

THE BRITISH TAMIL DIASPORA AND THE GENERAL ELECTIONS

By Charles Somasundrum

This article is not an attempt to influence the reader into supporting any particular political party in the forth coming general elections in Britain. On the contrary, it is an attempt to persuade the British Tamil reader, to examine very carefully all possible avenues open, before deciding to vote one way or the other. Above all, the intention behind this article is to ensure that every British Tamil voter performs his civic duty by casting his/her vote. Sadly, it has been my experience to see complete indifference on the part of the British Tamils, often to the extent of not even being aware that there was a general election or local election being conducted.

Often, the reason is because the British Tamil voter who has been in this country for less than ten years is puzzled by the stoicism shown by the average British voter. The Tamil voter tends to compare the British election with the elections in Sri Lanka where most individuals of voting age would be discussing the merits or otherwise of the candidates in question, at every street corner. Often, these discussions could become heated, leading to blows being exchanged. Supporters of participant candidates may also get involved in fights, using weapons, often leading to the deaths of one or more persons. In contrast, the British Tamil voter, who does not read the daily newspapers or listen to the radio or watch television, may not know that there is a general election campaign going on in Britain. This applies to those British Tamils who, as a rule, prefer to watch Tamil Satellite programs or the Tamil Radio and read only newspapers in the Tamil language.

I am personally aware however, that there are quite a number of British Tamils in this country, who are very familiar with the English language and do watch television or listen to the radio or read English language newspapers. There are some amongst the British Tamils, who have experienced not one but many general and local elections and yet others who were even born in Britain and educated in Britain and are now of voting age. Yet, a fair number of British Tamils remain indifferent about elections or casting their votes at elections whether local or general. I would put this down to sheer indifference. Yet, these are the very people who are the first to complain, were the government to embark on a policy that would personally impinge on their interests.

Few Tamils have, to my knowledge, ever cared to vote at elections be they local elections or general elections. This conclusion is not the result of a statistical study of Tamil voting habits, but my personal observation, over a number of years. I refer here, to educated and employed Tamils who have been in Britain over a number of years. In the past there have been Tamil candidates, at local elections, who have lost by narrow margins, who may have won, if only the Tamil voters in the ward had bestirred themselves to vote. The votes that were cast in favour of these Tamil candidates were mostly from non Tamil voters. It is always important that we have friendly relations with our non Tamil neighbours. I have a friend, who has sadly since died, who was the chair of his local Labour constituency group. He was the only Tamil in the group and was elected to this post because the other members had great regard for him as an individual. Sadly, few of us Tamils act in such a manner as to extend willing assistance to our fellow neighbours.

There is a very large 'stay at home' factor affecting Tamils in London. I am aware personally, of one Tamil family with four votes (father, mother and two working daughters) whose

polling booth was just up the top of their road and who, I am aware, are Labour supporters but yet, preferred to go shopping in Oxford rather than vote. As I said earlier, I have not carried out a survey of Tamil voting trends in London but am aware how Tamils living in my ward, that has a high percentage of immigrant Tamils, voted or rather, did not vote at the last local government election. I was surprised to find that there was not a single Tamil at the polling booth in the St Albans Church hall in North Harrow, the local polling station, when I went to cast my vote, midmorning.

A British national newspaper had an interesting article by Ken Livingstone; the first mayor for London, who held this position for a period of eight years over two terms. In his article, Mr Livingstone has made an extremely valid point. He said 'London, under a Labour mayoralty and a Labour government, became recognised as the most successful capital city in the world. We introduced new social programmes, helped sustain a cultural life that was the most dynamic in the world, cut racist attacks by more than half in eight years, and led the way on climate change.' I would like to add that all this was achieved against a backdrop of media scorn and media vilification. It was only in very recent years that the British media has even dropped the use of the name 'Red' as a prefix to Livingstone!

In his article, Mr Livingstone had been most charitable in his reference to the 'bone lazy' Londoners who could not be persuaded to spend the 20 minutes or half hour, to walk to the polling booth on their way to work or dislodged themselves from their settees, before the television. Mr Livingstone said '*There was no Labour "stay at home" factor in London*'. I am not too sure of his contention here, at least as far as Tamil voters in London. At the last mayoral election, Labour's vote fell by 2% compared to 2004. Mr Livingstone held, because the percentage of first preference votes that he received went up fractionally, the increase in the absolute number of votes was 220,000 or 30%. He says that he polled 13% ahead of Labour, nationally, as compared to 10.8% four years ago.

Tamils are the first to complain if we are ignored or if the state took some action that was generally prejudicial to Tamils. We sit around in tight little circles in each others' homes and bemoan the fact that politicians are not interested in our problems. Taking the last London mayoral election once again, even when Mr Livingstone attended a Hindu Temple in Ealing at the request of Councillor Iddaikadar, a Harrow Borough councillor, there were Tamils who claimed that it was the typical act of a politician. Like an election candidate kissing a baby in a pram! Mr Livingstone never claimed to be a Hindu. His presence in that Temple, on that occasion, was at the invitation of the councillor, who he knew very well. It was only intended to show that he was willing to meet with Londoners wherever they met, be it in a Temple hall or a Church hall or at a social gathering. Let us stop pointing our finger at others and let us start looking at ourselves. What sort of image do we project to others?

I have met Tamils who complain that there is no point in voting because it is always the place seeker who gains in the end while the grassroots are left in the lurch. These are persons who would rather stay at home than vote. What these persons should realise, is that it is the civic duty of every citizen of voting age, to cast his or her vote. Never mind who you vote for but, vote you must. Always make sure that you have exercised your right to vote.

The Tamil population in certain parts of London can have an important impact on the outcome of an election in a particular area. This is because of their presence in large numbers in that area. We can make our voice heard by using our right to vote in such a manner that we cannot be ignored, especially when we do have a real concern that we wish

to take up with the government of the day. This is where the Tamils can make it known that they will be voting as a 'bloc' (en bloc). The member or councillor or Mayor who is elected, will be aware that their ultimate win at the election was in no small measure due to the Tamil 'bloc' vote at the election. There are Tamils who support the Labour party. Some support the Conservative party while yet others support the Liberal party. Please support whichever British political party that your own personal political views meld with. Your political views are your own and you have every democratic right to hold them. But please, do exercise that right. Do not let lethargy take hold of you and then bemoan the fact that the government or council or MP is not of your liking.

A recent issue of a London bilingual (English/Tamil) newspaper carried an article by a person called Arvalan. This person began the article with a very appropriate quote from Napoleon Bonaparte that read *'Ten people who speak make more noise than ten thousand who are silent.'* The author's main suggestion is termed a *'lobbying strategy'*. The author suggests the establishment of *'Tamil nationalistic think tanks'* through which lobbying groups could be organised and motivated. This is certainly a very good suggestion. The 'think tank' suggested by Arvalan, can function as a coordinating point for the 'Tamil blocs'. Tamils have let themselves be trapped into ineffectual 'demonstrations'. We organise processions or 'marches'; carry banners; shout slogans; distribute handbills and often end up at 'public meetings' where a number of Tamil speakers speak in excellent Tamil, with a lot of feeling and fervour – **to a mainly Tamil audience!** We also have the occasional non Tamil speaker who, if he/she is politician, would speak with equal fervour in English. The sad thing is that such politicians will have forgotten what they said or who they said it to, no sooner they have left the stage!

The author of the article, Arvalan, has the right approach in suggesting that Tamil lobbies can be very effective. The lobby can be a very effective tool when the lobby is backed by a large number of votes. Politicians seeking votes will invariably listen carefully to voters, particularly if they are represented in sizable numbers, are well organised and know what they want. The politician elected with the assistance of such a power 'bloc' will always be wary of the fact that were they to renege on their undertaking or promise, there would be the next election where they could be held to account. Lobbies will be successful if they are backed by a solid 'bloc vote'. This brings us to the 'bloc' vote. How can any 'bloc' be successful if Tamils are uninterested in politics or in voting? The effectiveness of a lobby lies in its effective use of the 'bloc vote' to make a significant impact on the result of an election.

Tamil immigrants in Britain have mostly come from a land (Eelam) that is occupied by the Sinhala army with an alien occupation government. There are whole tracts of the Tamil homeland that Tamils are barred from, by these occupying soldiers. Yes, there is some form of 'democracy' in Sinhala Sri Lanka though not in Tamil Eelam. The residents of Eelam in such areas, dread casting their votes at any election whether local or general. Candidates for election have often been murdered and sometimes 'disappeared' without trace. Even elected members of parliament have been murdered even after the electorate has returned them against all odds. The principal candidate who contested the current President Mahinda Rajapakse, was arrested after the election and is still in confinement.

There is obviously a fear in voting, a fear that they (Tamils) could lose their lives if the candidate who is favoured by the occupation army were to lose the election. People have accepted the presence of danger in voting, as the norm. They have not heard of the 'power' of the ballot. To them, the gun is synonymous with the ballot. I can understand why such persons give a wide berth to voting and elections. They would rather stay at home!

It is up to Tamils who have lived in the west for some time, in an atmosphere of democracy and free voting, to advise their less confident friends and kinsmen that there is nothing to fear in casting their vote. Some of these immigrant Tamils may have children who are grown up or, are employed in Britain or the west. I would plead with these children to guide their parents.

The power of the ballot is the most powerful power that an individual has in a democracy. We must not let this power be wasted. We will have a general election and a number of local elections shortly. There are quite a few Tamils and non Tamil candidates who understand about the problems our brethren, continue to have in Eelam with a 'terrorist' Sinhala government. Let all Tamils study the background of the candidates and vote for the candidate who they believe feels for the problems of the Eelam Tamils and promises to do their best to help.

May I end by saying that the 'bloc' vote of the Tamils should not be used only for Tamil causes, there are many other causes in the world in which we Tamils can make our mark as a group. Arvalan suggests that the 'Tamil lobby' extend its support to other political groups on a quid pro quo basis. He gives a few such groups, but this list needs to be revised. He has suggested the Jewish lobby, the East Timorese lobby and the Kosovo lobby. The Jewish lobby is one of the most powerful not only in Britain but in most countries in the world. We can meet with them in order to win their support, as suggested by Arvalan, but will they be prepared to support us. We have very little to offer them in return. Kosova is now an independent nation state while East Timor does not have a lobby in Britain that is of any significance. What we need to do is to follow the news in the newspapers and TV/Radio and offer our support to any group that supports justice and freedom. We should offer such groups our support, when they wish to make a democratic stand, on a quid pro quo basis.

Above all, we must encourage a political consciousness among Tamils. We have to use the power of the ballot in the countries we live in, to help our brethren at home in Eelam in their battle for a free nation.