

Article sent to gentleman

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Whatever the result of the General Elections to Parliament in the first few days of January, the political outlook for the coming years is bleak. There is little to choose between the three protagonists for power in New Delhi and none of them is likely to be able to resolve India's basic problems or to take the country forward.

Political instability marked by horse-trading on the one side and continuing controls and corruption on the other are only too likely to dog our footsteps. This is because the basic causes of our plight are deep rooted and not easily removable.

The first of these factors are the weaknesses in our national character. A tradition of hero worship, the cult of personality and an inability to say "No" do not make a good foundation for a free society. Nor does a dialectical mind which is unable to come off the fence and distinguish between right and wrong and which therefore seeks refuge in "non-alignment." Indiscipline and an absence of team spirit are other noticeable factors. If the battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton, how many playing fields, one asks, have we got? The changes necessary in national character require a prolonged campaign of education at home and in school which it is difficult to see materialising in the next few years.

The other basic cause of our troubles is the so-called "socialist pattern of society" and a controlled economy, more appropriately described as Statism, which were imposed on the country soon after Independence. The combination of political and economic power in New Delhi has raised the stakes of power so high that all scruples have been discarded in the struggle for power. Our economic stagnation and developing crises are also in marked contrast to the progress made in raising the standard of life by countries which have followed a different pattern, namely, Malaysia, Singapore, Hongkong, Thailand, Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan. This calls for a "U" turn away from sterile State Capitalism to a system of competitive free enterprise with incentives for enterprise and hard work.

All the political parties now asking for the favours of the electorate are however committed to the status quo of a controlled economy, a wasteful public sector and the pursuit of equitable distribution at the cost of increased production. This shows a lack of ambition and adventure. If

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the size of the cake is to remain what it is, any measure of social justice only means sharing abject poverty. The way out is to increase the size of the cake, but that again cannot be done without a "U" turn. How long will it be before an awareness of the fact that there can be no clean government without limited government spreads from a small number of intelligent and enlightened persons to the mass of our people ?

What India needs is democracy with discipline, and discipline without dictatorship. Unfortunately, the immediate choice appear to lie between extreme instability and chaos on one hand and an authoritarian regime on the other. For reasons that Walter Lippman has explained so well in his book "The Public Philosophy", no nation that is faced with the choice between inept and inefficient democratic government (such as we have had for the last three years) and authoritarian government chooses the former. The prospect for the next five years, as I see it, is therefore extremely bleak.

But what then of the latter half of the eighties ? Not being a clairvoyant or an astrologer, I would ask to be excused from attempting any forecast.

The future of our country during the second half of the coming decade will depend on how we as a nation respond or react to the experiences we encounter meanwhile.

Will the Indian people be able to surmount the challenge or will the spiral of declining law and order, deteriorating public services and a stagnant economy which we are at present experiencing descend still further ? How long the night ? The Indian people have many fine qualities. While it is true that every country gets the government it deserves, perhaps after all we have not quite deserved such bad government as we have had ?

If India is to be saved, it will have to be saved not by the politicians and the tycoons, though there are honourable exceptions among both classes, but

by the small man, particularly the middle classes of the cities and small landed farmers in the countryside. They are the backbone of the community. These classes have suffered cruelty under the economic order that has prevailed since Independence, but their back is not yet broken. The length of the tunnel we have entered is hard to divine, but one would like to think that at the end there is light.