
Politics and history

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by Dayan Jayatilleka A former Israeli Minister of Justice Yossi Beilin "The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living." - Marx, 1852 Malinda Seneviratne has history on his mind, perfectly illustrating Marx's point in the 18th Brumaire that "The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living." I on the other hand am animated by concern about "the present situation and our tasks", "the concrete analysis of the concrete situation" (Lenin), "turning one's face violently to the present (Gramsci) and "the fierce urgency of now" (Martin Luther King, Barack Obama). Justice CG Weeramantry, animated by a nobler, more refined version of the same concern, has given us a warning in his two part essay published a few days ago in the Daily Mirror. Contrary to what Malinda alleges ('History is a cake' Sunday Island July 12th) in what seems like a McCarthyite witch-hunt, none of the distinguished historians I mentioned ever supported Tamil Eelam, unless Malinda can prove me wrong. They may have supported federalism (which I have held inappropriate for Sri Lanka) but that isn't the same as Tamil Eelam, except in the mind of one who cannot distinguish between federalism and secession which should be easy enough: the American Civil war was fought to preserve a federal union against secessionism. And I didn't base myself on their reading. What I did say was that the most distinguished Sri Lankan historians - and neither Malinda nor I are credentialed to pronounce on History - do not hold with a view of history that negates the call for devolution, and most are at variance with his view. A former Israeli Minister of Justice Yossi Beilin, speaking on the same platform in Geneva as his partner in the search for peace, PLO ExCo member Yusuf Abed Rabbo, made a point the other day about the abuse of history. The extremist ideologues of every community, he said, make historical and archaeological claims for territory that derive from when their respective community was at the zenith of its power, which is of course hardly the whole story. If such claims were to be the basis of political solutions and settlements, he went on to add, the planet's surface would have to expand at least several times. My defense of the 13th amendment is not animated by any version or "reading" of history whatsoever. It is motivated by the simple facts that a country can win a war and lose the peace if the correct policy is not supported at the correct time; and that a thirty years war arising out of competing claims of collective identity can be resolved only in one of three ways: either by integration through full equality of citizenship, or autonomy and power sharing, or a combination thereof. Superficially Malinda's solution falls into the first category, namely that of citizenship, but this is not so. A purely citizenship based solution can work only if as in the USA or France, the Constitution and the laws ensure full equality of citizens. Such a vision of Sri Lanka has been superbly articulated in the more recent writings of a Sri Lankan historian with stellar credentials, Prof Nira Wickremasinghe, and I am in agreement with her view, which is inspired by the example of French republicanism and citizenship. The US Constitution does not entrench the privileged position of a single language, religion, or ethno-linguistic or ethno-religious community, even if it is a majority. This is true not only of the USA and France but of Indonesia which has a secular state though over 90% of the population is Muslim. It is only if Malinda and the majority of Sri Lankans are willing to change our Constitution to eschew a privileged position and ensure a truly level playing field for all citizens of all communities, is it possible to abandon the discussion of territory based autonomy solutions and power sharing between centre and periphery. All empirical evidence points to this not being the case, and perhaps it is not only unrealistic but unfair to expect this. If so, those who do not belong to the dominant ethnic community require and deserve some measure of autonomous existence. The 13th amendment has nothing to do with Marxism-Leninism unless the late Rajiv Gandhi and JR Jayewardene were closet Communists, which I rather doubt. Ain't no Reds under them beds. (These are the strictly personal views of the writer). Courtesy: Island.lk