

when he said that patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel. At least as far as the Sri Lankan situation is concerned, it would seem that patriotism of the kind touted by sections of the national press is the first and only refuge for a multitude of middle class scoundrels who

have forgotten the best of their own heritage. For my part, I treat these people with *karuna* and *mettha* as the Buddha himself had preached. And my patriotism is still intact even though I may be excluded.

DISCUSSION IN DISSENT

Lucien Rajakarunanayake

My choosing of today's subject "Discussion in Dissent" is an effort, however limited, to draw attention to the overriding limitations to dissent that exist in our society. In a sense it is a reaction to the evasion of discussion, the refusal to discuss, and the satisfaction in letting problems remain unsolved, if not being made worse, by shutting out the windows to new, varied and different opinion.

We live in times when the intellectual is often the deliberate target of vilification. There is a popular thesis which at present heaps scorn on the individual, whether intellectual or not, for the mere advocacy of minority rights. For all our claims, there seems to be a refusal to accept even a change in individual opinion on public issues, without vilification for previously held views.

These attitudes, I believe, flow from the deep-seated lack of appreciation of dissent and a largely held belief that nothing but good, albeit with minor warts, could come from the dominant view, the prevailing position, the status quo, be it in government, social organization or political process.

We are today in the midst of what appears to be a new political ferment. If we can, even with difficulty, ignore the tragi-comedy of self-centered politics which we see on both sides of the so-called political divide, one cannot ignore the fact that we are indeed at a new cross-roads of our social and political organization. But, what is the nature and content of discussion of the new realities that take place today? To the concerned observer, the answer would be a sad lacuna.

It is unfortunate that dissent, in our country, remains largely in the domain of the political parties - parties which, within themselves, allow for very little discussion, as seen over and over again in the internal conflicts that reach the limelight. Parties, adopt policies without even the semblance of discussion, but solely for the purpose of harvesting votes or harvesting goods and favours for their members, supporters and kith and kin.

We are supposedly in the midst of a great debate about the direction of our economic thrust - the oft-quoted race for the celebration of NIC status. We are full of the great

benefits of a market-oriented economy. We hear constant reference to the collapse of the Soviet Union, the failure of the Socialist / Communist system. The private sector is the darling of the decade. The public sector is the demon, to be wished away through the exorcism of legislation. But listen to the din, and try to discover whether there is serious discussion as to how the new trends can really help our people, our society, the new generations with a whole range of new expectations. What we find, in real terms, is a threatening silence.

Or, take our political system itself. The Executive Presidency is a concern of a great many who have watched with alarm the erosion of the democratic process in Sri Lanka. There was the time of the impeachment motion and its aftermath, during which time every political party, including the one which introduced the system, made statements about the need to change it. But beyond vague statements, made with the headline in mind, where do we see any serious discussion of the subject? Not even in the political parties which promise more than the moon in the matter of political change.

Instead of the great public debate which should be generated on the subject, through political parties, newspapers, academic centres, professional organizations, trade unions, human rights and community organizations, what one discovers is a tuneless chorus, lacking in depth, about the need to change the system, but not discussion on the methodology of the change or what we should have in its stead. Each section of society which should take a lead in the discussion appears to have abdicated its responsibility; there is a total void where there should have been informed exchange of views.

The situation is reduced to farce when those who were once the most ardent advocates of an immediate end to the Executive Presidency, now say, when again close to its warm and enriching rays, that it need not be done away with so soon. The farce is made more unendurable, when the other side which promises to have nothing to do with the system, offers a candidate for the Presidency whose sole purpose, it appears, is to abolish it, and that is all. What of the future we may ask. But who dares question?

This is the text of the K.Kanthisamy Memorial Lecture, delivered in June 1994. Lucien Rajakarunanayake, Senior Journalist, is with the Free Media Movement.



I believe I would not be wrong if I say that by and large, our society is one which is agreed on the constant presence of dissent. Indeed there will also be some agreement on the necessity of dissent, although there could be varying positions on the extent of dissent and the manner of dissent. But, the unfortunate reality is that this agreement on the presence and necessity of dissent is often hidden behind the conformist positions that make up the cloak of social acceptance. It is this cloak of social acceptance which leads to what I mentioned earlier as the trust in the *status quo*.

This is a conformism born of the absence of discussion, which in its initial stage would merely ignore the need to discuss, but in its final stage would lead to a fear of discussion. It is this which makes our laudable belief in dissent lack real meaning or content.

What are we ready to discuss in Sri Lankan society? Are we prepared to discuss our roots? How frankly do we discuss our past? How much do we discuss our faiths? How fully do we discuss our strengths? How often do we discuss our weaknesses? How deeply do we discuss our present, and how well do we discuss our future?

It is unfortunate that a large part of the burden of discussion in Sri Lanka has to be borne by the press. As a member of the much criticized profession of journalism, I must admit that the press has its own limitations in carrying out this responsibility.

Firstly, we lack newspapers which can reflect sufficient viewpoints. Next, there is an unfortunate metropolitan bias in our press, born out of the soil in which they have grown, and, through the nature of ownership structures. This situation has lent itself to the prevalence of what I would call a dangerously majoritarian viewpoint in our press.

It is in this context that one must admire, in great measure, the role played by what is respectfully called the "alternative press" and with contempt labelled the "tabloid press", in the encouragement of discussion in Sri Lanka. Whatever views one may have about the news content of these newspapers, and I for one believe that they have glaring shortcomings, but not much worse than those of the mainstream or broad-sheet press, it has to be admitted that they have added to and extended the scope of discussion in Sri Lanka.

They have had the courage to test the waters for even the broad-sheets by publishing news items which the latter had in their possession but were scared to use, until the tabloids did. Publishing mainly in Sinhalese, they have had the courage to challenge the commonly held view that dissenting views about the so-called majority viewpoint on ethnic issues will find no acceptance. They have often gone to the core of corruption and have dared challenge the unbreachable privileges of corrupt citizens turned people's representatives.

It is indeed a chastening thought that, had the "*Saturday Review*" continued publication, it would also have been labelled part of the tabloid press. Do we see in this contempt for the tabloid by the broad-sheet, some parallel in the attitude to the minority of the majority?

But even with limitations faced by the broad-sheet, alias mainstream, alias national, press, it is an unpalatable truth that they have done little to encourage through their columns, a genuine and fair discussion of issues of importance. It is almost fashionable today to decry the controls and manipulations of the government in the matter of press freedom. But the experience of most journalists will show that the press in Sri Lanka is as much controlled by the petty politics and business schemes of proprietors, and the whims and fancies of editors, as by the pressures and threats of the State.

Reporting the war

Let us take as a case in point the reportage and comment on the war in the North and East. Just now, the Free Media Movement, which I am closely associated with, is conducting a series of seminars in the country on the topic of "The War and the Media". We started this series because of our conviction that there is a serious gap in the information which the public receives about the truth of this decade-long war, which is sapping the strength and resources of our people and country.

Over the decades during which the ethnic crisis in Sri Lanka has grown to its present proportions of a war between the troops of the Sri Lankan state and the armed cadres of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the treatment of this issue by the broad-sheet press has been one which permitted little room for honest discussion. They have stood, by and large, for the dissemination of the establishment point of view which is wholly majoritarian. Mass circulation newspapers have often made themselves the champions of single viewpoints, often pouring scorn on the views held by those with other perspectives and approaches.

Over the years there has been the least discussion in the mainstream or broad-sheet Press of the realities of the war. The concurrent reality of the war, which is the creation of refugees, and the plight of these refugees have been ignored in the main, except at the outset of a major event, which leads to a refugee problem. One cannot help but recall how very influential sections of our Press lamented the fact that our people were being made refugees in their own country when the Sinhalese were being driven out by the brutality of the Tamil Tigers. They did not use the same description on the many previous occasions when Tamils were driven out of their homes, largely by the thuggery of the State.

There is an apparent conspiracy of silence, which links the metropolitan based broad-sheet Press, when it comes



to the discussion of the ongoing war, its causes and consequences and the crises which it has generated. Over the years, what many critical students of journalism describe as the National Security Syndrome, has taken over our major newspapers, clouding their function of accurate reportage and their role as leaders of discussion, with a mistaken commitment to official interpretations of national security.

The all embracing commitment to this particular interpretation of national security has led the major newspapers to virtually give up their right to discuss the costs of the war, in terms of national resources and the quality of life of the people. It has led our newspapers to virtually abandon on-the-spot reporting on the war and its victims, which can lead to wider discussion of the war itself. Instead, these newspapers have sought to confine themselves to the reportage of official statements on the war. Very often one has noticed the hidden journalist emerging out of the editor, when local newspapers publish foreign news agency reports of aspects of the war, when in fact such reportage should have come through their own news gathering resources.

If this is true of the major newspapers, it is not untrue of society itself. This unquestioning emphasis on national security has led to a refusal to discuss the war and its effects and consequences. It has led to a muted silence about the harassments of citizens under emergency regulations, and even without their cover. It has led to the new chorus of satisfaction that there are more Tamils living in peace outside the Jaffna peninsula, and among the Sinhalese, than there are within the peninsula. No question is raised, no discussion carried out, as to why people have been compelled to uproot themselves from their homes, villages and communities. Is it only the harsh brutality of Tamil Tigers, or the reality of the war itself?

It is not my intention to heap all the blame for the extreme lack of discussion in our society, on the newspapers alone. They come into focus first because of the nature of the Press, its manifest ability to present many views and the great advantage of the newspaper in its ability to allow for re-reading, reflection and response. However, a much larger responsibility for the lack of discussion in dissent lies with the electronic media of our country.

Limitations of Electronic Media

In terms of age, Sri Lanka certainly has maturity in the broadcast media. Radio is over fifty years old. Television has already pushed behind its first decade. In terms of technology and training, the facilities, although not state-of-the-art, are more than wholly adequate for the needs of good public information. Yet, the truth is that both radio and TV consider information to be of the least importance among their tasks, whatever pronouncements may be made by the parade of ministers who seek to place the stamp of personal idiosyncrasy on the broadcast media.

One does not need research to inform us that radio is the media with the most reach in Sri Lanka. Television today would come second. Yet, what have these two media done to encourage serious discussion of issues of importance in our society? The recent expansion of radio and TV has been essentially in the direction of greater entertainment. It is not my intention here to decry this emphasis on entertainment, although one may have reservations about the quality of entertainment offered. But, both radio and TV, whether owned by the State or the private sector, have carefully, avoided the aspect of dissent and discussion, and in so doing deliberately abandoned a key function of the electronic media.

There is a whole range of topics, from the basic issues of democracy which affect our society today, to the war and the ethnic crisis to issues such as the threat of AIDS, the overall dangers of uncontrolled tourism, the quality and content of education, public health, transportation, and many more areas - all of which find some serious reference in the newspapers, which are almost wholly ignored by the electronic media, save as a litany of praise for the government.

This absence of participation by the electronic media in the essential role of discussion and information, gives rise to a major problem with regard to the development of an informed society, which is a necessity for the proper functioning of democracy. How much scope can there be for informed dissent in a society, when the media with the widest reach shuns discussion, indeed discourages it, and worse still, presents an official monologue in place of truth and accuracy?

It is certainly no secret that this absence of discussion on the electronic media is both government fostered in the case of the state-owned radio and TV, and largely a result of the fear about government reprisals in the case of the privately-owned electronic media. In the latter instance, there is also the undoubted conviction of the owners of these media institutions that it is not their role to encourage discussion or give expression to dissent.

This again comes from the general attitude of belief in the established order, the reluctance to look at problems in a different light and consider new options or solutions, unless they have the prior blessings of even a dominant section within government or the State structure.

Sanctioned Freedom?

Regrettably, it is this belief in the necessity for official sanction, that has given the courage to politicians, including Presidents, Prime Ministers and lesser types, to often pontificate on the role of the media, very often with hardly a whimper of protest from the other side. We are not strangers to many occasions when newspapers have been lectured to on what their role is or should be. You will recall that in early 1993, when it was the policy of the then President to unleash violence on journalists and newspaper owners, the public was told that the



President was not only unafraid of criticism in the press, but that he gave permission to the newspapers to do so.

Little did that President, who was supposed to head a democratic society, realize that it was not within his power to sanction or permit criticism of himself or his government and that such criticism was in fact an inalienable right of the people, whether they published newspapers or not.

More recently, we saw the somewhat sad spectacle of newspaper proprietors and editors being summoned before the current President, again for a great homily on their duties. It is apparent from what one reads of the latest homily, that discussion, from the point of view of this not so venerable gentlemen, is a wholly one-sided affair. It is based on an official interpretation of what constitutes the public good - the overall need to publicise and propagandise government policy, or even the lack of it.

In this particular instance, it was all the more disgusting for the head of a government, who is also the head of a political party, who will most probably be a candidate in the next presidential election, to lecture to the Press as to how it should behave fairly in an election. This too when the party he heads has by no means shown great respect for free discussion in times of election or out of it, a party which has not hesitated to create conditions for insurrection and war, due to its refusal to consider discussion and dissent.

If one is critical of government and its personalities over the issue of discussion and dissent, it is only because they appear in larger profile as those who are in the driving seat. There is precious little which could be said in favour of those in Opposition either. When the Free Media Movement launched its public campaign for the protection of the journalists, and to build public opinion on the need for media freedom and free expression, we made no bones of the fact that every political party, which has held power by itself or in coalition, and every political party which has sought to hold power, had been guilty of attacks on media freedom.

This extended from the far right to the far left. It covered the middle and included the extremes. As a mere statistic of attacks on free expression, this may seem curious. But, in fact it shows a far greater danger. It shows how much our society is not ready to accept dissent, or even the discussion that leads to, or reinforces, dissent.

If this is true of the parties that preach democracy, it is equally true of those who sought to change this system by force. It is a fact that the JVP in its terrorizing rampage not only attacked and killed those who disagreed with them. They killed journalists and even newspaper vendors and readers for working on, selling, or reading newspapers which they did not approve of.

The situation in the North, where the Tamil Tigers have established their own sphere of influence, is no better.

They have not only destroyed the only regional newspaper which had wide acceptance but have also prevented the publication of any views which do not tally with their own interpretations of history and current politics. We are told they are in the process of re-writing history itself, in itself not a bad task, as long as it is done with the knowledge and objectivity of the true historian, but certainly to be feared where there is no discussion and dissent.

I have attempted to show in this lecture one important aspect of the precarious situation of democracy in Sri Lanka. It is, I believe, a situation about which none of us could be proud in the least. It is not a situation which one expects in a society which often boasts of having enjoyed universal suffrage, even longer than most countries of the West. It is not a situation which is in anyway compatible with our loud proclamations of being a vibrant democracy, of whatever star category. It is a situation born out of the failure to recognize the importance of free, open and fair discussion as an essential aspect of dissent and democracy.

Fear of Discussion

It is this reluctance to discuss, the near fright of honest discussion, that lies at the core of our failure to address the key issues of our day, the most important of which is the continuing crisis in the relations among the many communities in our country. It is at the core of the growing lack of trust between the main religions in our country. It is what is causing an increasingly wide chasm between the English educated who make up the socio-economic elite, and the vast mass of the people who lack opportunity. It is also the lack of discussion that is even eroding our trust in the independence of the judiciary.

There is little doubt that democracy is being put to the most difficult test in Sri Lanka today. Whether the approaching elections will be free and fair will depend to a large extent on how free the people will be able to discuss the issues before them and whether there will be issues to discuss at all. As the parties get set for the race, it would appear that we will once again have to decide on personalities and not policies and issues, which is a sad state indeed for those who believe in the liberal values of democracy and its recognition of dissent and discussion.

Kandiah Kanthasamy, who is remembered today, is one who had no truck with a democracy which had no place for dissent and discussion. He was one who saw in dissent the source of the truth, which he always cherished and adhered to.

Suriya Wickremasinghe, on behalf of the Kanthasamy Commemoration Committee, in summing up the threats faced by the moderate, non-partisan human rights activist, made the following observation, in the introduction



to *An Untimely Death*- the Kanthasamy Commemoration Volume (June 1989).

“Everyone concerned with human rights and relief work must face up to and discuss these issues; the public must be made aware of them. For, in the last analysis, it is the responsibility of the people to decide on and demand the standards they expect of their leaders, and the nature of the society in which they aspire to live”.

The threats she referred to were those from the State and other unseen elements. The enemy that took Kandiah Kanthasamy away from us, abducted without trace, the threats she referred to, have not gone away. They are still very much with us. Abduction is very much a part of our political reality as is murder. It is part of the

fear one has to live with when one dares to discuss, what others would not. It therefore becomes the responsibility of all who believe in democracy to discuss these issues; to discuss them so that we can agree on new standards for ourselves and for our leaders, discuss the true nature of the society in which we aspire to live, what we wish to leave behind to those that follow us.

Kandiah Kanthasamy was one who did not hesitate to open this discussion whenever and wherever he could. For those of us who respect him, there is no greater tribute we can give but to carry on the discussion and the struggle for truth and honesty that he was snatched away from.

CHINA IN THE RUSSIAN MIRROR

Roberto Mangabeira Unger and Zhiyuan Cui

1. When people all over the world think about the collapse of the Soviet Union they draw a certain picture in their minds. According to this picture, modern societies have developed along two different paths: the market economy and the command economy. Countries that took the path of the command economy made the wrong choice, and suffered economic failure as a consequence. They must now return to the fork in the road and take the other path. Although the transition is costly and ridden by conflict between those who stand to gain and those who stand to lose, the definition of the road is the not in doubt.

Many people in the West as well as in China believe that China has been cushioned from the worst effects of this necessary transition. long ago it decentralized its economy, expanding opportunities for private property and for individual or local initiative. What it must now do is to continue developing the market economy while maintaining the political order needed to avoid regional anarchy and social conflict.

The picture from which this view starts is, however, false. It encourages the misleading idea that developing countries in general and post-communist societies in particular are limited to a choice of the speed with which they can travel toward the same unquestioned goal; hence the vocabulary of gradualism as the rival to shock therapy. This vocabulary has its kernel of truth, suggesting as it does that any institutional change, no matter how ambitious, may advance step by step. It nevertheless suffers from the fatal flaw of minimizing the most important point at issue in national politics: the diversity of possible national futures.

Institutional fetishism animates and vitiates the terminology of gradualism and shock therapy: the false belief that abstract institutional conceptions, like the market economy and representative democracy, have a natural and necessary form, namely the form established in the rich industrial countries. In fact, there are different ways of organising market economies and representative democracies. The United States, Germany, and Japan all have their distinct and changing institutional arrangements. As we free ourselves from many types of determinism in economic and political thought, we come to understand that these actual variations in the institutional structure of market economies and political democracies represent a small portion of a far broader field of possible variations. Those who fail to recognise this wealth of possibility in the construction of real democracies and democratized market economies often end up accepting an authoritarian or colonial imposition as an unavoidable national destiny.

The conspiracy between elite self-interest and elite superstition stands today as a formidable obstacle to the popular stake in political and economic democracy as well as to the pursuit of national independence. The present experience of Russia—and the experiences of developing countries around the world—demonstrate that these countries cannot achieve the wealth, strength, and freedom of the rich industrial democracies by simply imitating the economic and political institutions of those democracies. They must, to succeed, invent different institutions. An appreciation of what is actually happening, in Russia and in other developing countries, can help guide this practice of institutional invention.

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