

Share power or share misery – a call from Sri Lankan expatriates for a genuine devolution of power to solve the national question in Sri Lanka.

This is an initiative by PHRE (People for Human Rights and Equality), a group of Sri Lankan expatriates of different communities living in Australia. We believe that a genuine sharing of political power through a Federal constitution is essential to extricate Sri Lanka out of the protracted conflict that is destroying the country politically, socially and economically and that we must contribute whatever we can to persuade all Sri Lankans towards this perception. Our call is based on the following observations:

- That the current conflict in Sri Lanka has its roots, among other things, in the unitary constitution inherited by Sri Lanka at independence. Provision made in the Soulbury Constitution to safeguard minority rights was subsequently removed thus preventing the prospects of enjoying equal rights and equitable opportunities by the peoples of Sri Lanka. The protracted conflict has its genesis in our failure in the past to address issues raised by the Tamil people in Sri Lanka through non-violent means. Current armed violence came into being as a reaction to the violent suppression of the non-violent agitations of the Tamil people to find equality and dignity within the framework of a united constitution.
- A solution to the National Question in Sri Lanka is not possible through violent means. To believe that justice and peace can be better obtained by defeating one side militarily, even if such a defeat were possible, is a mirage and would only perpetuate chaos and destruction. Crushing the Tamil militancy militarily will not bring an end to the roots of Tamil hostility. On the other hand, seeking to destroy the unity of Sri Lanka by violence has only hardened views in the South and will in the long run usher in a new phase of the armed conflict rather than an end to it.
- A Federal constitution has been proposed by many Tamils as well as Sinhalese and has at various times been accepted as a basis of settlement. The Federal arrangement is widely recognised and adopted as a way of reconciling national unity with the achievement and maintenance of the legitimate rights and aspirations of the diversity of peoples who occupy a country. By a Federal constitution for Sri Lanka we mean a political arrangement that genuinely shares power between the centre and the constituent parts of the country through delegation of power by peoples in their sovereign capacities. Such an arrangement of sharing power from its concentration in Colombo should be seen not only as one that addresses the grievances of the Tamils but also as a device that will bring greater justice, democracy and dignity to all the peoples of Sri Lanka. Needless to say a peaceful political solution to the conflict will establish peace on a firmer basis than any military victory.
- We do not believe that an arrangement for power sharing is a prelude to an inevitable fragmentation of Sri Lanka. To say that a unitary form of government is essential to safeguard national unity and that abandoning it would facilitate Tamil separatism is to be blind to the roots of the Sri Lankan Tamil separatism in the majoritarian populism that has characterised unitary

Sri Lankan politics. On the contrary, Federalism has the potential to convince the constituent states and territories of the benefit of remaining within a united Sri Lanka.

- There is considerable support for a political solution to the national question based on a power sharing arrangement. The results of recent elections also show that a majority of the people of Sri Lanka voted for parties that accepted the need for such a solution. We must therefore take courage from this reality and expose the retrogressive thinking that blinds some to the tragedy that is threatening all aspects of Sri Lankan society.
- The international community including Australia can play a major role in exerting pressure on both sides to the conflict to move towards a political rather than a military solution. Australia in particular can use its influence as a major investor in Sri Lanka and also as a nation with considerable experience with a Federal Form of government.

Based on these observations PHRE proposes the building of broad-based, cross-ethnic movement of Sri Lankan expatriates as well as members of the wider Australian community to lobby the Australian government to use its good offices in bringing the two parties to the conflict to an agreement on genuine power sharing.

To this end, the following steps are proposed:

- Canvassing support for a political solution to the national question in Sri Lanka among Sri Lankan expatriates and members of the wider Australian community.
- Extending our solidarity and support to individuals and groups working for a peaceful resolution to the national question and to address all forms of injustice and discrimination in Sri Lanka.
- Organisation of workshops/seminars where the need for a political solution can be discussed and the appropriate model for a solution can be explored.
- Approaching the Australian federal government as an organisation with wide community support and requesting the government to use its influence to persuade both parties to the conflict to start negotiating for a political solution.