

RECENTLY, I had the opportunity to travel through the UK and the US for almost one month. I want to share my assessment of the two countries. It is needless to say that Great Britain and America cannot be compared in economic or political prowess because the latter is literally dominating the world.

Yet one thing common I found was the loss of direction in the two countries. There was no vision. Both President Barrack Obama and Prime Minister Cameron exuded confidence when they were talking either to the press or to the people. Nevertheless, I could see that the talks were predicated with many ifs and buts and most of their conclusions were generally made up of wishful thinking.

Both the countries are supposed to be coming out of recession. Yet, America primarily depends on China and Great Britain, for strange reasons, has targeted India. President Obama is coming to India in November to assess if New Delhi could fit in somewhere in Washington's efforts to avoid another recession. Prime Minister Cameron was recently in India and the reports say that he has been able to persuade Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to use British technology and services more than India has done so far. It was interesting to note that more businessmen and industrialists accompanied Prime Minister Cameron to India than those went with him to America.

Whether President Obama and Prime Minister Cameron are doing their best to stall another round of recession is difficult to say because their critics feel that they have been so reckless in the past—having no supervision on any financial institution—that the D-Day can be postponed but not avoided. However, I saw America doing a bit better than it was a few months ago. More customers are visiting shops and the stores are relatively full of goods (interestingly, made in China). But unemployment is more than nine per cent and the dole itself is a heavy burden on the exchequer. Prices of houses have generally come down by 50 to 60- per cent.

The UK, looking every bit like a poor relation, has been able to save the pound from going down further (at present it is trading at about Rs 70 to one pound). Even this upsurge may have happened because of a successful tourist season. Customers in shops have not yet come back in the numbers they did a couple of years ago. Many industrial units have stopped because of lack of demand. Yet the impression is that the efforts that Prime Minister Cameron is making through visits abroad, particularly to India, will pay dividends sooner or later. India's growth at the rate of eight per cent is viewed with an expectation as if some advantage would come to the Great Britain.

London is still looking towards the European Union, hoping that countries like Spain and

Portugal would be saved like Greece which narrowly avoided bankruptcy earlier this year. But if this calculation does not come through Britain thinks that it may be the next country to face the same dangers. Germany is not liked because it has put a different foot forward and has preferred to go it alone, despite the distress calls from other European partners.

Suddenly, there is summer as far as India is concerned. It is being respected and wooed like never before. Prime Minister Cameron even went to the extent of condemning Pakistan from the Indian soil, saying that Islamabad must stop exporting terrorism. Even though President Asif Ali Zardari went on an official visit to London soon after Cameron's remarks, the latter did not offer any apology. What London hopes for now is that in return New Delhi too opens up its markets for British exports. England has already responded with more lenient visa procedures for Indians wishing to visit the UK. However, America has not relaxed its visa policy to benefit India or the people from South Asia. In fact, Washington's security at airports is humiliating. I experienced it even with the diplomatic passport.

Obama's recognition of India is apparent from the number of people of Indian origin he has appointed to several jobs in the White House. They total more than any other ethnic community. Sadly, America is not willing to give up on the use of carbon. The world expected Washington to agree to cap green house gases that cause global warming. But it is clear from Senate Democrats that the policy has been changed. They are abandoning the effort to pass an energy/climate Bill that would have capped gases and opened a path for renewable energy.

It's a pity that the West, which has already consumed one third of human resources in the world, has still not woken up to the devastations it has caused. The developing world will have to muster collective pressure on America, UK and European countries to stop plundering whatever is left of natural resources. India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka have been badly hit by the climate change. The devastating floods in Pakistan are a recent example.

What I personally missed both in America and the UK was the liberal thought that once attracted intellectuals and others to look towards Washington and London. It is true that the 9/11 tragedy and the subsequent terrorist attacks in the UK have scared the people. Still I hoped that there would be some individual or organizations to raise their voice against the shrinking political space and personal freedom. Muslims are the main suspects in both countries and what they undergo is a slur on democratic liberty. I thought the permission by the New York City Council to build a Muslim cultural centre next to the 9/11 site was a gesture worth commending. But the manner in which even President Obama has gone back on his words of religious equality indicates the lengthening shadows of parochialism in America.

The relevance of liberal voices, both in the public and the media, can retrieve the situation to some extent. But the fact is that even those people who feel that democracy is being deformed and mutilated do not speak out. Protestors have become fewer, feeble and all too respectful to the establishment. Famous universities, which once raised the banner of defiance, are busy with meaningless curriculums and ways to collect more and more money to satiate their ever increasing hunger.

I am not looking for Professor Laski or John Kenneth Galbraith to rise from their graves. Yet I

expect those who remember their sane, liberal and moderate voices to take a stand against the sense of narrowness and parochialism which is consuming whatever is left of free thinking. Who else will fight the encroaching darkness?

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