

## OPINION

# The UK Column



## Ending more of the same

Despite Sri Lanka's brazen defiance of international norms, Britain's policy towards Colombo remains one of steadfast support, of appeasement. But this approach, however callous it may appear, is not driven by simple disregard for Tamil suffering. Rather it is driven by a natural inertia that makes governments as well as people continue to do what they have always been doing, even if the strategy is clearly futile or even counterproductive.

However, with the circumstances driving British policy having now clearly changed, effective Tamil lobbying can help bring the UK in line with the growing international consensus that is beginning to confront Sri Lanka's violent reality.

As discussed previously in this column, British policy has been driven by faith that Sri Lanka is a liberal democracy in the making. In this view, the only thing holding Sri Lanka back was the LTTE's armed struggle and Western policy for years has been to resolutely back Colombo, no matter what.

However, for many Western policy makers, this confidence in Sri Lanka's liberal potential has been shattered by Colombo's ongoing and open brutality against the Tamils. But many others have not lost their faith and, although faced with Sri Lanka's recalcitrance, they are simply continuing to do what they know and have always done.

When confronted with unexpected and unpredictable conditions, the natural response is to revert to familiar strategies and tactics. If the car will not start or the lift does not come when called, the initial natural response is not to give up and walk, but to stubbornly turn the engine several times over or to press repeatedly on the lift button.

British policy toward Sri Lanka is similarly, 'more of the same'. By appeasing the Sri Lankan state and arguing it can be reformed, British policymakers are simply carrying on as they have always done.

In time, however, faith is confronted by reality. The car will not start, the lift will not arrive and Sri Lanka will not change. Something different will thus have to be attempted. The excuse of fighting terrorism is now gone. Western policy makers must credibly answer the question as to why Sri Lanka won't now reform.

Britain's ongoing support for Sri Lanka - most recently over GSP+ concessions from the EU - has inevitably caused dismay and consternation and, amongst some sections of the Tamil community, is

starting to breed a deep-seated resentment.

Although the frustration is understandable, the challenge that faces Tamil activists is a difficult but not impossible one.

Clearly those Western policy makers who have staked their personal professional reputations on the present policy of appeasement will insist on it continuing. But for many others, the reality of Sinhala repression has already overtaken faith in a future liberal democracy.

It is clear Britain's continued appeasement of Sri Lanka's brutality will not usher in peace, stability or prosperity to the island. The consequent need for a radical reappraisal of British policy will only become more apparent as Sri Lanka's crisis continues to deepen.

And there is a great deal that Tamils can do to force the pace of change.

For example, the general election next year presents a clear opportunity to raise awareness and engage the main British political parties. Using the networks and capacity that have been built up over recent years Tamil activists must build relationships with all of the parties in each constituency.

Tamils should direct their efforts towards securing commitments from across the political spectrum that the policy of endless appeasement will come to an end.

In practice this means credible steps towards sanctions, beginning with the repeal of GSP+ privileges but extending towards further economic and political sanctions and support for war crimes prosecutions.

Many other Western countries have already realised this. Tamils must work to convince the main political parties that British policy on Sri Lanka cannot just drift in the utopian expectation of an ideal liberal democratic state. Instead, Britain must work with other international actors to secure concrete objectives.

As a priority the camps must be unlocked and the Tamils allowed to resettle their native towns and villages and an internationally mandated process of justice must be established to re-build trust. Finally there must be a political solution to the Tamil question that credibly secures Tamil rights.

These results are not just in Tamil interests but in Britain's wider interests as a responsible member of the international community.

The present policy of appeasement will inevitably have to give way to Sri Lanka's reality of racial oppression. Tamil lobbying can help speed up this change.



**SJV Chelvanayagam was among the leaders who drafted the Vaddukkoaddai Resolution and had it electorally mandated**

have inflicted military defeat on Tamils are now all out to defeat them politically by capturing, hijacking or deviating the democratic politics of Tamils.

India and the West compete in subtle ways in this exercise, adopting crude as well as highly sophisticated methods. Preparations, institutional arrangements and recruitments have been done long back by them to face a 'post-defeat' scenario as it was their foregone conclusion to inflict military defeat on Tamil nationalism.

The powers have carefully studied the non nation-centred 'virtue' of sections of Tamil elite or rather weakness of the Eelam Tamil nationalism, cultivated since colonial times to always orientate their politics in terms of the interests of others - British colonial interests, Colombo-centric interests, Indian interests, Western interests and there was a time when some were orientating it to the interests of Russia and China.

The elite politics of Eelam Tamils - except for the rare occasion of Vaddukkoaddai Resolution, and that too is said to be a result of youth pressure - was always hiding its mind fearing for others and was thinking in terms of others.

Influenced and discouraged by calculated power machinations, campaigns and Karunanidhis, the murmur heard in some elite circles now is that if a powerful armed struggle has failed, what could be achieved through democratic politics and claiming for what the heart aspires is only bravado.

They fail to see that it is more legitimate and more workable in democratic organisation to come out boldly with what you feel righteously deserving, register the claim and then to fight for it or negotiate until acceptable results are achieved.

This is possible only when we have the guts to independently evolve our politics firmly by ourselves first and then only to relate

it to others. Of course this is not possible when we start looking at ourselves through the eyes of others. This mindset is the biggest impediment to our political organisation.

Mullivaaykkaal was not the real defeat. Colombo and the powers know it. Their victory comes only when Tamils are made to politically denounce their heart-felt aspirations. It is in order to achieve this victory much easier, they advise or find agents to advise Tamils to drop their national aspiration, even though democratically registering a national aspiration could in no way be considered an obstacle for negotiation.

Powers have created a desperate situation for Eelam Tamils hoping their will power would wither even politically. But one should not fail to see that if not for Tamils, for the sake of their own interests, the powers have to find out solutions very soon in the island. Tamils have to be ready with their own politics to face the situation.

In the past, the failure of democratic Tamil politicians in adhering to people's emotional needs with firmness and their inability to resist undue power interests, paved way for the rise and acceptance of militancy.

Tamils should take care that their political organisation now needs to be truly representative of their aspirations and needs to be firm in negotiation if they want to uphold democracy and avoid another rise of militancy. No need to say the powers should respect this reality, as they too share the fear.

It is now an acid test for the emerging democratic politics of Eelam Tamil nationalism.

The move in the diaspora for transnational government of Tamil Eelam is not only for negotiating the liberation and emancipation of Tamils in the island of Sri Lanka but it is also an alterna-

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