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THE BASIS OF AN ALLIANCE

In their joint declaration on January 3 the Congress (O), the Jana Sangh and the SSP pledged themselves to trying to put up "one agreed candidate, for each Lok Sabha constituency throughout the country, who will be supported by all our parties". All three parties seemed confident that they would succeed in this "endeavour". When on January 8 the Swatantra Party decided to join the alliance the assumption was still more explicit; the resolution adopted by the party's national executive said that "there shall be one agreed candidate for each Lok Sabha constituency". But the slow progress at the first two meetings of the four-party coordination committee on January 16 and 17 suggested that agreement on a common list would not be easy. Although agreement was reached on some crucial seats, disputes persisted over many others; and at the end of Wednesday's meeting it appeared that a fairly large number of seats would be left open to be contested by different partners in the alliance. By the end of the week the number had been reduced, but it still seemed unlikely that the four-party front would be able to present a particularly compact and cohesive challenge to the Congress (R) in the parliamentary poll as a whole. This is unfortunate, because only an agreed list of candidates could have partially compensated for the absence of a common programme. The relevance of Mr Masani's early insistence on a common programme should now be clearer than before. When the Swatantra Party decided to fight the elections jointly with the three other parties in spite of its misgivings about an alliance without an agreed body of stated aims, it seemed the right step in an area of imperfect choices; but surely the choice made could have been

more attractive than it is turning out to be. Even in the absence of a common programme the constituent parties could have refrained from highlighting their policy differences in the manner they have done. The Swatantra Party alone seemed anxious to build and preserve an image of unity by deciding to adopt the AICC (O) resolution of June 28 as its own election manifesto; neither the Jana Sangh nor the SSP has hesitated to issue its separate manifesto and make the alliance look a curiously disparate combination. The views of the Jana Sangh and Swatantra on the right to property are well known, and the former have stated them explicitly in its manifesto; yet the SSP has chosen to strike a radical posture by demanding the deletion of this right from the list of fundamental rights.

The Congress (R) can be trusted to pick on these policy divergences and exploit them to the full. But if it makes political capital of the four parties' failure to play down their differences, these parties have only themselves to blame. In retrospect it seems that a much more serious effort should have been made at the beginning to find at least some common ground between the four parties. Certain differences may be irreducible, but a statement of minimum common aims could have been formulated without introducing these controversial issues. To find such an identity of basic interests with the SSP would perhaps have been difficult, but surely there is much common ground between the fundamental policy objectives of the Congress (O), Swatantra and Jana Sangh. Only by highlighting this identity of democratic values, as Mr Masani pointed out, could the alliance have presented a wholly credible alternative to the Congress (R).

Quoted
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Memoirs
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