

YOUTH EMPLOYMENT AND THE NORTH/SOUTH DIALOGUE

Hon. Lalith Athulathmudali

Minister of Trade and Shipping, Sri Lanka

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen, I consider myself honoured to be invited to address this second meeting of Young Commonwealth Leaders. It is also a matter of national pride that you have selected Sri Lanka as the venue for this important meeting.

I have noted with satisfaction the rapid increase in all aspects of Commonwealth activity including this programme. No doubt, the Governments of the Commonwealth have been largely responsible for giving the political direction necessary for these advances. Simultaneously, the Commonwealth Secretariat has effectively co-ordinated and multiplied this political will. In recent times this success has been largely due to the incumbent Secretary General, His Excellency Mr. Ramphal, a respected leader of the Commonwealth, who has won recognition beyond it as an acclaimed international figure.

I have been asked to speak about 'Youth Unemployment and its place as a compelling issue in the North/South Dialogue'. Before I venture forth, I think it is necessary that we should look at the youth of today and compare them to the young generation of a previous era - let us say 50 years ago. Today, youth constitute a greater proportion of the total population than they did before. If I were to take youth as those under 35 years of age, today Sri Lanka society would have 9.3 million youth out of a population of 14 million, while 50 years ago, the proportion was much less.

The youth of today are better educated than their fathers. Sri Lanka's present literacy rate is about 90% while not even 40% could read and write many years ago. The new generation have a better knowledge of science than their forefathers. In our country there are today a significant number of children in the Science stream while many more learn General Science. Fifty years ago, however, very few had the privilege of even going into a Science school. Similarly, health standards have improved. Life expectancy today is around 70 years - gone up by over 30 years in half a century. Infant mortality in our country has dropped dramatically and is one of the lowest ever in the developing world.

These young people are healthier, more knowledgeable, better educated and are greater in number, but they are subject to more pressures. The pace of life, the exhortations of advertising, the propaganda of radio and, if I may say, the mesmerisation of TV, have changed life quite substantially, quite irrevocably. All these have contributed to impatience. They have presented a wider challenge, they have, opened up bigger and better horizons for the young, awakened in our youth a desire to reach up and conquer these horizons, created in this generation an awareness to find themselves on their own terms.

In this bold new context, it is necessary to identify the attitude of elders to the youth of today. It would be a generalisation, but a fairly accurate one, to say that no longer is the father a 'pater-familias.' No longer are young people considered to serve by merely standing and waiting. No longer in our society is there a dictatorship of the elders. Young and old are today partners in progress. In a country such as ours, where parental love is a strong and sustained element of our culture, parents often work and sacrifice for a better future, not for themselves but for their children. The partnership is, therefore, a natural development as far as this country is concerned.

May I commend to you therefore my interpretation of the ideal exercise, the perfect compromise for youth and its elders today-

A partnership between youth and its elders:

Where aspirations are tempered by experience

Where radicalism is channeled by practicality

Where desirability is modulated by possibility

Where justice and love go hand in hand.

While the attitude of elders to youth has changed, so has the attitude of youth to elders. It is increasingly one of independence and one of challenge. Challenge is often characterised by impatience and in many instances leads to confrontation. In a culture such as ours, the question that is often asked is 'should confrontation lead to disrespect and the neglect of elders?' Confrontation, however, is the very essence of youth. It is the sine qua non of change. The need for change is inevitable, but the criterion is to be able at any moment to sacrifice what we are for what we could become; therein lies the justification of change.

If one were to summarise the three stages of man, one would find that:-

- a) the young believe in total change in one blow;
- b) the middle aged believe in some change but in many stages;
- c) the old believe in a little or no change in any way.

In this confrontation, therefore, society faces the age old problem - the need for change as opposed to the yearning for stability. This generation clamours universally, more vigorously, more demandingly and, sometimes, more ferociously for change. One may look for many causes for this and give many explanations, but no analyst can escape a reference to or overlook the burning problem of unemployment among youth.

Youth Unemployment

That unemployment affects youth is an unfortunate truism. Part of this is a problem of rapid growth of population unaccompanied in many countries by a commensurate expansion of employment opportunities. This has often been compounded by the way in which education has been handled. There has been misdirection in education and the result is that today one is constantly faced and bewildered by the presence of the right man without the right job and, in reverse, the right job without the right man. We have produced in many countries a surplus of Arts graduates and suffer from a paucity of Science ones. We have many many competent people to be clerks but few competent to be mechanics.

There are many to teach the arts, but oh so few to teach the sciences. We have also throughout the world created what may be called an education of specialists, that is to say we have produced many people who are specialists in their own fields and know nothing about other fields. They live in the vacuum of separate 'specialist compartments' unable to communicate with or move to take the position of another specialist who in turn is in another similar predicament. All this has not only reduced the mobility of labour but also aggravated the problem of employment.

It was Lord Charles Snow who warned us in his book 'Two Cultures' of what we were facing, but his warnings have gone unheeded. In an analysis of this problem Lord Snow wrote: 'In fact, the separation between the scientists and non-scientists is much less bridgeable among the young than it was even thirty years ago. Thirty years ago the cultures had long ceased to speak to each other: but at least they managed a kind of frozen smile across the gulf. Now the politeness has gone, and they just make faces. It is not only that the young scientists now feel that they are part of a culture on the rise while the other is in retreat. It is also, to be brutal, that the young scientists know that with an indifferent degree they'll get a comfortable job, while their contemporaries and counterparts in English or History will be lucky to earn 60 per cent as much.'

The problem of youth unemployment has been complicated by the nature of social aspirations. Everybody, from politician to preacher, magnifies the dignity of labour but none uphold it by example. Often employment is a matter of status. All extol the efforts of our blue-collar comrades but secretly aspire to white-collar positions. Yet in most labour practices, employment is horizontal and affords very few opportunities to climb up the ladder to higher status. The fact is that in most systems of employment, dignity of status is confused with dignity of labour, so that in many instances administrators are paid more than better qualified technicians.

These are some of the complications that arise in attempting to focus on the problem of youth unemployment, but there is a more cardinal error which we must guard against - that is the belief that employment is the answer to youth. It is a mistake, and a mistake far too often made, to equate employment as a fulfilment of youthful aspirations, or, to believe that unemployment and youth unrest are coterminous. Many prescribe employment as a remedy for youth unrest but they hardly know that they are providing only a momentary solution to a perpetual problem. True enough there is a connection between employment and youthful aspirations but they are no more than two circles with a common core.

What then are youthful aspirations? They range from the mundane to the sublime. From the day to day worries and anxieties to the ultimate fulfilment of hopes and ideals. Youth dreams pure dreams, untroubled by vested interests, unqualified by practical considerations, unruffled by tensions of power. They see a mirror of society with its injustices heightened. Injustices caused by society by mal-distribution of income, by superstition and prejudice. Their innocence does not always perceive that the fight against individual and social injustices is a perpetual or an ever recurring one; instead the simplicity of their perception heightens their clamour for action.

All this demands that society should set its course and travel constantly and unswervingly towards not only a morally just but also a morally righteous society. It is a path that one has to tread even though one may never arrive at the end; it is a path from which governments and nations have too often strayed; it is the only path along which society can liquidate its debt to youth. Everywhere people ask: "What can we actually do"? In the simple wisdom of "Small is Beautiful" Schumacher provides the answer: "The answer is as simple as it is disconcerting: we can, each of us, work to put our own inner house in order. The guidance we need for this work cannot be found in science or technology, the value of which utterly depends on the ends they serve; but it can still be found in the traditional wisdom of mankind."

Most of what I have spoken of so far relates to the internal situation in countries. Naturally, that is where most of the elements of a solution lie, but it will be superficial to believe that countries by themselves by their own efforts will provide all the answers for the problem of youth and unemployment.

The world economy has become so interdependent and science has brought the ideas and ideals of nations into such a juxtaposition that escape for anyone from the outside world is as impossible as from his own society. Most crises, economic and otherwise, in a given society have their source in or impinge upon the rest of the world. So, any solution to the problem of youth and, particularly of unemployment, has to be resolved at international level.

The North/South Dialogue

When one begins to do so, that is the point where the North/South Dialogue - the third aspect of my talk comes into focus. The North/South Dialogue is a focussing by nations on the principal economic injustices of this world. The developing countries, who are the poor primary producers, are in world economic terms - the hewers of wood and the drawers of water - for the rich industrialised nations. The developing countries consist of more than two-thirds of the world and each of their citizens on average is nearly one hundred times poorer than a citizen of an advanced country. What is more, they still continue to grow poorer. The stark reality of the existing Economic Order is seen from its by-products:

- a) 900 million below the required calorie requirement for nutrition (i.e. 2350 Calories);
- b) 1200 million do not have access to safe drinking water;
- c) 800 million do not have basic health services;
- d) Approx. 800 million do not have basic housing;
- e) 1100 million do not have basic education;
- f) 700 million live in absolute poverty (per capita less than \$200) i.e. 40% of the Third World.

The North/South Dialogue has produced various issues for discussion - the reasonable prices of commodities, transfer of technology, protectionism in trade, the power of multinationals etc. At a glance, it will be obvious to many that all of them in one way or another affect both youth and the problem of unemployment.

Perhaps, it is necessary for me to illustrate one of these problems - that of protectionism. The most advantageous position for the world has been the strategic location of industries from the point of view of comparative cost advantage. This has resulted in some distribution of more elementary industries in the developing world such as garments, electronics and footwear. Consequently, there has been a very slight movement of some types of jobs from North to South. But, unfortunately, the North which hitherto espoused the cause of free trade is now the harbinger of evil tidings in the form of protectionism. Everywhere governments of advanced countries are taking steps to cut off and limit the industrial manufactures of the poor countries of this world. All this action is taken despite the fact that the consumer in the advanced country has to pay more for his goods. Action is, however, taken on the grounds of high unemployment.

I remember a minister in a developed country with whom I once negotiated a textile agreement saying to me that, in his country unemployment would go up from 7% to 8% if there was no restriction imposed on exports of the developing countries. I said to him in reply that, if the export was allowed, unemployment in my country would go down from 22% to 19% and that an 8% unemployment, which he feared so much for his country, was to me more a solution than a problem! I pointed out to him that only 6% of Europe's textiles came from Asia and for one job lost by "cheap imports" 54 are lost by advances in technology.

One can discuss the evils of protectionism at length. One can point out for instance that for every so called job lost to exports from developing countries many more jobs are gained by the advanced countries by satisfying the increased demand in the developing world for the industrialised goods of the developed nations. One can point out that restrictive practices in world trading conditions adversely affect total world employment and help to keep total world unemployment at a higher level than it ought to be. However, to put it briefly, protectionism is and has always been collective suicide. Protectionism although it may temporarily alleviate national unemployment always fuels universal unemployment which in turn must necessarily lead to youth unrest, particularly in the developing world.

As an enemy of the New International Economic Order, Protectionism cannot but widen the gulf that exists between the developing and developed countries. We have in this country under the leadership of President Jayawardene, turned away from Protectionism. Despite the fact that we have had to face severe economic difficulties as a result of the terms of trade being constantly against us, we have two years ago embarked on a bold outward looking policy of liberalisation in import/export control and exchange control procedures. Already the benefits of these policies are being felt by the vast majority of our people and I wish to commend for your consideration the spirit behind these policies. A return to more liberal policies of trade, aid and investment cannot but herald a recovery in world economy.

Today, what is politely termed North/South Dialogue did not occur sua sponte, but was born of the insistent demand of developing nations for a New International Economic Order. The New International Economic Order, called NIEO, in international jargon, is often thought to be only a governmental matrix, but it is a polarised circuit of vitalism - one which all of us, particularly those of us who have undertaken greater national responsibilities have to accept - NIEO is the only instrument by which the problems that engulf the quivering circuit of master and man, rich and poor, developed and developing, can be circumvented - it is another way of life. It is the indication of Time's arrow!

The North/South Dialogue is often a forum of confrontation where far too often the developing countries seek some share of the primal things and the developed countries often reluctantly concede and gradually give relief. More often than not, negotiations are long drawn out and negotiators on behalf of the developed world lack insight and understanding of the true but frightening dimensions of the Third World's problems. The International Economic Order is not a banner for confrontation, but by its claim for justice a true herald of world economic cooperation. The New International Economic Order is founded on the bedrock of interdependence.

Many of us talk of interdependence, but far fewer understand its true proportions and potentialities. As the world advances it has to specialise, and one has to depend on other people and other nations to satisfy ones ever increasing and ever more sophisticated demands and wants. No country can be self-sufficient any more. Any country which seeks to proceed on the path of self-sufficiency will travel but never really arrive. Interdependence, even for those who understand it, is not sufficiently important in their minds to seek to convince others. The theme of interdependence, as I said earlier, is the essence of the NIEO and needs to be more widely perceived so that we will not obscure the truth, that we must not despise the elemental needs, when some have been granted them and other have not. It is therefore the responsibility of every one of you Young Leaders, especially as you are of the most geographically diverse but spiritually compact group in the world, to evaluate and inculcate the theme of interdependence among the people you lead and whose lives you claim to influence. The commitment comes more

sharply into focus in many key countries of the North/South Dialogue which are democratic ones and their governments are formed by the votes of the people. Interdependence is sharing and sharing brings work for each and everyone of us - a task to be fulfilled within the framework of any democratic society.

The birth of a New International Economic Order is essential, for then and then only, will youth be satisfied not merely with employment but with the opportunity of raising their eyes to the world outside of themselves, to other lives to which we are bound by loyalty and obligation - to others whose lives have the same irremediable components as our own, components that one can help, or that can give help. It is in this tiny extension of the personality, it is in this seizing on the possibilities of hope, that we become more fully human; it is a way to improve the quality of our lives - it is, for them and for us, the beginning of a morally righteous and socially just society, which after all is the totality of social condition.