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In the present political context

THE LIBERAL'S DILEMMA

by

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In a country with a low level of political awareness and correspondingly fragile standards of democratic functioning, the Liberal faces a painful dilemma. Is he to swallow his scruples, accept a large measure of Statism and join in political manoeuvres such as those of which we have recently had a surfeit in New Delhi or is he to keep his hands clean by abstaining from political activity and thus expose himself to the charge made by Pericles that "we must regard a man who takes no part in public affairs not as harmless but as a useless character"?

It was with such a dilemma that I was personally faced when my friend Jayprakash Narayan asked me, late in the year 1976 during the Emergency, to help me with his effort to form a new political party from very disparate elements, which later came to be known as the Janata Party, in an effort at ending Indira Gandhi's authoritarian regime.

I told J.P. that, while I was in profound sympathy with his objective, I would plead with him not to ask for my active participation in the formation of the proposed new party because, unfortunately, I had ample experience of most of the elements he had in mind, particularly during the year 1970, and I was extremely doubtful whether they would work together as a team or solve the country's problems. My fear was that they would let him down and in course of time create a backlash in favour of authoritarianism, which is precisely what was to happen. I said I would certainly vote for J.P.'s candidates when the time came, as I did in March 1977, but would like to be excused from more active involvement in the move.

Was I wrong in the response I gave? There are friends who argue that I was wrong and that my presence in Delhi in the Janata Party apparatus and ~~for~~ the Janata Government would have made a difference. I wish I could agree, but even my conceit does not allow of any such illusions. What would have happened is that I would within a very few months have found myself forced to resign

in protest against the activities of several of my colleagues. In fact, this is what actually happened when I was persuaded to agree early in 1978 to be the Chairman of the Minorities Commission.

Now once again a similar situation has materialised and Mr. H.R.Khanna recently found himself impaled on the horns of this dilemma. The leaders of all the existing political parties have behaved in a manner that has caused profound disillusionment and even 'disgust', an expression recently used by none other than Jayaprakash. Above the din of the raucous charges and counter-charges, the sad realisation emerges that the difference between the protagonists is no wider than that between Tweedledum and Tweedledee. The people quite correctly see no reason to believe that the problems of our young democracy are likely to be solved by whoever may come to office during the life of the present Parliament.

The Liberal once again faces the dilemma: should he or she join one of the existing political parties or groups on the basis of choosing ^{the} "lesser evil" in an endeavour to influence the course of events? Gandhiji had taught us to eschew the lesser evil and to practise what Louis Fisher in his book The Great Challenge described as "the double rejection". I for one would respectfully follow the Mahatma on this point.

Or should the Liberal just sit at home, attend to his business and gnash his teeth in impotent rage as most good and patriotic men and women find themselves forced to do these days? I do not think that is an alternative one can commend to anyone who cares for the country and holds certain values dear.

What then? The key to the answer for which the Liberal gropes is perhaps to be found in a proper understanding of the role of government. As a result of three decades of Statism and all embracing controls which have cruelly burdened the tender plant of our young democracy, our entire national life has become politicised — whether in industry or trade or agriculture, whether in education or arts or sports. The concentration of political and economic power in a few hands in New Delhi has, by raising the stakes, made the competition for political power all the more tempting and devoid of scruple, and has added to corruption. Should we not then turn to Gandhiji's wise judgement that "that Government is best which governs the least"? If public morality is to be re-introduced in our national life, the role of the government will have to be confined to its proper limits. What we need is strong but limited government in place of the big but flabby administration from which we have been suffering since Independence. In other words, what India needs is what Mr. N.A. Palkhivala has described as a "U-turn".

That the evolution of such a consensus is not altogether beyond our reach is shown by the wind of change that has been

blowing recently throughout the world, including our own neighbours in Sri Lanka, against bureaucracy and Statism. Recently in India we have had two indications that this wind has also started blowing in our country. The first of these was the way in which the Indian press, with near unanimity, rejected the idea of nationalising certain major enterprises which was put forward by two Ministers of the Janata Government. The story has been told by Mr. R. M. Lala in a little book India says 'NO' to Nationalisation published by the Rajaji Foundation in March 1979. The other straw in the wind was the splendid and massive Convention I addressed which was organised in Bombay on 25th May by the Federation of Associations of Maharashtra to protest against the oppressive provisions of the Sales Tax Law as it had been amended in Maharashtra.

If we leave politics any longer to the politicians in New Delhi, the backlash in favour of authoritarianism - however much we may deplore it - will become irresistible. We have to give people yet another choice of democracy with discipline and of discipline without dictatorship.

To create the climate and the conditions for such a development in the few months that we may have is the middle path and the way out of the Liberal's dilemma.

The question is : Have we Liberals - scattered all over India - the courage of our convictions and the readiness to work for them? Have we got the time? I do not know, but I do know that the challenge is on our doorstep and that it can not and will not wait.
