

Statesman

10/1/71

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BETTER LATE THAN NEVER

THE Swatantra Party's decision to join the National Democratic Front will be welcomed not only by those who see the need for a change of Government but also by many others anxious to see some clarity restored to the country's party politics. The direction of Mrs Gandhi's policies has been clear ever since the Congress split: a continued monopoly of power by manoeuvre, and by the use of the existing administrative authority for political ends. To remain in power, her Government has become increasingly authoritarian; and, to give a semblance of democratic sanction to this increasingly dictatorial practice, the Prime Minister has been trying to beguile the public with promises of socialistic participation. Inevitably, she has to seek her political support from parties whose socialistic conscience can readily reconcile itself with a steady diminution of democratic freedom. Hence an opportunistic combination of radical rhetoric and authoritarian practice; but, however opportunistic, its character is clear. The Prime Minister's opponents, on the other hand, have hitherto failed to display an equal clarity of purpose in presenting a combined democratic challenge to her clever but pernicious strategy. With the formation of an alliance of all the major democratic parties a clear challenge has at last been posed.

Admittedly, the challenge would have been much more effective if the parties in the alliance could agree on a common programme. Mr Masani was entirely right in insisting on one, as he pointed out

again on Friday, only a body of common aims, specifically formulated and openly stated, could have made a democratic alternative wholly credible to the electorate. But politics, after all, is an area of imperfect choices: by staying out of a less than ideal alliance, Swatantra would merely have harmed the interests it has in common with its present partners, even though these interests are yet to be spelled out in positive terms. Mr Masani would naturally be happy if efforts were made even at this stage to formulate an agreed programme, but he recognizes that this may not be easy. An awareness of "the totality of circumstances" has naturally persuaded him not to make his party's entry into the alliance conditional on the evolution of a common programme. So long as the associating parties keep their fundamental aims above their sectarian or tactical interests, a common element should emerge in the course of united functioning; as Mr Masani himself has pointed out, successful coalitions have been formed even in the absence of prior agreement on common policies. In any case, a major uncertainty has been removed and, thereby, a big step has been taken towards the consolidation of democratic forces. Clearly, Mr Rajagopalachari's wise counsel has been largely responsible for this realistic understanding. As for fears that the SSP might seek bilateral adjustments with the CPI(M), Swatantra's presence in the alliance will be an additional safeguard against any such unprincipled arrangement.

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