

INDIVIDUAL STUDY TOUR TO SRI LANKA REPORT

AUSTRALIAN POLITICAL EXCHANGE COUNCIL

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INTRODUCTION

My individual study tour to Sri Lanka was an opportunity like no other. When people of a political background seek to learn about another nation's political environment, they often seek to get a better understanding of those who are from a similar political background in a stable democratic institution. For example, if you come from the Australian Labor Party, you are more likely to use your opportunity to look into comparable progressive parties in western democracies. These could be the British Labour Party in the UK, or the Democrats in the United States. They are able to study the political environment that particular party resides in, and analyse similarities, differences, opportunities or threats. Alternatively, they may look into the internal environment of that party and make a similar analysis to the political environment.

I knew very little about Sri Lanka, except for a slight understanding of the civil war and the disastrous Tsunami on Boxing Day 2004. It meant that this Study Tour was going to be a whole new experience for me. I had not read much about the politics in Sri Lanka, nor did I have any understanding of the political parties within the political framework. I did not try to separate the political parties into what I understood of politics growing up in Australia; for example conservative versus progressive (in a very wide-ranging sense), etc, because it would have been unfair to distort my views on broad assumptions. It turned out to be a good choice. I also had very little idea about Australia's involvement with Sri Lanka, and I believed that this was a good starting point for me, and an opportunity to explore.

As I arrived in Sri Lanka I still had not conceptualised what specific topic I would study, and I believe in hindsight that this was the best approach. I learnt very quickly what the political issues were for the parties, civil societies, and media organisations. I was able to contrast this with what I felt the 'ordinary' Sri Lankan people believed were the important issues of the day. I was also able to look at Australia's involvement with Sri Lanka. Culture was another important aspect of the Study Tour, because it gave me a bit of context into the political environment as well. It showed me why Sri Lanka was so beautiful, aside from the natural beauty of the country.

These are the issues that I learnt and will discuss in this report:

- Reconciliation and Rehabilitation
- Accountability
- The Media
- Australia and Sri Lanka
- Beautiful Sri Lanka
- Economic Development
- Other Issues

Before proceeding with my report, I must firstly thank the Australian Political Exchange Council for this fantastic opportunity. I'd like to extend my appreciation to Belinda Henderson and Suzy Domitrovic who worked tirelessly to get me there with such short notice. Secondly, I am grateful to the Australian High Commission in Sri Lanka, who without their help and organisation of

meetings, none of this would have happened. I would especially like to thank Nazreen Marikkar and Namaal Perera who were exceptional researchers and provided me with a broad understanding of Sri Lanka. Without these people, this trip would not have been as fulfilling, as they took the time to patiently explain the political environment of Sri Lanka. Their contacts in Sri Lanka meant I met with many significant individuals and organisations that were able to provide me with so much information about Sri Lanka and the issues that dominated the country. I would also like to thank the Australian High Commission's Third Secretary, Chloe Ashbolt, for her time. I would like to highlight how well respected the Australian High Commission is in Sri Lanka and this has much to do with their staff. So much credit goes to them and DFAT. I would also like to thank Amare, from the JF Tours, who was my tour guide during my trips outside of Colombo.

In the nine days I was in Sri Lanka, I was able to meet with many individuals, parties, and organisations. I thank them all, and provide a list of those:

- Sonya Koppe – Australian Deputy High Commissioner
- Edward Archibald, Counsellor, Development Cooperation Australian High Commission (AUSAID)
- Shameel Javadh – Country Manager, Austrade
- Dr Jehan Perera – President, National Peace Council of Sri Lanka
- Bhavani Fonseka – Centre for Policy Alternatives
- Daya Gamage – Opposition Leader for the Eastern Provincial Council/National Organiser for the United National Party (UNP)
- Hon. Udaya Gammanpila MP – Western Provincial Council for the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU)
- Nizam Cariapper – Deputy General Secretary for the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress/Deputy Mayor, Kalmunai Municipal Council
- Vijitha Herath MP – Democratic National Alliance/Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)
- Amal Jayasinghe – Bureau Chief AFP
- Tiran Alles MP – Chairman Democratic National Alliance
- The Free Media Movement
- Parliament House – Briefing on the legislature and administration
- Thilanga Sumathipala MP - Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) – Majority Party of the ruling United People's Freedom Alliance.
- The Foundation of Goodness
- Senaka Silva – President of the Sri Lanka Australia New Zealand Business Council

Please note that I have excluded mentioning one for confidentially reasons. There was also a meeting with the Tamil National Alliance that was scheduled; however there was a last minute cancellation.

RECONCILIATION AND REHABILITATION

After a lengthy period of war, the Government forces in Sri Lanka had defeated the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The Tamils in the North and East of Sri Lanka felt they were not represented in the Sinhalese majority society and were being discriminated against. I believe this is a point which is now widely accepted amongst most political parties in Sri Lanka. The Tamils used the political system to fight for their rights, before there was a shift to militancy with calls for separation utilising methods such as terrorism for tactical advantage. The country went into a prolonged period of civil war. This was a deeply devastating conflict in Sri Lanka which resulted in many casualties, often civilians. In the period towards the end of the war, the debate in Sri Lanka was to either support a military solution or a political solution as a means to end the war. The end of the war stopped the terrorist attacks and the conflict; however, since the war was ended through the military solution, the debate today is dominated by Reconciliation and Rehabilitation and very much at the heart of this debate is the political solution.

Speaking with civil societies (NGO's) such as the National Peace Council of Sri Lanka and the Centre for Policy Alternatives they believe there is room for a political solution in Sri Lanka.

When we speak about a political solution it is about delivering more power to the regional provinces. In Sri Lanka they use the term of devolution to explain this, and also refer to the 13th Amendment. The National Peace Council of Sri Lanka and the Centre for Policy Alternatives believe the ethnic tensions can only be resolved by greater power sharing set out in the 13th Amendment. The 13th Amendment is a move for more power shifted to the provincial councils.

Since the war has ended there has been less talk (with the general population) about the devolution of powers. This is mainly because many feel that this was a solution to end the conflict, yet with the conflict already ended there is no longer a need for it. Talking to ordinary Sri Lankans, especially Sinhalese Buddhists, you get a sense that they subscribe to that view. They believe the terror has ended, and they can now move on with their lives. I wasn't able to speak to many Tamils or their representatives; however, representations made from the Civil Societies felt that this is an issue that can bring about lasting peace and reconciliation. In a strange way, this issue dominates the debate in the political environment, but does not concern everyday Sri Lankans who are not Tamils.

It was a very compelling argument made by the Civil Societies and made a lot of sense for the case of reconciliation. Their argument was that if the North and East were able to determine their own futures in regards to local matters, and not have a central government made up of the majority Sinhalese determining their future, then the country would move forward. They feel the Tamils in the North are effectively powerless in Sri Lanka.

I have a feeling that the Government is playing two sides of the coin here. They talk about reconciliation and rehabilitation and point to the many thousands of former Tamil Tiger insurgents being rehabilitated into society. They also talk about education, language, housing, infrastructure and economic development programs happening in the North, but fail to put a solid position in relation to the devolution of powers. The Lessons Learnt Reconciliation Commission which was appointed by President Rajapaksa and seen as a Government report. The report made positive

recommendations towards devolution (13th Amendment). However, what the Government is nervous about is giving up land and police powers to the provinces, and have failed to act on the recommendations. When speaking to Thilanga Sumathipala MP from the SLFP (President Rajapaksa's party) he did not really go into the issue of devolution but focused on the point that this is a language issue that Sri Lanka needs to resolve. He also believes that developing the North and providing education solutions would help with reconciliation. There is a bit of a grey area in understanding their actual position on this matter.

The main opponents of the 13th Amendment and devolution are the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU). The JHU have their base with nationalist Sinhalese Buddhists, who apparently have a lot of respect in the Buddhist community, because the party hierarchy are made up of Buddhist Monks. The JHU are a minor party with the Government and were the strongest supporters of a military solution to end the war. The Hon. Udaya Gammanpila MP stated to me that there is no longer a need for devolution, because the war has ended. He believes his views are shared with the majority Sinhalese Buddhist in Sri Lanka.

Even some of the opposition minority parties have similar lines to the Government. These parties are the Democratic National Alliance and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), but are probably more forward in their opposition to devolution.

The representative from the major opposition party the United National Party (UNP) did not really go into the devolution of powers, however, it is understood that the party does support a political solution (devolution of powers). It's interesting to note that the UNP receives a lot of support from Muslims and Tamils (non Buddhists) living in the South. Mr Nizam Cariapper, Deputy General Secretary of the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress, said to me that the UNP's position on implementing the 13th Amendment fully would cost them future elections. His comments took me by surprise. He informed me that because a political solution had always been the UNP's position during the war, the current Government would run a campaign to the majority Sinhalese Buddhists targeting their position as a position that supported the terrorist. I believe he makes a fair point, as the President was re-elected with a clear majority, mainly stemming from his ability to end the war and bring 'peace' to the terrorised Sinhalese/Buddhist population.

The interesting point of it all is that the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress would benefit from devolution with their political base in the North East provinces of the country; however, they are a minor party of the Government who are reluctant to make any progress on this.

Considering the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress is a very strong supporter of the 13th Amendment, it was critical of the authoritative powers of the Government, I asked Mr Cariapper why his party was in a coalition with the Government and he clearly put it to me that the only party that can make devolution work is the Government (majority party SLFP). As much as this was a contradicting statement it does have clarity to it. The majority of the Sinhalese community would only support it if the Government leads the people to accept it. This would however take a lot of work and would face a very strong campaign from Sinhalese Nationalists, such as the JHU.

Mr Cariapper's insights were very valuable, as he believes there will one day be an internal push by provincial councillors of the SLFP, and that they will start to demand greater powers for their provinces. He believes this is where it could start pushing the Government into taking action and bring about the devolution of powers.

The current situation will take leadership from the political leaders, but if there is not a push from the Sinhalese majority or moves made by the Government, then it is highly unlikely that this issue will ever disappear.

ACCOUNTABILITY

During the war many atrocities occurred, and those in the international community, civil societies, and media believe that these atrocities need to be accounted for. In my discussions I heard of many alleged cases that occurred on both sides, and stories of thousands of people in an area that have simply gone missing. The Lessons Learnt Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) was seen as the first step of moving towards seeking justice for the victims of the war, even though it was not considered as an independent commission. The LLRC were told of many alleged war crimes, however the report pretty much absolved the alleged violations of international humanitarian and human rights law, as regrettable occurrences of war. This has been seen as the Government protecting themselves from facing allegations of war crimes.

From my meeting with the Australian High Commission, it was understood that there was international pressure to address these allegations of war crimes and for these matters to go through the proper processes. I was told by various groups that the Government is telling to the public that this is a matter for Sri Lanka, and has to be done in their own time without any international influence. Apparently, when the issue of accountability comes up, they point to the positives of the LLRC report, and the recommendations that are generally supported by the international community and civil societies. It appears that the other core lines that are used for accountability are those same lines for reconciliation such as bridging the language gap, investing in infrastructure, rehabilitating former LTTE combatants, resettling Tamils and educating those who never got the opportunity.

A lot is riding on the UN resolution on this matter. There are concerns that Sri Lanka will gain support from China, Russia and other developing nations in opposing any resolution on Sri Lanka. The Government has stated that "it is taking measures to implement the LLRC recommendations methodically and it needs time and space to work towards reconciliation without interference from the international community". I believe most of the international community will perceive this as Sri Lanka avoiding the issue of accountability.

This matter is so important to the Tamil community; but it is not an issue concerning the majority of Sri Lankans. Unfortunately, I believe there is a disconnect from the international community's view on accountability and the public's. The Tamil community is certainly supportive of the international community's representations and always make reference to it. It is my understanding that the Sri Lankan Government believe that if the genuine grievances such as language, distrust, education, and economic development are resolved for Tamils, then accountability will no longer be an issue.

As civil societies stated to me the Sinhalese are not concerned about accountability, and the Government are simply utilising the lack of concern as their right to no action.

The position put to me by Mr Cariapper is that accountability will not reconcile the Tamil grievances, but that the devolution of powers will. He believes the Tamils will use this issue to get international support, and get that perception that the international community is behind the Tamils. But this only forces the Government to go back to their lines of needing to do it their own way.

Most nations are calling for Sri Lanka to implement the recommendations of the LLRC promptly, and the civil societies are hoping that those benchmarks are put in place so they can hold the government accountable to their timeline.

THE MEDIA

I would like to briefly touch on this topic. From my discussions with the civil societies and media groups, there is a genuine concern that the media is not free and transparent.

There is distress over the influence that the Government has over journalists and editors. I was told about intimidation tactics used against the journalists, such as threatening calls, threats of jail, and even acts of violence.

Considering a major part of the Sri Lankan economy is the public sector, advertisements are extremely important for the financial viability of the papers. If there are major criticisms of the Government, then there is risk they may lose advertisements.

I assume the opposition parties have their own papers that are bankrolled by wealthy individuals, who would also have their own personal agenda. This has resulted in papers being polarised to one side over another, and takes the balance away from news.

I was surprised to learn that there is no Freedom of Information Act in Sri Lanka, and if Cabinet details are leaked and/or published, then the journalist and editor risks facing a jail term.

Media groups are of the belief that this is not just a problem with the current government, but that it would continue under an opposition administration.

The media do not feel safe in Sri Lanka, and know they are continually under the watchful eye of the Government.

AUSTRALIA AND SRI LANKA

Australia has a significant stake in Sri Lanka. Every political organisation I spoke with was very supportive of an ongoing relationship with Australia. During my discussions with the Australian High Commission they discussed the fact that the Government and opposition parties work extremely well with the High Commission. This was reciprocated by the political parties I spoke

to who stated they enjoyed a very frank, professional, and friendly relationship with the High Commission. This goes for civil societies and media as well who are highly respectful to Australia's opinion on matters.

I believe this is because there is a strong connection that Sri Lanka shares with Australia. There is a large community of Sri Lankan Diaspora that have settled in Victoria and New South Wales. Family connections remain strong, and often the family in Australia financially support those 'back home' in Sri Lanka. There is also a large community of Sri Lankans studying in Australia. In fact, Australia is currently the lead exporter of tertiary education to Sri Lanka, even leading the UK in this area. The Hon. Udaya Gammanpila MP, from the JHU, studied at Monash University and there were many of those that I met who had nephews and nieces studying in Australia. These links will only continue to become stronger as more Sri Lankans leave their homes to pursue study in Australia.

During the study tour I was also able to meet with AusAid, who were kind enough to give a briefing on their program. It was very interesting to hear about Australia's involvement in aid to Sri Lanka, because international aid is a major part of funding for infrastructure programs there. Aid to Sri Lanka peaked at \$80 million after the Tsunami, but has dropped back to about \$45 million. AusAid are in charge of most of the assistance, which is so far going into humanitarian efforts in the North, such as reconstruction of schools and houses, the demining of areas, and cash transfers for displaced people.

Edward Archibald from AusAid has three major focuses for Australia's aid program for Sri Lanka. That is Sustainable broad based economic development, education and health. These three focuses are about providing people with the skills needed to be able to work, possibly bringing our TAFE system to Sri Lanka, and trying to solve the issue of under nutrition, which is major problem in Sri Lanka.

State Government's and NGO's have been very active in sending aid to Sri Lanka. I was fortunate enough to visit the 'Foundation of Goodness', which is an NGO that has supported the local community in education, skills training, work programs, medical care, housing and sporting facilities. It is an impressive setup that has received support from the Victorian State Government, and the Red Cross, building 84 houses for families affected by the Tsunami.

I also had the opportunity to speak to Austrade in Sri Lanka, who specifically looked into Australian businesses capitalising in Sri Lanka. Australia currently exports \$230 million in products to Sri Lanka, and the majority of this is agricultural products. For example, 70% of the Australian lentil crop is bought by Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka is also a big importer of dairy products such as milk powder.

We spoke about the opportunities for Australian companies and one of those is the tourism industry where our knowledge can be exported to Sri Lanka. There is also a market for our high end products to be supplied to major hotels. Sri Lanka proudly exports tea, rubber, and clothing to Australia.

BEAUTIFUL SRI LANKA

I was lucky to be able to travel thru other regions of Sri Lanka and visit many of their national sites. I was happy to meet the locals and see how the Sri Lankan people live. As mentioned in this report, Sri Lanka is a diverse country with many cultural differences. The country is made up of a majority Sinhalese Buddhist population, to the North, and East of the country there are large populations of Tamils, although throughout Sri Lanka you will also find Muslims and Christians. There is also what they call 'Burghers' – those who are descendants of the colonist.

As much as there have been problems in the country in relation to cultural differences, for an Australian you are accepted by everyone. It was incredible to see people try to do so much to make you happy. I believe if they feel like they have not satisfied you that they have failed. This genuine care for tourists is a credit to the Sri Lankan people.

Tourism is going to be a very important part of the Sri Lankan economy and you can see why. Not only because the people are so beautiful in their demeanour, but because they are so ingrained with the natural beauty of the island. I was able to travel to Dambulla, Sigiriya, Kandy, Nuwara Eliya, and Galle. These were amazing locations that enabled me to broaden my understanding of Sri Lanka.

After a visit to Sigiriya, I held a firm view that Sri Lankans are extremely proud of their past. It is a historical site where a palace was built on top of a big rock. It was a marvel to look at, as you could almost visualise the palace with the rooms, pools, and picturesque views. The entrances were a carved snake and lion out of the stone. Unfortunately the head of the lion is no longer there. I believe it gives Sri Lankans much pride that their people had built one of the great marvels of the world.

In Dambulla you get the understanding that for Buddhist's their faith is very important, especially in how they live their lives. Dambulla is a place where Buddhist monks had built a temple in a cave. This is the same with Kandy, where I was able to visit the Temple of Tooth (where Buddha's tooth is housed). Being a Catholic, I visited the St Anthony's Church in Colombo and that showed the deep devotion of parishioners there. Faith is very important to Sri Lankans and I believe they take the very best of their faiths in living their lives and treating others, and I have great hope that they will be able to use this to bring lasting peace in Sri Lanka.

Nuwara Eliya is of upmost importance to Sri Lanka, and from there they export their most proud product and that is tea. The tea fields were simply amazing, and my favourite part of the tour. High in the mountains you see rows of tea covering an entire mountain. The beauty of the place is incredible. It is all thanks to the hard work ethic of Sri Lankans. I was amazed to see the female tea pickers walking up and down a mountain picking thirty kilos of tealeaves. They do this for only ten dollars a day- it is incredible and heart breaking at the same time.

Galle is another amazing place where you can almost see the colonial soldiers holding down the fort, protecting their colonial built city. Driving down to Galle from Colombo also revealed the devastation of the Boxing Day Tsunami. It is such a contrast, on one side you see a picture perfect

beach, yet on the other you see shelled out houses, and memorials. However, there is optimism that these beaches will once again be filled with lively people and tourists enjoying the beauty.

Sri Lanka's beauty is not separate from the people; you see faith, history, optimism, etc. To understand a Sri Lankan you must understand the beauty that surrounds them.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Economic development is seen to be moving in a positive direction in Sri Lanka. I understand growth is at approximately 8%. There seems to be a large investment pipeline due to the greater stability in the country. Individuals such as Mr Amal Jayasinghe and Mr Senaka Silva are very optimistic with the future. They believe Sri Lanka has the potential to be what Hong Kong is to China, but with India.

It is an interesting point that \$5 billion of the economy comes from Sri Lankan's working abroad, however this was a figure that was mentioned to me and I cannot confirm this. Nevertheless, there are concerns with the garment and tourism industry, as a result of Europe being in financial difficulty.

Amal Jayasinghe believes there are issues with the economy that could come up; he believes the Government is banking on foreign investments to maintain economic development. It is also my understanding that the Government bonds are maturing and they are hoping to issue a 1 billion Euro bond to pay this off.

The other concern that was raised to me was in relation to foreign investments. I was informed that the Government is currently involved in agreements where, for example, they would borrow money from the Chinese government for a Chinese company to build that infrastructure, and use Chinese workers to build it, leaving no economic benefit for Sri Lankans.

The SLFP are obviously very confident about Sri Lanka's economic future, and believe this will be due to the tourism industry, and ability to be a hub of professionals for outsourced services.

Complementing this will be their staple industries such as garment manufacturing and tea exports. However the UNP (the main opposition party) believe that the Government is running the economy to the ground and this will eventually lead to a voter backlash. In saying that, it seems the country is apathetic to the economy, and will not vote on issues regarding this issue.

OTHER ISSUES

There were so many topics I was able to discuss during my stay in Sri Lanka, but I cannot discuss them all in depth. These issues were the centralisation of powers with the President, the electoral system (proportional representation), the parliamentary system, populist political policy and the standard of living in Sri Lanka.

I hope that in the future that other individuals that travel to Sri Lanka as part of the Australian Political Exchange Council can look into the issues I discussed more in depth, and also look into these issues I was not able to report on.

CONCLUSION

Obviously there are major issues that Sri Lanka must contend with, but I do see hope for Sri Lanka. There is development occurring - whether this is financially sustainable is another question. The country's growth is another important point to be made, and I hope that it is sustainable. I also hope to see the general population benefit from the growth in the economy.

The political situation is another issue for Sri Lankans to contend with, I cannot say one political party is better than the other. What I can say is that the people that I met were incredibly intelligent, and who have the best interest of the people in their mind. I hope that whichever direction the country goes, that it is the voices of every individual in Sri Lanka that is heard. I believe it is everyone's consensus to have that equality of opportunity and the standard of living lifted, whether they are from the North or South, East or West, or are Tamil or Buddhist.

One thing is for sure- the Sri Lankans are resilient people. They have faced decades of war and a devastating Tsunami, but remain optimistic in that they can move forward in unity and make Sri Lanka an even more beautiful country than it already is.

For me personally, my visit was able to broaden my understanding of politics away from a stable environment. The visit also revealed to me how the voice of a minority can be lost in the majority, no matter how well intentioned the majority are. I guess this can be considered governing for the majority rather than governing for all – a perfect lesson for anyone involved in politics.