

LETTER

NATIONALISM, FEDERALISM AND REALISM

Pravada's call, in the editorial of its December '92 issue, for a "Farewell" to nationalism seems to fly in the face of current history. The 20th century has seen the triumph of Nationalism over ideologies, especially internationalist ideologies. Five years after the October Revolution of 1917, Irish nationalism broke in two, the state which was then the mother-country of the largest empire on earth, a state which had emerged victorious from World War I and was then the foremost industrial country of the world — Great Britain. Seventy years later nationalism caused the relatively peaceful unravelling of the Soviet Empire. It has dissolved Yugoslavia into 5 ethnic states in a welter of fighting. It has broken the Czech federation, quite peacefully, into two independent states. Nationalism is at the heart of most of the world's conflicts today. Is it nationalism that is to blame or those who oppose it? As just mentioned, nationalism has given rise to many peaceful separations.

Nationalism is not a structured political philosophy that can be expressed in measured, objective categories capable of analytical dissection. It is an emotion grounded in the hearts of men and women (even children) and it propels them into attitudes and actions which are either heroic or repulsive depending on the eye of the beholder. It is not a "project" (in the intriguing language of social anthropology) ; it is more like a "happening" in pop culture. People do not bid it farewell either formally or informally — it wears off after the object of its heart's desire is achieved.

While it lasts it is very vital, pumping a lot of adrenalin into the body politic. It is unquestionably the most potent social and political force in Shri Lanka and in the purported state of Eelam today. It is Tamil nationalism that fuels the fire of the LTTE. It is Sinhala nationalism that spews up the *Jatika Chintanaya*, the *Hela Urumaya*, the *Bhumi Puthras*, the *Mawu Bima Arakshakas*, the *Sinhala Arakshaka Sanvidanaya* et al. These are the most vital elements of Sinhala politics today and they have an in-built immunity to the vitriolic scorn poured upon them by what they regard as "*thuppahi*" critics. They will not go away and leave the political parties of the first three decades of independence all of whom have their noses firmly in the pork-barrel and cannot see, and choose not to see, anything above their heads.

The nationalist movements among the Sinhala people are acutely aware of a Sinhala nation for which they desire an uncontested nation-state. The LTTE is acutely aware of a Tamil nation for which it desires a nation-state. These are birds of the same feather. Both deny the existence of a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-religious, multi-cultural nation. They impliedly deny there is a single nation-state as the home of that fictitious nation. These are vigorous, realistic positions — there is nothing hypothetical or theoretical about them. Admittedly the Sinhala nationalist movements regard the whole island as the corpus of their nation-state. That, however, is becoming increasingly divergent from reality. Also it is becoming clear, in slow degrees no doubt, that the seven Sinhala-occupied provinces are an uncontested area in which the Sinhala nation can engage in its own welfare and improvement — and, indeed, does so in ever increasing measure. The Sinhala nationalist movements have a higher propensity for change and for grasping existential reality than the old political parties which are afflicted with a rampant medievalism and are sunk in a *folie de grandeur*.

To a keen observer of the Shri Lankan political scene from this distance — and distance not only lends enchantment to the view but also aids a satellite — like penetration of the local smog ! — there is absolutely no hope from the old political parties which are in a permanent political gridlock. The only movement can come from the new nationalist groups who have no hangers-on to be fed from the pork-barrel and who empathise with a wide spectrum of Sinhala society. To them I say in a classic "*thuppahi*" greeting "**Ave**" rather than "**Vale**".

All of them are incredibly naive and want a military victory over the LTTE: they are confident of being able to get the LTTE to the point at which it sues for peace and, as a **quid pro quo** for peace, surrenders its arms; and then a return to the status **quo ante bellum** followed by the descent of universal benevolence from on high. It is the business of all thinking and informed people to demonstrate that this is a fanciful chimaera from beginning to end. The facts of the military situation, in comparable form with other theatres of such conflict, must be given wide publicity. The Sinhala people must come to know that not only is the current 10 to 1 ratio of troops



to guerrillas absurdly insufficient but also that even 100 to 1 will be of no avail as proven by the British army's experience in Northern Ireland. The unarmed, rock-throwing **intifida** of the Palestinians has lasted for three years against a battle tested Israeli army and there is no sign of it weakening. **No nationalist guerilla war has ever ended other than by the establishment of its separate state.**

The back page of *Pravada's* December issue in question has the Liberal Party urging a "genuine" federalism. Implied, though not explicitly stated, is the hope that this will be a sufficient **quid pro quo** for the LTTE to surrender its arms and quit the armed struggle for a separate state. This is the wishful thinking of people who do not have the red blood of nationalism coursing through their veins. It demonstrates what little understanding they have of people in what is now **de facto** a foreign country.

Let us examine the federalism proposition politically rather than constitutionally — by politically I mean from the point of view of **realpolitik**. There cannot be a federation (or any state for that matter) with two armies in it. So one of the two must needs be disbanded (and its weapons surrendered) or absorbed into the other. Either way one must disappear. The LTTE is not a beaten force — it has proved invincible against both the Indian and Sri Lankan armies. A federation cannot be imposed — it has to be constructed by a joint effort of the participants. To expect one party to enter the federation armed and the other unarmed negates the putative equality of the participants. Of course, if the Shri Lankan army is disbanded simultaneously with the forces of the LTTE — "balanced force reduction to zero" — the Central American Republic of Costa Rica.) The sense of outrage and provocation that arises in our breasts at the mere mention of such a thought is palpable. It should teach us what the LTTE leaders feel at our oft repeated and unctuous request to them to "lay down their weapons" — a risible euphemism for surrender.

It seems to take us much longer than most other peoples to grasp the obvious. It is perfectly obvious, and has been proven in case after case without a single exception in the world's history, that once the armed struggle commences for a state of their own no form of constitutional tinkering, including federalism, can buy them off. The Irish

were given successive doses of Home Rule which far from quenching their desire for total sovereign independence fanned the flames of that desire. In India, with the Irish experience fresh to mind and hoping to avoid an armed struggle, successive British governments gave ever-increasing degrees of independence to local elected politicians by a series of constitutional reforms in the first four decades of this century only to find that they had whetted the Indian appetite for sovereign independence. It was exactly the same in the colony of Ceylon. The proposition that some kind, any kind, of devolution of power to some form of local legislative and executive bodies in the north-east will buy off the LTTE and wean it away from their armed struggle for a separate sovereign state of their own is pure, undiluted delusion. There is not an atom of rational possibility in it.

The very nature and language of the Sinhala discourse on the subject shows how far we have gotten ourselves from reality. There is a constant talk of "giving" something to the Tamil people — one-third of the land and two-thirds of the coastline is a favorite formulation ignoring the fact that the Tamil people have had them for centuries and have them to this day; at other times we want to "devolve" some powers to them ignoring the simple fact that they have resolved to rule themselves in the homeland in which they live and do not require any powers "devolved" on them for that; at still other times we declare fervently that we desire to meet "legitimate" Tamil aspirations as we regard to be "legitimate."

There never is the slightest hint of an understanding on our part that there is another party to all this who wants nothing from us, but has decided, unilaterally, to rule themselves in what they regard to be their homeland and do not require either our permission or consent. These simple facts utterly defy our comprehension — reality has become a **terra incognita**.

There are occasional calls for a return to righteousness. Far more important and urgent is the return to reality — to a clear-eyed perception of our best interests in the light of the manifest reality of the existence of a neighbouring state on the island, with which we must come to terms and live in peace.

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