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## Sushma Swaraj to the rescue

Routine matters should not need the intervention of the minister

Your name will be written in history in letters of gold' said a grateful man on twitter after external affairs minister Sushma Swaraj stepped in to help him get an urgently needed passport. Ms Swaraj's penchant and ability to help fellow Indians, whether in India or abroad, sort out a myriad of problems bears no repeating now. It could be a visa, an intervention with a foreign government, tourists who have been stranded, a person who has lost her documents and recently a foreign national who had trouble getting her marriage registered in India. This is laudable but begs the question: Why it takes the minister's efforts to clear what should be garden issues? This seems to suggest that the institutions that should routinely be dealing with these issues are simply not working or are holding back.

In the case of Indians abroad for whom Ms Swaraj has intervened repeatedly, the primary responsibility for them vests with the embassies. Are we to assume that they do not entertain complaints or requests as a matter of course? In the event of a large-scale evacuation, Ms Swaraj's involvement may be necessary, but day-to-day issues should not even figure on the foreign minister's agenda. Her remit is far broader; she is in charge of policy and should not have to function as the go-to person for matters which should be sorted out at the local level. In the latest case of a Brazilian woman who had difficulty registering her marriage to an Indian national, that Ms Swaraj smoothed the path should not obscure the fact that there should be an inquiry into why this was not done in the first place within a stipulated time. The passport offices across India are meant to guide people on how to deal with any complication that could arise in the course of acquiring, renewing or re-issuing passports without the might of the foreign minister. This is what should be worrying — that systems don't work unless a VIP pushes them.

It is heartening that Ms Swaraj is so accessible, but the next time she is called upon to exercise her good offices, she would be well within her right to ask the institution in question what prevented it from discharging its duty. It is a matter of comfort to know that we have Ms Swaraj's assurance that even if an Indian were to face a problem on Mars help would come from her ministry. But, those tasked with the job should not hold up things necessitating intervention from the highest quarter.

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## Vegetarianism is fine, but food terrorism will misfire

In recent years, veganism, that extreme form of vegetarianism, has been pretty much in your face in North America: From the media to popular culture to even rides in the subway, starting at advertising featuring cute calves, chicks and piglets juxtaposed next to puppies, with the question, "Why Love One, But Eat The Other?"

Even as the global community chews on the American president's decision to withdraw from the Paris climate agreement,

there's been some commentary on how intensive animal husbandry, mainly for food, releases methane in the atmosphere and may deliver more noxious greenhouse gases than automobiles. As Donald Trump was doing his grand European tour, his predecessor Barack Obama was in Milan, speaking at the Global Food Innovation Summit. "People aren't as familiar with the impact of cows and methane," he said.

It would be hypocritical to ignore this threat to climate change, and at least in

these parts, it's gradually getting attention. The motto, however, isn't 'Meat is Murder', but rather reducing meat eating, bringing down the carbon footprint that industrial-scale cattle ranching carries along. This is an exercise in persuasion, pleasantly, just as with automobiles about a decade ago. For example, Veguary promotes starting the year with a meatless month. New York-based New Harvest works on research that "reinvents the way we make animal products — without animals." Just as fossil fuelled vehicles will face social stop signs in the years ahead, as smoking already has, meaty meals may well follow that road in the future.

But we are nowhere near there yet. Meanwhile, while politics is about offering red meat to the masses, in India, it appears, it's become about snatching it away from kitchens. Perhaps the central government also wants to eliminate meat-eating by 2030 as it makes the vehicular fleet go electric. That's a problem partly because ranching is not yet a major challenge in India as in the West. Change impacting a deeply personal part of an individual's life has to be organic

and predicated on choice. There has to be sufficient space at the table for those who want to continue enjoying their carnivorous fare. It can't be the government's affair to encourage ideological overreach onto our plates, literally having violent vigilantes pushing it down our throats.

Just as the opposite reaction is self-defeating, dietary extremism of the plant-based variety isn't a winning strategy either. In theory, it's a fine objective, but when you're forced to practise it, a non-vegetarian like me will find it truly unpalatable. And when it's garnished with intimidation, even murder, it simply turns into food terrorism.

That fear keeps cattle meat disguised as a buffet menu, which always reminds me of Beat Generation writer William Burroughs' 'The Naked Lunch'. He once wrote, in another work, "How I hate those who are dedicated to producing conformity." You can trust a government to convert the virtues of vegetarianism into a vice-like grip of tasteless statism.

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The views expressed are personal

comment

## The British election verdict will impact Brexit and anti-terror plans

The fractured verdict has widened the faultlines and the spectre of 'two nations' has resurfaced



SWAPAN DASGUPTA

June is turning out to be the cruelest month for British prime ministers. Last June, in trying to put an end to the unending bickering over the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union, David Cameron called a referendum he expected to win. He not only lost the vote but also his prime ministership. Now his successor Theresa May has done it again.

Thursday's British election was an exercise in political audacity, aimed at seizing the moment and arming Prime Minister Theresa May with a political mandate to take the tough decisions that were necessary to negotiate Britain's return to full national sovereignty.

With the polls showing a 21-point lead of the Conservative Party and the Labour Party in apparent disarray over Jeremy Corbyn's sharp Left turn, the election was seen as a walkover when it was called in April. May cast herself as a second Margaret Thatcher, a "difficult" woman who could look the European leaders in the eye.

The gamble misfired horribly. Whereas the Conservative Party had a working majority before the dissolution, Britain is now confronted with a hung Parliament. The Conservatives won 43% of the vote — an increase of six per cent — but the collapse of Third Party votes ensured that Labour trailed by just two points, having witnessed a spectacular 10% increase in its popular vote.

The Conservatives may cobble together a government with the support of the Ulster Unionists, but May's future is in doubt. Even if she doesn't go the Cameron way, her

political authority has been severely diminished. By Friday morning, she was being labelled a loser and even mocked for her coldness, as opposed to Corbyn's archaic socialist authenticity which many suddenly found endearing.

It is not merely May and, by implication, the Conservative Party that has been cut to size. The real big loser is Britain. At a time when the country needed clarity, direction and political resolve, it has voted for confusion, tentativeness and, perhaps, chaos. It may take another election within a year before the country begins the process of finding its feet again.

On the face of it, May's decision to call a snap election — when she had no need to — was more than just an act of hubris. The Brexit vote had revealed deep fissures in British society between those who wanted to walk a cosmopolitan future and those who felt left out and unwanted. It indicated two alternative visions of the British future.

There were those who saw Britain as a part of the larger European project and others who felt that a celebration of the country's uniqueness was the way forward. Then there were the fissures over Scotland's future in the United Kingdom and the social strains caused by decades of uncontrolled immigration. In seeking to secure a resounding mandate, May hoped to unite British society and confront an uncertain future out of the European Union and face up to the new challenges posed by terrorism.

Far from cementing the cracks, the fractured verdict has widened the faultlines. Britain may take heart that the appetite for another referendum for Scottish independence has been diminished by the Scottish National Party's setbacks. Some may even welcome the fact that Ulster Unionism that was increasingly being seen as a burden of history will now have to be reintegrated into the mainstream.

Yet others may see hope in the fact that May has managed to restore a measure of



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REUTERS

Conservative support in the north of England, although this accretion did not result in seats for the party.

However, the other fissures have widened. The spectre of "two nations" that had alarmed the likes of Benjamin Disraeli in the Victorian Age has resurfaced. The Conservatives are still the majority party of England, winning the support of the middle classes, farmers and the elderly.

However, in urban Britain, particularly London and places populated by non-White Britons and the young, it is the radical alternative proffered by Corbyn's Labour that has resonated.

There is a sharp rupture between those who prefer social stability, moderate taxation, tough law and order and Britishness and others who prefer a culture of entitlements, equity and multiculturalism. Young Britons are talking a different political lan-

guage from their elders. The schism is likely to have a direct bearing on both the Brexit negotiations and the strategies to cope with immigration and terrorism. There is an unresolved confusion over "hard" and "soft" Brexit that will be exploited by hard-nosed EU negotiators determined to show that it doesn't pay to renege on the European project.

Britain had begun talks with non-EU partners, including India, over a post-Brexit future. Now these may lose their urgency and await a clarity of purpose in Whitehall.

For the moment, Britain appears to be on crutches. Maybe not for long but even a short-term sickness is damaging.

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The views expressed are personal

eurovision

SUNNY HUNDAL



## Why India can be a world leader in clean energy

Renewables can transform this country, put it on an accelerator to the future and save the planet

Would you be surprised if I told you India was already a leader in clean energy, the most important technology of the future?

Don't worry you are not alone. In fact it's more surprising the Indian government doesn't brag about its achievements given it has shown no such shyness on other issues.

Across India, right now there are villages where households get loans to buy a solar power system for a few light bulbs inside. They don't need to pay for power, only the initial cost. It is helping children study at night, saving farmers money on their crop, letting remote hospitals do necessary operations.

Renewable energy can not only transform thousands of villages and towns across this vast country, it can put also India on an accelerator into the future. The opportunities for transformation are vast.

The only complaint is the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party led National

Democratic Alliance government is not going far enough.

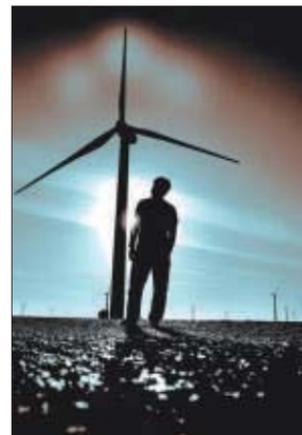
Last month the New York Times even praised India (and China) for leading the world in clean energy investment, as it complained that Donald Trump's America "now looked like a laggard."

With the Americans now planning to leave the Paris climate agreement the opportunity for Prime Minister Narendra Modi to lead the world is even greater.

In the last few years the global price of solar energy has fallen so fast it has left heads spinning. A lot of that drop has come from here.

Five year ago solar companies in India were producing a kilowatt-hour for ₹7. It's now down to ₹2.44 - even cheaper than coal. The world is watching this progress in amazement.

The strides being made here are manifold: First the price of supplying solar power to the grid is falling fast. That in turn gets more companies to invest more money



The race to invest in clean energy is also a race to save the planet before climate change overwhelms us  
REUTERS

and create more jobs. And storing power for cloudy days has become less of a problem as the price of batteries has fallen.

Being able to produce cheaper energy helps Indian companies export parts to all over the world.

Secondly, falling prices have encouraged the centre to set ambitious targets to expand clean energy capacity: from 36 gigawatts now to 175 gigawatts in five years.

They even want to ensure only electric cars are sold by 2030. This could mean an end to blackouts and bottlenecks, and an economy that grows even quicker. India's strides are encouraging Europe to

follow suit. Switzerland voted last month to phase out fossil fuels and focus on clean power. The new President of France has announced a similar plan.

Germany has already set itself very high targets. China is investing more in clean energy than anyone else and expects to create 13 million new jobs in the sector by 2020.

This is a race to dominate the most important industry of the future. It is also a race to save the planet before climate change overwhelms us.

Farming-heavy states like Punjab and Chhattisgarh are already feeling the effects as monsoon patterns keep changing. Climate change affects farming and crops and thus will hit India particularly badly.

India is the third largest emitter of greenhouse gases in the world. Indian cities dominate the list of the most polluted on the planet. It needs clean energy so Indians can breathe properly, but also to power growth, educate the youth and create more opportunities.

"What's happening with solar in India gives hope for the future," I was told by Alasdair Cameron at Friends of the Earth. He added: "As the costs of solar continue to fall India has a real opportunity to become a world leader in the transition to a clean, 21st century energy system."

This boom is changing our world so quickly it may look unrecognisable soon. But it needs the Modi government to get ambitious and deliver. If India wanted it could not only become a world energy leader but save the planet in the process.

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The views expressed are personal

## In this holy month of Ramadan, we must show compassion to all

innervoice



Vijai Pant

The holy month of Ramadan provides an opportunity for people to focus on their spiritual growth by practising compassion and extending the hand of help for the less fortunate. Today, more than any other time in history, there is an urgent need to develop compassion and understanding between fellow human beings and to do away with our self-centered lives.

Many times we come across news of victims of road accidents being left to die while we pass by unconcerned. Acts of

kindness have become a rarity and we are reminded of Mother Teresa's words, "If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other."

It is the month of Ramadan; and with its tenets of empathy and compassion, this holy practice teaches us to be together. Ramadan tells us that it is not enough to sympathise with others' sorrows but that we must also take a step forward in helping them. There must be an overriding desire to alleviate suffering, which compassion alone can do, connecting us to others as well as our higher self. Ramadan is the time to starve our bodies, while feeding and replenishing our souls. So, let this Ramadan lead to you to spiritual growth and a revival of souls.

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