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Last Hope or Lost Hope?

by

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At the Founding Convention of the Party in Bombay in August 1959, I had, in my speech as Chairman of the Organising Committee, described the birth of the Swatantra Party as the "last hope of Democracy in India." Is it possible today to hold to that hope?

Recently, while travelling round the country, whether in Hyderabad or Lucknow or elsewhere, many people mentioned to me somewhat wistfully the high hopes that had been aroused in them and in many others at the time of the establishment of our Party, the hope that this would prove to be not only an alternative to the Congress Party but also one that would provide India before long with good government. The unspoken implication in all these remarks was that these hopes had been belied. However distasteful it may be, realism forces one to the view that it would be unpractical to hope now, as things are, that the Swatantra Party by itself can displace the Congress at the Centre and provide India with an alternative government. It will not be without some use or purpose to consider why this should be so and also what the implications of such a state of affairs are.

Clearly, it is not the principles or policies of the Party that have failed to win adequate response or support. Wherever the message of the Party has reached, it has found instant response in the minds and hearts of our common people. This is particularly so in the case of the rural areas. The failure has been of what I have described as "the conveyor belt" which consists of a body of dedicated, disciplined and articulate workers to carry the message to the remotest corners in the countryside. Our failure to create such a cadre of workers is what is limiting our mass contact.

It is the task of the leadership of the Party at State and District levels to create such a cadre. This can only be done by hard work in the form of the recruitment and training of Party workers and infusing them with enthusiasm, dedication and a readiness to sacrifice which such voluntary work involves. If, however, the leadership of the Party at State and District levels lack, by and large, sincerity of purpose and a sense of dedication, the satisfactory fulfilment of this task becomes almost impossible. "If the salt hath lost its flavour," Gandhiji was fond of *quoting, asking*, "wherewith shall it be salted?" It is the behaviour of the Party's

functionaries at National, State and District levels which has denied us the rate of progress and growth which we had envisaged in 1959 and which has led to a kind of stagnation of which we are all painfully conscious. It is these same causes which have damaged the image and credibility of the Party in the minds of the general public.

In this respect, there has been considerable deterioration in the situation since the General Elections of 1967 in which we did reasonably well. We had had to bear in quick succession the odium of the debacle in the Rajya Sabha elections in Gujarat, of March 1968, the gross mismanagement and consequent rout in the Bansa election in April 1968, followed by the massacre of our candidates in the Hariyana Assembly Elections in May 1968.

All this bodes no good for the future of our Party. It is for the rank and file of the Party to assert itself. Let the small man, the common man, the young man in the Party speak out and assert himself, if he does not want his hopes to be blighted further. There is need for a change of heart at all levels of the Party leadership. There is still time for such a change but time is running out and we simply cannot afford any more of the kind of developments which have been referred to above. A new spirit has to inform our leadership alongside of a wholehearted acceptance of the necessity of disciplined and ethical methods of functioning.

We have been proud of claiming that the Swatantra Party has faith in the people, but the more relevant question is whether the people have faith in the Swatantra Party. Let us each of us answer that question, sincerely and honestly in our own hearts, and then consider in what way we can each be more worthy of the great cause of freedom which we have espoused.