

# CONSOCIATIONAL DEMOCRACY?

Chris McDowell

**D**r. Uyangoda's 1993 S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike lecture, reproduced in the *Tamil Times* (No.11, pp.13-15), was both erudite and timely. The author, a senior lecturer in political science at Colombo University, discovered a precedent in Sri Lankan political discourse for the development of a new Sri Lanka rooted in the ideas of consociation. In the pre-independence period the birth of consociational democracy was extremely troubled and finally still-born. In the 1990s, however, Uyangoda is hopeful that a new 'political space' has emerged within which can evolve a 'Grand Ethnic Coalition' to overcome maximalist thinking and lead instead towards conflict resolution and a fair and equitable society.

The terms used are those of the political scientist. Academics have a driven desire to introduce yet more '...isms' into situations which are necessarily complex in their explanation. But Uyangoda's arguments and proposals can be put simply and can be questioned. What the author desires is a restructured Sri Lanka in which all people

come together in a 'Grand Ethnic Coalition' which is elaborated through a 'Social Contract' and organised around the principles of consociation. Consociationalism is a theory about constitutional arrangements, it is a theory which is used to understand the workings of democracies which seem to be unusually divided but in which stability is somehow maintained. In practice consociation is the practical arrangements whereby interests are balanced to achieve stability.

The relevance for Sri Lanka is clear. Theoreticians are in a continuous search for a model of democracy which could be grafted on to Sri Lanka. For many the search has led them to those European countries which have a democracy that contains certain features of consociation: Switzerland and the Netherlands. Uyangoda is no exception, but he fully realises that a political system that works in one country cannot simply be transposed onto another country that is fundamentally different in a number of key aspects. The conditions have to be right. And in preparing the ground the author proposes a controversial cultural pre-condition. In pursuit of a 'Grand



Chris McDowell is affiliated to University of Zurich, Switzerland.

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## Notes

1. World Bank: *World Development Report 1991: The Challenge of Development*, Oxford 1991.
2. Lawrence Summers and Vinod Thomas *Recent Lessons Development*, World Bank mimeo 1993.
3. Benno Ndulu - *UNU/WIDER country study of Tanzania*, Helsinki 1987.
4. Michael Bruno, *Stabilization and the Macroeconomics of Transition - How Different is Eastern Europe?* mimeo 1992.
5. Lal Jayawardena - *A Global Environmental Compact for Sustainable Development; Resource Requirements and Mechanisms* - WIDER Research for Action, Helsinki 1991.
6. United Nations General Assembly Document for Preparatory Committee for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (3rd Session, Geneva 12 August - 4 Sept. 1991). *Progress Report on financial Resources: Report of the Secretary General of the Conference*, document No. A/CONF.151/PC/51 of 5 July 1991, p. 18-19 section (vii).
7. INDP *Human Development Report* (1991) p. 41; Table 3.1 UNDP *Human Development Report* (1992) p. 9.
8. UNDP *Human Development Report* (1991) op.cit. p. 39. See also p. 41 Table 3.1. The data are given in Annex Table 1.
9. UNDP, *Human Development Report* (1993), p. 172-3, Table 19, Aid Flows.
10. James P. Grant, Executive Director of UNICEF - "Children and Women - The Trojan Horse Against Mass Poverty?" - *Address to the International Development Conference, Washington, D.C.*, 11 January 1993.
11. S. Stanley Katz "East Europe should learn from Asia: from central planning to a market economy." *Financial Times* 24th April 1991 - The subsequent account of East Asian experience draws on this article.
12. OECF occasional Paper No. 1 *Issues Related to the World Bank's Approach to Structural Adjustment - proposal from a Major Partner*, The Overseas Economic Cooperation fund, October 1991.
13. Sir Kenneth Berrill et al *Foreign Portfolio Investment in Emerging Equity Markets*, WIDER Study Group Series Report No. 5, Helsinki 1990 p. 3.
14. Masaki Shiratori "Role of Government in Development: A Critique of the World Bank Approach", *Mimeo*, Tokyo (1993).
15. Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen, *Hunger and Public Action*, WIDER Studies in Development Economics, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1989 p. 227-9. *The Financial Times* review of the book stated: "If their book has the impact it deserves, it may save the lives of millions. It is one of the most important contributions to economic thought for many a year".
16. Lal Jayawardena, Liagat ali and Lakdasa Hulugalle, *Indo-Sri Lanka Economic Cooperation: Facilitating Trade Expansion through a Reciprocal preference scheme*, WIDER Study Group Series Report No. 9, Helsinki, 1993.



Ethnic Coalition' he proposes that all groups in Sri Lanka must suspend or put on hold their ethnic identity until the political process has been seen through. Only then, once 'ethnic justice' is defined, can groups go back to their ethnic identities.

The argument is neat and the desire laudable but is it credible? I have two disagreements. The first has to do with the nature of ethnic identity and the second concerns the desirability of consociational democracy for Sri Lanka.

Academic contributions to the anti-Apartheid campaigns of the 1980s included a principled stand that later became known as the 'similarities discourse'. Today little is heard of it. But in the 1980s a basic cannon of progressive academic thought in South Africa advanced the view that ethnic groups as bounded entities were merely either the invention of self-interested politicians or were imagined communities constructed in the pursuit of gain or opposition. Subsequently black students entering white universities were taught how to demistify and downplay ethnicity. There are signs that the 'similarities discourse' has now entered Sri Lankan universities under the guise of Uyangoda's 'de-ethnicisation'.

The conflict in the former-Yugoslavia led South African scholars to re-evaluate the message from the 1980s. The harsh lesson of the 1990s has been that you cannot simply wish away ethnicity and ethnic identity as only a convenient construct. In earlier theories the way in which ethnicity (and culture) was defined made it manipulable and Uyangoda's hope, that members of ethnic groups could somehow suspend their identities for the common good, almost credible. In the 90s and particularly in Sri Lanka, cultural and ethnic identity cannot and must not be voluntarily suppressed but must be taken as central to any future constitutional arrangements.

My second point of departure from Uyangoda leads out of the first Assuming that a 'Grand Ethnic Coalition' has been attained the democratic principle for new constitutional arrangements will be based on consociational models. The argument of political scientists has been that consociational democracies have succeeded in holding together fragmented communities in a stable system. Air Lanka has transported numerous delegations of Swiss constitutional experts to Colombo to explain the intricacies of their system. Presentations are greeted with initial enthusiasm but not before long a deep sense of unease sets in. It cannot be denied that the Swiss system works; the question is how?

At its root the Swiss polity is one which has compromised with mainstream democratic forms in the sense of 'one

man one vote' with majorities prevailing at all levels of government, in the sense that it has accepted a 'blocking minority'. Most recently this has meant that in a national referendum to decide whether or not Switzerland should proceed with plans to join the European community, German-speaking voters who did not want to proceed denied the wish of French-speakers who did want to proceed. The referendum result and the nature of the campaign to persuade voters divided Switzerland along its language lines.

Balance, stability and fairness are by no means always assured in the Swiss system. Consociation depends upon there being separate, discrete and bounded groups playing a role in the polity. Uyangoda's plan for 'de-ethnicization' is anathema to consociation. Consociation in the wrong hands leads to chaos and oligarchy. It demands that decision-making is in the hands of elites or cartels of elites which have the right of veto over decisions of which they disapprove. And finally, in a bid to safeguard the interests of subordinate minorities, consociational democracy demands proportionality, which means that the various segments of the population must have proportionate representation among the major institutions of the state. Which in practice means that subordinate groups can, under certain circumstances, hold the majority to ransom and stifle progress.

It can be argued that Switzerland has not held together because of her consociational democracy but in spite of it. The Swiss complain that important decisions are made in smoky backrooms without public debate and that referenda - a pillar of the system - are a sham. Switzerland holds together because throughout its history and today in particular it sees itself as under threat. The system is there to repel the French, the German and the Italian state. And the system is there to protect the wealth, the comfort and the reputation that is Switzerland.

Sri Lanka is not an Asian Switzerland. What is 'wrong' in Swiss politics, elitism, backroom deals and deliberate polarisation is precisely what has been wrong in Sri Lankan politics. What is 'right' with Switzerland, vast wealth, highly sophisticated population, historical desire for unity, compromise and neutrality are not, unfortunately, features common to Sri Lanka. Sri Lankan political scientists, unless they enjoy skiing, should strike Switzerland off their itinerary and instead remain at home from where any workable solution will be found.

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