

Conditional Mandate for Congress

PEPSU has a lesson for Congress. But it can be over-emphasised, PEPSU consists of Patiala and the East Punjab States. It is a Part B State, like Rajasthan, Saurashtra or Hyderabad. But unlike Rajasthan and Saurashtra, politics in PEPSU is not dominated by a princely hierarchy. There are formidable feudal groups in PEPSU. But Congress has lost the political battle in PEPSU primarily because of schism within its ranks. Congress was making headway in the former Indian States. But it never had any hold, in any of them. They have now been politically and territorially merged into the Republic of India. Congress has gained ground in these areas since Independence. But the Congress party machine is not as developed as in all the Part A States.

PEPSU is not the only State where Congress has emerged out of the elections with a bare majority. In PEPSU, Rajasthan, Saurashtra and Orissa, Congress faced a challenge from reactionary feudal and vested interests. That challenge Congress overcame. It confronted more formidable opposition in all the southern States. Here the challenge was from Further Left. Congress suffered reverses in the election in all the southern States. But both in PEPSU and in southern States Congress came out of the election as the single largest party.

In these States Congress had two choices. It could either refuse to form the Ministry on the ground that it was not sure of forming a stable Government. In that event the responsibility for forming the Government would have fallen on the United Democratic Front, an electoral alliance of Communists and of groups or parties with varying political ideologies. Alternatively, Congress could follow the traditional democratic practice which enjoins the single largest party to make an experiment with formation of the Ministry. Congress adopted this alternative. Events in PEPSU have raised doubts about the post-election strategy of Congress.

PEPSU has more than one claim to distinction. Its foremost claim to political individuality is that it is the first State in the Republic of India where a non-Congress Ministry has been formed. It is flanked by Rajasthan and Sau-

rashtra on the sides, and by East Punjab on the north. Politics in PEPSU reflects all the cross currents in the neighbouring States. But it is not dominated by any of them. Sardar Gian Singh, its Chief Minister, is a Sikh. He is a member of the Akali Dal. But he and his Akali Dal, Sardar Gian Singh assures PEPSU's Hindus, are not Panthic Sikhs. Apparently, then, Sardar Gian Singh does not look to East Punjab or to Master Tara Singh for his political inspiration. He has been suspected of a clandestine alliance with the former rulers of PEPSU. But he can argue that it is not he, an Independent turned an Akali Dal member, or the Akali Dal who has formed the Ministry. The Government has been formed by the United Democratic Front.

The United Democratic Front (UDF) manifests itself in more than one way. In southern States, it is an alliance of Communists, Left Socialists, and some Independents of non-descript political complexion. In PEPSU, UDF is an unholy combination of communists and political groups of the Right. PEPSU, in a way, is a political phenomenon which is a by-product of the election in some of the north-western States. (Orissa is a solitary eastern State which reflects the same phenomenon). Pandit Nehru, it will be recalled, had occasion to warn the country as the elections were being held of the danger of a combination between political and economic fascists. Not only in PEPSU, but in some other States in northern and eastern India, communists are committed to alliances with political fascists masquerading as communalists or advocates of linguistic states or supporters of sects or castes.

Politics is a game of the possible. Whether or not the Communists are political opportunists, it is undeniable that Congress has suffered considerable loss of face in the defeat of the Congress Ministry in PEPSU. More intriguing is the emery whether Congress could have turned the table on the Communists in the southern States. Formidable arguments can be marshalled in favour of a strategy of indirect approach. Congress could have lulled the Communists into a greater sense of security by permitting them to form the Governments in southern States. Soon the coal-

ition cabinets would have discovered the formidable strength that Congress, the single largest party in all these States, could master as the Opposition. These Governments would have been under the constant threat of the division bell. Political incompatibility of the coalition parties could have weakened their cabinets. They would have fallen under the pressure tactics of Congress. Then Congress could have sought a fresh mandate. It would have emerged out of the fresh election with an overwhelming majority.

It is a strategy which has many attractions. Congress flirted with the idea initially. It abandoned the strategy presumably because it was alarmed at the implications of the Communist hold, even if temporary, over the machinery of the administration in some of the major southern States. What drawing-room strategists failed to realise. Congress, with its long experience of party machines and with its post-independence experience as the party in power, instantly appreciated. The Communists may be political opportunists, but they are aware of the high stakes they are playing. It would have been a tactical blunder for Congress to allow the Communists to get hold of the administrative machinery. Subsequent events have vindicated the post-election strategy pursued by Congress. Even as Congress Governments have not been dethroned in the southern States, Congress might not have succeeded in defeating cabinets formed or led by the Communists. The composition and strength of parties in assemblies in southern States were, and are, too fluid. Congress was right in not making the risky experiment.

Even if it be assumed that Congress could have succeeded in defeating coalition cabinets in northern States, it is doubtful whether Congress could have easily formed alternative Government in some of these States. Today PEPSU is an exception. In almost all the southern States Congress has tested its strength against the Opposition. It has succeeded in manoeuvring itself into a position in all the southern State Assemblies which assure? continual Congress Government. Those who were in favour of allowing Communists to form coalition cabinets in southern States are either amateur strategists

or optimists. Realism is a virtue in politics. And the Congress Working Committee was right in sensing a possible danger in provoking a situation which would have compelled the northern States to go to the poll again.

Could Congress improve its position in the election in southern States now or immediately after the indecisive verdict of the general elections? It is difficult to be dog-

matic about hypothetical cases and their sequences. But there is reason to believe that Congress would have lost more ground had there been a second appeal to the country immediately after the general elections. Today the position is slightly better. The Opposition in all the southern States has tried its strength without success. In none of these States Congress has been defeated on the vote of thanks and the address of

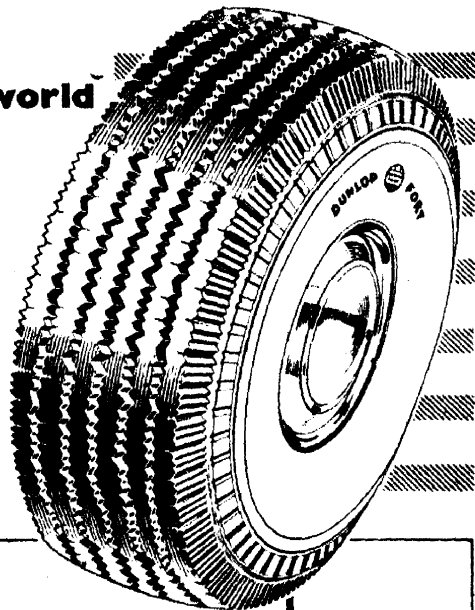
the Governor or the Rajpramukh. All this will be admitted by those familiar with party politics. Congress has played its cards cleverly and shrewdly. As a political party it is entitled to play party politics.

Here the issues of party politics end and wider political issues emerge. There is a joke going round the streets of Bombay and Poona that Congress would suffer a decisive defeat if the elections were held again today. There is a country-wide agitation against the rise in rationed food prices following the abolition of subsidies. The economics of subsidies is not in question here. But its political implications are palpably evident. They, as nothing else, emphasise the conditional mandate that Congress has received from the people. The voter voted Congress back to power not because of its past performance, but because of its election pledges that it will pursue a more progressive economic policy. The Socialists may well resent their ill luck. They would have fared better with proportional representation and cumulative voting. They could have done better still, had the rise in food prices consequent on lifting of subsidies taken place before the elections.

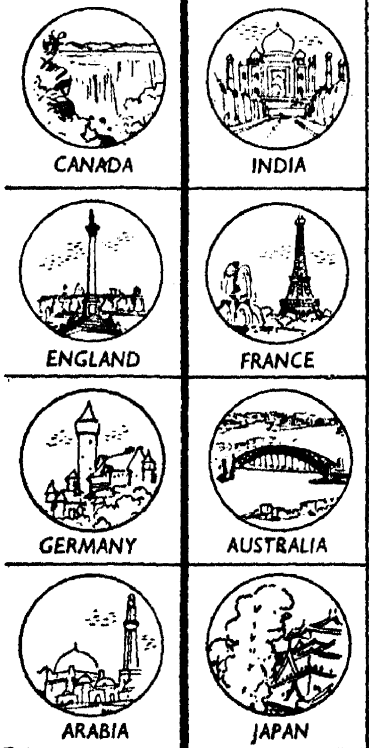
That Central subsidies would be lifted was known even before elections. But it was good tactics of the Nehru Government to announce its decision relating to subsidies after the elections, and after arrangements for forming Congress Ministries, in the uncertain southern States had been completed. Congress has an overwhelming majority in the House of the People, and in many State Assemblies. With the exception of PEPSU it has now managed to secure a working majority even in those States where it emerged out of the elections only as the largest single party. If the opposition is weak, or almost non-existent in industrial States like West Bengal and Bombay, it is doubtful whether even an economic depression and unemployment can threaten its position in the southern States. Indications are that Congress Governments will enjoy their normal period of life of five years. But if Congress does not realise that it has only a conditional mandate, the shape of things may be entirely different five years hence. There is yet no indication that Congress has either the humility or the vision to acknowledge that it has got only a conditional mandate from the people.

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