

The historic apology offered by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd to the Australian Aboriginal people for the pain and suffering caused by the removal of their children by the government, marked a significant departure from the practices of his predecessor - the Liberal P. M. John Howard.

After his sudden change of heart (which was ridiculed by Paul Keating as 'death bed' conversion) John Howard did not want to consult any one - not even his Northern Territory Chief Minister - before embarking on his Northern Territory Intervention Programme. He said, he knew the problem and there was no need to consult anyone. He did not think of getting the support of the opposition either, perhaps because he thought he could steal a march over them in the forth-coming general election. To put it bluntly, all what he did at the time was election driven. Little did he realize that national issues need national solutions - national approaches, and not patchy partisan exercises.

The alternative PM Kevin Rudd made a pledge that he would apologise to the stolen generation if elected to government. This was something John Howard, in spite of his

opposition leader through their bi-partisan approach took the first step in solving the multi-faceted problem of the Australian Aborigines.

I recall a similar expression of bipartisanship as far back as 1977 in another great democratic country - the United Kingdom. That was soon after the Prime Minister Harold Wilson announced that he was sending a large contingent of British army personnel to Northern Ireland to fight the IRA terrorists. Margaret Thatcher, then the leader of the Opposition Conservative Party went to Harold Wilson and extended her



National Issues and Bi-Partisanship



sudden change of heart, steadfastly refused to do. So much so that he stood out as the only surviving ex-Prime Minister absent from the distinguished gallery in Canberra Parliament on that historic day. February 13, 2008. The only surviving ex-Prime Minister from John Howard's party, Malcolm Fraser was there along with three Labour ex-PMs, Gough Whitlam, Bob Hawke and Paul Keating.

Even when he joined his friend George W Bush, in the questionable intervention in Iraq against the wish of the majority of Australian Citizens, he did not want to consult the opposition or even the Parliament.

The current opposition leader Dr Brendan Nelson too initially echoed the sentiments of his mentor and former leader John Howard. He repeatedly refused to agree to the apology. Malcolm Frazer even went to the extent of saying that the Liberal Party would become irrelevant if they did not join in the apology. Kevin Rudd did not give up. He went out of his way to talk to Brendan Nelson more than once to get his support and cooperation. Thus amidst dissenting voices from certain members of his own party, Dr Nelson was able, at the end, to utter that historic and significant word "Sorry" in endorsing the apology offered by the Prime Minister thus making it a bi-partisan apology given by the Australian Parliament on behalf of the entire nation.

Both the Prime Minister and the

support to the government. That was at a time when she was campaigning to become the country's first woman Prime Minister.

Sri Lanka too is suppose to be a democratic country, initially modeled under the British example. The country is faced with a national problem which remain unresolved for more than three decades costing the lives of thousands and thousands of armed soldiers and more and more civilians. There have been a number of cease - fires and conferences with no result. Perhaps the most publicised and hopeful cease - fire came when Ranil Wickramasinghe was Prime Minister under President Chandrika Kumaratunga. The historic cease-fire agreement he entered into with the LTTE leader V Prabhakaran was engineered by Norway. The irony of it all was that it was done without the approval of the executive President at whose mercy he functioned as PM. She belonged to the opposition SLFP and her approval would have meant the cooperation of the opposition. Instead of that he went along with the agreement which could have been declared null and void by the President. There was opposition from the people and the clergy. One would recall the Rs 5 million cheque Ranil Wickramasinghe handed over to the most powerful figure in the Buddhist clergy, Mahanayake of Malwatta on the eve of his rescinding the proscription on the LTTE. No one called it a bribe or 'hush - money' because it was an offering made to a leading Buddhist monk.

The killing of the much-loved Cabinet

Both the Prime Minister and the opposition leader through their bi-partisan approach took the first step in solving the multi-faceted problem of the Australian Aborigines.

Minister Luxman Kadiragarmar and a number of Tamil and Sinhala politicians and thousands of civilians by the Tamil Tigers is part of the history of this illegal cease-fire.

Let us face it. It was virtually dead long before the government decided to end the cease-fire. Only result of the decision is that terrorist activities have increased. Civilian life all over the island is threatened and disturbed.

What is the role of the opposition in solving this national problem which is going to affect future generations of not only of Sinhala and Tamil communities, but also their future of Muslims and other minor groups?

There is an international outcry by some western countries and interested groups to bring in international forces to handle the issue. In addition to that, we can see the leader of the opposition (who has led his party to a dozen or more defeats which must be a world record) going round the world speaking against the government. His main aim is to somehow defeat the government and capture power.

Neither the President or the Leader of the Opposition seems to have the patience or the foresight to see the need for a national approach to a national problem. Neither seems to think of genuinely making a joint effort to solve the problem.

Or else are they looking at this national problem as a spring board to launch an attack on the opponents in order to retain power or to regain power.

Let us hope and pray that they learn a lesson from Kevin Rudd and Brendon Nelson.

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