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The Left and the 1972 Constitution: Marxism and State Power



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The drafting of the 1972 Republican Constitution was dominated by the larger than life figure of Dr Colvin R. de Silva (hereafter Colvin), renowned lawyer and brilliant orator, neither of which counts for much for the purposes of this chapter. Colvin was also co-leader with Dr N.M. Perera (hereafter NM) of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), and that is the heart of the matter. Although it was known, rather proudly till recently in the party, as ‘Colvin’s Constitution,’ this terminology is emblematic; no, not just a Colvin phenomenon,¹ it was a constitution to which the left parties, that is the LSSP and the Communist Party (CP), were inextricably bound. They cannot separate themselves from its conception, gestation and birth; it was theirs as much as it was the child of Mrs Bandaranaike.

Neither can the left wholly brush aside the charge that its brainchild facilitated, to a degree, the enactment of a successor, the 1978 J.R. Jayewardene (hereafter JR) Constitution, which iniquity has yet to be exorcised a quarter of a century later. However, even sans this predecessor but with his 5/6th parliamentary majority, JR who had long been committed to a presidential system would in any case have enacted much the same constitution. But overt politicisation, dismantling of checks and balances, and the alienation of the Tamil minority afforded JR a useful platform to launch out from.

The relationship of one constitution to the other is not my subject; my task is the affiliation of the LSSP-CP, their avowed Marxism, and the strategic thinking of the leaders to a constitution that can, at least in hindsight, be euphemistically described as controversial. But that is precisely where the quintessential paradox lies. The absurdity, the impossible contradiction, is that historically it was the left that had for thirty-five previous years championed democracy and led the popular classes against authoritarian power; it was the left that stood against the dictatorial excesses of the state; it was the left that had spoken truth to power. Squaring off this legacy with the 1972 Constitution and its aftermath is a

¹ Colvin R de Silva: “I believe in the secular state. But you know when Constitutions are made by Constituent Assemblies they are not made by the Minister for Constitutional Affairs”; “The Constitution was not my own product.” C.R. de Silva (1987) *Safeguards for the Minorities in the 1972 Constitution* (Colombo: Young Socialist): pp.10, 12

paradox that has baffled many. The relationship of the left to the 1972 Constitution is intertwined with its perception of state power and hence the unfolding of its coalition project with the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP).²

The purpose of this chapter is to examine this perplexing conundrum, and it requires, as an introduction, a careful look at two matters: reflecting on the theoretical foundations of the LSSP, that is, its Marxism; what kind of Marxism was its Marxism? And second, a review of the class dynamics of postcolonial society; changes in socio-economy in the postcolonial world and Lanka, and the left's perceptions thereof. These readings led the Old Left to make certain commitments in respect of the transformation of the state and the road to socialism; that is the heart of the matter. Therefore, an examination of specific articles of the constitution is quite beside the point for the purposes of this chapter; this is well looked after in other portions of this volume.

Setting the Theoretical Stage

The *Communist Manifesto* (CM)³ resonated in the timbre of the young men and women who gathered on 18th December 1935 to found the LSSP and who in the early years took their bearings from its compass. The notion of the living presence of the past is borrowed from Paul Sweezy's 1953 work *The Present as History*,⁴ which locates the present as a process in which the past meets possibilities pregnant in the future. This is just what happened in the hallways of constitution-making in 1972. I will also borrow, as a point of departure, three of the five principles (historical

² "We seek your mandate to permit the Members of Parliament you elect to function simultaneously as a Constituent Assembly to draft, adopt and operate a new Constitution. This Constitution will declare Ceylon to be a free, sovereign and independent Republic pledged to realise the objectives of a socialist democracy; and it will also secure fundamental rights and freedoms to all citizens." United Front Manifesto (1970): para.1.

³ By far the best version, including commentaries, analysis and interpretations, is the Norton edition edited by Fredric L. Bender. K. Marx & F. Engels (1848) *The Communist Manifesto* (Ed. F.L. Bender (1988), New York: W.W. Norton).

⁴ P.M. Sweezy (1953) *The Present as History* (New York: Monthly Review Press).

materialism, class struggle, nature of capitalism, inevitability of socialism, and the road to socialism) into which Sweezy partitions *CM* in his *The Communist Manifesto After 100 Years*.⁵ How does the oldest, and for many decades central political entity in this country, the LSSP, measure up on these counts? The story of the relationship of the Old Left to the 1972 Constitution should begin with an examination of their Marxism measured on three of these axes – historical materialism, the class struggle and the road to socialism. This is the first segment of this chapter.

Sweezy does not include the state in his centenary summary of the *CM* since Marx explored it later in life in the context of the 1851 *coup d'état* of Napoleon III in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*,⁶ the Paris Commune in *The Civil War in France*,⁷ and the framework of *Capital*. In the second segment of this chapter I will deal with the key to grasping the left's involvement in coalition politics and constitution-making; how it saw, measured and intervened in the making and changing of state power. One question is whether there was theoretical weakness in the party's relationship to Marx's revolutionary dialectics of the state. Was there a deficiency in the use of historical materialism, or was it an unusually bad conjuncture of adverse local and global events in the early 1970s that scuttled a grand, and at first sight rational, project? The reason for the failure of the project is my concluding segment.

A feature of this chapter is that I write as an insider, someone who was wrapped up in the story, one way or the other, for the last sixty years. As a youngster I was drawn to the LSSP by the 1953 *Hartal* and later participated as an undergraduate at the momentous 1964 Party Conference. I was among the founding protagonists of the internal *Vāma* (Left) faction that opposed coalition politics in the early 1970s and was expelled in 1975 into

⁵ P.M. Sweezy, 'The Communist Manifesto After 100 Years' (1949) *Monthly Review* August 1949.

⁶ K. Marx (1852) *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, available at: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/> (last accessed, 14th September 2012).

⁷ K. Marx (1871) *The Civil War in France*, available at: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/index.htm> (last accessed, 14th September 2012).

the NSSP. I am now a partner in groups that are heirs of the LSSP and I share common ground with movements like the LSSP's Left Tendency. Hence there is an inner Marxist and *Samasamajist* consistency in the road that I have traversed and in the telescope through which I gaze. I intend to exploit this vantage in writing this chapter.

From my vantage as an insider there is a misconception that I must lay to rest at the outset; it is sometimes said that the left now in government – the LSSP, CP and Democratic Left Front (DLF) allied to the SLFP in the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) – is an extension of the 1970 to 1975 experience. Nothing could be further from the truth. The project the Old Left undertook was the ambitious one of attempting to transform the state and lay the foundations for socialism. Yes, they failed, but the gravity of the task they set themselves and journey they set out on, was one of revolutionary proportions. Revolutionary, not by the Leninist yardstick of the instrument of transformation, but revolutionary by the Marxist measure of the intention to transform state and society. Today's UPFA-Left inhabits a different universe.⁸

The Marxism of the LSSP: Historical Materialism

There is nothing in Marxism that has better stood the test of time than its foundation in historical materialism. "Man's ideas, views and conceptions change with every change in the conditions of his material existence, his social relations and his social life" (*CM*).

⁸ The actors in today's UPFA-Left, as political personages and left intellectuals, are but a shadow of the men and women of yore, but this is not the point. The project, actually the absence of one, is the stunning difference between today and 1970-75. The Old Left was rooted in a strategic perspective, it intended to change the world it was living in; it intended to carry through a gigantic task. Today's UPFA-Left is simply there; idle bodies without vision, perspective or purpose. It cannot shift the behaviour of the Rajapaksa government by one millimetre. Realisation of the caricature status of these leaders has inspired a turn to NM hagiography in articles, websites and conversation. I cannot imagine that generation subsisting on portfolios. They erred or ran out of luck, strategically, but the perks of office, a different and crasser sort of materialism, was not the stuff they were made of!

This is the scaffolding on which all modern economic, political and social discourse is constructed. Paradoxically, even grotesque neo-liberalism, with crass crudity, refocused the same message in the final quarter of the twentieth century. The way society lives determines how it thinks; the principal ideas of every age flow from material, social and class struggles; the roots of ethnic conflict in Lankan minds lie buried in conflicts and jealousies over possessions and positions with consequences for the very nature of the state; constitutions are made not to expound men's ideas in the principles of constitution-making but as manifest expressions of conflicts in society. There are many ways of making the point. This mode of thought has soaked not only into social thought but also, like mathematics, into all science.

Yes, historical materialism forever changed politics, economics and sociology and has now seeped into science. All discourse on society and the relationship between society and nature bears its imprimatur. Furthermore, though the term 'systems theory' did not emerge till the twentieth century – in cybernetics and automatic control, far removed from Marx's domain – he was its *de facto* creator. Systems theory is about interactions within and between complex configurations that influence each other, such as, in his case, the economic, political, ideological and military instances of a social whole. Structure, hierarchy, determined and determining, and the relative autonomy of subsystems, such relationships, though absent in the terminology of the times, underpins Marx's exploration of events and societies. He sought to think systems and the interaction between complex systems and subsystems, from immanent materialist foundations and prevailing social beliefs. In effect Marx founded systems theory, and his domain was the systematic study of society. A systems outlook is now taken for granted in the biological, environmental and physical sciences.

The discourse in *Capital* is about value as a category in production and exchange, about capital and accumulation, reproduction and technology, and about class struggles and social relations. These conceptions are examined in their interdependence as well as in

their relative independence, that is, as systemic processes.⁹ The discourse in *Capital* opens using what is called a logical-dialectic of presentation, but the body of the text alternates between logical and historical dialectical modes as needed. The leaders of the Old Left, though not self-conscious in those days of this manner of expression, made explicit by scholars in recent decades, were living through these thought processes in their political practices. Did they err, if it is agreed they erred, in the specific decisions they made within their Marxist intellectual apparatus, or were they the victims of great changes in the external world outside their control? This essay will allow that both propositions have merit, but it will eventually conclude that greater weight must be assigned to the external factor.

The historical materialist mode of thought, which permeated the LSSP till the demise of the old leaders, was clearest in Hector Abhayavardhana (Hector hereafter), who, to make a tangential comment, also best grasped the relationship between India and Lanka. Hector was a dialectical thinker, deeply sensitive to directions of change. He was also the first to see the significance as well as the hideous limitations of the rising petty bourgeoisie. But paradoxically and inexplicably this is where he and the left leadership slipped. If they were historical materialists *par excellence*, how come they slipped on the dialectic of the state in Lanka?

Let me dwell on this paradox. Well before NM's 1964 'coalition proposals' to the party, Hector saw the changing post-1956 class scene and pushed for an alignment with the SLFP. I remember as a teenager listening to disputations at home where LSSP pundits held forth on the inevitability, or conversely the impossibility ("Oh God what are you saying Hector!"), of governmental alliances.

⁹ Marx's dialectic differs from Hegel's in two respects: first, the well known 'standing on the head' or the substitution of the material world for Hegel's ideal world where the dialectic moves in the realm of thought and ideas. The second difference is not so widely recognised but equally important: Hegel's dialectic is the movement of an immanent whole, Marx's is more loosely structured, the movement of different process with dependence and relative independence, or what I have called a systems point of view in this essay. See also K. David, 'Hegel's and Marx's Dialectics Revisited', *The Sunday Island*, 29th April 2012, available at: http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=50656 (last accessed: 14th September 2012).

His case was historical materialist; the abstract terminology was absent, but the debates I watched in awe were framed in concrete class, social and historical materialist categories. The debate was about a bourgeois that had failed to unify the nation and rise to national leadership, the small influence and semi-rural nature of the working class, the preponderance and power of the petty bourgeoisie in backward countries, about capital, the world context, and about imperialism.

None can say LSSP thinking lacked originality, sensitivity or was lax on social dynamics. Nor was coalition politics something the LSSP and CP rushed into without debate; it was debated hotly from mid-1960 to the fateful 1964 LSSP Conference; it was a debate in which the Paris-based Fourth International intervened many times and Gerry Healy of a rival UK-based entity travelled to Colombo and stood outside the conference hall demanding admission that he was refused.

The Old Left included historical materialists but there was no shortage of theorists of the state. However, from the early stages of coalition government something was not quite right. Doric de Sousa, no mean intellect, more than once injected the notion of dual power into debates against *Vāma*, after the formation of Mrs Bandaranaike's (hereafter Mrs B) coalition government. The manifest absurdity of this, coming from Doric, was hard to believe. Glaring Bonapartism was inexplicably confused with dual power, which is a cleavage of the structures and instruments of state power. Territorial dual power was reality in the latter LTTE phase, but to describe conflicts in the coalition government triggered by the class contradictions (land reform, restrictions on foreign trade, handling the 1971 JVP insurrection) as dual power! This is no little error for a party like the then LSSP, which took its theoretical standpoints seriously.¹⁰

¹⁰ The party's historical materialism and its approach to state power seemed to have slipped on the revolutionary dialectic of the young Marx. "The philosophers have explained the world in various ways, the point however is to change it": Karl Marx (1845) *The Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach*, available at: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/index.htm> (last accessed, 14th September 2012). Brilliant though the disciples were, they fell well short of the genius of the master. If Marx met his pupils he would have had to remind them that the dialectic envisages an understanding of the

To be fair, let the historical materialist record show the profound social changes that the post-colonial period ushered in. It has been too much written about to need repetition, but a Marxist would emphasise changes in class and social relations over the cultural renaissance. A Marxist would focus on the rise of a national bourgeoisie, the role of the petty bourgeoisie in democratic enfranchised polities, the place of new political agents corresponding to these changes (in simpler words, the SLFP), and the politics of exclusion between the island's two main communities. This is not an only-Ceylon story, but spreads across all postcolonial nations and is lubricated by the explosive post-war boom that provided space and project aid (from Gal Oya to Aswan to Mahaweli). The Cold War allowed these nations to play both sides; it was the age of non-alignment, Nehru, Tito and Nasser.

Let the historical materialist record also show the profound shock waves that this phenomenal surge sent through the left. If "man's ideas, views and conceptions change with every change in the conditions of his material existence, his social relations and his social life," how could it be that now it bypassed the left and seemed palpably otherwise? This concern surfaced in 1956 but the shock hit in 1960. In March that year the LSSP sought to gain control of government by winning an election but when it went down in massive defeat, disillusionment with the former categories of discourse set in, and disputations about strategic alliances with the petty bourgeoisies commenced. Not many outside the LSSP know that if Mrs B had not secured a working majority in July 1960, May 1970 would have happened in July 1960; in any case it first happened, briefly, in June 1964.

Socialism, Class Struggle and Constitutions

It is necessary to backtrack a little because the issue is not only the state but also the socio-economic agenda, that is to say socialism. The LSSP was the agent that consolidated the working class

contradictions of the whole. The left had lost sight of the profound changes occurring in the outside world: globalisation and the reconstitution of global capitalism in neo-liberal raiment.

movement, and after the war the CP joined, in an important supportive role. From Mooloya, the Wellawatte Spinning and Weaving Mills, the GCSU, the 1948 General Strike, resisting the stripping of citizenship of Tamil plantation workers, to the great final episode the 1953 *Hartal*, the LSSP stood at the helm of the working class. The *Hartal* is particularly important, as certain Trotskyites have argued that it could have been taken forward to a revolutionary seizure of state power. Nonsense, there was no such possibility; the LSSP acted correctly in taking it forward to a point and then restraining it before it was crushed. The working class came out stronger thanks to the correct tactical handling of the *Hartal*; 1953 was still part of the gilded age.

In class terms, were the LSSP and CP too much the parties of the Anglicised middle-classes and too remote from the rising Sinhala-speaking petty bourgeoisie? Was the failure of the left located in the cultural and ideological domain? This was much debated post-1956 and post- Sinhala Only. I do not agree; the left could have pre-empted SWRD Bandaranaike only by embracing his programme, championing Sinhala and sharpening anti-Tamil sentiment. Recall that in socio-economics the left including Philip Gunawardena stood far ahead of the SLFP on industrialisation, nationalisation and non-aligned foreign policy. What was missing was chauvinism; to take SWRD's laurels would have needed snatching his programme, which thankfully the left resisted for another decade. Social progress and national unification did not reinforce, but opposed each other, in petty bourgeois culture.

Indeed a postcolonial cultural renaissance blossomed and reached new highs not only in Lanka but all over the world. However, racism, anti-secularism, and hostility to internationalisation were symbiotic with this upsurge. Naturally the swell of the petty bourgeois in the postcolonial world was accompanied by the ascendancy of this ideology. The left did not capitulate to Sinhala Only, rather, a reactionary culture, inimical to ethnic unification, but rooted in the socio-economic soil of the times defeated *Samasamajism*, the only real culture of national integration Lanka has ever known. Historical materialism was unkind to secular intellectual and leftist class hegemony in those days.

As a consequence the left was forced to share its dominant position in the working class with the SLFP. In Europe, despite defeats Labour, Communist and Social Democratic parties were never pushed out of their commanding positions in the trade unions by the alternative capitalist party. The reason is the difference in the character of the class itself. The real working class in this country for generations was in the plantations, cut off by space and race. The Sinhala urban working class was mixed with rural peoples and spaces; the *gama* (village), and constant physical, social and cultural overlap. The left leaders understood this existential reality and edged towards the judgement that there had to be a different way of transforming the state than laid down in the classical Trotskyite texts.¹¹

However, this creates a conundrum counterposing socialism and the road to socialism. In retrospect, was the left movement correct to explore other roads, the constitutional road to socialism, in alliance with a strident petty bourgeoisie? The left in Lanka was a socialist left, a new constitution and putative transformation of the state made sense only as a step to this objective. It is through the relationship of state and democracy to socialism that we enter the minds of the left leaders when they consented to write what was largely a bourgeois democratic constitution.

The Seductive Autonomy of the Democratic State

The relationship between the road to socialism and the relative autonomy of the bourgeois democratic state is the trickiest question confronting the left movement even today. The answer

¹¹ On a tangential matter, Trotsky argued that socialism was impossible except internationally, that is until advanced nations moved forward to a new dispensation. Stalinists (CP included), believed that Marx erred in saying socialism first needed a material basis of prosperity. Instead they saw socialism emerge, phoenix-like, from the Russian steppe and an East that was Red. An accident at the Berlin Wall and a neither-fish-flesh-nor-fowl Chinese state has landed them in an awkward fix! Trotsky did not err; both permanent revolution theory and the combined and uneven development thesis assert that the proletariat could capture state power in a backward country before it did so in an advanced nation, but warned that socialism would not follow. He explained tirelessly that socialism is impossible except internationally, that is impossible until advanced nations moved forward to a new dispensation.

NM and his comrades gave to this question is the point of transition from the first to the second segments of this chapter: the transition from historical materialism, class politics and the road to socialism, to the practices of alliance and coalition politics.

The capitalist mode of production distinguishes itself from all previous modes of production by the autonomy of the state, notably its relative autonomy from even the ruling class and the economy. In all previous social forms, the state represented the ruling class and economy with considerable directness. In the Asiatic mode of production, the state consisted of the department of taxation and the department of war. The emperor and court was the ruling class and this was replicated in the provincial nobility at large; the identity was direct, the extraction of taxes and corvée labour, brutally explicit. The symbiosis of state and ruling class was so manifest that instrumental descriptions of the state were meaningful. In feudal society, the monarch of the realm, the lord of the manor and the bishop are both state and ruler; the class itself was the state. In absolutist monarchies the identity permeated language; Henry V did not converse with Charles VI during breakfast; no, 'England' was chatting up 'France' over bacon and eggs! The very person of the monarch embodied the state.

The autonomy of the state from class, crucially even the ruling class and the economy, is a distinctive feature of the capitalist mode of production and is most developed in the bourgeois democratic republic, though it is a feature of all capitalist state forms. Though this autonomy is constrained, as I will discuss anon, it is not a charade, a counterfeit or an illusion; it is real and it seduced the Old Left into collaborative constitution-making in a particular global context.

Electoral politics in a parliamentary democracy can threaten the hegemony of the ruling classes. Nicos Poulantzas, among others, explored these concepts in *Political Power and Social Classes*,¹² but he couched it in the convoluted argot of the 1960s European Continental new left that it made reading his book akin to

¹² N. Poulantzas (1975) *Political Power and Social Classes* (London: New Left Books)

choking on hardwood splinters. Still the core discourse of this period is worth extracting because the tantalising door opened by this autonomy seduces the left all over the world, sometimes reasonably and sometimes not, into populism, class collaboration, and sometimes a breakthrough.

No question about it, the bourgeois democratic republic is the most advanced (democratic, flexible, plural, accountable via the separation of powers, and where appropriate regionally devolved) state form that the world has seen to date. It was not born but evolved through immense struggles spread over centuries. Cromwell's English Revolution of 1648 climaxed forty years later in the constitutional monarchy of the Glorious Revolution of 1688, but it took till 1928 for women's suffrage to cement democracy in the UK. In France, the land of Enlightenment and the Great 1789 Revolution, women won the vote only in the Fourth Republic of 1945. From American independence in 1776 it was nine decades to the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, but in the fullness of time another century lapsed before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was secured.

Democracy came to Japan, Germany and India after World War II; Brazil and South Africa even later. From the triumph of the capitalist mode of production to the bourgeois democratic republic has been a long, slow and arduous journey. It does not surprise me that the state forms associated with post-capitalist modes of production have been monstrosities – Soviet Stalinism, Eastern Europe, or dictatorships to varying degrees: China, Vietnam and Cuba – but it is still early days. It is unlikely that China or Vietnam will revert to capitalism and in the long view, democratic states, founded on non-capitalist modes of production and property relations, are likely to emerge.

The fascist state is so independent of the ruling classes that it physically abuses them. The welfare state is so susceptible to pressure that it can drive a capitalist economy to paroxysms of inflation, deficit and breakdown. However, there are the limits of relative autonomy. When the democratic state undermines the capitalist economy, crisis arrives. The post-war Labour-led welfare state in the UK was responsive to working class pressure, which in time built unbearable burdens on the capitalist economy.

Eventually, the ruling classes responded with Thatcherism's big stick, rolling back benefits, imposing harsh cuts and abolishing the welfare state. When stagflation and the good life of America's most celebrated post-war decades debilitated American capitalism, Reagan's neo-liberalism arrived, curbed populist modalities and morphed the state with a neo-conservative flavour.

Since the seductive power of the bourgeois democratic republic lies in its relative autonomy from the ruling classes and capitalist economy, does it open space for the democratic state to be an instrument of social transformation? The goal could be social democracy (Europe), the overturn of property relations (Salvador Allende), reaching for social engineering beyond capitalism (Chavez in Venezuela, Morales in Bolivia), or writing a new constitution (the Communist project in Nepal). There is no *a priori* answer: it depends, case-by-case on circumstances and power balances. European social democracy has a chequered balance sheet; Allende was drowned in blood, but was it foreseeable? The betting season is still open on Chavez, Evo Morales, Ecuador's Correa and Nepal; some outcomes are less certain than others. However, there is no denying that the seductive lure of the relative autonomy of the democratic state makes it a tempting instrument to get hold of for social change. When Chavez goes, the principal achievements of his social programmes will remain as there are powerful class and social interests that will resist their amputation.

Constitution-making and the Dialectics of State Power

"We gave it everything we had": Hector Abhayavardhana in personal conversation with this writer on 4th February 2012, on how the left had committed itself to the United Front (UF) coalition government of 1970. This drove home to me the mindset difference between the Old Leaders and us younger rebels about the coalition. They took their hands in their lives and gave it all they had; it was a Rubicon they crossed and there would be no turning back. To us in the party's dissident left, the coalition was a strategy; go for it, but push to go beyond it; when the limits are reached it will be time to part with the national and petty

bourgeoisie and go beyond it. All our *Vāma* Marxist eggs were not going to be put in that coalition basket.

The LSSP was stonewalling internal critics, myself included, about the state. I recall confrontations in 1973-74: “Do you want to break-up the government, comrade, long before our work is done?” Bernard (Soysa), Leslie (Gunawardena) and Colvin would fire back (foxy old NM was the first to see that things were going amiss). I have a story to tell. Over and over again Bernard drilled it into my thick young head, but my numb skull proved impenetrable. “This is it; Kumar, this is it; there is no something else to follow,” he kept saying, and “What’s the next step?” I kept asking. One day the penny dropped! Coalition with Mrs B was the instrument, it was the fulfilment of the Holy Grail, and here lay the road to socialism. Bloody fool; I was barking up the wrong tree; the coalition was no stepping stone to a Leninist world beyond; it was not the prelude to the overthrow of the state; ***it itself was the real thing!*** The new constitution had created an essential instrument for that task.

This saga of my shocked youthful epiphany and the left leaders’ paradigm shift is the tale of how the road to socialism altered. An accommodation with populism, an alignment with the petty bourgeoisie, a strategic thrust in 1964, and the new constitution – an instrument of state power – had become the real thing in itself. The disjuncture was deeply theoretical, it was not opportunist, it was more than strategic; they gave it all they had. I really have no time for today’s intellectual pygmies who are unable to grasp that the leaders of the Old Left erred but they were not opportunists. Or if you prefer, they grabbed opportunity by the grand historical fetlock, they were not in it for ministerial perks, jobs for the boys and petrol allowances. That is why when it came to the crunch they would rather quit than change tack or polish slippers.

Colvin had much to show for his case: a new constitution, separation from the Crown, an autochthonous judiciary, the fiscal and administrative strengthening of parliamentarians against the old bureaucrats and the Civil Service, the takeover of the commanding heights of the economy (the plantations); Pieter Keuneman’s far reaching housing reforms; and NM’s stewardship of the economy laying the ground for internally sustained

development.¹³ No government in Lanka has ever pulled off so much radical change in so short a time. “Let us go on like this without overturning the apple cart and we will have a deep social transformation in place” – this is what Bernard was trying to drive into youthful *Vāma* radicals passionate about the ‘next stage.’

We have now arrived at the core issue. What were the LSSP leaders attempting to achieve, what goals would have justified compromises as far-reaching as they were prepared to make, and why did this great gamble end in failure of the dimensions of a Greek tragedy? The answer to the first question is unambiguous: the left leaders were marshalling everything they had for a monumental battle to transform the state¹⁴. To transform it from a liberal democratic state to an instrument that could be employed for movement towards socialism. Achieved from the inside and by constitutional processes¹⁵ – unlike textbook revolutions where the barricades are stormed – and spread over a period, say the duration of a parliament, and not at one swell sweep as when the Bastille fell. Nevertheless the aspirations were no less bold.

Nothing else would have justified the compromises they were prepared to make, nor explained why they were leaving no eggs out of this basket. To use Colvin’s words from another context, the LSSP leaders were putting all their eggs into an omelette and

¹³ Though least commented on, the most significant achievement of the coalition has received less attention, though its importance is not disputed on both sides of the political divide: that is NM’s management of the national economy. He pulled the country’s external finances out of the abyss they were staring into, corrected major structural defects in the internal finances, and put in place financial systems to support development and growth. It is open to debate whether the austerity measures went too far, but sound long-term management of the economy in the public interest, not cheap populism, was his lodestar.

¹⁴ Colvin R de Silva: “Remember the stage of development of our country when the 1972 Constitution was passed. What was facing us was on the one hand the assertion of our independence, our sovereignty, our freedom as a people and as a nation. Secondly, was the need to create the appropriate instruments which would enable us as rapidly as possible to lift ourselves out of a state of poverty and degradation of which any community should be ashamed.” De Silva (1987).

¹⁵ The Constitution of Sri Lanka (1972): Section 5 provided that, “The National State Assembly is the supreme instrument of State power of the Republic.”

there would never be any prospect of undoing it again, as indeed post-1975 history has shown at terrible cost.

There was international justification for the opening that the left saw. To take the Third World examples again, significant, sometimes transformational, socialist changes were being pushed by Nasser (1956-70), Allende (1970-73), Ben Bella (1963-65) followed by Boumedienne (1965-78) and Sukarno (1945-67) – the dates in parenthesis show the dates in office. Victory in Cuba, Che, and impending victory in Vietnam, Mozambique and Angola were inspirational reminders of the possibilities of socialism. One has to throw one's mind back to the heady 1960s to grasp the freshness in the air and the spring in the step. The JVP uprising was infantile folly, but it was born of the same mood.

I have been at pains to explain the commitment, the evolving local class relations and the international mood that motivated the Marxist leadership of the left, schooled in historical materialism, to make a political and theoretical leap in the 1960s, seeking frontiers beyond but via bourgeois democracy. Marx held, after the Paris Commune of 1871, that the proletariat could not lay hands on the old state machine and wield it for its purposes; it had to fashion the state anew. But the 1960s transformations of the state in postcolonial nations was mind-boggling in quantity and variety: secessions, unifications, ethnicity-inspired states, fascist ones, military juntas, and by far the most important of all, the modern bourgeois democratic republic. It was reasonable to treat Marx's injunctions as sketches to be filled out in the flesh as time moved on.

The Brutal Monstrosity of a Sinhala-Buddhist State

This brings me to the tragic concluding segment of this chapter, which I will lay out in two sections. Superficially (why, I will dwell on later) it seemed that the left's grave error in the 1970s was not entering a coalition, ***but the way it conducted itself in coalition***. It compromised on issues when it ought not to have.

Vesting executive authority in MPs,¹⁶ which powers, including the chit system for government employment, were abused, widespread corruption of SLFPers, and robbery of state property such as after the estates takeover: these were some of the culpable articles of compromise.

The left in coalition may have been able to survive these compromises and keep its project alive but for one crucial compromise that spelt disaster. Acquiescing in the oppression of the Tamil minority was a Mephistophelean compact; the shameful *masala vadai* 1966 May Day parade was an egregious forerunner. Actually the left was in a daze as the postcolonial pluralist state, morphed into a Sinhala-Buddhist one, over a period of about twenty-five years. The LSSP did not compromise on the national question; rather it refused to theoretically assimilate this *de facto* on-going transformation of the state. The enthusiasm of the left leaders for the new constitution blinded them to catastrophic consequences the ejection of the Tamils from the nation's political spaces would have, in subsequent decades. The so-called betrayal of the national question by the old leaders was actually blindness – vide Colvin's haughty dismissal of the pleas of the Tamils and his personal hubris towards Federal Party leaders. The constitution was only one factor, the written words less important than the many conflicts of the times, in the rise of the Sinhala-Buddhist state.

Consider this dichotomy. From the exit of the British Raj to present times, India has found progressive solutions, where we have strayed into blind alleys. Secularism, versus a proto-religious polity; an economy that binds states together, versus a civil war; a stable, robust, rumbustious (and venal) parliamentary democracy,

¹⁶ Article 2 of the UF Manifesto says in paragraph 2: "Administration: The present administrative set-up, including the Kachcheri system, is inherited from the colonial days. It is not only bureaucratic and inefficient but also thoroughly unsuited for ensuring the speedy fulfilment of today's needs. We shall transform the administration thoroughly, make it more democratic and link it closely with the people through Elected Employees' Councils, Advisory Committees in government offices, and People's Committees on a territorial basis". Unfortunately, though execution of administrative powers was visibly transformed, they were not brought any closer to the people, but grabbed by MPs.

versus an autocratic and ferocious presidential system; great tracts of plural and internationalist culture, versus an entourage of atavistic and divisive ideologies.

I use Sinhala-Buddhist state as a Marxist, not an ethnic, category: the hegemonic ideology of the nation, ethnic repression, mono-ethnic armed forces and police, discrimination in education, employment and in dealing with the state in Tamil; these drove the Tamils to political alienation, territorial dual power and civil war. While the left was seeking to craft an instrument for passage to socialism, in reality another monster was emerging. None of this happened suddenly. It was a process and as an insider I know that the LSSP was negligent in addressing the dangers of the emerging Sinhala-Buddhist state and did not prepare its cadres to face the peril. Involvement in constitution drafting made this task more difficult.

Would a stand on these several concerns have led to the break-up of the coalition and was it wiser to remain silent to achieve the greater and grander goal? Could the leaders not have quit cabinet, retained their positions in the United Front as a commitment to the UF programme, and pursued a vigorous political line among the people? Many tactical options would have opened up if the party were prepared to be flexible; it could have cut out the JVP as well. Of course Colvin's omelette would have had to be unscrambled! When the end of the road was becoming discernible in 1974, the left was not agile enough to make a decisive break and modify its objectives; yes poor dialectics you can say, or the *Bridge on the River Kwai* syndrome.

The end result was empty-handed expulsion from government and the loss of a generation to the JVP, the alienation of the Tamils, and impotency when authoritarianism arrived in the shroud of the 1978 Constitution. The left had lost the masses; it could no longer summon them to action and for the first time lost the working class and the intelligentsia, lost its base in the Western, Sabaragamuwa and Southern provinces, and lost control of the city streets. The left had lost much of its identity.¹⁷

¹⁷ An interesting aside is why could not Edmund Samarakkody, Bala Tampoe, V. Karalasingham, Percy Wickremesekera, Reggie Mendis, Osmund Jayaratne, a

The Cruellest Cut of All

Notwithstanding all of the above, the cruellest cut was the metamorphosis of international circumstances. There are two sides to the dialectical coin, contradictions enabling change and the uncertainties accompanying that change. In the abstract, this sounds absurdly simple; the challenge however is the contextual concrete. The Old Left leaders saw the contextual concrete contradictions, but the coalition came too late in time, meaning the greater global dynamics of the age undermined their project. The outside world changed dramatically in the 1970s as social democracy and the welfare state were bundled out by Reagan-Thatcher neo-liberalism. The post-war boom reversed, and the social contract and the good times drew to a close. Previously I termed the many compromises superficial, excepting the enduring alienation of the Tamils as a body blow. However, it was the changing outside world of global capitalism that dealt the left's project the fatal blow.

In this perspective, the left was jettisoned because neo-liberalism had arrived. The age of populism, of Nasserism, Allende, Algeria and populist socialism was collapsing and the Lankan left's project misfired. The coalition project was behind the times; a new global dynamic caught the left mid-stream in its project. Neo-liberalism as an economic philosophy and neo-conservatism as an ideology rose to prominence in the West, burying social democracy, the

talented, principled and experienced pool that broke away to form the LSSP(R), win the vacated ground and emerge as an alternative to the mainstream party? Trotsky's *The Class, Party and the Leadership* springs to life since it talks dialectics not empty logic; leaderships are fashioned on the anvil of party struggle and 'inherited,' they are not 'improvised' like how the LSSP(R) thought it would be. The LSSP(R) and all its later shoots fizzled out because these movements were removed from history; they had no presence in real, albeit imperfect history. Had these leaders remained within the mass left movement their presence would have mattered and they would have influenced events. Had they remained in the party they would have succeeded in changing how coalition politics was conducted and been the vehicle of an alternative strategy; they would have been decisive allies in accomplishing what *Vāma* was not strong enough to do alone. L. Trotsky (1940) *The Class, the Party and the Leadership* (unfinished draft article), available at: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1940/xx/party.htm> (last accessed, 14th September 2012).

welfare state, and eventually post-war liberal democracy in the last quarter of the twentieth century. The switch from a social contract with liberalism and social democracy to the neo-liberal schema was the global background to the collapse of Lanka's coalition experiment. It would be three decades before the neo-liberal edifice, in turn, came crashing down in the post-2007 New Depression, but that's another story.

Shortages and long queues were the fault of the left and the economic blind alley into which it had led Mrs B, it was said. The truth was otherwise; the global economic climate turned sharply hostile in the early 1970s¹⁸ and the coalition government could not have escaped a painful economic downturn. The pressure to capitulate to neo-liberalism was considerable; the Pinochet military dictatorship grabbed power in 1973 and set out as the first full-throttle version. By 1975 neo-liberalism, theorised by Friedman and Hayek, was the creed of the IMF radiating from Washington and London. The oil shock of 1973 drove prices up by a factor of five between 1972 and 1974 and the value of Sri Lanka's exports in comparison with import prices declined by nearly 50% between 1971 and 1975. Global currencies were in turmoil since the fixed exchange rate mechanism was abandoned by the advanced economies complicating life for small countries.

The multilateral agencies, at that time the World Bank more than the IMF in the case of Sri Lanka, and Western ideological thinking was swinging sharply in a direction different from state-

¹⁸ Dr Saman Kelegama, in a review of Professor Buddhadasa Hewavitharana's book on NM's economic policies, dwells on the unprecedented global and local difficulties that Sri Lanka's economy ran into in the 1970 to 1975 period. "The terms of trade deteriorated from 260 in 1970 to 145 in 1975 (44 per cent decline), international oil prices soared from 147 in 1972 to 826 in 1975 (price index of oil with 1969-100). It was also a time when the Bretton Woods system of orderly exchange rates collapsed, creating chaos in currency management. On the domestic front, the 1971 insurgency had disrupted the supply side of the economy, the 1972 republican constitution had re-emphasised 'economic independence' and less external dependence, 1974 was marked by a severe drought". S. Kelegama, Review of B. Hewavitharana (2006) *Dr N.M. Perera's Policies and Achievements as Finance Minister* (Colombo: Stamford Lake), *The Sunday Island*, 10th December 2006, available at http://www.ips.lk/staff/ed/news/2006/book_r_10122006/book_r%2010122006.pdf (last accessed, 14th September 2012).

led economics, curbs on private capital, self-reliance, import restrictions, and the prioritising of equity over markets. It is of the greatest importance to recall that it was Mrs B who in effect¹⁹ fired the left from the government and shredded the UF manifesto. Recall that it was not JR who first brought neo-liberal economics to Lanka though he became its principal architect and his name is synonymous with the policy. The midwife who introduced it was Mrs B and the year of its birth 1975. That Felix Dias Bandaranaike wanted the left out and the unceasing tensions between the two sides only adds superficial flavour to a deeper tale of rift in policy.

Hence the left's coalition project in Lanka came too late in global time; the global balance of power was shifting inexorably to neo-liberalism and the Old Left's project was caught flatfooted half-way through its mission.

Summing Up

An interesting hypothetical question is what if it had been given a few more years? What would have become of NM's project to put the country on a sound footing for domestically driven economic development and Colvin's transformative constitution? It is absurd to separate the two since the fate of the 1972 Constitution is inextricable from the fate of the coalition project, but it is an interesting thought experiment.

There is good reason to believe that NM's project would have borne fruit. It would not have been a socialist Lanka, but an economically stable and social democratic one. Lanka would have

¹⁹ Mrs Bandaranaike downgraded the left ministers offering NM the Health Ministry and Colvin a more junior position, but the message in effect was a radical transformation of the relations of power in the government and emasculating the left. I have laboured the point in this chapter that the left parties entered the coalition with the intention of carrying through a transformative project. Mrs B and Felix Dias Bandaranaike were forcing through a change that spelt the end of this road and unsurprisingly the left rejected it. In similar circumstances the UPFA-Left leaders, sans vision and purpose, will accept any portfolio from President Rajapaksa; they lack programmatic commitment beyond being ministers.

had to adjust to the tidal wave of globalisation and neo-liberalism, but it could have done so on a surer footing. There are three broad reasons one can hypothesise for the failure of the coalition project: (i) it was necessarily doomed from the start (the hard Trotskyite line), (ii) blunders in execution as outlined previously, (iii) the onset of negative international conditions.

I attach greater significance to (iii) over (ii); but I have granted that alienation of the Tamils and over-politicisation of the state administration carry considerable weight. The view that nothing could have rescued the coalition project, option (i), I believe is deterministic and simplistic. It is absurd to suggest that the future was carved in stone on the coalition's horoscope. A lesser goal than across-the-board transformation of the state or substantial socialisation of the economy was feasible. The 1977 elections would have been lost, even if Mrs B had not shredded the coalition, enabling the UF to hold together, but it would not have been cataclysmic. The years from 1975 to 1977 would have had to be used to come to terms with new global economic realities by making the exchange rate flexible, relaxing import controls and compromising with foreign capital.

A bigger question mark seems to hang over the constitution. But again I differ with the view that the left was blithely insensate to the reality that appeasing the mildly authoritarian populism of Mrs B cleared the road for the real authoritarianism of the JR Constitution. I concur that the new constitution contributed to the disaffection of the Tamils and to undermining professionalism in public administration. However, it was the crushing electoral defeat, that is to say the general failure of the coalition project, that cleared the way for the 1978 constitution. Had this been blocked, that is had JR's majority been kept below two-thirds, feasible if the UF had not been demolished by Mrs B in 1975, the far from perfect 1972 Republican Constitution would still be limping along and Lanka would have been spared the near dictatorial presidential system. And therefore, had JR's market ideology not made such deep inroads, corrupting social mores and erasing social consciousness, democratic and human rights would have been better protected by a more alert public.