

Thursday, 26 July 2012

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OPINION

'Politics is too serious to be left to politicians'

26 July 2012, New Delhi, David Schwerin

No one trusts self-serving leaders whose actions are dishonest, inequitable or unsustainable.

'Bereft of leaders, an Asian giant is destined for a period of lower growth. The human cost will be immense.' This bold statement was headlined in the 9 June 2012 issue of the widely-respected magazine, *The Economist*. The article focused on India but could have described most countries in the world. They all face most of the following challenges: pervasive poverty, pollution and corruption; deficient medical, educational and natural resources.

Most are self-created; bureaucratic inefficiencies, bloated budgets and a denigrated eco-system being some of the most obvious. When the ecosystem is degraded, people's health and vitality withers. When the gap between the rich and poor widens, social unrest harms every level of society. When budgets are not balanced, the economy eventually suffers and unemployment skyrockets. Short-term, selfish thinking is at the heart of our problems. No one trusts the self-serving leaders whose actions are dishonest, inequitable or unsustainable. Complex challenges require cooperation and collaboration neither of which is possible unless citizens trust their leaders.

How can political leaders regain the trust of those they lead? First, they need to tell the truth. We all know when a politician is waffling or lying. We also know that hard choices need to be made. As Charles de Gaulle once quipped, 'I have come to the conclusion that politics is too serious a matter to be left to the politicians.' None of us like to make sacrifices, but we know when our country is living beyond its means just as we know when our family is. Most people are willing to pay a price for past indulgences if everyone chips in and required hardships will set the stage for a more prosperous and sustainable future. The next step, which dovetails with the first, requires leaders to explain how the current problems came about and where they will lead if left unchecked. We must know how we got where we are before we can decide how to proceed.

It's time to stop blaming; we need to move on and start getting things right. Our leaders should not minimise the hardships nor exaggerate the future benefits. Telling the truth and making the hard choices requires courageous leaders; perhaps these things can only be done by distinguished citizens who are not career politicians.

As the late Vaclav Havel said, 'A good politician should be able to explain without seeking to seduce; he should humbly look for the truth of this world without claiming to be its professional owner; and he should alert people to the good qualities in themselves, including a sense of the values and interests that transcend the personal, without taking on an air of superiority and imposing anything on his fellow humans.' We desperately need self-aware leaders who understand the benefits of shared sacrifice, are willing to make hard decisions and forsake a status quo that is no longer sustainable. We can solve our problems but we can't do it without courageous, farsighted leadership and we cannot afford to wait.

David Schwerin is an author and gives lectures on leadership, ethics and spirituality.

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