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"I don't believe in predestined fate.
The future is what we choose to create." -- Jim Davidson

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Whether electoral reform is a pressing issue

In the aftermath of the recent break-up of the government, the MMM came forth with the question of electoral reform. Such was the certificate of urgency given to this subject that both the MSM, freshly out of the government, and Labour, faced with a sharply thinned down majority in the House, were all ears to the MMM's demand for electoral reform. In view of the speed with which this matter was taken up by all parties all at once, speculation was rife that this might have been a sheer pretext for new political alliances.

A communiqué dated 14 September issued by the Prime Minister's Office, states that the Prime Minister has decided to set up a team of three foreign constitutional experts to review and report on the subject of electoral reform in Mauritius by the end of this year. This has been justified on the grounds that this item figures in the program of the Alliance de l'Avenir and that it is appropriate to undertake it at an early stage of the government's current mandate. The timing of the exercise is also meant to give stakeholders time to weigh the recommendations to be made.

M.K.

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Interview: Prof Thomas Eriksen, Anthropologist, University of Oslo, Norway

**"You cannot
impose identities
on people...
... the people will just
resist them"**



• **Best Loser system:
"It would really be a dangerous
thing if one were not to accept
the existence of communities"**

Do not make Mauritius another vanilla island

SEAN CAREY

Mauritius has a fantastic tourist brand. Not for nothing is tourism referred to as one of the "pillars" of the country's economy. Indeed, it is of some significance that the tourist sector, which started in a small way in the early 1970s, has been for many years the island's main source of foreign exchange. According to the most recent statistics, receipts from the 464,604 people visiting the island for the first six months of 2011 increased to 21.3 billion rupees (\$740 million) compared to 19.8 billion rupees (\$690 million) in the same period last year.

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Culture Without Borders Fostering Mauritianism at the Ramayana Centre

DR R. NEERUNJUN GOPEE

On the occasion of Tulsi Jayantee that was celebrated on 6 August at the Indira Gandhi Centre for Indian Culture, Phoenix, the Ramayana Centre had launched essay competitions in Hindi and English, and for the first time a Painting and Drawing Competition. Numerous entries were received for all the competitions, and first, second and third prizes awarded for each. In the case of the Painting and Drawing Competition, which was for lower and upper forms of secondary schools separately,

several themes were proposed, such as the meeting between Lord Rama and his brother Bharata when the latter went to seek him in the forest and request him to return and occupy the royal throne, or the building of the bridge over the sea between India and Sri Lanka and so on.

The number and quality of entries surpassed our expectations by far. In fact nearly 700 entries were submitted, and the most interesting thing was that there were about 70 entries from non-Hindu students.

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From the commemoration of 9/11 to the Wikileaks cables US blinkered self-righteousness prevails

JOONEED JEEROBURKHAN

Over the past weekend, the North American media deluged us with a non-stop, wall-to-wall orgy of 9/11 tributes to the 2,605 US victims of the terrorist attacks of 10 years ago.

It was again time for collective navel-gazing, for repeating the official story of the events, and for the US to portray itself as the epic, innocent victim of "hatred", "barbarism" and "inhumanity".

The fact that the victims were overwhelmingly civilians, except for 55 military personnel who were killed at the Pentagon, only fed the media-aided patriotic ritual of a never-ending litany of heart wrenching individual and family "human interest stories".

The 372 foreign nationals from more than 90 countries killed on 9/11 were barely acknowledged. As for the reported 19 hijackers - 15 Saudis, 2 Emiratis, 1 Egyptian and 1 Lebanese -, well, they took their usual dose of media-lynching, together with Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden et al.

Millions killed as a result of 9/11

Questions about "What really happened on 9/11" were, as usual, batted out of the ballpark by the media and official Washington. Like, why did the 47-storey building at No 7 World Trade Centre collapse when it was not hit by any airplane?

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Termination of pregnancy: Let the woman decide and support her



TP SARAN

"The government must not allow itself to be swayed by arguments that belong to the middle ages and that do not take into account contemporary complex social realities, and medical and scientific advances that have allowed women to be less subjected to the dictates of cloaked men who do not understand women's bodies and their needs..."

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The Importance of Sound Economic Decisions

MURLI DHAR

The economy of Mauritius is not growing at the brisk pace we would have wished for. The reason for this is simple: we depend on demand from other economies for our goods and services. The more those economies grow, the bigger the demand for our goods and services from external markets. The income so generated feeds into the local economy and helps create demand for local goods and services by a mechanism called the "multiplier effect". Conversely, the less the external markets grow, the lower their demand for what we produce. This much is a given for us.

The world economy is a much interconnected thing. What is true for Mauritius is equally true for other bigger exporting countries: if there is a slow pace of growth in their own export markets, the pace of their economic activity comes down. This is what has been happening in varying degrees in the leading economies of the world ever since the economic downturn came in 2008. Despite a slowdown of economic activity in our export markets, however, we have been doing relatively well: an annual rate of growth of GDP of 4 to 4.5% is not a negligible factor in the circumstances, despite the lop-sidedness of income generation in the economy.

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Need for new think-tanks Vision 2030 is a future that begins now

MOHUN KANHAYA

At a round table meeting in the last week of August at the Link, Ebene, on 'Appropriate monetary and fiscal policies for export-led growth', organised by Mauritius Export Association (MEXA), "les bons techniciens" of the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development (MOFED) were arguing that there were no cause for alarm and that we could continue with business as usual. And they are getting ready for the shallow Bretton Woods Spring Meetings and with the usual IMF prescriptions - year in year out - namely fiscal consolidation, improvement in the investment climate, changes in labour laws and social safety net policies. For the past five years we have been force-fed with high doses of Programme Based Budgeting, the Ease of Doing Business Index, labour and fiscal reforms to be told now by the World Economic Forum's Global Competition Report that we are still being burdened by an inefficient government bureaucracy and an inefficient labour market.

Le Defi Quotidien of 14 September 2011 notes that « alors qu'effectivement le climat des affaires est excellent à Maurice, dans la pratique c'est souvent une autre histoire. ». A previous issue had noted that « Cinq ans après l'entrée en opération de la fameuse 'Business Facilitation Act', cette loi révolutionnaire qui a soi-disant éliminé la bureaucratie, voilà que cette bureaucratie tant décriée fait son retour dans nos institutions régulatrices : municipalités, conseil de district, organismes publics, etc.

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Return to Chagos: Brilliant Minister, duly noted of course

DAVID SNOXELL

In a revealing answer on 8 September to a parliamentary question (PQ) from Andrew Rosindell MP, Vice-Chairman of the Chagos Islands (BIOT) All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG), Henry Bellingham, the FCO Minister responsible for Chagos, said that neither he nor

the Foreign Secretary had had any recent discussions about BIOT with their Mauritian or American counterparts. I take 'recent' to mean since the government came to office, 16 months ago. There was, however, a preliminary meeting between Prime Minister Ramgoolam and William Hague in early June 2010 in which Mr Hague indicated that he would be reviewing all Chagos policies. But clearly there have been no discus-

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Best Loser system: "It would really be a dangerous thing if one were not to accept the existence of communities»

Mauritius Times: Professor Eriksen, you were saying in your keynote address at the 'Contemporary Mauritius' international conference that some things have changed very fast in Mauritius, some others like the importance attached to kinship, the role and the place of religion in Mauritian society, etc., have hardly changed. Would you consider these to be impediments to progress?

Not necessarily, because if you take the example of the Chinese in East Asia, one of the keys to their success in places like Malaysia, Taiwan and Indonesia is kinship; they have strong clan organisations, which make it possible for them to borrow money without interest and to collaborate on large business projects and so on. Such collaboration is based on trust and you have obligations towards people you are related to. This is also present in Mauritius among some communities, so I would not say that kinship is an impediment to progress. In fact if you take some of the more disadvantaged groups in Mauritius such as some Creoles, they have very weak kinship ties, they are very individualistic.

* Would these weak kinship ties cause constraints to the progress of the individuals and of the community?

Yes, because if you do not have a strong network around you, people whom you trust and who will help you out, you are all on your own and you may not get anywhere as an individual. You do need that kind of network around you. I know that this is a very controversial issue in Mauritius, but it is quite clear that there is favoritism associated with kinship, which means that if there is a vacant job, you can never be sure if the best qualified person will get it. That is if you are connected through kinship and you belong to one of the big families, you could be pretty sure of getting a job at the expense of some people. This is why the issue of meritocracy is hotly debated in Mauritius, and rightly so. Otherwise I would say that Mauritius is doing quite well, and that should be the starting point. Things are happening, there is economic growth, people are getting out of poverty. It is a much better society to live in now than it was when I first came here, 25 years before. Probably the biggest problem today has to do with corruption,

religious and I speak Creole but the moment I need a job, I'll need someone to call. And it's quite likely that that person would be my uncle, or my neighbour, and so, very often it could be part of an ethnic network. We need to understand that ethnicity is not just a mental construct, but has a social and material reality.

* Such practices have not prevented us from being able to live together peacefully, haven't they?

That's the fascinating thing about Mauritius, because at the same time the people have tried to develop a shared national identity - "mauricianité" - and to respect each other's community. It is a very difficult balancing act because not only you have the nation composed of all the communities, but also the individuals who should be allowed to define themselves.

You have also the Best Loser system in politics, which accepts the existence of communities. I believe it would really be a dangerous thing if one were not to accept the existence of communities. That would result in a very poor representation of certain minorities if you didn't have the Best Loser system.

* Are you saying that the Best Loser system, though very much communally based, has indeed fostered peace and harmony in Mauritian society?

Yes, I think so. The reason I am saying this is that we need to accept the fact of the existence of ethnic communities, you just cannot obliterate that fact. If it has to go away, that will have to happen in a much more organic and slow way — through the development of world economy, the educational system, perhaps mixed marriages. But I do not honestly see that happen at the moment. I have done some research on mixed marriages in Mauritius in the 90s and I've come across two main difficulties that arise. They do not really have to do with cultural differences, but with family and religion. Many people who are married out of their group face difficulties with their families and that present a lot of practical difficulties as well as considerable emotional stress. You cannot change that overnight.

The Mahatma Gandhi Institute, the University of Technology and the Mauritius Research Council have come together, this week, to discuss issues relating to "Contemporary Mauritius", which is often cited as a model for its remarkable achievements in successfully reconciling the social, the economic and the cultural. Local and foreign academics have assessed the major structural and social transformations that Mauritius has undergone during the last five decades. It is also expected that they will also work on the platforms that will encourage "innovative interdisciplinary dialogues" on societal issues, original research and its dissemination.

We caught up with Prof Thomas Eriksen, anthropologist, of the University of Oslo, Norway, who has carried out a tremendous amount of fieldwork here to better understand the dynamics of identity in Mauritius. As long as ethnicity operates in everyday life, through family and kinship, networks and acquaintances, obligations and duties, it will remain an important organising principle in Mauritian society, he says, no matter how much interculturalism or multiculturalism there is in the public arena...



everybody is respected and that you have cultural events that highlight the sega and that sort of thing. There has been, in my view, an uneven development, and the Creoles have been the losers basically. I have done some amount of fieldwork in Rivière Noire, particularly in some Creole-dominated villages, as well as in Roche-Bois. You could see that they have not benefited much from development, and it is quite clear that there is an element of discontent prevailing among such groups that see development passing by and leaving them on the sidelines. One can always ask: who is to blame and what are the reasons for this state of affairs?

* Is it because of some form of discrimination, or does it have to do with their culture?

It is a very complicated question to answer, but I would think that there is a mix of both elements therein. In the very first article I wrote about Mauritius, entitled 'Creole Culture and Social Change' — that was published in the University of Mauritius's *Journal of Mauritian Studies* in 1986 — I addressed the question as to why there is so little social mobility upwards amongst the Creoles. My argument was that there was little long-term planning, very few incentives within the community to move upwards, and there is also the fact that they are organised differently as a group. Some of them do become artists, quite a few become excellent writers, but there is little collective mobility.

* So they have to do with mostly intrinsic factors, haven't they?

Yes, and there is still a legacy from slavery, but there is also the perception of a Hindu-dominated establishment at the level of the government, of the police force — which also however stands to reason, to some extent, given the fact that the Hindus constitute the largest group in the country. Now you may get into a situation where people in the villages, Creoles, for example, may not have access to people up there who can pull them higher up in the system. I do not have a solution to this, I am only doing research, but it may be discussed whether some form of positive discrimination would help to bring them up.

* Can it be said that positive discrimination has really been effective in those societies which have tried to address the issues of poverty, uneven development through this instrument?

That might be discussed, I am not sure if it would be effective. In some countries where there are obvious advantaged groups, they have tried to adopt some form of affirmative action. For example, where there are two equally qualified applicants for a job, that job goes to the one who belongs to the historically disadvantaged group. We have applied that principle to some extent in Norway with a view to addressing the problem of gender inequalities: the woman gets the job if she possesses the same qualifications as the male candidate. It's difficult to say if it would work, but it's quite clear that it would help if the disadvantaged groups in Mauritius had had their established elites which might help social mobility among the others.

* You have been saying that multiculturalism and the "communities of disagreement" present in the Mauritian context have served us well, but why does it look like the notion of nation-state seems elusive here?

It is something that needs to be discussed. What I have been saying is that multiculturalism is good and necessary here, but it shouldn't be taken too far. Because it could degenerate into what one could call "apartheid with a friendly face" — in that you get these segmented, segregated groups which fear mixing and cultural impurity. One should accept that people are members of different communities, but one should also encourage people to be individuals, to define themselves... so both things should be possible. As regards national identity, I think that Mauritians have a fairly clear notion about what Mauritius is — that it is diversity, a "société arc-en-ciel", but also that it is a most stable democracy in Africa where cosmopolitanism, trilingualism, etc., are very much present. There are a

number of things that you could say about what is it to be a Mauritian.

* It has nevertheless been a slow process, I mean the making of a Mauritian nation, a process that would not allow for the imposition of any politically-inspired cultural will upon the people... What do you think?

I don't think any form of imposition will work. Let's take the National Day celebrations here: these are state-organised ceremonies, and at least in my time — I do not know what it is like now — there was very little enthusiasm about the National Day amongst the people who thought that it was what "gouvernement" wanted them to do, and school children were brought out to participate in the celebrations... But then suddenly you see something else happening, as when in the 'Jeux des Iles de l'Océan Indien' you see the people of this country, proud of being Mauritians, rallying behind the national athletes. This sentiment of belonging has to develop, as you said yourself, slowly and from below — you cannot impose identities on people, because people will just resist them.

* Nor should we impose a language on the people as well?

That's another controversial subject. Like corruption, communalism, "le malaise créole"... it's a very touchy and politicized issue.

Anyway, I have noticed that there now seems to be a bit less French and a bit more Creole used for communication in the public sphere; you can see that on posters, in adverts, not yet in the newspapers though. In the Seychelles, the main newspaper is mostly written in Creole...

* Would you say the prominence of Creole in Seychelles, in that newspaper, for instance, has been worth the while?

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I do not know. My feeling is that in Mauritius, one needs to be trilingual — unless you have Bhojpur as your first language, in which case you will be quadrilingual! You may need Creole to forge your national identity — a very much linguistic identity in a sense. A language creates a worldview; so if you share a language, you see the world roughly in the same way. But then you'll still need English and French in order to communicate with the world. It has always been an advantage for Mauritians to be fluent in both languages, which is a great asset and not least in the African context. So I think this trilingualism should remain a source of pride.

Now you have the decision to have Creole used as a medium of instruction in Mauritian schools, well everybody knows that teachers have always spoken in Creole to their students... In my view, as far as schools are concerned, English must be taught as a foreign language — it is a foreign language and it is not being properly taught as a foreign language. This is not to downplay the importance of English, which is in any case a world language. My own view is that you should use Creole as a medium of instruction, but then you also have to learn English and French properly.

* The Seychelles have carried their own experiment of giving prominence to Creole in the classroom. What has been the outcome?

It's very hard for me to tell, but what I have

noticed is that French is almost gone... there is hardly any French left in the Seychelles...

* Due to the introduction of Creole?

Probably. That could be part of the answer. I don't think it would be a good thing for Mauritians to allow that to happen here, because it's such a big advantage for Mauritians to be fluent in two of the world's main languages.

* Would you think the same scenario would operate here, with French displaced at the expense of Creole? Or is it going to be English?

It's not going to happen to English; it's after all the official language and there are lots of vested interests in English here. French, on the other hand, has some historical connotations that to some Mauritians are a bit unpleasant. At the same time you should remember that when your first language is Creole, learning French is quite easy. But certainly French might be weakened as a result of the strengthening of Creole.

* One could suspect that political calculations have to some extent prevailed in the decision to introduce Creole as a medium of instruction here, isn't it?

Yes, there may be some politics there... I don't think I should comment on that either. But Mauritians know that they have to live together in this island, and for that you'll always have to find a balance and arrive at compromises. Despite the fact that you may be aware that there may be the hidden agendas of certain groups which try to manoeuvre in a certain way, only to be outmanoeuvred by other groups, which thus creates a kind of equilibrium.

What could be dangerous is that some of the communities that make up Mauritius get the feeling that they are not being heard at all and

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in one way or another, I mean the networks at play in Mauritian society...

* Are you talking of a perception or what?

No, but the networks in Mauritian society leave in one's mind a strong suspicion of corrupt practices because of the lack of openness about informal connections.

* Would you say there is a relationship between these support networks, kinship ties and the maintenance of ethnicity across the board in Mauritian society?

There has been a decline in some segments in society. You have within the emerging middle class many who have studied abroad and are working in new sectors of economic activity, for example in the Information Technology sector, in the offshore industry, in tourism, etc., where your network connections are not that important — you are employed on the strength of your graduation papers. So for them, ethnic or communal identity would not be that important because they've earned their personal capital on the basis of their skills and abilities. But for the vast majority of Mauritians, you need to have a support network for a number of reasons. I think ethnicity in Mauritius is very often an extension of kinship, that is a sort of comfort zone where you are associated with your people, where you can have some intimacy and where you can feel at home, where you can have shared memories — all those things that make up your life and give you a sense of security. But change is operating, as I said earlier, in some segments of society. I have been talking a lot with young people here, some in their early 20s, who say they are against communalism. All of them say that it's a horrible thing that should be got rid of. People have been adopting this kind of posturing for ever; remember that was what was being said at the beginning of the MMM in the early 70s, about the will to put an end to communalism. But I think that does not say anything about change, because the same people are going to realise when they get a little bit older that they will need people around them to help them, they are going to need that security which is offered by kinship and by extension by their community. So it is very firmly embedded in the kinds of needs people have. If for example I were a Mauritian and belong to the Tamil or any other community, but I didn't go to the temple, and am not very

Having said that, I think that it has been wise on the part of the Mauritian state to recognize the existence of communities in the island. One should also recognize the fact that some people do not want to be part of any community, they only want to be just individuals.

* Besides the Best Loser system, there is also the "communities of disagreement" you referred to at the Conference. In other words, the fact that we have agreed to disagree has kept us together. Is that so?

Yes, I think so, that is to have something to disagree about in a civilized way. In my own country, in Norway, we had a terrible terrorist attack this summer where 80 people were slaughtered by a right-wing extremist. That event brought us much closer together and it made many people think that we do have a lot in common despite the fact that we disagree, we argue with and throw insults at each other. But at the same time the reason we can do that — I mean the disagreements, the hurling of insults, etc — is because we are quite confident that, at the end of the day, we stand together. I think that kind of feeling has emerged slowly in Mauritius as well which makes it easier to disagree because you know that behind that disagreement there is a commonality of identity.

* Would you say that politicians here have generally behaved responsibly and not gone to the extent of upsetting the appletart, and that has a lot to do with the country's success and relative stability?

I would think so. In fact Mauritius has been lucky in many ways, or should I say, good at choosing its politicians. On the whole, you have had some excellent politicians across the political spectrum. During most of my fieldwork here, Jugnauth was Prime Minister, and Bérenger the Leader of the Opposition. They were to join forces some time later, and the way they went about it was so civilized. Unbelievable, I thought then, but we have to reckon that this is a very democratic society and a small-scale country where the elites know each other in and out.

* How about the Kaya incidents you referred to in your keynote address? An "accident de parcours" in the life of "a very democratic society"?

I am not sure if I should comment on that... But, clearly, that shows that it is not enough to have a multicultural society in the sense that