

## **The SLFP Proposals: The Slap in the Face and the Shot in the Arm**

**Dr Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu**

The international spotlight is upon us yet again and this time against the backdrop of the third successful outing of the LTTE air force, the “mountain moved and produced a mouse” SLFP proposals and the House of Commons debate on Sri Lanka. US Under Secretary of State for South Asia Richard Boucher will be here this week, along with the Archbishop of Canterbury, a member of the House of Lords, and most members of the IIGEP as well. It is to be expected that the twin Achilles’ heels of the government – human rights and proposals for a political settlement of the ethnic conflict along power sharing lines, will be further exposed in and by these visits. No doubt, the “offence is the best form of defence”, defence will be used to assure the faithful about the unflinching and furious defence of national sovereignty. Beneath it all, however, the fundamental truth remains undisturbed. As this columnist has opined, be it either a straight forward case of mala fide and of deliberately misleading all and sundry or simply one of a missing gene in the cognitive make up of this government, on the human rights and political settlement fronts its perspective and position – policy being a concept beyond it - is best described as antediluvian. No pun intended, given the recent weather.

The SLFP proposals – the proposals of the principal party in government and the party of the president amply illustrate this. And this story is not over yet – in deference to the moral outrage and shocked sensibilities of the JVP and the JHU, the proposals will explicitly include the honourable mention of the “unitary state” before being officially submitted to the APRC. The President himself, it is reported, is on the case. Earlier, it was reported, that a SLFP response to the Tissa Vitharna report was rejected by the President and Mr Gomin Dayasiri instructed to come up with something nearer the heart’s desire, wit and understanding of the SLFP Central Committee – for which read His Excellency. The result of this Herculean labour, whether it be by one apparatchik or more, has been a nostalgic rewinding of the political and constitutional reform clock, two and a half decades back to district councils and then a further rewinding to the Senate of the Soulbury era ! And now the challenge thrown to the rest of us, international community included – is to pinch ourselves back to the present and decide as to whether this mind bogglingly paltry offering must be taken seriously or dismissed out of hand and exposed for the absurdity and anachronism it is.

Governments have to take other governments seriously, most of the time, or else international relations will flounder. Citizens don’t have to, but unfortunately we in Sri Lanka have an unhealthy respect and fear of our government. Anything and everything it pronounces is endowed with good intention and constructive purpose – few are willing to expose the nakedness of the emperor. The real issue therefore is as to whether this can be allowed to continue and the responsibility for salvation laid solely and squarely at the feet of the international community. Mr Boucher and the Indian government in particular, given the latter’s statements of the need for proposals that constituted the August 2000

constitution plus, have to impress upon this government the seriousness of what is at stake – no one can or should be, taken for a ride anymore.

Of course, these proposals are not supposed to be the end of the story. There are other proposals from other parties to be submitted to the APRC and the final product presumably will reflect all of them and thereby be saved from irrelevance and absurdity. Voices have already been raised by other political parties and civil society actors in protest and some individuals are at pains to say that these are proposals for negotiation, ironically not unlike the LTTE position on its ISGA proposals - the mirror image of which these seem to be. It still remains to be seen as to whether **this** government will go to the negotiating table with any proposals other than these in terms of their fundamentals – unitary state, blatant centralization, deliberate neglect or honest incomprehension of the roots of the ethnic conflict. Lest we forget, staying in power and holding on to it for as long as possible is the imperative; sharing it is not. The JVP and the JHU know this of this president and the LTTE, only too well. He has confirmed Mr Prabhakaran's telling point, made in the 2005 annual Heroes' Day Speech, about his incomprehension of this conflict.

It is surely not unfair to see these proposals, with reference to the unitary state included, as reflecting the mindset of the president. Consequently, the polite and optimistic gloss on this is that they should be seen as the opening gambit in a set of negotiations in which the other set of proposals will be the ISGA and the Tissa Vitharna report. The negotiations will therefore be a serious interaction and the result, a product of hard bargaining across the spectrum of political opinion as regards a political settlement. The problem though with this interpretation is that any set of negotiations must have agreement on fundamental assumptions and on a principled framework within which they can be located. Of the three, two go beyond the unitary state and the district precisely because these two are predicated upon the willingness and on the necessity of power sharing. The SLFP proposals, from the District Councils and Grama Raj to the Senate and the commissions mooted, have one clear purpose in mind – centralization.

Actually the SLFP proposals are founded on the assumption of military victory by the Sri Lankan state and in this respect the Rajapaksa SLFP has not been dishonest or disingenuous. This is what is to follow, three years down the line when all the LTTE planes and airstrips have been destroyed, its military power “degraded” and the North and East liberated, as our straight talking Defence Secretary would have it. The real slap in the face constituted by these proposals is not to the pretensions of the LTTE or indeed to the aspirations of the Tamil people, but to the pride and perspectives of the anti –LTTE Tamil political representation spanning Anandasangaree to Devananda , the ex-militants and Karuna who have stood with the government as conscience, ally and asset. They have been cynically ignored as only those who are dependent and without power and those who have outlived their usefulness, can be.

Is there any representative of any smidgeon of Tamil political opinion who honestly and honourably can support these proposals? Likewise the Muslim polity. Does the Sri Lanka Freedom Party care about Tamil and Muslim opinion? Is there anyone within that

party with the guts to stand up and say that it does and as a consequence cannot accept this absurd reaffirmation of majoritarianism? Mr Samaraweera for one, surely cannot play the reluctant debutante now, his intimacy with the JVP notwithstanding? Can he, will he, deny the August 2000 draft constitution of his political mentor, the former president? Is it too dangerous and foolhardy to do this, now?

President Rajapaksa is effecting the overthrow of all the assumptions that were taken for granted with regard to conflict resolution and transformation – negotiation with the LTTE, political settlement, power sharing, the unit even of devolution, merger. Whatever he and his brother manage to do to the LTTE militarily, politically, they are well on their way to ensuring that it will live and thrive.

The SLFP proposals are both a slap in the face to the opponents of the LTTE within and without the Tamil polity, as they are a shot in the arm to the LTTE itself.