

# ELECTIONS DOWN UNDER



We witnessed an interesting election at the Federal level in August immediately followed by a mini-election by an ethnic broadcasting group, namely the Sinhala group of the Ethnic Broadcasting Association of Victoria. The latter of course attracted only of a limited number of Sri Lankan Australians living in Melbourne.

anointed committee of the Sinhala broadcasting group has begun working earnestly.

There was another significant difference, in that while the Federal election was a neck-and-neck race, the ethnic contest was a one-horse-race. Perhaps experts trained or coached by seasoned Sri Lankan campaigners had been at work. Whether this guess of mine is true or not,

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the groups to get on with their business without bothering about unnecessary procedures and limitations. However, one has to accept that meetings have to be conducted in a way common to such activities all over the world. A country like Australia no doubt has enough and more conventions and traditions, if one bothers to find out. I remember even the school literary societies in Sri Lanka had set procedures to be followed.

For a normal annual general meeting all members are given notice in writing well in advance. True, there was a notice posted to members about it, and the agenda indicated on it consisted of four items, namely:

1. Minutes of the last AGM,
2. Reports by the office-bearers
3. Election of the Committee
4. General Business

It appeared to be following the set agenda in a way to start with. However, the meeting started without a pro-term chairman being elected as usual. This is a simple procedure followed even by a village gathering. I have witnessed this being observed by the AGMs I attended over the last fifteen or sixteen years. My recollection is that I was there at least five of them. The first thing they did was to elect a chairman to conduct the business of the house. Here at this AGM, the persons responsible would have thought otherwise. It didn't seem to create a problem either, at least to start with.

Things appeared to be moving smoothly. Minutes of the last AGM were read and duly

aware of the dynamics of the assembled members. Adopting an unusual procedure, he said, 'Let me put to the house and see whether they approve'. He did and got what he wanted. What he did not know or did not bother about, is that certain things are not to be determined by a show of hands. There are standards and practices that one should not tamper with for one's own advantage or to appease someone. My thinking is that this falls into that category. No one raised an objection. Even if someone did, the outcome would have been the same.

This really is the point at which the groundwork for the ensuing puppet show was laid down. Let us proceed further and see what follows.

Puppets are inanimate objects, pushed around by one or a number of individuals who know what to do with them to get the desired effect, the story or some hilarious creature or incident. Puppets by themselves are helpless, unable even to move around. Their strength lies in their willingness to the bidding of their boss, the puppeteer. The puppeteer knows his subjects and when and how to pull the strings. He did that pretty well, as we will see eventually. For the show is just beginning. All those puppets are going to deliver whatever the Emperor



wants'. This is what the emperor wanted first.

'Will those who agree to continuing on the meeting like this put their hands up?' He had a captive audience of members, that delivered the goods.

## Federal Cliff-Hanger and Ethnic Puppet Show

At the Federal level as I write this, both the Prime Minister, and her counterpart are waiting like the proverbial jackal hoping for the plum of office to fall in front of them. On the other hand, the newly

one group of candidates had done their homework and countered all possible incursions into their bastions of power. Anyone trying to defeat them had to think twice. Such attempts would have been no better than trying to oust Bandaranaike from Attanagalla or J.R. from Colombo South.

The purpose of this article, therefore, is not to find fault with the new committee, but to point out certain absurd features about the conduct of the annual general meeting at which these individuals were 'elected.' It is therefore nothing but right that I start by congratulating the new committee and wishing it all success. Let me also state very clearly and sincerely that I quite appreciate the overture made by the 'new' convener at his first appearance after victory over the radio, to come together and serve their community. I have to explain the reasons for my description of the event as a puppet show. Before that let me say something which might not please those waiting for an excuse to exclaim: 'we told you so. I prefer to take a rather a pragmatic approach to the whole issue, and look at it as fait accompli. My difficulty as hinted by term puppet - show, is more with the process, rather than the result. Someone at the meeting was heard saying that he had never seen a meeting being conducted in that fashion. No one paid any heed to his words. Nor did I think of supporting his stand. Nor did I was too naive. Some people become wiser after the event. You may even put me in to that category.

AS far as I understand, there is no separate constitution under which a particular group in the association has to work. Only the main body has its own constitution. This makes it easier in a way for

adopted. Report of the activities of the committee for year was presented. The convener gave fairly comprehensive review or 'analysis' of what happened during the period, during which he found time to respond to some of his critics too.

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So far, so good. What came next was a shocker. Why?

Let me explain. After finishing his address, the convener handed over the conduct of the remaining business to the 'most important' outsiders present there. Although I call him outsider, he may have a right to be present as he was apparently the chairman of the parent body. I have no reason to object to his presence or participation in the deliberations. Yes, there were others who felt he was not the man to sit in the chair at the moment. One at least was braver than me. He got up and pointed out that the proper course of action was to have a chairman selected by the house. I do not know why he did not raise that issue at the beginning. It is better late than never.

Then the farce did start, leading to puppet show to come later.

The chairman now occupying his rightful or 'bestowed' position of chairman did really take over the reins. He invented a new technique to justify his occupation of the chair. What better way than to look for support from a captive audience of members, He probably was made

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It did not end there. There was, more to come, equally, if not more, entertaining. At the annual general meetings that I attended earlier, election of office bearers was held only once. In fact I remember voting at that meeting held some ten or twelve years ago in a building down Buckley Street, Nobel Park. I did not know most of the people listed on the ballot. I do know that a man whose name I still remember was selected by the house to function as the Returning Officer. That was the person responsible for conducting the election. Those were not valid at this puppet show.

When the so-called 'peoples chairman' announced the next item, i.e. the election of the committee, someone from the audience again got up and pointed out that there was a procedure to be followed in such matters. That too fell on deaf ears. What is more interesting is that a ballot was in operation all the while. Even without a Returning Officer, a couple of members had started issuing ballots to would-be voters. To put it bluntly, an election was being conducted with no preliminaries observed. No, the 'chairman' knew about it and actually took action to stop it. Now comes the question of the ballots already cast. Can and should they be accepted?

Any question can be found an answer for. Our wizard did that too. 'Let us put it to the house,' and he did put it. What an absurd way to handle something so sacred as the vote of an individual? Who cares?