

East polls signals end of free and fair elections – Ranil

I was amused to read the above statement by Leader of Opposition Ranil Wickremasinghe.

I like to find out when Sri Lanka had a free and fair election after the 1977 General Election.

The rot began with the Scandalous Referendum of 1983 to extend the term of the then Parliament by six years.

Viswa Warnapala has written a well documented book on the referendum.

It was the most vulgar and criminal exploitation of the ballot.

Polling agents in Attanagalle were pulled out from stations and assaulted. JR gave the green light to do anything to win it.

Incidents similar to Attanagalle were seen all over the island.

The 1988 Presidential Election was again a violent one with several SLFP organizers killed on the day before and the day of the election. I was the SLFP organizer for



Police carry their belongings as they report for election duty at the main vote counting office in Batticaloa March 9, 2008. The island nation held local elections in the eastern district of Batticaloa, on Monday.

Panadura.

I was a near victim when gunmen shot at me and my wife on the 18th of December, 1988. Eight of my supporters were killed, including the Secretary of the SLFP Youth League and my driver: It was a UNP government and they did nothing to arrest the culprits.

My wife and I escaped while the assassins were following us and shooting.

Was that a fair and free election? After that, the General Election under President D. B. Wijetunga was free of intimidation and violence.

I am sure that a flawed election in the Eastern Province is better than no election. The people of the East, who have been denied their human rights for over 20 years, now have a chance of taking the first step to democracy.

Dr. Neville Fernando
Former Member of Parliament, Panadura.

Teachers of the disabled – are they outcasts?

The Island of 07/03 carries on page one the pathetic story of teachers of the disabled of the Western Province PC who are paid an allowance of only Rs. 3000/- per month. Among them is a teacher who has taught mentally retarded children for twelve years on this allowance.

These teachers have undergone special training and are a class of specialist teachers. Their job is far more difficult and strenuous than those who teach normal children. Hence, like other teachers, they should have been absorbed into the permanent cadre on an incremental salary scale with a travelling allowance because they have to travel to places where disabled children are housed.

Politicians shout themselves hoarse on the need to do our best to make the lives of the disabled happy. But all successive govts. and ministers of education have failed to look after the welfare of the teachers who teach the disabled. And what have the teachers' unions, that go on strike and fast opposite Isurupaya at the drop of a hat, done for these teachers? Sweet nothing!!

In Sri Lanka nothing gets done today without orders from the top. So, will the president look into the plight of these teachers throughout the country and ensure that they are absorbed into the permanent cadre with retrospective effect? They deserve it.

S. Abeywickrama,
Nugegoda.

English tutors

Many English tutors do not really want to get their students to speak in the target language in their so called 'Spoken English' classes.

Everybody is aware that students are charged high tuition fees by those tutors. But how many of these students are able to utter a few words in English?

As an experienced teacher of English working at a State school, I have carefully checked and found that only a very few tutors get their learners to speak a few words in English in their classes, although hundreds of 'spoken English' classes are conducted in Kalutara and the suburbs.

What these tuition masters do is that, nicely designed 'lesson notes' are distributed in very attractively printed file covers among the students. The poor students do not know that they have been taken for a ride by their tuition master. Is this what's called teaching of English? What's the use of having a file cover unless the students are made to express themselves? How can students learn to speak with the teacher in these heavily-crowded jam-packed classes of English?

I will never accept that a successful teaching-learning process takes place in these popular English classes. Those beautiful file covers or dictionaries given free of charge do not serve any purpose in learning English.

H. L. Sunil Shantha,
Kalutara.

25th Anniversary - Lanka Electricity Company (LECO)

Seeing a banner near the Lanka Electricity Company office at Boralesgamuwa, announcing the 25th Anniversary of the organisation, my thoughts went back to the year 1982. It would be interesting for the readers to know how the idea of forming the Lanka Electricity Company originated.

Prior to 1982, and from the inception of the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) or much earlier, the Department of Electrical Undertakings (DGEU), the supply of electricity was done by Local Government Authorities - The Urban Councils (UCs) Town Councils (TCs) etc., under the Ministry of Local Government. They were termed Licences in terms of the Electricity Act and every year they had to renew their licenses, paying a fee. The electricity thus sold in bulk to the licensees was retailed to the consumers on a tariff approved by the Ministry for Power and Energy. The monies so collected from consumers by the local authorities were remitted to the Ceylon Electricity Board, regularly. However, as time passed, the local authorities failed to remit, making use of the funds for other activities of the local authority, which made the CEB face a severe cash liquidity problem. Repeated requests and warnings by the CEB, even to the extent of discontinuing supply had no effect. Under these circumstances, the Ministry for Power and Energy had to find a way out. When the matter was brought to the notice of His Excellency the President J. R.



Jayewardena, who was also the Minister for Power and Energy, there were two suggestions made, either to disconnect the supplies or take over the supply by the CEB. I must mention here, that His Excellency, J. R. Jayewardena without any hesitation agreed to the disconnection of supply. A very drastic and disastrous action, specially when he was facing election to his second term of office. However, discretion being the better part of valour, the Secretary to the Ministry, Prof. K. K. Y. W. Perera, sensing the damage which would be caused, recommended the setting up of a special committee to look into possible alternatives. The committee comprised of Prof. K. K. Y. W. Perera, as Chairman, and members - R. Abeyratne Adl. Secretary, Ministry of Local Government, Housing and Construction, M. Somasunderam, Director, Public Enterprises, H. S.

Subasinghe General Manager, CEB and the Secretary to the Committee was P. B. N. Fernando, Deputy General Manager (Transmission CEB).

The Committee considered six options, one of which was for the CEB to take over and distribute electricity, which was considered unacceptable due to the work load which CEB had. Under the circumstances, the committee recommended the formation of an Electricity Distribution Company with Ceylon Electricity Board, Urban Development Authority and the Local Authorities participation. A Cabinet paper was submitted on the acceptance of the recommendations by his Excellency and thereafter, taking action to register the company under the Register of companies ordinance etc. The first General manager of this newly formed Company (LECO) was Mr. H. S. Subasinghe, who had just retired as General Manager of CEB. I am personally aware of the initial hardships he had to face to put this organisation on the right footing.

As a consumer who is served by LECO, I am personally happy about the efficient manner the company runs today, attending promptly to complaints, regular billings, handing over the bill on a specific date etc. It is hoped that LECO will continue with the good work.

G. A. D. Sirimal
Boralesgamuwa
(The writer is former Asst. Secretary SLAS, Ministry for Power and Energy)

Sri Lankan factory girls dismayed by government move

The Sri Lankan girls who toil in garment factories in Dubai and elsewhere in the Gulf have been dealt a mean blow by none other than our own Government. This has stung them into shock and disappointment.

Recently, the UAE government declared that minimum wages be fixed for all girls working in garment factories. Accordingly, in January this year, the minimum wage of Sri Lankan workers in all Gulf countries, was revised in accordance with the value of each country's currency and its per capita income. The Sri Lankan Government had fixed the minimum wages at DhS.825 (Approx. Rs.24,750.00) for Sri Lankan garment factory workers in Dubai, but has suddenly made a startling u-turn on the decision and gone back

to its earlier pay scale, which ranges between DhS.450 and 600. It is reported that factory owners from various Countries had approached the Sri Lankan Consulate here, pleading to revert to the earlier scale, and promptly they complied! At this stage I do not want to make any tempting utterances about the decision of the Consulate and the State, to go with the factory owners rather than stand by our girls.

The factory owners say the Sri Lankan government's decision made business sense, as extra hours put in by workers bring their salary to DhS.825. Besides, they argue that these workers have to work only for minimum eight hours unlike the maids! Also they say food and lodging is provided, and that the present cost of production is very high

and it is not feasible to run a factory at higher salary scales. Meanwhile a Sri Lankan factory girl has conveyed to a local Newspapers here, that she has been working in a factory for 7 long years and her salary has remained a mere DhS.400.

I presume many others could well be in similar situations.

I find the arguments of the factory owners rather wobbly. Providing food and lodging for workers and 8 hour working days are regular factory policies that are in force in many establishments, in accordance with labour laws. What I cannot comprehend is, why the government of Sri Lanka, who should be fighting for the rights and perks of the Sri Lankan workers are taking the side of the factory owners. It is the duty of our State to see to the

welfare of these poor workers, who bring in much needed money into the country. All other countries have approved new wages for their workforces except Sri Lanka! Enhanced wages for these workers will not only bring in more foreign exchange into the country but make the lives of these workers and their families a little bit more comfortable, what with the astronomical cost of living strangling the poor and the middle class!

As for the factory owners, sure, their production costs will rise but that is not going to bring them to their knees. Also, is it not better to have a smiling, content workforce who may help increase production than have dismayed grumpy workers?

Amarnath Paul,
Dubai.

'Sacrifice' and consent

It was interesting to read Prof. M. Sivasuriya's ideas (21st January) on the above. It was novel thinking by the learned professor.

With regard to 'consent', the animal's body-language is quite convincing As the butcher approaches, it senses him. The poor thing would run or buck, if it's tethered. One could see this at the licenced abattoir in

Welisara where even buffaloes are slaughtered in spite of the rule against it.

The last few lines were both right and hilarious: "Why sacrifice poor me? take your kith and kin". He really hit the target, bulls eye! I wish he'd write more to The Island.

Tudor Wickremasinghe,
Colombo 9.



A fate worse than terrorism or death

Life has a beginning and an end. So does terrorism. It has a beginning and an end. But in a country, corruption has no beginning and no end.

Look at the situation in our country.

1. There is the COPE report on corruption in many state institutions

2. There is the VAT Scam

3. PAYE SCAM in CEB

4. There is the 'Waters Edge' deal, Thavakkal deal, selling of Air Lanka and Ceylon Oxygen and many other questionable deals by the former president

5. The Fertilizer corporation deals recently reported

Not a day passes without a report of a massive fraud in some dept, some corporation. Most corrupt deals involve ministers or

institutions under them. I have simply lost count of them. There is rampant corruption all round us involving public funds. There is gross waste of public funds by ministries and depts. And corporations. There are lavish parties at state expense. There are celebrations and events at state expense involving millions. Just the other day it was revealed that a press conference cost the state one million. Who cares? Not the president, or the cabinet, or the secretary to the treasury. THEY ARE SILENT. No voices are raised in parliament except by the JVP, COPE and the auditor general.

I have heard that no prosecutions can be brought in the case of the Minister of Sports and its officials involved in a big foreign visa

racket. The police, I'm told, has been instructed not to question the Minister. No prosecution could be brought because there is insufficient evidence.

In the case against ex-Air Force officer Gajanayake, also it is said there is insufficient evidence. This seems to be a pattern that is developing - most bribery and corruption cases fail due to insufficient evidence. The politicians would interfere with the police and not allow them to gather evidence. Or the culprits are allowed to escape abroad. Interpol is not being asked to arrest these million dollar crooks who have stolen state funds.

With this new ruse of the government - of having no evidence to proceed with prosecutions, the government will let corrupt offi-

cial and politicians escape the courts. If the practice of bribery and corruption continues unchecked, we would win against terrorists but in the long-term we will lose the battle against elimination of corruption. Sri Lanka will be a haven for corruption and bribery and we would go from being poor to one of the poorest nations in the world. Remember we have one million households or 4.5 million people below the poverty line. A recent report which says that there has been a 50 percent reduction in wheat flour consumption does not mean the people are eating 50 percent more rice - which is even more expensive. Many people are not eating at all and are therefore starving.

The government penchant for

extravagance is stupefying. Much of the expenditure is for personal comforts - duty free cars, pensions, housing, allowances, insurance and trips abroad, subsidized meals etc. The President does not check waste, himself engaging in wasteful expenditure.

To let public servants who were corrupt to escape, Basil Rajapaksa, the President's younger brother in his first meeting in COPE, said that most of these seemingly corrupt practices were either due to negligence or carelessness on the part of public officials. He is thus setting the stage once again to exonerate corrupt public servants and officials from. It appears that the government is frightened of investigations into corruption.

How convenient it is to say that

there is insufficient evidence in B&C cases. Firstly you can ask police not to collect evidence, secondly you can suppress the evidence if collected. The chances are that before going to court the court action is thwarted.

There is a distinct feeling in the country that the government and particularly the President is silent on B&C, thus encouraging it. The latest is the unwarranted removal of the DG of the B&C Commission. Justice Ismail, President of the Bribery Commission said that clearly it is an attempt to stop ongoing prosecutions for B&C.

We have a right to ask why the President is soft on B&C. Is something in his past haunting him?

Dr Rohan de Silva,
Boralesgamuwa.