasm, publicity and fanfare ? If not, why ? If so, where had they gone wrong and why had they failed ? Are not the answers to these questions necessary pre-requisites to pursue endeavours to resolve the North-East conflict in a pragmatic manner ?

Would not the very lack of knowledge of the bi-partisan Liam Fox agreement and/or the non-recognition of the significant importance thereof, by the representatives of the chambers of trade, commerce and industry, be of concern, ironically when they had embarked specifically to push for a bi-partisan approach to resolve the North-East conflict ?

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