

Some time ago I wrote about the man who would be king. This time I wish to refer to him again on a completely different subject. Sajith Premadasa, the individual concerned has recently come out with something sensible, which most Sri Lankan politicians prefer to turn a blind eye to. i. e. the absurd national disaster that is glorified by the name of Provincial Councils ought to be scrapped.

Although it was introduced when Sajith's father was a powerful figure in government, he played no part in the political game that his leader at the time H. E. Junius Richard Jayewardene engaged in with India. As a matter of fact, Premadasa was opposed to the whole exercise.

Does a country like Sri Lanka need such a cumbersome apparatus to run its administration? That would be the blunt question any sensible man is bound to ask. Why this question was not raised at the time is beyond me. My guess is that no one dared question His Excellency then. No one on his side of politics did so.

Those living in Australia can imagine the luxury of having so many heads in so many places in such a tiny island. An island slightly smaller than Tasmania having nine governors, nine premiers or chief ministers, nine cabinets or boards of ministers, and a whole host of officials to look after the interests of those wielding power. (not so much of the people living in those areas.) Tasmania on the other hand, can boast of just one governor, one premier, and a few ministers. One can immediately turn round and counter this by pointing out the obvious disparity in terms of the number of persons to be taken care of. 'Your vast island has a tiny population less even than the city of Sydney whereas our 'pearl of the east' has a population comparable to that of the whole of Australia,' would be the retort.

No one can deny that. No one can also deny that Australia being an island continent because of its size, has a land mass almost one hundred and twenty times that of Sri Lanka, but manages with six governors, six premiers plus two chief ministers and two administrators.

For a third world country (apparently it has been promoted to first class recently) to cater to so many political heads at the expense of so much to be done to give its citizens a decent life and a future for their kids, is again something a politically conscious population should have taken note of long ago. Was it because they can easily be lulled into a feeling of comfort and safety that no one raised a murmur? Or was there a well-thought out plan to stifle such voices? Whatever the reason was let us hope Sajith's call will bring results. Now to get back to the question of provincial administration coming under the purview of the complicated hierarchy described above, one has only to reflect on what took place under the colonial masters who set up the provincial structure dividing the island into nine provinces each to be administered by an educated and properly trained man belonging to super category of administrators called civil service. They were all university graduates who proved to be the cream of the intellectual youth of the land. The person taking charge provincial administration was a senior hand in the service with substantial experience. I am stressing this fact to highlight the sudden drop in efficiency and effectiveness with the advent of political heads sans experience or knowledge to handle the immense responsibility of running the entire province.

Experience or knowhow may not be there, but he gets the plums of office in good measure. Leaving aside the fleet of vehicles to transport him and his family everywhere, think of the number of mansions that are paid for by government (ultimately by tax payer) to give them a comfortable life. Under the previous system, the Government Agent who was the head of provincial administration had his official residence and his official vehicle, but not a



fraction what a current governor, chief minister and the plethora of ministers would command. What is the outcome? Before that one has to look at the mess created in the administration of government departments now parceled out to the nine provinces with another set of bureaucrats to be paid for by tax payer for duplicating and complicating what was done under a G.A. without a governor, chief minister or a provincial minister to interfere.

At what cost is all that done?

Starting from North, you get one governor in Jaffna, one in Anuradhapura, one in Trincomalee, another in Kurunegala, and so on. After meeting the governor of the western province you have only to drive a mere seventy two miles to Kandy or Galle to meet another. It is even less if you want to meet the governor of Sabaragamuwa. It is only about sixty miles from Colombo, whereas in outback Australia people at times travel over one hundred miles to see their G.P. How fortunate are our kith and kin back home? The problem is that they would get nothing special by seeing this high-powered politician or to be exact, favorite of big shots. He is a mere ornament to glorify the system rather than serve the people.

What is the purpose of having this top-heavy administrative structure? What are the benefits it has brought to the country, which is still struggling to get on its feet and make its people well-fed and looked after? Sweet nothing would be the obvious and only answer. Has the new system improved and accelerated the functions of its various sections? I don't think anyone in his right mind would answer in the affirmative. Just imagine a teacher wanting a transfer from Negombo to Trincomalee. Instead of going to the regional office he would very often be compelled to seek the assistance of a provincial councillor and through him or her, a local minister. Am I exaggerating the problem? I don't think so in view of the keenness shown by provincial politicians to make decisions that were at one time left to the discretion of the relevant officials. Now they have been reduced to the level of henchmen doing the bidding of politicians. Wasn't that what happened

before the provincial councils came into the picture? One might ask. True, but there were fewer politicians to mess around then. The new system has increased the number interested parties wanting to wield power through this type of interference. It has also added to the cost to the nation that maintains these power-hungry individuals.

There is at least one member of the old civil service who was a respected and down-to-earth administrator among the current ministers, able to advise those responsible as to the efficacy of the old system and the fit-falls created by the innovations. He is Dr. Sarath Amunugama. Even the other ex-civil servant, Ronnie de Mel might be around perhaps still as a presidential advisor. Whether their experi-

wrong side of politics then. This was long before he was appointed M.P. by the ruling SLFP. The question is not one of party politics, but of national significance. However it does not appear to have ever received serious consideration prior to putting any of these structures in place. It may be something like the inevitable changes introduced to national education after each minister takes oaths.

Even as it is I do not think the politicians have a clear picture in mind as to what turn it ought to take to turn things around. What is needed is not a multiplication of politicians as found right now, but a sensible decentralization where politicians have no room for fattening themselves with bribes, commissions or other forms of corrupt practices.

Let us wait for His Excellency Sajith Premadasa to arrive on the scene with his magic wand to bring in the desired change and sanity into provincial administration. Will he or will he not? The question has two sides to it. First is will he step into the shoes of President? The second is will he deliver the goods if he becomes President? First things come first, and current read-



FATTENING THE WHITE ELEPHANT

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ence and expertise is sought by those responsible is doubtful again.

The need for the decentralization of the administration has been felt and acted upon even before Provincial Councils were established. There was what is called district councils at one time which reminds one of notorious elections in Jaffna at which some three or four Gaminis from the south descended on Jaffna and played havoc provoking even the rather docile commissioner of elections to come out against what took place under the pretext of conducting a fair district council election. The commissioner was placated by sending him to Rome as ambassador. As for the Sinhala heroes carrying the revered name of Gaminis, nothing was done to put them in their place. The fact is that a couple of them are still in parliament, though now on different sides. Perhaps the Jaffna debacle sounded the death knell of district councils too.

Was sufficient attention paid to the issue of decentralization? Even before H.E. had this rush of blood after Rajiv Gandhi's threats, there had been serious studies done on the subject. I know of at least one by Dr. Kamal

Kaewanayake as his thesis for his P.H.D. degree. He proposed a system for decentralization which, as far as know, was made available to the then Prime Minister R. Premadasa. It did not attract the attention of anyone in the government, maybe due to the fact that Kamal was on the

ing is that he has more than fifty per cent chances of getting there. The only road block is an individual who has more lives than even the proverbial cat. Even after the constitutional changes adopted by the UNP recently its leader Ranil Wickramasinghe has not given up hopes and the usual forces are already at work to ensure his safety. Sajith on the other hand, has been playing safely, without making a fuss. The fact that there were two press briefings by two groups after the party convention strikes a rather promising note, more so because of the presence of a number of MPs at Sajith's press conference. In particular, the presence of a person like Gayanthya Karunatilake along with woman MPs Rosy Senanayake and Talatha Atukorasla seemed encouraging. However one cannot still rule out a Ranil comeback.

Let us hope President Sajith Premadasa will bring some sanity into the provincial administrative system so that the country will no longer be required to feed and fatten this white elephant.

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