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A Question of Broken Pledges

MY friend and successor as General Secretary of the Swatantra Party, Mr. N. Dandekar, told the Press some time back that I was 'adamant' in adhering to my resignation from the National Executive and Central Parliamentary Board of the Party. As it happens, the reasons why I am adamant are of relevance not only to the Party to which I belong but, it appears to me, to all political parties in India today. These considerations may, therefore, be of general interest to the public.

The debacle in the Gujarat Swatantra Party in the recent election to the Rajya Sabha was nothing unique but largely representative of the disintegration that has set in, one way or another, in all parties. In an article entitled "Swatantra—the Credibility Gap" in the Swarajya Annual on January

26 this year I had warned against developments precisely such as this. The demoralization within parties represented by defections, breach of faith, indiscipline and the selling of votes and seats is in its turn leading more people to be disillusioned with politicians of all kinds.

In West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh, many intelligent people, quite frankly, do not want early elec-

In this article Mr M. R. Masani M.P. explains why he resigned as General Secretary of the Swatantra Party.

tions and the restoration of Party Government. They say they are much happier under Governor's rule which gives them clean administration and interferes least with their personal lives. If this trend continues, such a feeling might spread to more and more parts of the country until it envelops the entire nation. The implications for the future of democracy and our Constitution of such a state of mind are not very difficult to imagine. If our entire Parliamentary system collapses and is replaced by some form of authoritarianism as in Pakistan, Indonesia, and Greece, what price the Swatantra Party or, for that matter, any other party?

Party's Debacle

It was against this backdrop and with these considerations in mind that I had to take a decision when Mr Dandekar wrote to me conveying the wish of my colleagues in the National Executive of the Swatantra Party that I should withdraw my resignation. For reasons explained in my reply to Mr Dandekar which has been released to the Press, I had sadly to come to the conclusion that the announcement regarding disciplinary action was mere eyewash and that there was an ostrich-like refusal to face the nature and implications of the debacle at both the National and Gujarat State levels within my Party. That attitude is not only unfortunate from the ethical angle but shows a lack of political acumen in so far as the failure to take action towards restoring the shattered credibility of the Party in Gujarat is concerned. There was also in evidence an appeasement of indiscipline which would lead to the Balkanization of the party.

Not that other parties concerned in the incident have behaved any better. The Congress Party in the Gujarat Assembly quite

shamelessly announced that they would cast their second preference votes for whoever stood against the official candidate of the Swatantra Party. How creditable it would have been if the Chief Minister had instead extended his moral support to the Leader of the Opposition by joining in defeating the attempted breach of faith with an independent public figure of the Gandhian persuasion and had gone on to express the hope that some day the Swatantra Party might be in a position to reciprocate the gesture in the interests of clean politics and democratic discipline?

My Friend, Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee, told the Press in Rajkot on April 13 that the General Secretary of the Gujarat Swatantra Party had seen him in order to discuss joining the Jan Sangh along with some MLAs of the Swatantra Party. He mentioned that the talks would be resumed later. How wonderful it would have been had he rapped the gentleman in question on the knuckles and reported the incident, not to the Press, but to the Leader of the Swatantra Party in Parliament as an act of inter-oppositional solidarity?

It is of course not much use trying to reform other people's parties. We must "turn the searchlight inwards," as Gandhiji would have suggested and put our own respective houses in order.

I would not like my Party to develop the same cynicism about the sanctity of its pledged word and the same contempt for the electorate that the ruling party has been showing. People are hankering for a little idealism and ethics in our politics. The Swatantra Party could supply these if it made up its mind to do so I hope it will not be long before the Party comes to appreciate that having a few spokesmen in whom the people have faith is even more important than adding to the number of its MPs and MLAs.

Leadership Lacking

India suffers today from lack of leadership all round. While it is true that every country gets the government it deserves, I cannot help feeling that the Indian people deserve somewhat better leadership than they are getting. The root of the evil lies in the fact that most of the leaders of all political parties practise what Lenin aptly described as "tailism." A young friend of mine was provoked by this phenomenon to suggest that they should all be presented with a copy of Kennedy's book, Profiles in Courage! It is obvious that this kind of leadership, if it can be called that, has not done these parties

or the country any good. A sounder concept of leadership would be one that links leadership of a Party with an acceptance by the Party of the approach and policies of the leader. This acceptance should however, come from the heart and should not be one which is imposed by pressure, mechanical majorities or considerations of expediency.

Not Conditional

My resignation, as I explained then, was an act of atonement for the Party breaking its pledged word. It was not a conditional resignation calculated to influence the Party into taking action in any particular direction. If my resignation has challenged the conscience of some of my colleagues and provided a ray of hope to the general public, it will not have been entirely in vain.