



Revolving Door or Closed Door?

Reflections on Leadership Politics

By S. Piyasena

When I arrived in Australia for the first time in late 1991, I witnessed a process which became a recurrent theme in Australia's federal as well as state political landscape for the next two decades. This process, which comes to fore in the form of a contest between two personalities of a political party for the position of the party leadership usually takes place within the political party in the Opposition at a given time in most democracies, but in Australia, whenever a decline in popularity of a party in power is perceived, the incumbent prime minister's position could come under challenge from within the governing political party.

For us in Sri Lanka, in-fighting for the position of leadership within political parties have been a fairly common occurrence. In the government, under the Westminster system, these personality conflicts, with or without policy differences, were resolved not by a ballot within the parliamentary party membership but by resignations of groups of MPs from the government as in the case of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike and his followers from the UNP led government in 1951 and Philip Gunawardana and his followers from SLFP led government in 1959. In 1964, it was the mass-scale defection of C.P. de Silva led group which brought down the Sirima Bandaranaike's coalition government. In Opposition from 1965 to mid-1970, it was probably the perceived dynastic right to lead helped Mrs. Bandaranaike to keep a firm grip on the leadership of the SLFP. The long dormant leadership tensions between Dudley



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Senanayake and J.R. Jawawardene, however emerged once UNP was relegated to Opposition but after the death of Dudley in 1973, J.R. took over and, in 1977, established a presidential system where it has become almost impossible to unseat a serving president except in the event of death in office, voluntary resignation or through an impeachment motion which, as we witnessed in 1993, is not an easy option.

Even under the presidential system, leadership tussles within the opposition parties were recurrent and continue to the present day. In the first presidential election of 1982, the SLFP could not agree on a candidate in place of disenfranchised Mrs. Bandaranaike and Hector Kobbakadwa's run was effectively destabilised by Anura Bandaranaike, Maithripala Senanayake led group within the SLFP. After the reign of terror of late 1980s and early 1990s when either occupants or pretenders to the throne of presidency did not need to be ousted through intra-party rivalries because most of them were assassinated, SLFP finally launched a successful challenge to the presidency in 1994.

Chandrika Bandaranaike survived two terms as president not because of the lack of any dissent within the government but because of the continued ethnic conflict and the sheer impossibility of ousting an incumbent president. The same truth probably applies to the present government as well. The only difference is that the present government will con-



tinue to be stable due to the public memory of its role in ending the ethnic conflict. The intra-party leadership rivalries, however, are rife in present-day UNP led Opposition with Ranil Wickramasinghe, Sajith Premadasa, Karu Jayasuriya, etc., playing out the leadership contest in the public arena.

Sri Lanka has experienced three decades of the presidential system. With the benefit of hindsight, we should be able to discuss whether party politics of Westminster system or centralised political control of presidential system is better for democracy or the country's polity as a whole. Let me take a look at how party politics played out in Australia during the past two decades to see how beneficial to democracy and how damaging to political parties the intra-party rivalries have been.

Within days after I arrived in Sydney two decades ago, and took up residency in Bankstown in the electorate held by the then Treasurer, Paul Keating, the media was agog with speculation that Keating was calling for a leadership spill in the Labor Party parliamentary caucus against the Prime Minister, Bob Hawke. Upon inquiry, I found out that Keating has asked for a similar ballot few months earlier and after managing to get only 44 votes against 64 in favour of Hawke, retreated into the back bench stating "I had only one shot at the locker and I fired it". Undeterred, Keating again called for a spill on the last day of the parliament sitting for 1991 and, against all expectations, won it by a 56 to 51 vote split. Hawke, longest serving Labor prime minister in Australian history, sat on the back bench for a couple months and resigned from his parliamentary seat which was won by an independent candidate in the ensuing by-election. In the following general election of 1993, billed by the media as "unwinnable", Labor, under Keating was returned to power defying all media predictions and opinion polls which favoured an easy Liberal victory.

This was not, as I learnt later, the first time a sitting prime minister was ousted by another leader from his own party. In 1971, when the long-serving Liberal Party government was facing a probable defeat at the hands of resurgent Labor Party led by Gough Whitlam, the then prime minister, John Gorton was replaced by his deputy, Billy McMahan in a party-room ballot who, never-

theless, was defeated in the impending election.

Having won the 1993 election which he called the "... sweetest victory of all", Keating went on to rule the full term without any internal challenge but lost to Liberals under John Howard in the next general election in 1996. The Liberals, who were in the Opposition throughout the Hawke/Keating years, had many of their own revolving door leadership tussles. In the 1980s, when he lost a party-room ballot to Andrew Peacock, Howard pledged not to seek leadership again and famously declared that his probable come back would be like a "Lazarus with a triple by-pass". But when the Liberals' experiments with John Hewson and Alexander Downer as leaders failed in the early Nineties, Howard threw his hat into the ring and was elected as the leader and became the prime minister in 1996.

From 1996, Liberal/Nationals coalition went on to rule for four full terms. During the first two terms, the Treasurer, Peter Costello did not talk about a change of leadership although there was supposedly an unwritten agreement between Howard and Costello to the effect that the former would hand over the leadership to the latter towards the end of his second term. In spite of the reminders from the media and pestering from the Labor Opposition benches, Costello could not gather enough support within the caucus to stage an effective challenge. It was only towards the late 2006 in to the final term of the Liberal government that continuous reference to Howard reneging on his commitment to Costello started to damage the government because these speculations became serious distractions. Still, Costello could not gather-up enough courage and support to stage a challenge and the party went into face the 2007 general election with a public declaration from Howard that after the election he would hand over the leadership to his deputy. But by then it was far too late and the damage had already been done.

In the Opposition benches for a long time between 1996 and 2007, there were number of changes to the Labor leadership from Kim Beazley to Simon Crean to Mark Latham and back to Beazley to finally settle with Kevin Rudd in late 2006. However, all these leadership changes were brought about because all those leaders either lost general elections

or, in Crean's case, found to have not enough mass appeal. None of these leadership spills resulted in public recriminations and did very little damage to the party's public image.

Labor, under Kevin Rudd's leadership, won the 2007 general election in a landslide with 88 seats to Coalition's 59 and even ousting 4th-term Prime Minister John Howard from his Sydney constituency of Bennelong. Upon being elected to the Government after 4 terms in the Opposition, Labor set in motion a number of progressive legislative acts including making a grand gesture of reconciliation by making a public apology on behalf of the people and government of Australia for the past injustice to indigenous Australians and ratified the Kyoto Protocol, another symbolic gesture, which, like the "apology", John Howard adamantly refused to make throughout his 11 years in office. By early 2008, the effects on the global financial crisis were beginning to be felt and the government's response of releasing a stimulus package went well with the public because it seemed to have staved off a probable recession in spite of some budget blow-outs in home insulation and building school-halls schemes.

Meanwhile, the Liberal Party in Opposition went through its own share of leadership crises. John Howard finally retired from politics and Peter Costello resigned from his Victoria constituency. Liberals elected Brendan Nelson as their leader but when his public image did not improve, the party, in late 2008, quite uncharacteristically, elected Malcolm Turnbull, a merchant banker who was leading the Australian Republican Movement before joining the Liberal Party just five years earlier.

By this time, riding an unprecedented wave of popularity, Rudd declared that action on man-made climate change to be the "greatest moral and economic challenge of our generation". With Turnbull, a truly liberal idealist, having become the Opposition leader, Rudd announced a plan to create an emissions trading scheme with apparent Opposition support in the Parliament. But both Rudd and Turnbull failed to discern the unwillingness of the larger Australia to a commitment to action on climate change before the biggest emitters of green house gases, i.e., USA, China, India, etc., come on board.

In December, 2009 Liberals replaced Turnbull in a fiercely contested party-room ballot with an ultra-conservative, climate change septic, Tony Abbot. Few days later, Rudd attended and played a prominent part in the international climate change conference in Copenhagen which ended as a damp squib with no binding agreement. Highly demoralized, Rudd nevertheless persisted with moving the ETS bill in the parliament in 2010 but it was knocked back by Liberal and Green senators and he decided to defer any action on climate change until after general elections.

This act by the Rudd government and increase in arrival of asylum seekers by boats and the government's failure to handle that issue have generally been accepted as turning point in Rudd's popularity and all opinion polls since early 2010 have indicated a decline in public support for the government. But Rudd was still popular with the electorate and there was no need to oust him from the position of prime minister even before he completed his first term. However, on 23rd of June 2010, most of the Labor parliamentary caucus, media and the larger public were taken by surprise by news that the deputy prime minister, Julia Gillard has

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