

NOTES AND COMMENTS

Business Community Engages Politics

The latest to enter Sri Lanka's debate on war and peace is the business community. In a public appeal to the leaders of all political parties in Sri Lanka, seven business leaders representing the private sector, have proposed that "a common and unified approach be taken" on ten areas of policy. The first such area they have identified is "the effective resolution of the North-east conflict". Among the signatories to the appeal are two leading business men, Ken Balendra and Lalith Kotelawala. The signatories also represent all business chambers, the exporters association and the employers federation.

The business leaders, after making the appeal, decided to initiate a process of consultation primarily focusing on the question of peace. They started meetings with government and opposition leaders and then organized an all-party consultation. They also met with NGO activists.

Two aspects of this initiative warrant some reflection. The first is the very fact of the business community coming together to publicly impress on political parties the need to solve some of the urgent problems in the country through a unified and common approach. The second is the political responses this initiative evoked.

The Sri Lankan business community has not been known, until this particular intervention, for taking public positions on politically sensitive issues. Their interests have been primarily economic. Even then such interests were limited to their own sectoral concerns. They have also had the tradition of articulating their sectoral interests totally outside the public sphere. The various chambers were the vehicle through which they articulated their demands to governments. Similarly, in the specific political and business culture in Sri Lanka, businessmen maintained personal links with political leaders and parties. Donating lavishly to election campaign funds of political parties and powerful politicians has been an essential part of their politics of "we don't do politics".

This subterranean culture of politics among the businessmen and political leaders also created a situation where the business community as a whole did not take an active interest in resolving the most crucial problem with which the country has been grappling for fifteen years—the ethnic war. When the war broke out in the early eighties, the business community obviously suffered. It was the time when Sri Lanka's economy was expected to enter a period of rapid take off in the context of trade liberalization. In the violent eighties, the business community struggled to survive, largely with state support that was given in the form of concessions to affected sectors of the economy. When the conflict appeared to protract itself, some business people also learned how to thrive in the business of war. An entirely new stratum of big business houses emerged during the

eighties through political patronage. Three phases of the Sri Lankan economy during this decade provided the context for their emergence. They are: (i) the massive public works programme involving irrigation, housing and other construction projects, (ii) privatization of public corporations and the opening of the Colombo stock-market, and (iii) the economic opportunities associated with the war.

What really seemed amazing until a month ago was the business community's total disinterest in resolving Sri Lanka's internal conflicts. This stood sharply in contrast with the experiences of other countries where business leaders, for pure economic purposes, have played a role in conflict resolution. The political significance of the present initiative taken by Sri Lanka's business leadership is that it marks the end of this culture of political passivity and silence. In their declaration, the business leaders have been exercising some caution in not proposing solutions to questions they highlight. They merely propose a bi-partisan approach, a common policy framework, to national issues. They appear to believe that their role is a catalytic one to bring the government and the opposition together. In this they share a belief that has gathered momentum in the country during the past two years, namely, that the government and the opposition should work together in finding a solution to the ethnic conflict.

What is striking in the declaration made by the business leaders is the private sector perspective through which they have formulated their concerns. They begin their statement by saying: "despite successive governments identifying us, the private sector, as the engine of growth we are concerned that Sri Lanka has still not achieved the desired level of sustained economic progress". Then they "deem it necessary to urge all political parties to adopt a common policy framework to enable the private sector to perform its role more effectively and to ensure that future generations of Sri Lankans can hope for a better life".

The variety of responses that this business initiative received is symptomatic of Sri Lanka's present crisis itself. At one level, the Left and the extreme Sinhala nationalism adopted a similar approach in denouncing the initiative by suggesting an unwarranted interference by the selfish capitalists in the affairs of the government and politics. While Sinhala nationalists saw in this initiative a conspiracy against Sinhalese interests, the Left saw a conspiracy against the interests of the working class. The nationalist English press even went to the extent of borrowing Left-wing terminology in its contemptuous dismissal of the business leaders initiative.

The most grotesque response actually came from the opposition UNP, when the business leaders proposed and organized an all-party consultation. In the context of an on-going political war between the PA and the UNP, the UNP decided to boycott the all-party consultation. The excuse given by the UNP was that the PAs Minister G. L. Pieris presence at the parley was not acceptable to the UNP. The

UNP was angry with Pieris, because they think that it is Pieris who wrecked, the all-party conference called by the UNP itself a few months ago. The business leaders would by now have learned a lesson in politics. Dealing with political parties on public policy issues is more complicated than contributing to the coffers of political parties at election times.

Meanwhile, it needs to be noted that the business community's proposal, smacks of anti-political authoritarianism of the East-Asian kind. In their public utterances, they have been at pains to explain that they want to avoid politics. What they mean by this statement is that they want to keep themselves away from every-day partisan politics. But their actual vision is to see a particular kind of politics emerging in Sri Lanka in which the two main political parties would agree on a moratorium on policy debate on a variety of key issues. That includes the ethnic question, the economy, and the relations between labour and capital, educational reforms and the legislative process. Just look at the way they have formulated their approach: "We deem it necessary to urge the political parties to adopt a common policy framework to enable the private sector to perform its role more effectively." Such "common policy" then should remain unchanged "for a minimum term of fifteen years." Their last demand is that formulation and implementation of the national economic plan should be done "in consultation with the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, employers' organisations and trade associations".

The Original Inhabitants

For connoisseurs of political controversies, Sri Lanka provides a veritable storehouse. Even before one controversy disappears into the twilight zone of public memory, another will appear. The print and electronic media appears to thrive on controversies concerning politicians, public officials, sport-stars and business tycoons.

One of the latest of such controversies is centered on an alleged statement made by President Kumaratunga to the South African television. As the controversy goes, she has said that Tamils were demanding a separate state in Sri Lanka when they were not even the original inhabitants of the country.

This statement has evoked an interesting set of responses. Tamil politicians have condemned this alleged statement. The TULF has issued a statement saying that they were hurt. The Sinhala nation-

alists are quite delighted that the President has spoken "the truth". President Kumaratunga is probably embarrassed to count the National Movement against Terrorism, an extreme Sinhalese racist outfit, as an ally.

Meanwhile, an official statement issued by the Presidential Secretariat has tried to clarify the issue. According to this explanation what the President meant was that the LTTE Tamils who were fighting the war in Sri Lanka were not original settlers who were trying to oust alien invaders, as in the case of the whites in South Africa.

Why should one, in any case, bother about the question of original settlers in Sri Lanka? Archaeologists in recent years have shown that there was a megalithic culture common to South India and Sri Lanka and they are discovering early settlements which pre-dated the "Sinhala" and "Tamil" migrations. Even the evidence provided by Sinhalese historical chronicles testifies to the fact that Tamils have lived in Sri Lanka for at least two-thousand years. Who can then claim to originality as settlers in Sri Lanka? Those who believe that their ancestors arrived in this island exactly two thousand five hundred and forty two years ago? Or those who probably arrived a few centuries plus a few years later? We must also not forget that there are, among the Sinhala community especially of the South and Western parts of the Island many who are proud of the fact that they migrated to Sri Lanka between the 13th and 15th centuries from South India and assumed a Sinhala identity. The absurdity of this "original inhabitants" debate is so strong that Sinhalese and Tamil nationalist historians and other nondescript scribes in internet bulletins are the only ones likely to have a really busy time in straightening out historical records.

The important problem, however, is not about who are the original settlers in this island. The real issue should be about the democratic rights of ethnic communities who make up the nation of Sri Lanka. The demand for a separate state by the so-called late settlers of the LTTE is simply a symptom of political rights of the Tamil community within the framework of a unitary state. There is absolutely no reason for the TULF leadership to feel hurt about the Presidents alleged statement of history. Even if the Tamils arrived in Sri Lanka five years ago, they should have a right to democracy and political equality. Why should the late settlers be denied political rights for the original sin of their not being the original settlers? For Sinhalese reformers as well as reformist Tamil nationalists, the question of original settlers can serve no constructive purpose.

P