

NO! TO A PARLIAMENTARY SYSTEM

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Hop on board the express train to a parliamentary system, say our politicians. Anyway, the shift is inevitable, one trumpets. If we change our form of government to that of our better performing neighbors and eliminate legislative gridlock, we shall reap the rewards of economic prosperity, they all promise.

The advocates of the shift to a parliamentary system argue that it is our form of government that is holding us back and preventing us from keeping economic pace with our neighbors. They argue that the “legislative gridlock” built into the presidential system is the main problem and that eliminating this – which the fusion into a single body of the executive and legislative branches of government (the distinguishing feature of the parliamentary form) will do – will speed up our economic growth and development.

These arguments are so weak it is hard to believe that even those making them actually believe what they are saying.

For every country with a parliamentary government that is racing ahead of us economically, one can cite a country with a presidential system that is doing as well or better. In Asia, for example, Malaysia and Thailand (which are parliamentary) may be performing better than we are, but so are South Korea and Taiwan (which are presidential) and these latter two are even stronger economically. The economic performance of a country is a function of its economic policies, resource endowments, and certain environmental conditions, not its form of government. (China, an economic racehorse, is not even a democracy.) In fact, in a parliamentary system, it is much more difficult for government to adhere to economic policies that are right for the country as a whole because such are often in conflict with the special interests typically represented by members of parliament. Of course, all politicians represent special interests. This problem, however, is compounded in a parliamentary system because the fusion of executive and legislative power in the parliamentary form simply puts too much power in the hands of politicians. They can do virtually anything.

We can easily dispose of this issue of “legislative gridlock”. It is argued that the elimination of legislative gridlock as a result of adopting the parliamentary form of government will solve the country's problems and lead to accelerated economic growth. This argument is based on the wrong premise that legislative gridlock is what has held back the country's economic progress. This is simply not true. There was no legislative gridlock at all during the Marcos years and yet it was during this period that the Philippines fell behind its neighbors in economic performance. There was hardly any legislative gridlock during the Cory years and the Philippines fell even farther behind. Our failure to keep pace with our neighbors is a consequence of protectionist economic policies, too much regulation, and, basically, too much government. Not entirely facetiously, one might even say that legislative gridlock may sometimes help in that it prevents our politicians from doing the country more harm.

In a parliamentary government, the Prime Minister and his ruling gang decide what projects to implement, they allocate the funds from the budget for these projects, *and* they are also in charge of executing these projects. This gives the ruling cartel enormous power. This effectively makes the entire national budget (except for debt servicing, salaries, other fixed expenditures) one big 'pork barrel'. In a parliamentary system, there is no check for the power of the Prime Minister and his cabinet except to resort to the Judiciary, but that assumes one can actually document and prove wrongdoing (which is never easy to do). If we are now disturbed by the way politicians are presently wielding more limited powers, what should we imagine will happen after they've been given virtually unlimited powers? And, if even the proponents of the parliamentary form now attribute many of the nation's problems to politicians, why in heaven's name would they propose a solution that gives even more power to politicians? If this isn't completely illogical, it is at least terribly naive.

Parliamentary proponents might counter this by saying that the Prime Minister and his cabinet can be changed at any time through a no-confidence vote and that this constitutes the check against the ruling coalition's abuse of power. They always cite this ability to change leaders at the drop of a hat as a major virtue of the parliamentary system. Actually, it is a very serious shortcoming with easily predictable repercussions. The instability of the Prime Minister's tenure and his utter dependence on the votes of the

other members of Parliament for his stay in office from one day to the next means that he is forever hostage to the demands of every member of Parliament. Thus, the decisions that can be expected to be made by a parliamentary government will usually be short-term in nature, often inconsistent, narrow in focus, and rarely congruent with the national interest. The parliamentary system enshrines 'horse trading' as a way of governance. The perceived 'transactional' decisions supposedly being made by the President to win the support of Senators and Congressmen is a pale preview of the constant and recurring 'transactional' decision-making that is inherent in a parliamentary government.

Given that even those who advocate the parliamentary form concede that political and economic power in this country is too concentrated (in less than 1% of the population), the obvious appropriate response should be to adopt ways that disperse power, not ways that concentrate it further. Thus, a shift to a parliamentary system is a totally inappropriate reaction to the country's present political and economic realities. What it does is concentrate power even more instead of spreading and distributing it. Moreover, it allows such concentrated power to be wielded more easily and more effectively than is possible in a presidential system where the executive and legislative functions remain separate.

Certainly, we need some changes in our Constitution and in our system of government. Such changes should include limitations in the powers and prerogatives of public officials, electoral reforms, a better way of impeaching or recalling elected officials, reforms in the Judiciary to expedite judgments and make the system of justice more effective, enhanced local autonomy, and the liberalization of the economy and the removal of citizenship restrictions on the exploitation of natural resources, the operation of public utilities, and the ownership of land, mass media, advertising companies, and educational institutions. We should also enshrine voluntary exchange, open market competition, private initiative, and minimum regulation as the bases of national economic policy. If we want to stop looking enviously while foreign capital pours into our neighboring countries and creates the employment that spurs their economic growth, these are things we need to do. We do not need to change to a parliamentary form of government.

Those who still harbor the mindset that it is government that will lead the country to economic prosperity should abandon this kind of outmoded thinking. Only business – by creating products and services that are competitive in a global marketplace – can do that. Government doesn't create products. Government only creates costs. Government should be viewed for what it is, and this is that it is merely a support function. What we really need is for government to spend less and tax us less.

In any event, it is obvious that momentum is building for the shift to a parliamentary system. Most of the major players in our political firmament are pushing it. We can expect these politicians to campaign for the ratification and, with their personal constituencies, it could already be a foregone conclusion that this shift will be ratified in a plebiscite. The only (slim) hope for this not happening is if enough concerned citizens make it their crusade to oppose this. Concededly, this is not very likely because it is difficult to generate much public interest in such an abstract and unexciting issue. Which is too bad: giving unchecked power to politicians by shifting to a parliamentary system has long-term consequences and future generations should blame us for this mistake.

'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times....', Dickens once wrote, and – if the shift to a parliamentary form of government does come to pass for us – we may yet get to see what this means. It will then be the best of times for the politicians and, potentially, the worst of times for the rest of us.

Continuing, Dickens wrote, '...it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness....' Well, when the shift to a parliamentary system happens, the politicians will look very wise, and the rest of us very foolish.