

**Forging a Radical Centre : A Response to Extremism and Intolerance”**

14<sup>th</sup> Lal Bahadur Shastri Memorial Lecture

Delivered by

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18<sup>th</sup> January 2007, New Delhi

The Hon. Mangala Samaraweera, Minister of Foreign affairs of Sri Lanka, delivered the fourteenth Lal Bahadur Shastri Memorial Lecture on 'Forging a Radical Center: A Response to Extremism and Intolerance' on 18th January 2007 at the National Museum Auditorium, New Delhi. Mr. Anil K Shastri, Trustee, Lal Bahadur Shastri National Memorial Trust chaired the event. Hon. A.H.M. Fowzie was also present at the lecture. The text of the lecture is as follows:

Distinguished Guests

Ladies & Gentlemen

It is indeed a privilege to be invited to deliver this year's Lal Bahadur Shastri Memorial Lecture. I wish to thank Mr. Anil Shastri and the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Memorial Trust for giving me this opportunity. Today's theme is, "Forging a Radical Centre: A Response to Extremism and Intolerance" because I believe it aptly reflects the philosophy of the late Prime Minister Shastri and is very relevant in today's socio-political climate.

When researching the life of Lal Bahadur Shastri, what I found remarkable was the resoluteness and the strength of his convictions in his political vision despite his simplicity which almost bordered on invisibility. Like Mahatma Gandhi, whose fearless stance on non-violence revolutionized the thinking of the early twentieth century, Lal Bahadur Shastri too was committed to the path of Ahimsa and non-violence. However, unlike the Mahatma, Shastriji was a practicing politician and what I find remarkable was his continued commitment to the Gandhian principles, even in the turbulent and expedient world of 'real politick.'

Lal Bahadur Shastri's simplicity was not a weakness or lack of vision. Rather, it was an, integral element of his unique, moderate, centrist style of governance that sprang from Shastri's personality, resoluteness and the courage of his convictions. He was indeed a 'Radical Centrist' by example, vehemently and vigorously committed to ahimsa, tolerance and moderation. Hence, the topic of today's lecture.

The achievements of Lal Bahadur Shastri and his fellow leaders in the Indian independence struggle are all the more remarkable because they formed their political philosophy at a time when the world was being torn between the competing ideologies of fascism and communism. In an era where revolutions, regional wars and armed conflicts was the norm, the Indian independence struggle's adoption of the Gandhian approach of non-violent civil disobedience and democracy as the means to achieve freedom was indeed a radical affirmation of centrist values.

With regard to my own country, an important milestone in Indo-Sri Lanka relations was the successful negotiation and conclusion of the Sirima-Shastri Pact signed by Prime Ministers Lal Bahadur Shastri and Madame Sirimavo Bandaranaike. This was an important step in addressing the issue of stateless persons of Indian origin that had been an irritant in Indo-Sri Lanka bilateral relations. Even today, the Sirima-Shastri pact has significant symbolism. It reflects the statesmanship of our leaders as well as the moderation and resilience that always underlies Indo-Sri Lanka relations. It is also an example of the spirit of flexibility and mutual accommodation needed when dealing with difficult bi-lateral issues.

It was just a few years ago, after the end of the cold war and the fall of the Berlin Wall in the late eighties, that there was new hope that the world would be freed from destructively clashing ideologies. However, in the early years of the twenty first century, it is apparent that there continues to exist sharp divides of political visions and economic approaches. On the one hand, we are experiencing a largely intolerant reaffirmation of ethnic, nationalistic and religious fundamentalism. On the other hand, the idea of the state commanding the sectors of the economy as well as the blind belief in the virtues of the free market, have proven to be greatly misplaced. I believe today, the global challenge is to forge a centrist alternative that is radically committed to resolving the ill consequences of those failed and negative extremes. In doing so, Shastriji's philosophy and lifework remains as a beacon of light.

Ladies & Gentlemen, I personally am not against globalization. But we do have to be cognizant of certain well founded reservations. In 1998, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, at the 7<sup>th</sup> International Conference on the Future of Asia, in his inimitable style posed the question, “So what is there beyond globalism and globalization? There could be total oppression of the weak by the strong as capitalism runs riot. Or, there could be a world democracy where the resources of the world are combined with human ingenuity to create the greatest human civilization ever.”

There are many who claim that in every country across the world, globalization, spurred by the rise of international corporations, has made the poor poorer while the rich have gotten richer. According to Nobel Laureate Joseph Stiglitz, during the last ten years, the world’s total income has increased by an average of 2.5% per year. Yet the number of poor has increased by 100 million. The top 1% of the world earns as much as the bottom 57%. This disparity keeps increasing. It would be difficult, and indeed imprudent, to delink this growing chasm from civil unrest, which we see happening across the globe on a daily basis.

Arundhati Roy, one of the most outspoken and outstanding commentators today noted that civil unrest does not only mean marches, demonstrations and protests against globalization. Unfortunately, it also means a desperate downward spiral into crime and chaos and all kinds of despair and disillusionment. As we know from history and from events unraveling before our eyes, these gradually become a fertile breeding ground for terrible things – cultural nationalism, religious bigotry, fascism, and of course terrorism. Hence, the growth of intolerance and extremism that we face today.

As extremists from every part of the political spectrum – the evangelical right, the revolutionary left, fundamentalist zealots and separatist megalomaniacs monopolize the global media which thrives on sensationalism, many may wonder if moderation and tolerance are becoming bygone values of a distant and more civilized era. The loud and violent sounds of extremism make better news than the democratic pronouncements of the silent majority. The tyranny of the ‘few’ as opposed to the silence of the ‘majority’ is perhaps the biggest challenge many of our democracies have to face today.

Ladies & Gentlemen, this is why a ‘radical centre’ is needed to stop this slide towards open ended polarization and extremism. A vigorous reiteration of liberal values is the need of the hour. The ‘Centre’ should be home to a radical commitment to liberalism. The need is for a new political culture based on reviving the value systems drawn from Lord Buddha’s middle path to Gandhi’s path of non-violence, from Nehru to Martin Luther King, from Nelson Mandela to Bill Clinton; the liberal centre must strike back. Moderates all over, like brothers in arms must unite and stand up for a liberal ideology.

As I see it, the root causes of extremism are either economic, religious or socio-political in nature. Economic stereotypes have been thrust upon the developing countries under the guise of globalization. Many of the developed countries have reached the post-modern state of capitalism after several centuries of economic evolution and costly trials and errors, both in terms of human and social development. However, in many developing countries like ours, this form of capitalism is being thrust upon us without the slow learning curve the developed countries enjoyed in their evolution. This is why it is important that each country must evolve its own form of market economics if it is to get the most cost effective results.

As envisioned by Aristotle in his treatise ‘Politics’ in 350 B.C., the “middling element,” was the substance that bridged the chasm between the rich and the poor. It is more relevant to us than ever before in this first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The middling element that Aristotle wrote

about was what Lal Bahadur Shastri practiced. In his case, it included the strengthening of agriculture and the upliftment of the rural poor.

Neo-liberalism which has brought much confusion and confrontation in developing countries must be replaced by a renewal of the principles of consensual democracy that looks beyond the adversarial politics of the left and the right. As Anthony Giddens states in his book 'The Third Way', "a society where the market has free play may create large economic inequalities." And in doing so, it has been proven in many countries that a pro-poor, pro-growth approach to economics is a more successful model in meeting the demands of a developing nation. In fact, both the Indian and Sri Lankan electorates endorsed such policies in the general elections held in the two countries in 2004. Since then, India has averaged a growth rate between 8% - 9% while Sri Lanka, despite its continuing struggle against terrorism recorded a growth rate of 7.5% in 2006.

The American Declaration of Independence in many ways is an example of classic liberalism as it views life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness as the key objective of a Government. Such a philosophical stance of course implies that politicians must essentially concern themselves in providing the means necessary for each individual's vision of happiness.

However, in countries like ours, where there still is a large underprivileged class, such facilitation should be combined with provisions for the State to look after the weak and the poor with an effective social safety net. This is necessary in order to ensure that the free market does not become 'gravitational fall' for those unable to survive the test of the fittest.

In some instances, ignorance or the lack of knowledge about issues make people take extreme hard line positions. When I was the Minister of Telecommunications in Sri Lanka, a strategic decision was taken in 1994 to convert the state owned telephone corporation into a partnership with the private sector. There was strong opposition to this move by almost all the trade unions. When analyzing the reasons for this opposition, it was obvious that the primary reason was lack of knowledge about the proposed changes. Most of the employees did not understand what the changes meant and were opposed to it, primarily based on hearsay and misinformation provided by parties with a paucity of knowledge, and a bounty of vested interests.

In order to dispel the myths about the evils of this partnership as preached by some union leaders, we made a decision to send a direct mailing to every employee, their spouses and to every other stakeholder. The mailing explained the benefits of public/private partnership and helped stakeholders properly understand the issues. All employees were made shareholders of the new company. Thereafter the process went through smoothly and the telecom sector in Sri Lanka emerged to become one of the most successful enterprises in our country where consumers, investors and stakeholders have benefited greatly. Tele-density in Sri Lanka which was 0.7 in 1994 has now reached 19.2. The telecom partnerships are now the two top companies in the Colombo Stock Exchange in terms of market capitalization and profitability. This to me is a clear example of how the power of reason can win over the politics of economic extremism.

Ladies & Gentlemen, our contemporary world is distorted by covert and overt hatred. Modern crusaders of intolerance, like their predecessors from the middle ages, are wreaking havoc and destruction in different parts of the world. Extremists that deliberately misinterpret religious teachings and values have begun to spread their gospel of fear and intolerance to many corners of the world.

Adding fuel to this fire are various non-state entities, who under the pretext of bringing development to the poor and the underprivileged are engaged, in the process of converting the most vulnerable segments of society with financial and economic enticements. Exploiting poverty and ignorance, these new missionaries have become front organizations for induced mass scale conversions.

However, when responding to this threat, no Government in a modern, democratic society can try to counter this challenge by imposing anti-conversion legislation which will only serve to fuel further tensions. Those who engage in mass conversions should also understand that freedom to pursue ones religious beliefs, no matter how different they may be, is a fundamental right of all human beings. The state must remain aloof from interfering in the right of personal beliefs and must follow a policy of secularism, as India, to her credit, has done very successfully since independence.

With the rise of crime and corruption levels, which in many cases is the direct result of growing economic disparity, even ordinary people may see extreme measures as the only solution to society's ills. Citizens, being made helpless and frustrated by ever increasing levels of crime and violence ask for the return of capital punishment. Many politicians, wishing to be seen in tune with populist sentiment, do not dare state that capital punishment is not the answer to crime and violence. Sri Lanka has had a virtual moratorium on capital punishment for decades.

There has been no evidence that indicates that capital punishment reduces crime or violence in any country. Rather, successful investigation and fair and swift judicial process, remains the most effective deterrent. Countries where the rule of law and independence of the judiciary and the police are not firmly established are open to manipulation of the law by those in power. The weak and the ordinary go to the gallows while the powerful and well connected go scot-free.



It is in the face of such feelings of helplessness, that even good, decent and honest people begin to believe that extremism and intolerance might provide solutions to their problems. The recent execution of Saddam Hussein can be taken as an example. Regardless of the cruel and despotic nature of his rule, the question remains whether his execution will ultimately contribute to the healing process the people of Iraq so desperately require. As Mahatma Gandhi said, "An eye for an eye will only make the world go blind,"

The biggest challenge of our post-modern world is the scourge of terrorism. Those who have had to face the sorrows of terrorism in any part of the world must join hands in defeating this menace. Like poverty, terrorism anywhere is a threat to humanity everywhere. It must be fought vigorously and fearlessly. That it should be defeated if democracies are to survive, is beyond question. However, the debatable question is, how does one defeat terrorism?

Sometimes, Governments grappling with the scourge of terrorism respond to terrorist atrocities with equal amounts of brutality and violence. They seem to forget that democratically elected Governments must be above reproach at all times. Elected leaders do not have the option of resorting to terror tactics even when fighting some of the deadliest terrorists in the world. In fact, as Mr. Jaswant Singh wrote in his latest book, 'A Call to Honor', "the vital imperative of remaining 'civilized' is to avoid at all costs, the trap of becoming 'terrorists' to fight the terrorist. Our fight against terrorists must not convert us into a clone of their methods: unseeing, uncaring and totally unmindful of our civilizational and human norms."

Despite the challenge of having to battle one of the most ruthless terror machines in the world for three decades, Sri Lanka is constantly aware of the obligations to respect the rule of law and the need to address the grievances of the affected minorities. That is why we remain committed to a negotiated settlement to our ethnic question.

Despite having to respond to a brutal war, thrust upon us by an intransigent and murderous terrorist group, the solution is in how we gently nudge, or entice if you will, these extreme elements to move towards moderation and democratic methods without compromising our own integrity. The need today is how to find a durable and lasting peace without a craven surrender to a terrorist group.

There are those who think that the middle path is a philosophy of weakness and impotence. It may be seen as a recipe from bleeding heart liberals trying to find excuses for a situation where anything goes and where the rule of law doesn't exist. The Radical Centre as envisaged must not shy away from reasserting society's belief in the rule of law.

The middle path of the radical centre must be based on the courage of convictions based on the principals of decency, freedom and the rule of law. It must be a philosophy based on bringing the socio-economic extremists fearlessly and vigorously into a radically committed centre where the rule of law shall prevail. In doing so, it should engage civil society as its ally. At the same time, the radical centre must ready, whenever the need arises, to reassert society's belief in the rule of law with armed strength to protect the sovereignty of the nation.

Yet another personal example of how the rule of law played an important role in implementing a centrist vision occurred in 2001 when I was the Minister of Urban Development and Housing. I took a policy decision to clean up all the illegal and unauthorized structures which were not only an eyesore but a hazard to commuters in the centre of our capital city, Colombo. Hundreds, if

not thousands of unauthorized businesses and some illegal dens of vice had sprouted making the sidewalks almost non-existent. Our policy was to remove every one of these illegal structures without any favoritism.

However, despite the illegality of the structures, this proposal was met with much opposition, even from my own parliamentary colleagues. Many of them accused me that I was going ahead with it only because my constituents were not affected by it. At this juncture, I went back to my own electorate, far to the South of Colombo, and made sure that all unauthorized and illegal structures were removed in my hometown of Matara. Many of these structures belonged to people who had supported me in the general election. Having completed that, my Ministry officials returned to Colombo and were able to remove the structures without much opposition. Subsequently, all bona fide businesses that were torn down were offered alternative locations while the slum dwellers were provided with alternate housing. The lesson to be drawn is that the rule of law, when applied to all fairly, can be a potent tool in development and progress.

I am of the opinion that the only way to resolve the conflict situation in Sri Lanka, or for that matter any of the myriad of other similar situations around the world, to a sustainable peace, is by developing the concept and practice of a "Radical Centre". This would entail the creation of a centrist middle way where dissenting voices and opinions from every part of the political spectrum would have a place within a democratic framework through the decentralization of governance and the devolution of power to all stakeholders. It would be a place where the years of deep mistrust would lose their sting within a non-violent, democratic system where pluralism and secularism flourishes. The radical centre should be a place where the intolerant find that those they hate are in fact, quite similar to themselves and have the same dreams and aspirations as well as fears and concerns.

In conclusion, Ladies & Gentlemen, I would re-emphasize my firm belief that a return to centrist values is the only possible path to ensure the survival of democracy whose credentials are

tested today by the forces of anarchy and extremism. If we continue in our present path where even good people in desperation begin to feel that the only answer to extremism is more extremism, democracy as we know it today may surely be doomed to be confined to the pages of history as yet another tried, tested and failed political system.

Despite its shortcomings, the world has yet to come up with a political system which can successfully replace democracy accompanied by the non-violent resolution of disputes. That is why many of us in this room, will in just a few days from now, be enthusiastically reaffirming the resurgence of a worldwide mood in favor of the Gandhian approach to conflict resolution when we participate in the forthcoming commemoration of hundred years of the launching of the Satyagraha movement. Democracy, therefore, must be protected at all costs. The more powerful democracies must come to the help of the less privileged democracies in their struggle against extremism. While nurturing and encouraging new democracies, it is equally important to help existing, long established democracies to survive.

While right thinking Governments across the world must unite to protect democracy, the right thinking people of the world must also break their silence; the tyranny of the few can only be defeated if the silent majority wakes up from their somnambulist stupor to say enough is enough. The slogan of our times should be 'Moderates of the World Unite!'