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India Needs a Liberal Political Party

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In my speech at the open inaugural session of the Second National Convention of the Indian Liberal Group held last month in Mangalore on February 18, I shared with our delegates and others my view that the time was ripe to consider the formation of a Liberal Party to succeed the Swatantra Party which collapsed in 1974. In the context of the deplorable state of party politics in the country, it is my view that the younger generation would welcome a modern, principled party based on the Liberal philosophy. While I reassured delegates that the ILG should not convert itself into a political party, it could play the role of a midwife in the emergence of such a party. It is my view that the ILG will benefit immensely if there was a real Liberal Party - in thought, word and deed - to carry the Liberal Position into parliament and state legislatures, just as it happened in the sixties when the Swatantra Party made its presence felt in parliament and several state legislatures.

The purpose of the Indian Liberal Group's efforts to revive the Liberal Dialogue in Contemporary India is not an end in itself. It is the means to an end, which is the restoration of liberal values in our public life. Perhaps the time is now opportune to start thinking of others means to support the effort of the Indian Liberal Group. One such could perhaps be the emergence a political party based on liberal principles and values.

We have the economy moving in the direction that the Liberals have always advocated. But in all other areas of governance the situation has not improved much. For the Liberal a liberalised open economy is important but not in isolation. Liberal values have to permeate all areas of governance; and this is where the Indian Liberal Group has been seeking to push its message across. Hence the theme of this 2nd National Convention - 'Accountability in Governance'. This Convention, in addition to issues relating to the economy will be discussing such matters as the increasing number of suicides by farmers and the appalling state of the administration of justice. Even if the ILG comes up with liberal solutions - what we, in the ILG call Liberal Positions, to what extent can it put its views across and influence official policy?

How can the ILG help in making coalition politics more purposeful and effective and less self-centered, concerning itself in the main with political survival. Every political party in India other than the communists (it must be conceded), is personality-oriented. Is there,

in such an environment, political space for a Liberal Party? Can a party like the Swatantra Party (though not necessarily a revival of the Swatantra Party) be able to secure even a handful of seats in the Lok Sabha. And what about the State Assemblies? For, it must be accepted that we are moving towards a federal structure with states playing an increasing role in determining not only policies in their own states but influencing the complexion and policies of governments at the Centre.

Should the Liberals form a new party assuming the Representation of the People Act is amended to remove the insistence on political parties explicitly swearing allegiance to socialism? Ideally the answer should be in the affirmative. Very difficult but not impossible.

More importantly what kind of a party should such a Liberal Party be? In the first place it should be founded by those who believe in the Liberal philosophy. And what may such a philosophy be? Central to the Liberal philosophy of such a party would be its belief in the freedom and the liberty of the individual vis a vis the State and society. The system that enables the individual to make his or her own choices and live a life in dignity and a society based on the Rule of Law. This is the core belief that unites all liberals.

In economic affairs such a party swears by the dictum 'the business of the State is government, not business' even while accepting the proposition that the business of State includes not only the maintenance of law and order and safeguarding the country's security, within and without, but also accepting responsibility for providing social services like primary education, primary health care and the provision of basic needs like potable water for drinking and infrastructure like roads, railways, bridges and the like. At the same time the Liberal position does not accept a state monopoly but private sector organisations and enterprises will equally be entitled to participate in such social services.

Is there room for such a party in the emerging pattern of coalition politics in India? Until

recently it was my view this is not the opportune time; but in the last few months I have started thinking differently. Why? I think it is crucial for the early emergence of a party wedded to the liberal philosophy as soon as possible before parliamentary democracy collapses due to unprincipled political opportunism on the one hand and the subversion of the system by criminals and gangsters, on the other.

Apart from a belief in liberal values, the new Liberal party has to be founded and led by the young and, in any event not by full time politicians who have no independent means of income. This should be the starting point. While the Indian Liberal Group cannot and should not convert itself into a political party because it comprises of members from different parties and a majority who do not belong to any party, there is nothing wrong if it takes on the role of being a midwife to help the creation of a Liberal party. If the process starts today it would take two or three years to actually establish such a party and another five to ten years before the party makes its presence felt in parliament and the state legislatures. It has to be materially different not only in ideological content but must have the courage not to sacrifice its principles for the sake of power. As Rajaji so often reminded members of the party he founded - Power should chase such a party of liberals and not the other way around.

The ILG can help in two ways:

1. Begin the task of drafting a set of policies around which a party can be formed , and,
2. Identify and train potential leaders for such a party who would motivated by values and the public interest and not private gain.

Based on an address at the inaugural session of the Second National Convention of the Indian Liberal Group, Mangalore, February 18, 2005.)