

OPINION

The UK Column



Who should the Tamils vote for?

After months of speculation the starting gun for the general elections has finally fired and with just three weeks to polling day the campaigns are now in full swing. In an election that is too close to call and with many constituencies where the Tamil vote can be conclusive, the vital question facing British Tamils is where best to place their votes?

The simple answer is that Tamils should back the candidate in each constituency who has been the best on the Tamil issue. In the absence of a clear policy position from any of the three main parties, the Tamils should not make their decision on the basis of party politics. Voting by candidate rather than party also makes the most sense given that none of the parties is assured a strong majority in the next parliament. By choosing the best candidate Tamils can ensure that there is a strong cross party voice for Tamils in the next parliament.

At the official policy level there is very little to choose between the three parties. As the governing party for the past thirteen years the Labour party has of course the most to answer for. Since Labour came to power in 1997 British policy towards Sri Lanka has steadfastly backed the Sri Lankan state despite the visible cost to the Tamils.

Britain enthusiastically supported Chandrika's disastrous 'war for peace', proscribed the LTTE at a critical moment in the war and also lobbied strongly for EU proscription of the LTTE while the Norwegian lead peace process was ongoing. Britain also led international efforts to give Rajapakse the green light to resume the war in 2006 and stood idly by while Sri Lanka massacred Tamils in Vanni and the East, often with British armaments.

It is also important to remember that both Tony Blair and Gordon Brown held well publicized meetings with Rajapakse. Finally when the slaughter in the Vanni reached a crescendo in the early months of 2009 Britain did not make an unequivocal statement. Although there is now a growing engagement on the Tamil question by the Labour party this recent moves cannot readily compensate for the wreckage of the past thirteen years. There is therefore no longer a question of a block Tamil vote. However, the Tamils do have strong friends in the Labour party and they should be supported as a means of urgently addressing Labour's utterly discredited Sri Lanka policy.

As the main opposition party the Conservatives have not fared much better. Although they cannot be held directly responsible for the disasters of British policy they have also failed to oppose Labour's position on Sri Lanka in any serious way. If anything the Conservatives have been even more insistent in viewing Sri Lanka purely through the anti terror framework and have therefore, till now, been utterly in-sensitive to the issue of structural genocide. The progress that has been made with the Conservative party should be encouraged and where there are strong Conservative candidates who have taken a

principled position on the Tamil issue, Tamils should certainly give them every support.

The Liberal Democrats have generally been more outspoken against Sri Lanka and there are a number of Lib Dem MP's who have taken clear and consistent positions on the Tamil issue who deserve the Tamils' ongoing support and encouragement. However, more can still be done and the next step is clearly to obtain a clear commitment from the Liberal Democrats in favour of Tamil self determination. Such a position would be in keeping with the larger Liberal Democrat ethos and would also put Tamil self determination on the agenda of British party politics.

As the campaign heats up many candidates in areas with a significant number of Tamil electorate are directly canvassing Tamil voters. The voting statistics from Jan Jananayagam's campaign last April and the Vaddukodai referendum in February this year often make a compelling case. In situations where the Tamil vote can make a real difference, Tamils must therefore vote for the candidate who has the best record on the Tamil issue.

Tamils should support candidates who will be effective voices on the Tamil issue not just in parliament but also within their own parties. Candidates who have worked hard to lobby their own party leaders in support of the Tamil issue should clearly be supported. Meanwhile candidates who have been associated with the anti Tamil policies of the past thirteen years should not be able to call upon Tamil support.

The most important thing however is that British Tamils work to ensure that all members of the community are registered to vote and that the momentum of Tamils' participation in British politics continues its upward trajectory. Whatever the outcome of the election and whichever candidate wins in any particular constituency, if British Tamils participate in large numbers that alone will take the Tamil issue forward.

As British Tamils we have in this country every opportunity to make our voices heard. In contrast to the situation faced by Tamils in Sri Lanka, British Tamils can freely participate in the electoral process, make their opinions known, vote in full confidence of a rigorous and fair electoral mechanism, lobby their representatives and canvass support for the Tamil cause without fear of intimidation and oppression.

The Tamils in Sri Lanka have no such luxury and as the results of the last parliamentary elections on the island shows most Tamils have lost faith in the democratic process. In Britain the reverse is true. Through Jan Jananayagam's electoral campaign and the Vaddukodai referendum British Tamils have participated with hope and faith in the democratic process.

By participating with enthusiasm in the forthcoming general elections British Tamils can work towards a just and stable future for Tamils in Sri Lanka. By voting here we can make a difference over there.



The authors argue for a middle ground between the US approach to government and the Chinese style of government

such as a meritocratic upper house and some entity with the responsibility for continuity of governance that stands as a unifying symbol in an ever more diverse society.

During the first round of globalization at the turn of the 20th Century, Sun Yat Sen tried to blend the institutions of Western democracy with Confucian meritocracy. Perhaps today, as the

"rise of the rest" challenges Western dominance, the political imagination may again be open to new ideas. This time, it won't be just Western ideas flowing East, but Eastern ideas flowing West as well.

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