

THE WILL TO GOVERN

■ By Dr. M.N. Buch

There are dictionary meanings of three words with which I would like to commence this paper. The first word is “govern”. The Chambers Twenty-first Century Dictionary defines this word as “to control and direct the affairs of a country, state or organisation; to guide or influence; to control or restrain”.

The second word is “office”. The meaning of office according to the same dictionary is “position of authority, especially in government or in public service”. The third word is “power”. One meaning given by the same dictionary is “to be elected and hold office”.

The system of government in India is that people are elected under the Constitution to hold office, those who are in office have power or authority and through such power they are required to govern. The Constitution states how government would be conducted in India in the Preamble itself, which requires the Republic, through the executive government, to secure justice, liberty, equality and fraternity for all the citizens. The citizens have certain rights which are given in Part III of the Constitution in the Chapter on Fundamental Rights. It is the duty of government to protect these rights. The manner in which government will function is further given in Part IV of the Constitution, which lays down the Directive Principles of State Policy. Under Article 38 the State is required to secure a social order for the promotion of welfare of the people. This is a positive duty cast on the State and the functionaries of the State are expected to work towards this end. Article 39 lays down principles of policy to be followed by the State. Every citizen of India has the right to expect the State to do its duty in this behalf.

The elected representatives have the power to legislate, but obviously such legislation has to be in keeping with the Preamble and Parts III and IV of the Constitution and it is not permissible for the legislature to enact laws which go against the fundamental tenets of the Constitution. At the same time the State is not allowed to govern so badly that the welfare of the people can no longer be promoted. Welfare includes good laws, impartial enforcement of laws, the provision of honest government so that funds voted for the welfare of the people are properly utilised, probity on the part of the officials of the state, elected or appointed and the will to do the right thing and not make unacceptable compromises in order to save one’s own skin.

Every party tries at the time of elections to find acceptability with the people so that it can come to office and acquire power. So far so good. In a democracy it is not only legitimate but also desirable that there be viable political parties which, through their ideology and programmes, aspire for power. Some times power is gained by forming coalitions because no single party gets an absolute majority. India has been passing through such a phase for quite some time. However, whether it is a single party government or a coalition, its agenda of governance must be clear and it must have the will to govern. Paradoxically the will to govern carries within itself the willingness to give up office if the government is defeated in Parliament. As John Simon said about Britain, “Our Parliamentary system will work as long as responsible people of different parties accept the view that it is better that the other side should win than that the Constitution should be broken”. However, in order to save government, that is, one’s own office and the power which goes with it, political parties are prepared to make compromise even on basic issues. This is proof of lack of will to govern. Whether it is the NDA under Atal Bihari Vajpayee or the UPA under the Sonia Gandhi—Manmohan Singh combine, office and the concomitant power have been used not to govern but to remain in power. This phenomenon started in 1967 when both in Haryana and Madhya Pradesh under Govind Narain Singh members of the State Legislature were bribed

heavily in order to defect from the ruling party and to help in the setting up of an alternative government. Those who buy power cannot simultaneously govern because in order to remain in power they have to keep buying it either in cash or by other forms of compromise. Upto 1967, that is, in the first twenty years of independence, because office and power were either taken for granted, or because holding office was less relevant than governing wisely, there was the will to govern and results are there all to see. The entire edifice of the modern State and economy was erected during these twenty years, when our leaders took bold decisions and our officers implemented them. Our leaders did not hanker after office and to them power was a means of serving the people.

After 1967 the desire for office has increased and the greed for power has grown. However, because there is no will to govern nor the willingness to lose office, governance has been given the go-bye and expediency, bribery, unacceptable compromises and a willingness to do the foulest deed in order to remain in office have all taken over.

The culmination of the age of expediency has been the Gujarat communal riots, the Harshad Mehta scam, the massive complaints of corruption in the Commonwealth Games, 2G spectrum scandal, etc. In every case it has been found that the basic principles of government have been abandoned in order to continue in office and it virtually appears that there is no government functioning in the country. Other examples are weakness in dealing with Naxalism, the totally uncontrolled food prices, the breakdown of systems which has led to UGC, AICTE and MCI being mired in the slush of corruption, the various little insurgencies, agitations, etc., which amount to blackmail and growing disbelief of the people in every institution of government, including the judiciary. It is not as if the Indians are collectively corrupt but rather that governments which have no will to govern are in power and they have no desire to govern wisely, rebuild institutions and root out corruption.

If India ungovernable? The answer is that India is the easiest country in the world to govern and the people will always fall in line if government is determined, the process of governing is transparent and government is prepared to act firmly but justly. One simple example. The Gurjar community in Rajasthan wants reservation in government jobs. They have a right to make this demand. The people of India have a right to use highways and railways to travel. It is legitimate for them to have this right. A section of the Gurjar are blocking railway tracks and roads and have completely disrupted all movement of people and vehicles through Rajasthan. This has brought large sections of the country to a halt. If government had the will to govern they would have used necessary force against a few thousand agitators in order that crores of travellers can exercise their right to travel freely. Obviously there is no will to govern, either in Rajasthan or at the Centre and, therefore, the Gurjars can push their cause regardless of the harm that this does to the country at large. Multiply this by the thousands of agitations that occur, not for legitimate reasons but as a means of blackmail and one realises the extent to which the lack of will to govern has harmed India.

The 2 G spectrum scandal occurred. Government should be convinced that the reports on this scandal are simply not true, in which case there is nothing to be remedied. If on the other hand there is a prima facie case government should have acted immediately. If DMK tried to pressurise government the party should have been told that this is not acceptable and if the coalition broke on this issue, so what! Fresh elections would be held, a new government would be sworn-in, but DMK would not have been allowed to go scot free. The scandal could have been prevented and vast sums of public money could have been saved. It did not happen because we do not have the will to govern. Our weakness in government is making the country vulnerable to a whole host of diseases and disorders. Either we should stem the rot or we should be prepared to slide into anarchy. The position is as bad as that. Can our people countenance anarchy? If not, we must force those who hold office and have power to use these in order to govern.