

The Critical Moment

2274

The Presidential Address given by
Mr. PILOO MODY
at the SEVENTH National Convention,
New Delhi, August 4, 5, 1974

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FELLOW DELEGATES :

WE are gathered here today to deliberate and take a decision which concerns every single one of us, our lives and our future, and that of our members whom we represent. We are going to take a decision which will no doubt effect the entire nation and every citizen of this country. It is a decision which may alter the future course of history; on the other hand, it may turn out to be a foolish decision which may have no impact at all.

Shakespeare in his infinite wisdom had said : "There is a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at the flood leads on to fortune." What Mr Shakespeare did not tell us was how to recognize the "tide" or how to grasp the "flood." That is why man has groped and fumbled over the ages and will probably do so for all time to come. That is our lot.

Having said this I must go on.

There are some who are in the fortunate position today of not having the responsibility to take decisions. There are others, who have been entrusted to take decisions from day to day—some of them of very far reaching consequences. Believe me, the easiest decision at all times is to decide to do nothing, and thereafter to justify why it was wise to wait and see, to proceed with caution and to talk endlessly to cover up our inaction. Not only that, but with each passing event to feel self righteous and to denigrate what others have done to glorify our indecision.

I am different. I believe clear analysis and deep consideration must be followed by action. To be able to think and thereafter not to act is a sin and an abuse of intellect.

In 1971, we were told, we lost a war and we were advised by our leaders to reflect and to write a thesis. This is precisely what we did. During the interregnum we tried several experiments to find a Swatantra constituency concentrating on youth, a populist approach to arouse enthusiasm,

vast contact with urban intellectuals to motivate them into acting as conveyor belts, streamlining our organisation to reduce dissatisfaction, fighting elections to keep our workers interested and occupied. To do all this, as your President, I travelled a quarter of a million miles within India in two years. The enthusiasm was there but there was no follow up.

Throughout we suffered from a lack of men and money. Meanwhile with so many opposition parties, no party could gain any credibility. Meanwhile the political and economic situation kept deteriorating, driving our rulers to such desperation that they were willing to destroy the democratic process rather than give up their power. In particular they refuse to reform the electoral process. Elections in India are no longer free and fair.

It is in this atmosphere that the National Executive of the Swatantra Party met on April 6 and 7, 1974 to take stock of the situation and it passed the following resolution :

Resolutions-passed at the National Executive Meeting of the Swatantra Party held in New Delhi on April the 6th & 7th, 1974

1. The State of the Nation :

The very existence of India as a civilised and democratic nation is at stake. Rising prices, spreading unemployment, massive corruption, acute shortages, and universal injustice—economic, social and political—have put an excruciating burden on the poor man, yet the only concern of the Congress leadership is to absolve itself of any responsibilities and shift the blame for the present situation on some opposition parties and foreign agencies that, according to them, have combined for political motivation.

The greater the failure of the Government, the more frantic becomes its search for scapegoats with the result that the Ruling Party has been paralysed into inactivity, lethargy and even inertia.

The present crisis has created untold confusion in the minds of the intelligentsia and brought unprecedented hardships on

the common man, whose condition is steadily deteriorating and his temper is likely to erupt in any number of violent ways.

The recent events in Gujarat and Bihar bear eloquent testimony of the rising anger of the people against Government's ineptitude to tackle even the simplest problems.

Another reason for these violent eruptions is the near impossibility of registering any institutional complaint, the ineffectiveness of opposition parties and the deprivation of legitimate rights of protest either through demonstration or through the ballot box.

The entire electoral process has been vitiated by mal-practices which begin with gerrymandering of constituencies, playing the communal equations, creating and fanning religious hostilities, injecting massive amounts of money on which the Ruling Party has a monopoly, and projecting its propaganda through state owned or controlled media, the intimidation of the electorate and when all else fails, the stuffing of ballot boxes. In spite of this the Ruling Party could not have secured even the meagre success it had in UP and Orissa, if it had not resorted to the ultimate electoral fraud of actually miscounting the votes and/or the substituting of ballot papers carried out through coincidental contrived electricity failures during the counting at the appropriate moment.

It is only when the natural anger of the people cannot find its way through the ballot box, that the student community have to come forward and show us the way to political emancipation.

Having lost their natural safety valve by which the people could ventilate their grievances at the polls, the electoral process having been divorced and insulated from all other activities, it becomes incumbent on all decent and law abiding Indians to deprive the Congress of its right to rule.

Today the Congress in like a rudderless ship, devoid of ideology, devoid of principle and devoid of policies. Even its recent backtrack on taxation, takeover of the wheat trade and the relaxation of import policy does not arise out of conviction that they are striking a new path which is right and

proper, but out of fear of having done something that just could not work, and therefore, something else had to be tried. Because had they realised the magnitude of the situation and admitted the monumental follies of the past, they could have taken certain bold and fearless decisions in re-orienting the economy.

It is quite evident from the above that the Congress has been working under pressures: the external pressure of the Soviet Union, the opposition pressure of the CPI and the internal pressure created by Communist infiltrations creating internal dissensions within the Congress Party.

Such a party cannot last, much less govern for long, and the Swatantra Party must prepare itself whole-heartedly to present an alternative to the country.

2. Programmes of Action:

- a) To do so, the Party must build its cadre in every village and city of India through programmes to motivate the people and particularly the youth into the nation building activities and constructive thought based on the sound and integrated principles, policies and programmes of the Swatantra Party.
- b) At the same time the Party must continue to educate the Government and other authorities into accepting pragmatic postures, discarding dogma, and into mobilising the necessary energy and wisdom to administer efficiently and to root out corruption.
- c) The party will continue to explore all possibilities to bring about a two-party system in India with a view to remove the chaos prevailing in our political life and the confusion created in the minds of the electorate. In this connection the Swatantra Party urges all political parties and politicians to cooperate in this endeavour and to work for the common good.
- d) The Swatantra Party accuses the Congress Party for having defrauded the electorate from exercising its freedom of choice by vitiating the electoral process and

resolves to try by all means available to it to ensure fair and free elections. There is also a need for basic electoral reform which will bring the Indian electoral system into greater harmony with the Indian reality.

- e) In case the Government and the Congress Party fails to respond to our efforts to restore free and fair elections, the Swatantra Party must start thinking in terms of finding new methods to prevent the breakdown of constitutional and democratic processes and appeals to the youth of India to strengthen its hands through non-violent movements.

The thesis was written. The action was planned and I was authorised on behalf of the Party to put it into operation. Resolutions are not ornaments to get your name in the papers; nor are they sanctimonious sermons on how you could do better if given the chance, but documents for action. Believing in action, I did not lose a single minute in implementing the resolution of the Party.

Item one, on building the party, I started my tours all over India. I had planned to visit 12 districts of Gujarat, when I was called away to Delhi, after having toured only six districts, to attend to matters connected with the National Alternative.

Item two, on educating Government, I continued educating the Congress on economic reforms by endless dialogues with Ministers and others and also through speeches in Parliament which projected our policies and suggested laws and ordinances which if passed could save the country. I even saw the Prime Minister twice to explain economic policies and phenomena to her and contributed articles to the press in syndicated form which were very widely published including one whose title was "If I were The Prime Minister", which appeared in several English dailies throughout the country and also in many vernacular languages.

What I did on item number three, towards the formation of a two-party system, is now before this convention for your approval. It is the work of four months of continuous strenuous activity which has culminated in this proposal. On many an occasion my day has extended to 18-22 hours of continuous work.

On item number four, on electoral reforms, I contacted the leaders of other parties to explain the futility of fighting elections without basic electoral reform. Mr Ashok Mehta was particularly impressed by my promptness in dealing with his initiative in the matter. I am also participating in a discussion on All India Radio on the subject which will be broadcast shortly. The difficulty about suggesting electoral reforms is that it requires the cooperation of Congressmen—and the beneficiaries of the fraud are hardly likely to give up their unfair advantage. Therefore if you are going to fight elections in the future, you will have to police them yourselves for which you need men, money and muscle.

On the last item, in the search for new techniques, I was feeling my way as to how the Swatantra Party could cooperate with Jaiprakash Narayan without being charged with interference, knowing JP's aversion to being associated with any political party. The last point could not be pursued further because of the urgency of providing the National Alternative, which if formed, in my opinion, could very largely and meaningfully ensure free and fair elections.

This should satisfy you that your president has not been spending his time in idle pursuits but has been actively implementing the decisions of the Party.

If you did not wish me to act on your resolutions, you should not have passed them. I am tired of those who pass resolutions and thereafter conveniently forget to implement them. "Time and tide wait for no one". I have always been an activist and my father's favourite exhortation was : "do it now".

Today I have called this convention with a very heavy heart. Although I am intellectually convinced that we are doing the right thing, emotionally I am disturbed and sentimentally nostalgic. In the last four months I have had to carry the burden and responsibility almost single handed. Of course, whenever possible, I have tried to consult with whoever was available from amongst our colleagues, but the contact was brief whereas the problem was a continuous strain. At times I would wake up in the

middle of the night with considerable doubt, thinking: "am I doing the right thing?" "Should we pull back?" What if it does not work out, everyone will blame me, as indeed they should" and so on. Another constant fear was what mischief the following morning's newspapers would create—a twisted statement, a planted item, editorial scorn, because Mrs Indira Gandhi fears this merger more than anything else. Through this period, I consulted with our Senior Vice President, Mr R.N. Singh Deo and our Orissa President, P.K. Deo. I flew to Bombay to meet Mr Masani and Mr Dandekar, and also others who are not members of the party. Of course Mr Madhu Mehta and Mr Manu Amersey were constantly in the picture. In Delhi, there was Mr Loknath Mishra, leader of our Party in the Rajya Sabha and Mr H.M. Patel, Mr D.N. Patodia and Mr Arya. I must record that throughout this period Mr H.M. Patel and Mr D.N. Patodia gave me considerable strength through dispassionate and often stern advice. But above all, our courage did not falter because the thesis was correct. We had to act.

Today at last we have arrived at the moment of decision. Tomorrow you will all vote according to your conscience. My colleagues and I have done everything we could do that is humanly possible, and we will all abide by your decision.

In deciding, I would like you to consider the problem in its totality—the situation in the country, the state of the Party, the validity of our policies, the manner in which they can be propogated, the danger inherent in the status quo, the patriotic duty of every citizen and particularly members of the Swatantra Party and finally but most important, the future well-being of India—the hopes and aspirations of the people and their lingering urge to have a viable, credible National Alternative to 27 years of Congress oppression and misrule. In taking your decision. I commend you to the following thoughts:

- 1—Today no party however good or bad can replace the Congress. constituted as they are into fragments. To project our good points and expose their mistakes requires media control. We just do not have it and therefore we need cadres and vast numbers to go out

into the villages and convince the people. The New Party will gain us some cadres and provide more man power.

- 2—After what we have seen in the U.P. and Orissa elections you have to be convinced that elections are no longer free and fair. Does that mean that we stop fighting elections? Some of our members have suggested this. A few have even gone as far as to suggest that we turn ourselves into a Seva Sangh. Is this the answer of the Swatantra Party to the challenge and threat posed by Mrs Indira Gandhi to the Indian democratic system? If you wish to wallow in this sort of passivity, you will have to find someone else to lead you.
- 3—At the moment Jaiprakash Narayan is leading a great movement with the help of the young and the dispossessed against tyranny and oppression in Bihar. If you were to give up everything and go to Bihar and join him and help him to bring down a corrupt order, I would applaud you and even encourage you. But you cannot do this from your offices in Bombay, Delhi or Madras, or through the columns of the controlled press. And once his task is finished and done, what will you do? Forces over which you have no control will reap the harvest, to avoid which you will have to return to us, to the National Alternative, which is the only real answer to the problems.
- 4—Since 1969, Mrs Indira Gandhi has made politics money-based—an area in which no political party can match her. The reply of the Marxists-Leninists was to make it violence-based. Even on that score, Mrs Gandhi excelled. Today, political issues are decided over a large part of East India and Punjab by murder, and the latest score on murders is that the Congress is leading!—and we talk about non-elective politics!
- 5—No! This country cannot be surrendered to conscienceless grabbers and blackmarketeers, nor to extremists and murderers. As for those who look forward to

establishment of some sort of dictatorship—left, right or centre, civilian or military—they should have their heads examined and be locked up in a lunatic asylum. They know not what they say.

6—Therefore we have to find contemporary answers to today's problems. And the problem today, simply stated, is to save the democratic system so that at a future date a good, clean and democratic government can be formed, that dictatorship can be held at bay and the democratic process preserved by the opposition, in cooperation with the people, by policing the elections and ensuring that they are reasonably free and fair.

7—Now I ask you : Can the Swatantra Party do all these things all by itself ? Can any of the other opposition parties do them by itself ? The answer is obvious : we cannot, they cannot. That is why a larger political force is required.

8—We are all agreed that the policies and programmes of the Swatantra Party are as valid or even more valid today than they were in 1959. Why is it that less people are propagating them and fewer people are voting for them ? And if it is true, what is the harm if more people are enlisted to project the policies of the Party ? Even the most ardent advocates against dissolution have certified that the agreed draft programme, distributed to you, embodies the full scope of Swatantra thinking and more ! Then what can be our objections ?

9—If I may summarize the case against merger, it is on three counts only.

a—We stand to lose our name, symbol and flag—but we preserve something much more precious and that is our statement of policy.

b—The parties and people we are joining, by their past behaviour will create problems for us in the future and may, even today, bring discredit to us. Yes, these are legitimate fears. But are we going to run away from such fears ? Are we going to give up the opportunity of saving Indian democracy

because of these fears? Are we going to sacrifice the emancipation of India to some future threat which may or may not materialise? Even if we are to succumb to these fears, do you have another answer or another solution or an alternate plan? Well, where is it?

And finally, will the new party constitute a National Alternative? My emphatic answer to that is yes—not because of its size, nor because of its spread, but because it is the first integrating force on the horizon in almost three decades. It is a new process. By reversing the trend of the past, of parties splitting at every difference of opinion, it takes a bold step forward in uniting the existing parties. The process is by no means complete. I live and work in the hope of collecting many more parties and groups in the near future. And to do this the Swatantra Party, in keeping with its past performance must take the lead and set an example in selfless patriotic duty to the nation.

It is with anguish that the people of India have been looking for leadership which will unite them against Congress oppression and misrule. It is with frustration they have been watching the opposition dividing their votes and dissipating their effort. It is with disgust that they have been seeing opposition leaders betraying them in selfish pursuit of their own interests and lust for power and position. The time is not far off when the people of India will turn their anger away from the Congress and zero-in on the opposition for having failed them so miserably.

It is in response to the peoples' anger, it is in fulfilment of their yearning and it is in satisfaction of their needs that a National Alternative is being created, which I commend all of you to join.

I warn you, it is not going to be any bed of roses. Mighty forces are working against us, using every underhand method, including big money and blackmail. We will have to beware of this and fight it. If however we remain steadfast and stick together, no power on earth can break us. We will have created hope in every heart and ultimately, it is only hope that provides the sustenance of life.

Finally there is only one point I wish to make : For fifteen years I have been working for the Swatantra Party. For the last eight years I have even given up my profession. For the last two years I have been your president. Throughout these 15 years I have been a disciplined soldier of the party, carrying out every command of our leaders and cooperating with every member of the Party. I do not think any of our leaders have ever had occasion to complain about my loyalty or discipline. Whether it was Rajaji, Ranga, Masani, Dandekar, H.M. Patel or Cooper, I have served them all faithfully, always accepting the decision of the Party, once it was made. When I have disagreed, I have stated my reasons and even argued them vigorously, but I have never flouted the decision of the Party. Today I am just a little hurt : Those who have taken discipline on my part for granted all these years are reluctant to grant me the same courtesy. After all, whatever decisions we have taken, or are about to take, have all been taken constitutionally, with the fullest consultation and by established practice. There has been no attempt on my part to brow-beat anyone or to ride rough-shod over any opinion. Yet an insidious campaign has been carried out, crouched in innuendo, attributing motives, casting aspersions and even abuse on me. All this has come as a revelation to me—even shock. I have nothing to say in my defence. You shall be the judges.

However I plead with you—you have seen what has happened to the other parties braving the same storm. Let the Swatantra Party be the solitary exception. I would like you to decide this issue one way or the other, but unanimously. For those who suffer the same pain as I do at the dissolution of the Party, let them decide that they will do whatever the Party decides. Let this, the most crucial decision, be a manly decision taken by the Party as one man. The New Party is not the defeat of Swatantra but its triumph. Many more people today are willing to advocate our ideology—all they ask in return is that we change our name.

This is not the dissolution of the Swatantra Party, but a transformation of the Party to a higher order of struggle with redoubled vigour.

Jai Swatantra. Jai Hind