OUR VIEW

RAJ K. RAJ/HT

Our Parliament must get back to business

The monsoon session is due soon. Unfortunately, it's far from clear how it could safely be held. Given the country's need to discuss the covid crisis, though, let there be no delay

As coronavirus infections rage on, with only dim prospects of their upward curve flattening soon, we need our country to be in conversation with itself, no matter how difficult this is under constrained circumstances. We need Parliament, in particular, to reconvene. Unfortunately, the monsoon session, which typically begins in the latter half of July, still seems mired in uncertainty. Under our Constitution, there should not be a gap of more than six months between sessions, so this would require both Houses to hold sittings no later than autumn equinox. Secretariat officials in charge of determining how parliamentary proceedings can be safely held, however, are reported to have informed the Rajya Sabha chairperson and Lok Sabha speaker that none of the three halls in the building can accommodate a session without social-distancing norms being violated. Convening the lower house is especially hard, as it has 543 members. The Rajya Sabha has 245. Even the use of galleries meant for their relatives and the press would not expand hall capacity sufficiently. If this is so, an online session suggests itself, and while this idea is said to be under discussion, adopting it is not as simple as it may seem.

For one, it appears that virtual participation in House proceedings may require a tweak of the rulebook, one that could need to pass muster in the very Parliament that the move seeks to reopen. If this is so, then it makes for a catch-22 situation. For another, it is still not clear how comfortable members are with attending Parliament via the internet. While technological enablers do exist, political leaders may find their participation moderated by the technicalities of connectivity, which could introduce unfair disparities among equals. Unease about the idea could also stem from suspicions of the mechanism's vulnerability to an attack by hackers, especially if a division of votes is called for and every "aye" and "noe" must be counted accurately. At another level, politicians may miss the sense of party solidarity that is generated by being seated together.

Yet, we are faced with a moment unlike any other in the history of our democracy, and the gravity of it enjoins our representatives to do what they were elected for. They need to represent us. They should be our voice as they discuss myriad issues of popular concern that the covid crisis has thrown up. At a time like this, the country would benefit from a wide spectrum of views. If the current pandemic is playing a pivotal role in reshaping various fields of human endeavour, as it is expected to, then our legislative institutions must not only keep up with the changes being wrought, but also try to keep them in consonance with the will of our citizens. To enable as much, the government would be well advised to begin the process of forging a consensus on how the next session on our democracy's calendar can be held. A hybrid model of in-house and online participation has been suggested as well. For this, each party could pick a few parliamentarians to assemble in the usual hall, even as the rest attend the session remotely. Again, this raises a question of equity. What about small parties and independent members? Also, the membership of those who are physically present may be seen as weightier than that of others. All this needs a national debate. For now, what we could all agree upon is that Parliament must reconvene.

MY VIEW | HERE, THERE, EVERYWHERE

One way to uphold democracy is to point out abuse of power

Those who criticize the misuse of authority show a commitment to sovereignty resting with people

SALIL TRIPATHI
is a writer based in New York. Read Salil's previous Mint columns at www.livemint.com/saliltripathi

In a turbulent week of raging protests against racism and police brutality in the United States after a Caucasian police officer in Minneapolis killed George Floyd, an African-American man who was suspected of trying to pass off a forged $20 bill to buy cigarettes, *The New York Times* published a commentary by Tom Cotton, senator from Arkansas, which called for troops to be deployed on American streets to restore order. Cotton is a US army veteran. He was awarded a bronze star and has served in Iraq and Afghanistan. His opinion piece asked US President Donald Trump to invoke an old law against insurrection to quell the protests. An insurrection did occur at the newspaper that carried the oped article, where, following protests within the newsroom and an outcry among subscribers, the editor of the opinions section resigned.

Cotton appears to have become a mascot of free speech, casting himself as a martyr of a "liberal media bias". His own politics apart, of greater concern is the fact that a duly-elected American politician even considered sending troops against what are overwhelmingly peaceful demonstrators, to protect whom from external aggression remains the primary job of the army.

Cotton would know the record of American military ventures abroad—he has been part of two such adventures. The US has toppled some governments it has not liked; intervened militarily in far-flung corners of the earth, taking actions which are only sometimes justified under international law; and its operational record includes such examples of infamy as Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. Letting loose soldiers who operate in hostile terrain for crowd control under domestic law is not an idea to be entertained. It assumes that the situation is grave enough for the army to intervene, and it views dissenting civilians as hostile enemies.

Republicans like to surround themselves with generals, in particular Trump, who did not serve in Vietnam, the war of his youth when the draft was in operation, and retired military personnel often become Republican lawmakers. But even if retired generals have served Republican presidents (some have served Democratic presidents too), they know the limits of an army's role in a democracy, and they uphold the US constitution and the limits it places on a president's power. Over the weekend, four retired generals who have served several administrations spoke out against President Trump. James Mattis, who was Trump's secretary of defence and had been a marine corps general, was the harshest, calling Trump a threat to the constitution. John Kelly, who was Trump's White House chief of staff, backed Mattis, saying Americans should look harder who they elect. Mike Mullen, who has been a joint chief of staff, said the events had made it "impossible (for him) to remain silent". And Colin Powell, who has served as national security adviser, chair of the joint chiefs of staff, and secretary of state, said he would vote for Trump's rival, Joe Biden, in this year's presidential election.

What they know, and what Cotton appears to ignore, is the threat of limitless power in the hands of one person, especially one who seems as scornful of norms, rules and proprieties (if not laws) as Trump. The US constitution is not voluminous, and some of its language is vague, leaving future generations to interpret the intent of its framers. It is not infallible, but it has served the country reasonably well, although there have been glaring flaws, including its failure on racial equality.

The generals have warned of an abyss ahead if the situation doesn't change. To be sure, those who have served in the armed forces should avoid political partisanship. A soldier is meant to defend all compatriots and other civilians; in the United States, it is not for the soldier to choose between Republicans and Democrats, between African Americans and Caucasians, between the religious and atheists, and so on. But military personnel do have political views, and some do join politics later in life. Generals—Ulysses S. Grant and Dwight Eisenhower, to name two—have gone on to occupy the White House, and former military personnel have been governors and senators.

As in many democracies, people choose to serve the army in the US; there is no required military service. But there is a deeper point—those who wear the uniform are not committed to the nation any more deeply than those who don't don army fatigues. A former senior Indian army officer once berated a former colleague of mine, saying that journalists are not patriotic. My colleague replied, "Sir, some of us are paid to be patriotic, others don't have to be paid to be patriotic." There was wisdom in that glib-sounding response. Wearing the uniform does not make someone more patriotic. Those who don't wear the uniform are not traitors. Challenging the direction that one's country is taking sometimes shows greater commitment than the acts of those who unquestioningly obey the country's temporary leaders. That lesson is as relevant in the US as it everywhere else. Mattis, Mullen, Kelly and Powell appear to understand this. And it is a lesson that applies to every democracy, at all times.

10 YEARS AGO

JUST A THOUGHT

A good newspaper, I suppose, is a nation talking to itself.

ARTHUR MILLER

GUEST VIEW

The covid crisis could alter the appeal of public ideals

ALOK SHEEL

is RBI chair professor at ICRIER

Major epidemics have in the past fundamentally changed the course of history. The "Justinian plague" marked the end of the high noon of the Byzantine Empire. The extraordinarily high mortality of the Black Death altered the relative prices of factors of production, driving the technological and Industrial revolution in Western Europe.

It is still unclear how the covid-19 pandemic will play out. Will it be halted in its tracks by a vaccine or herd immunity? Will the economic recovery be Z, V or U-shaped? Be that as it may, policymakers are now alert to deadly public health black swan events.

Current indications are that the demographic havoc of covid will be nowhere near the levels of the Plague and Spanish Flu pandemics, where mortality was measured in tens of millions. Caution is also needed while extrapolating lessons from a localized low-tech era to a globalized post-industrial world. Despite high mortality, both the third plague epidemic and the Spanish Flu had a transient economic and social impact.

One persuasive argument is that the covid pandemic might accelerate the creative destruction already afoot. The decline of offices, greater use of information technology, artificial intelligence, and remote interpersonal transactions, particularly in the commercial, educational and medical spheres, all pre-date covid. These trends could accelerate. If alternative ways of doing things work, the transition to a greener economy might be advanced.

Globalization was in retreat in the wake of a resurgent nationalism. Might public health concerns and the covid shock to global supply chains hasten the localization of product and labour markets?

It is hard to see globalization declining alongside an accelerated shift to digital platforms. Countries would still need to cope with demographic transitions and market failures in labour markets, with the supply of blue-collar workers constrained in some, and skilled workers in others. Greater self-reliance in strategic areas like food and diversification in sourcing could reduce the vulnerability to disruptions of global supply chains. But nobody disputes the welfare claims of trade made long ago by David Ricardo. These were tested by the cascading Smoot Hawley Tariffs of the 1930s, only to transform a major recession into the Great Depression. Globalization resumed its long-term triumphal march after World War II. Greater diversification of supply chains might actually intensify globalization.

Countries have much more to gain through cooperation, and nowhere is this in greater evidence than in public health. The dangers of underinvestment in public health systems have been exposed in a stark manner. But even countries with robust systems have not covered themselves with glory, making the race for a covid vaccine a global enterprise.

It could even yield a world of greater parity in the soft power of Pacific and Atlantic countries

The crisis has ignited a light at the end of a long tunnel of a fragmenting European Union, with new prospects of the mutualization of public debt. Could this be a pointer to which way the battle between globalization and nation states is tilting? Transnational corporations were increasingly at odds with nationalistic governments. The legitimacy of the latter could be enhanced in the developing world, which is struggling to keep the flag of globalization flying even as the West seems disenchanted with it.

The most dramatic short-run changes could be political. Feudalism was dismantled by the plague, as it was too labour-intensive to survive high labour mortality. Fast forward, the rise of right-wing leaders in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis was a response to the failure of neo-liberalism to provide correctives for growing socio-economic disparities. These leaders, however, have not been able to shield the poorest in a major crisis. The seductive populistic charm of power-centralizing right-wing democratic leaders has also lost some sheen on account of their apparent contempt for science, resulting in a bumbling response to covid-19. Relatively decentralized responses have shown greater effectiveness in this crisis with so many uncertainties.

Liberalism has not escaped unscathed either. The crisis has underscored the importance of state capacity on one hand, and laid bare new tools to curtail democratic freedoms on the other. Women leaders have fared better, drawing attention to the value of good, compassionate leadership over muscular nationalism. This could shatter the glass ceiling in politics. A swing of the political pendulum back towards the centre-left, greater decentralization, and renewed focus on state capacity might well be the most enduring political impact of the pandemic in the West. The American election later this year should be an interesting pointer.

Pre-covid, growth in advanced countries was slowing even as it accelerated in Asia, with this tipped to be an "Asian" or "Pacific" century. The shift in economic weight was not matched by a shift in soft power because of a democratic deficit. The G7 countries were considered the fountainhead of global best practices. This has been belied by the better handling of the health crisis by countries like South Korea, Singapore, and even China. From a geopolitical perspective, the covid crisis, aided by the realization that democracies can elect autocrats, might lead to greater parity in soft power between Pacific and Atlantic nations, strengthening authoritarian tendencies in the former even as they weaken in the latter.