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Pravada in contemporary usage has a range of meanings which includes theses, concepts and propositions.

ABUSE IN POLITICAL DEBATE

A new controversy has arisen concerning the abusive references to political opponents made by UNP parliamentarian Rajitha Senaratne. According to the video footage shown on television, MP Senaratne made vulgar statements about four ministers of the PA government. Two senior Ministers who remarried about a year ago, he said, were sexually impotent old men who nevertheless married young women. Senaratne also referred to two other ministers in the PA cabinet, calling them eunuchs (*ponnayo*). The national list UNP MP, who addressed a party propaganda meeting in Matara, of course did not mention the names of the Ministers. But he made it adequately clear who he was talking about.

The alleged homosexuality of one particular minister was the subject of Senaratne's bigoted analysis. The MP, in the course of his attack on homosexuality, described the association formed by gay rights activists as an organization of eunuchs. This group, 'Companions on a Journey', is the only group in Sri Lanka that openly campaigns on behalf of gay rights. Their work should be supported and applauded, not derided.

Indeed, the avowedly liberal section of the PA should seize this opportunity to repeal the archaic laws still in our penal code that criminalize homosexuality and put an end to this debate once and for all. In this connection, Justice Minister G. L. Pieris has much to account for. Not very long ago, after being persuaded to change the law, but then coming under pressure from the Muslim Congress, he actually criminalized lesbianism as well. The Minister should realize that, for a variety of reasons, his liberal

credentials have become tarnished of late. This would be not just an ideal opportunity for him to shore up his credit; but also, and more importantly, to do the right thing.

Still, the question arises: should we be concerned with a pedestrian political speech made by a very ordinary politician? Yes, because Senaratne's speech, as well as the subsequent controversy, exemplifies some of the most disquieting aspects of Sri Lanka's culture of politics and the behaviour of politicians. As has happened so often before, bigotry and hate-speech passes for legitimate political discourse. This is, alas, becoming a routine feature of our political life.

Pravada has repeatedly commented on the perils of trivializing the political debate on public issues. Some politicians, particularly those in the opposition, as well as Sunday English newspapers columnists in recent times have been in the forefront of an almost willful exercise in making the public discourse on Sri Lanka's political life utterly banal and devoid of generosity of any kind. In a spirit of personal hatred and political bitterness, they have made such vital public issues as corruption, abuse of power, regime inefficiency and regime failures highly personal and personalized, and even sexualized. The opposition UNP as well as the English press and TV stations affiliated to the party have been following this particular line of attack against the PA administration since its very inception in 1994.

Even more disappointingly, some leading PA politicians have responded in kind. During the persecution of the internationally successful athlete Susanthika Jayasinghe,

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Editors

**Jayadeva Uyangoda
Kumari Jayawardena**

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the same Minister who is now the target of attack on the grounds of his unconventional sexuality, had no hesitation at all to make humiliating references to Jayasinghe's body, with disparaging remarks about her skin colour and physical appearance. This Minister made Jayasinghe into an undesirable male erotic object. And he, the Minister whose image is being projected as embodying the PA's youthful spirit of modernity, found no difficulty at all to defend the exceedingly inappropriate language which he used in parliament to belittle and de-legitimize a young woman who dared to challenge the powerful male sports establishment.

Rajitha Senarathne, on the other hand, does not make any claims to liberalism and modernity. His political background is rooted in the homophobic Left as well as the Right. Leaving his marginally Left-wing political affiliations, he has now established himself

as a Right-wing orator in the UNP's grand tradition of moral demagoguery.

The recent history of sexualizing of political issues by the pro-UNP weekend English press goes back to 1994 when a relatively young widow led a successful election campaign to defeat the UNP which had been in power for seventeen years. The weekly political analyses as well as gossip columns were replete with extremely trivial stories about Chandrika Kumaratunga's personal life. The food she ate, the colour of the pillowcases in her bedroom, names of males who had dinner with her—all these were stories in which lawyers-cum-newspaper editors relished. The pro-UNP elite in Colombo also became used to this kind of eroticized political gossip. At bourgeois dinner parties, it was quite normal to further embellish trivia about the woman that appeared in the clumsily-crafted gossip columns. This editorial practice has now become almost a tradition for the Sunday English press.

Those who remember Sri Lanka's recent political history would recall how the UNP made vulgarity into an art of political oratory in the sixties. This was the time when the widow, Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike came to lead the SLFP and then became the Prime Minister. During the election campaigns of 1960 and 1965, one of the main targets of the UNP attack on the SLFP was the body of Mrs. Bandaranaike. Before Mrs. Bandaranaike came to politics, male politicians had the habit of denouncing their male political opponents by publicly referring to extra-marital romantic or sexual liaisons.

But the entry of Mrs. Bandaranaike changed the ground rules of the dirty political game at election meetings as well as in parliament. They began, with absolutely no sense of shame, to use obscenities about her body. One of those leading orators of the UNP later became Prime Minister and President. As President of course he totally abandoned that particular culture of public oratory. He became an epitome of virtue and public morality, and the symbol of purity in the publicly uttered word.

But the most interesting thing about the UNP is that when it comes to public discourse, it has had a fine division of labour. The leaders of the party would project themselves as symbols of liberalism and tolerance. When Dudley Senanayake was the leader of the UNP, he had a team of liberal gentlemen to engage with the public in an idiom of statesmanship: J. R. Jayewardene, C. P. de Silva, Monty Jayawickrama, E. L. Senanayake, M. D. H. Jayawardane, Gamani Jayasuriya and a few others. All these were gentlemen who had elite school education and came from the urban landed gentry. In contrast was also the brigade of popular speakers who came from primarily Sinhala-speaking and non-elitist social backgrounds. As public speakers their mandate was to entertain the crowds. And they did entertain the predominantly male crowds at political rallies by uttering obscenities about Mrs. Bandaranaike.

This division of labour within the UNP continued under J. R. Jayewardene, R. Premadasa, and D. B. Wijetunga. It filtered into the DUNLFP formed by UNP dissidents Lalith Athulathmudali and Gamini Dissanayake. It now continues under Ranil Wickramasinghe. Senarathne has only inherited the legacy of Premadasa, Wijesiri, Abeygunasekera, Premachandra and many other crowd pullers of the UNP.

The point, however, is that quite a number of politicians in the PA as well as the UNP are guilty of bigotry, hate-speech and intolerance. And it is expressed in a variety of ways. The ethnic question has been a key area where bigotry has been advocated as a virtue. And in the Sinhala and English press, ethnic bigotry and intolerance gets both prominence and respectability.

Some of the letters to the editor as well as columns frequently published in the English press are so hate-generating that Rajitha Senarathne's homophobia is merely one manifestation of a generalized culture of intolerance and bigotry. The leaders of public opinion and civil society in this country should work, as a matter of some urgency, towards changing this.

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