

BUSINESS LEADERS' ADVICE GIVEN NO CREDIT



The 'National Committee for Peace and Economic Development' led by the Business Leaders of Sri Lanka representing the Chambers of Commerce and Industry of Sri Lanka, Employer's Organisation and Trade Associations met on Wednesday, the 20th of January 1999 and decided to release the following message to all Politicians.

TO ALL POLITICIANS

We the Business Leaders have watched with despair and horror, events leading up to the Provincial Council Elections in Wayamba.

400 incidents of violence, deaths, burning of vehicles, destruction of houses, pictures of injured politicians in bandages, and rhetoric of hate (recall we have seen and heard). Not a drop of love and compassion nor one line of reconciliation.

Are we the engine of growth are you now the engine of hate, violence and destruction? We seek the peace that all citizens of Sri Lanka desperately desire. You seek to represent them and be their voice.

Do you represent the gentle, tolerant, loving citizens of Sri Lanka? When elected, will you usher in Peace and Prosperity and give us a taste of Paradise that the people of this country yearn for?

Will you solve the unemployment problem, the housing problem, rewire the infrastructure for economic development and education? Most importantly, will you build a caring society that looks after its sick, the aged, the helpless and now thousands of crippled war victims?

Can we look forward to a better future for our children?

We have watched with horror, the carnival of hatred and violence. When the carnival is over, we hope that we will still have a nation not too brutalized by violence and cruelty.

CAN YOU, THE ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES OF OUR PEOPLE STILL THINK AND TALK PEACE LEADING TO DEVELOPMENT AND PROSPERITY?

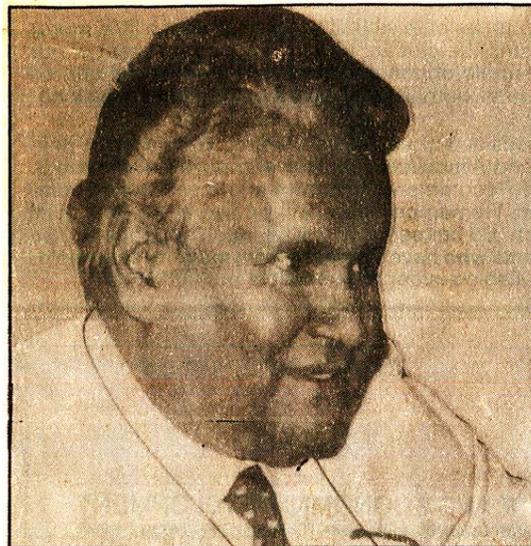
In the meantime, some additional thousand lives have been lost in recent weeks in the North-East conflict. But who is mourning? For, you have more important matters such as elections at hand and the nation stops to count votes.....!

Deshamanya Lalith Kotelawala
Co-ordinating Chairman
NATIONAL COMMITTEE FOR PEACE
AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

January 20, 1999.

The advertisement

The national committee for peace and economic development, i.e. the forum comprising the business leaders, representing the chambers of commerce and industry, employer's organisations and trade association, published in the Sunday newspapers last week, a full page public message addressed to "all politicians". This very prominently publicised message was given under the name of deshamanya Lalith Kotelawala, the co-ordinating chairman of this committee for peace and economic development of this country.



Deshamanya Lalith Kotelawala

The message strongly pronounced, that they, the business leaders, have watched with despair and horror, the events that had led up to the provincial council elections in Wayamba. The message righteously posed the following poignant questions addressed to the politicians – more pointedly to the political leaders:

- ◆ "Do you represent the gentle, tolerant, loving citizens of Sri Lanka ? "
- ◆ "When elected, will you usher in peace and prosperity and give us a taste of paradise, that the people of this country yearn for ?"
- ◆ "Will you solve the unemployment problem, the housing problem, provide the infrastructure for economic development and education ?"
- ◆ "More importantly, will you build a caring society that looks after its sick, the aged, the helpless and now thousands of crippled war victims ?"
- ◆ "Can we look forward to a better future for our children ?"

The message issued by the business leaders further re-iterated – " rhetoric of hate are all we have seen and heard we have watched with horror the carnival of hatred and violence."

CARNIVAL OF VIOLENCE

The business leaders' beautifully worded public pronouncement urging the politicians to shun violence was published on Sunday, January 24, 1999. Came the very next day, the Wayamba provincial council elections and what did the people of this country witness ? The business leaders' message was totally unheeded and rejected outright and given the boot ! What was witnessed at the Wayamba provincial council elections was much more sordid and despicable violence and terror, than what deshamanya Lalith Kotelawala had propounded upon, urging all politicians to shun and refrain from such a carnival of violence.

The reply from the politicians to the business leaders was amply loud and clear with the terror and violence deliberately unleashed by the politicians and their lackeys. What deshamanya Lalith Kotelawala and the business leaders propounded before the public of this country very patently fell on deaf ears with scant regard thereto. On the contrary, violence and terror of a much greater degree was unleashed with impunity at the Wayamba provincial council elections, thereby putting the business leaders to shame and their urgings into the dustbin !

Very evidently, those who spearheaded the election campaign and activities did not give a damn, as it were, to what deshamanya Lalith Kotelawala and the business leaders had publicly urged. This was, no doubt, a clear snub to chairman Kotelawala and the committee of business leaders, espousing the cause of peace and economic development of this country. Would they, the business leaders, have the courage to admit and accept the same ? If so, what action would they take now, if they are not to be portrayed as "lame duck" business leaders ?

If the business leaders are truly independent, fearless and courageous and have no hidden agenda of their own, as they had publicly pronounced in response to clarification specifically sought in that regard by the leader of the opposition, Ranil Wickremasinghe, then the business leaders ought to unreservedly condemn, in no uncertain terms, the sordid and despicable violence and terror witnessed at the Wayamba provincial council elections; particularly more so, when it had been in scant disregard of the public message that had been issued by them, urging the politicians to shun a carnival of violence. Otherwise, what is the use of such beautifully worded public message issued by the business leaders ?

HOLDING THOSE RESPONSIBLE ACCOUNTABLE

It is undoubtedly the government of the day, that is entrusted with the responsibility of maintenance of law and order and the enforcement thereof. A government cannot get away from such onus and responsibility. If the government fails to maintain law and order, then the government admittedly has failed in the discharge of its functions, duties and responsibilities. President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, herself, in a message promptly issued on the evening of the very day of elections, acknowledging adverted to the incidents of violence and disruption in the conduct of the Wayamba provincial council elections !

Ensuring the power and independence of the Public Service Commission, Judicial Service Commission and the Police Service – a cause espoused by the business leaders, the opposition political parties, as well as by many right thinking people of this country – cannot wait any longer for any "political package" or otherwise. The lack of such power and independence, that had been devalued by shortsighted and selfish politicians, has led to the present perilous plight of the country.

Many a right thinking civilised persons promptly courageously condemned the horrowful and despicable conduct and actions witnessed at the Wayamba provincial council elections. So did the independent election monitors and various religious dignitaries and journalists. Nevertheless, on the contrary, the business leaders, who ironically had prominently published a pontificating message, failed to promptly condemn the very sordid and despicable conduct and actions, that they, themselves, had urged the politicians to shun. Why did not the business leaders promptly condemn such dastardly despicable conduct and actions of violence and intimidation, whereby the very franchise of the people had been denied ?

In such given circumstances, can the business leaders honestly pursue with their committed endeavours and attempts to bring about a bi-partisan political consensus on national political issues ? First and foremost, to vindicate their credibility, they ought to, in no uncertain terms, have condemned what had happened at the Wayamba provincial council elections, more so particularly in the light of their public message urging to shun violence. As business leaders, they ought to be able to "bite the bullet" and hold those responsible unambiguously accountable. Surely, one's word of honour is the "cult", as it were, in the business world !

Men of business are quite adept in ascertaining and in skillfully sifting and sorting the correct facts and data and rationally analysing them and drawing conclusions therefrom; devoid of any emotion. Accordingly, the business leaders ought to be able to figure out without much difficulty, as to what actually had transpired, how and by whom at the Wayamba provincial council elections. As independent business leaders, devoid of any hidden agenda, surely they ought to unreservedly, courageously and fearlessly act, without any political subservience and any hesitation, whatsoever. Otherwise, such pontificating righteous public messages would be worthless, if no action, whatsoever, follows therefrom !

REACTION BY THE BUSINESS LEADERS ?

Given this scenario, it is pointedly pertinent to advert to the following specific agenda items that had been formulated and forwarded by the business leaders, to both the government and the opposition for their much advocated bi-partisan political discussions:

- ◆ "Ensure that white/green papers are published prior to legislation for open public debate on all important national issues;"

- ◆ "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 "
- ◆ "Formulate and implement national economic plans in consultation with the chambers of commerce and industry, employers' organisations and trade associations."

The government eagerly welcomed the initiative of the business leaders and the political leaders of the government gave them all encouragement at a well publicised public conference ! Whilst this was the scenario enacted, how did the government and the political leaders of the government deal with the business leaders in formulating, negotiating and finalising the Indo-Lanka free trade agreement ?

Clearly, contrary to the above agenda items placed by the business leaders before the government, the chambers of commerce and industry had not been consulted by the government in formulating and concluding the Indo-Lanka free trade agreement; thus and thereby clearly demonstrating scant regard to the agenda formulated and forwarded by the business leaders to the government.

What has been shockingly surprising is that, notwithstanding the specific dicta of the agenda that had been placed before the government by the business leaders, the government had acted insensitively with scant regard for such very agenda. What is even more intriguingly appalling is that in the face of such insensitive disregard by the government, to the very items of the agenda formulated by the business leaders, the business leaders had been ominously silent on the absence of such required consultations with the chambers of commerce and industry in the formulation and finalisation of the Indo-Lanka free trade agreement ? Why had the business leaders been unable to react thereto ?

Such silence and inaction by the business leaders even to voice a credible protest, raises the issue, as to whether the business leaders really possess the independence and fearless courage, to stand up to the political leaders, when there is deviation from the expected norms propounded by, they, themselves !

Surely, having formulated and defined a public agenda for bi-partisan political consensus, ought not the business leaders have strongly protested of not having been consulted on the formulation and finalisation of the Indo-Lanka free trade agreement, regardless of such specific agenda and in blatant rebuff of the spirit of co-operation extended by the business leaders to bring about bi-partisan political consensus ? Ironically, on the contrary, the political leaders of the government, frequently assure that the private sector is to be the engine of future economic growth of this country !

The only matter on which bi-partisan political consensus had been reached unanimously, willingly and spontaneously between the government and the opposition, without any prompting or assistance, whatsoever, from the business leaders, was the issue of dealing with the cancerous menace of corruption, that threatens the economic development and stability and the socio-economic emancipation of the helpless poor of this country. Legislation was enacted and a permanent commission to take action on bribery and corruption was established. A special presidential commission was appointed under a presidential warrant issued by President Kumaratunga.

But after a period of over 4 years in office, what progress by the government on action against corruption has the public of this country witnessed ? What has borne out of this bi-partisan political consensus and why had the government failed in its duty and responsibility to take action, as had been committed in no uncertain terms ?

Why have the business leaders not had the courage to have addressed this issue of corruption, on which bi-partisan political consensus had already been reached, but implementation thereof blatantly breached by the government ? After all, corruption is an issue of paramount importance, that goes to the very root of economic growth and development of the country, – to which the business leaders are committed to, – and if not arrested, would undoubtedly lead to economic disaster and socio-economic hardships to the poor people of this country, as witnessed by the recent economic debacles in the South-East Asian countries.

The people of this country shunned political violence and corruption. Accordingly, the People's Alliance was swept into power at the presidential elections of November 1994 on the promises held out to stamp out political violence and corruption – the catch words bandied about being "*Bheeshanaya*" and "*Dhooshanaya*". Therefore, in no way, can the government be seen to perpetuate such political violence and corruption, nor turn a blind eye thereto, whereas it stands bound to eradicate and stamp out such menace from this country. Have the business leaders endearingly embraced, those who are tainted with violence against the people of this country and allegations of corruption inimical to economic development of this country ?

- Published in The Sunday Leader on 31.1.1999 by Nihal Sri Ameresekere under the pseudonym 'Bismark'