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Party Forum

The Middle Ground

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THE present government in Delhi has been an indecisive one, incapable of taking the vital decisions that are needed to deal with the country's basic problems. The result is that the country has been drifting, its course being turned this way or that by pressure from various sides. The Prime Minister has shown a capacity to vacillate and procrastinate in regard to matters of public policy which do not directly affect the continuance of her party in office. The result is that important decisions on economic issues are constantly delayed.

The inability to maintain order and the abdication of one of the primary functions of government is another instance of the kind of dithering to which I refer. It is only in matters that bear on the continuance in office of her party that the Prime Minister has shown dynamism which would have been more welcome in a better cause and, indeed, the beginnings of an authoritarian temper which bodes ill for our democracy.

Blanket Mandate

The basic issues in this election are two-fold. The first is the blanket mandate that the Prime Minister seeks to secure from the electorate to make such changes in the Constitution as are necessary and to truncate the Fundamental Rights embodied in it. In regard to this, she is completely out of court since, under our Constitution, no such mandate can be obtained by her. The Fundamental Rights are not capable of truncation by Parliament, whether with or without an electoral mandate. What is clear, however, is the intention to wreck the Constitution, whenever it comes in the

way of the government of the day. The *Hindustan Times* foresaw this when, as far back as October 1, 1970, it commenced an editorial article with the words: "Whether Mrs Gandhi knows it or not, she is busily engaged in conjunction with the Naxalites in wrecking the Indian Constitution."

The Swatantra Party is pledged to protect our democratic Constitution and to resist attempts to destroy it or to impair the independence of the judiciary which is the custodian of the Constitution and of the rights and liberties of the citizen.

The other main issue is whether or not the present Government should continue in office. It is the Swatantra Party's view that the policies followed by the present Government are disastrous and that, without a change of government, no improvement in the miserable lot of the Indian people is possible. Twenty years of so-called "socialism" of the wrong kind have made a mess of our affairs. When the Planning Commission met in Delhi last October, its findings were summarized in a report in the *Economic Times* as follows:

"During the last two and a half years several imbalances have developed in the economy, the most important being a sharp price rise, acute shortage of cement, unabated growth of unemployment and inflationary pressures."

More shocking still are the conclusions recently published in the 22nd round of the National Sample Survey. This official document reveals that the per capita expenditure of the Indian masses, whether rural or urban, has not experienced any improvement over the last twelve years ending 1963. In 1967-68, 70 per cent of

the rural masses were in the lowest category of the absolutely poor with an average per capita consumption per month of Rs 40 or Rs 1.33 per day. The interesting thing is that in 1960-61, only 52 per cent of the rural people were in this lowest category. The proportion of this rural proletariat went up from 53 per cent in 1960-61 to 70 per cent in 1967-68, thereby testifying to the achievements of 'socialism.' This is the result of the Second and Third Five-year Plans.

Excessive Controls

A drastic change in policy which would liberate the economy which is enmeshed in miles of red tape and shackled by excessive controls is thus urgently called for. This cannot be secured without a change in government.

Surely we may expect intelligent socialists in India who wish to move with the times to share the twentieth century approach to socialism that is ours. Socialists in other parts of the world are already doing so. Some years ago we published a little folder called "Who is Outdated?" which carried in parallel columns the Swatantra Party Programme of August 1959 and the Godesberg Programme of the German Social Democratic Party of November 1959. Here, we find a most remarkable fact—that the German socialists had accepted, without knowing it of course, almost the entire programme of the Swatantra Party of India! They had discarded their Marxist baggage because it had become an encumbrance. And they had gone before the German people with a paraphrase of the Swatantra Party programme and on that they have come to power under Mr Willy Brandt, who is Chancellor of West Germany today.

It is against this background that we readily accepted the re-

solution of the AICC of the Opposition Congress of June 28, 1970 which offered a programme in which nationalist, democratic and socialist parties in India could come together. We readily accepted it not because it is anti-socialist but because it is a pragmatic programme which a Liberal or a Conservative or Democratic Socialist could equally happily accept. It is an open-ended programme shedding isms and biases.

Indeed, we have gone further. On January 8 this year we decided, despite the unfortunate decision by the other parties concerned, not to have an agreed minimum programme, to adhere to June 23 resolution and the programme it contains which was accepted by us and by the Jana Sangh. It thus constitutes the middle ground of Indian politics on which the major parties can stand together. This programme should have been, and could still be, the agreed programme of action of an alternative government in New Delhi. That is why we decided on this self-denying ordinance and have denied ourselves the luxury of our own distinctive manifesto.

The Swatantra Party rejects the label sought to be attached to it by those who can only think in meaningless terms like "left or right." The Swatantra Party is neither "left" nor "right." We echo the thought of an outstanding liberal in Asia, Carlos Romulo, who was for some years the President of the United Nations General Assembly. Later, when he functioned as a University President in the Philippines, he was heckled by some Communist students who asked him for a declaration of his policy. "Mr President, are you going left or right?" they asked. "Neither," answered Romulo, "I am going forward."

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