

The Decent Politician



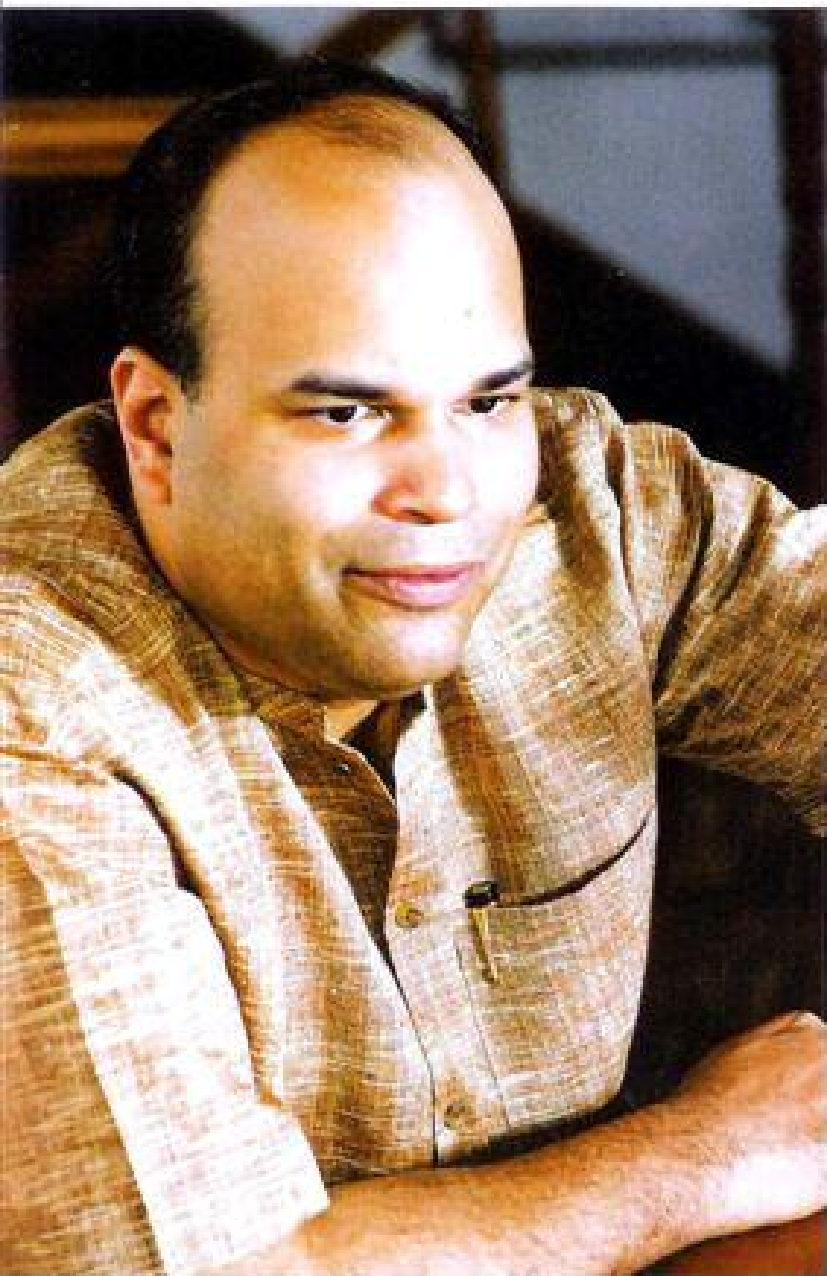
Above all, he strives for decency - a rare stand in today's context of politics.

Educated in Sri Lanka, Europe and the US and a successful entrepreneur, Milinda Moragoda entered politics in 2000 in order to "contribute to make a difference". In many ways he already has.

He was appointed the Minister for Economic Reform, Science and Technology as well as the Deputy Minister of Policy Development and Implementation in the United National Party Government. He also played a pivotal role in the ongoing peace process at the time. Currently he is the UNP Chief Organizer for Colombo East and West.

Although a new entrant to the political fray, Moragoda possesses great vision and drive, and has achieved much. In 1999, the Foundation Board of the prestigious World Economic Forum identified Moragoda as one of its 'One Hundred Global Leaders of Tomorrow'. He has been the Honorary Consul for Brazil in Sri Lanka since 1990 and has represented the country at several important global conferences. An accomplished academic, Moragoda has had articles and papers published in international journals.

In this interview with *Business Today*, Milinda Moragoda, discusses his political ideologies, his electorate, the criticism leveled against him, the country's economy and education policy, and his community service projects.



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▶ What is your political philosophy and has it changed since formally entering politics in the year 2000?

One of the fathers of the American Constitution, John Adams, in expressing his reservations about some aspects of democracy, was once quoted as saying that ‘in any assembly, a small minority of individuals silences the majority, by noise rather than sense, meanness rather than greatness, and ignorance rather than learning’.

In our political culture, this is truly the case. Take Parliament, for example. Many people do not realize that a majority of members would like to see a new political culture based on clean and decent politics, without violence and an end to personal attacks and character assassination. It is only a noisy minority of members, who acting like bullies, drown out the voices of the more sensible members. Through physical and verbal intimidation, an irrational few make the decent majority cower down. This is the same case when it comes to our society as a whole. Most people would like to see a change but are frightened to speak out.

My political philosophy is focused on trying to awaken the silent majority of decent people, for I believe that this is the only way in which we can change our society for the better. This does not mean that we need to go down to the level of those who drown out the voice of reason. All that is needed is for the silent majority to stand together and assert themselves in a civilized manner and change will occur. The noisy minority are often hollow bullies who will continue if they are left unchallenged.

On the other hand, as a Member of Parliament elected to represent the people, it is important for me to listen to opinions and criticism and I appreciate constructive criticism. However, I find that it is often idle criticism. I would tell these people that they have the right to criticize, but that they also have the obligation to get involved.

Democracy is a two way process. It has to be earned. Everyone has a contribution to make and can make a positive difference. Until people realize this, their lives will be dominated by the noisy minority who rule by intimidation, who pander to the lowest common denominator, and who have the audacity to believe that they can get away with this forever.

I also believe that many Sri Lankan politicians play to the gallery rather than providing proper leadership. So much time is wasted that could be better utilized for debating and formulating policies which will move our country forward. Sometimes leaders have to take tough decisions which are necessary but which may be unpopular in the short term. The public elects us to take decisions that are in their best interests and we have to possess the courage to do this.

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Meeting with the people.



sion. In a way, you can't blame politicians alone; we have to blame ourselves as well. In a democracy, our political leaders are selected and elected by the people. To blame the politicians for messing everything up is the easy way out. We have to look at ourselves and see where we as a society went wrong.

► **Is there anyone you consider to be your political guru or role model?**

The two Sri Lankan leaders who have had a direct influence on my political career are Mr Ranil Wickremesinghe and the late President Ranasingha Premadasa. Mr Wickremesinghe brought me into politics and he influenced my career a great deal. President Premadasa originally invited me to work for him in the field of international economic co-operation and foreign relations. In this capacity I was associated with both the Janasaviya program and the 200 Garment Factories Program. I have also been a student of Sri Lankan political history and have respect for the vision of many of our leaders from the entire political spectrum, including Mr D S Senanayake, Mr Dudley Senanayake, Mr SWRD Bandaranaike, Mrs Sirimavo Bandaranaike and Mr J R Jayewardene. All of these leaders shaped our post-Independence history during a difficult transition from centuries of colonization to our new found freedom. Each of them had unique personal leadership styles and left their mark on different facets of our country's political history as a democracy. Collectively, by association and by reading, I have learnt a lot from all these leaders.

Internationally, leaders whom I admire include Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru, Lee Kuan Yew, and Dr Mahathir Mohamad. In my view, Pundit Nehru's vision for India is what made it possible for it to emerge as a secular, democratic society. He was a democrat of unique distinction. I admire Lee Kuan Yew for his clear sighted pragmatism and intelligence. He has a remarkably versatile mind capable of seeing future trends and building up his country so that it is always in the forefront of progress. Dr Mahathir is a leader who had immense self-confidence, was fearless in fighting for what he believed in and was successful in creating a cultural identity for his country. He was also not afraid to take on giants and to express his controversial opinions.

Above all, these three leaders led from the front, took tough decisions, often went against the tide of popular opinion, forged a unique path, and gained the trust and confidence of their citizens to the extent that they were able to convince them to sacrifice and endure the necessary hardships on the road to progress.

► **Can you talk about the electorate you now represent?**

Colombo East was my original electorate. The UNP has now appointed me to represent both Colombo East and West. Before 1977, Colombo East and West came under one electorate called Colombo South. Interestingly, at that time, Colombo South was a multi-member constituency, which was represented by two MPs, who were for well over a decade President Jayewardene and Mr Bernard Soysa. To me, this represents the type of politics I believe in - the idea that there can be two individuals with diametrically opposite views, politically and ideologically, who can represent the same electorate and deal with each other. The two of them disagreed on almost everything but were able to work together and serve the same community. That is the kind of politics that I would like to represent and foster and I wish to take these values to the rest of the country.

Today decency has been largely forgotten in the political system. It has become the norm for political parties to demonize each other. Politics should not be a sport where you seek to win at all costs. There has to be a united approach to developing our country. We cannot have a culture that is fundamentally based on mutual demonization and power at all costs. This does not serve the interests of the nation.

► **What are the critical issues in your electorate?**

This often depends on whether a person is from the middle class or living in the shanty areas, though some common concerns are those of housing, infrastructure such as electricity, drainage and roads, public services like garbage collection, building of unauthorized structures etc.

The Sri Lankan political structure consists of three tiers of government: local government/municipal councils, provincial councils and national-level structures, ie,



The de-mining project.

Parliament and the Executive Presidency. In the ideal world, the local council should handle all local issues, such as road maintenance, garbage collection, drainage issues, housing for the poor, etc, and even in some cases, education. Then at the provincial level, the areas of responsibility should involve the administration of national education, health, transport and other policies. Finally, at the national level, the focus should be fundamentally on policy formulation.

The rationale for regional devolution was to decentralize decision-making so that it would be more responsive to regional needs, interests, and aspirations. However, in my view, devolution has not worked and has no relevance outside of the northeast. I believe it would serve us well if we did away with that layer of government. We do not have the human or financial resources to maintain these councils and ensure that they meet the needs of the people. In reality, the true result of this policy is that the best resources are in Colombo and the other urban centers, and the process of many things is slowed down due to the lack of competence and bureaucratic red tape.

As for local government, it is sad to note that the situation exists where constituents often come to see national MPs to solve problems which should be handled at the local government level. As an MP they expect you to attend to these problems and often it is a desperate move as they feel that nothing can be achieved without intervention at the highest levels. Therefore we have to seriously reevaluate the political and electoral systems we have set up.

Today, because of the proportional representation system, I as an MP elected to the Colombo District, technically represent about a million constituents along with all the other MPs who have been elected to the Colombo District. This means that every citizen living in Colombo is represented by 20 MPs. One outcome of this, is that it is difficult for an MP to serve such a large number of people directly. Another outcome is that this makes campaigning very expensive as the MP has to reach out to a large number of people, further contributing to corruption and violence. Thirdly, this makes the MP further removed from his/her constituency and in many ways less directly accountable. I strongly believe that the electoral system should be changed so that MPs are responsible for



Visiting tsunami-affected areas.

an individual electorate rather than for an entire district. I believe that the MP will be able to serve his/her constituents more effectively if this were the case. A mixed system such as the one in Germany may be a solution.

I also believe that if more middle class professionals and business leaders entered local politics, we might find our municipal councils to be more effective at problem-solving and management. It is important to note that in most countries, the offices of local government is not a full-time vocation and many professionals such as doctors, lawyers and business people serve on local councils. In fact, in many countries, many local distinguished citizens serve on local councils more as a public service than for anything else.

During earlier times in Sri Lanka, this was also the case. In fact the historical reason for the low salary paid to council members is based on the assumption that the person has another job. But as the situation evolved to where council positions became full time, this led to endemic corruption in the system. In addition, due to the nature of the preferential vote system, the municipal elections require substantial funds to contest. In fact, the cost of running for the Colombo Municipal Council can be as much as it is for contesting for a seat as a Member of Parliament in a rural constituency. So, automatically the recipe for corruption is being created. Many municipal counselors are trying to make a difference but I think the system prevents them from carrying out what they need to do, and as a result, in a vicious cycle, professionals with a civic consciousness and a public service orientation are hesitant to enter such a system and thereby leave these responsibilities to full-time politicians.

In order for Sri Lanka to progress, politicians from the national legislature must be allowed to attend to national policy issues and local bodies must be competent to attend to more local or grassroots issues. However, this will require the participation of citizens in the political process. I hold the middle classes in Colombo responsible in many ways. Everyone seems to have an opinion but many do not want to get involved in helping bring about change. It is in some ways easier to affect change at a local level than it is at a national level. Initially there were no political parties in local government. It was later that our present party system arose. We need to change this orientation. If you as a citizen of this country feel strongly about any issues

of local government, you should contribute by running for office in local government while pursuing your career. The mayor and deputy mayor need to work fulltime but municipal counselors need not be fulltime jobs.

► In your opinion, why is there reluctance by the general public, including members of the private sector who are quick to criticize, to enter local government?

It is understandable because of the way in which state power is used in this country. Violence and intimidation and abuse of power are prevalent in our political culture. A businessperson can be easily persecuted or victimized if he/she is on the wrong side of the political divide. Therefore most businesspeople are generally nervous, and whatever their personal political views, prefer to keep their heads low. As a result the system is perpetuated.

► Certain critics label you as "uniform and unadventurous" as well as being too sympathetic towards the LTTE during the peace negotiations and too "Westernized" in your approach. What have you to say?

I will touch on your last point first. A critic once accused Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru of being 'Western by education, Muslim by culture and a Hindu by accident'. Pundit Nehru simply smiled and replied: 'I know who I am. I am an Indian'. Similarly, I am not insecure in who I am. Those who criticize generally do so because of their own insecurities. They wear their so-called identity as a badge of honor on their sleeve. And their identity often rests upon the exclusion and demonization of others. Political leaders can take the easy path and exploit this weakness in their hunger for power at any cost, which is what has happened in much of our post-Independence history, or, they can seek to provide true leadership by seeking the path they know is correct.

In fact one of my favorite passages from Jawaharlal Nehru's book, 'The Discovery of India', which he composed while imprisoned during the Indian struggle for independence, illustrates the complex nature of identity in the modern world. In this passage we see a true and honest leader grappling with his feelings for the right path for his country:

'India was in my blood and there was much in her that instinctively thrilled me. And yet I approached her almost as an alien critic, full of dislike for the present as well as for many of the relics of the past that I saw. To some extent I came to her via the West, and looked at her as a friendly Westerner might have done. I was eager and anxious to change her outlook and appearance and give her the garb of modernity. And yet doubts arose within me. Did I know India? - I who presumed to scrap much of her past heritage? There was a great deal that had to be scrapped, that must be scrapped; but surely India could not have been what she undoubtedly was, and could not have continued a cultured existence for thousands of years, if she had not possessed something very vital and enduring, something that was worthwhile. What was this something?'

His deep words have special relevance even today as we as many other nations in the world seek our own identity in the new era of globalization.

As per your second point, in our 50-year history, many politicians built their careers by capitalizing on the divi-



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Meeting with the Malwattu Asgiriya Hamuduruwo.

sions of our society, be they race, caste, class or religion. At the time we initiated the peace process, there was much distrust and suspicion on both sides, so much so that there was simply no communication. Without trust, there would have been no basis for the talks for the process to begin. To build trust, requires sincerity of purpose. Sincerity is not appeasement and requires immense self-confidence and courage.

The title of my book of speeches, 'A Warm Heart, A Cool Head and A Deep Breath', summarizes our government's approach to the peace process. A warm heart symbolizes sincerity. Without sincerity there is no trust to move the process forward. A 'cool head' implies the need to be realistic, healthily skeptical and not to indulge in wishful thinking. We were not naive to think that the LTTE would change overnight. The LTTE has a certain point of view. However, since the whole world was watching, both the LTTE and the government had to act responsibly. This transparency vis a vis the international community, I believe, made our approach pragmatic and viable. And finally, 'a deep breath' implies the difficulty in achieving success and the risk involved in trying to settle a longstanding and intractable conflict. In our short period in office, we were able to bring the whole process to a new paradigm. We were able to save lives, regain our nation's self-respect and stature internationally, and restore some level of normalcy to the lives of many ordinary people in a country that was on the verge of self-destruction. Ultimately, history will be the final judge of the way we handled the peace process.

It is important to highlight that, many of those who are in government today who criticized the basis on which we conducted the peace process are today continuing on the same foundations we laid. Unfortunately, it is this type of opportunistic approach that led to the creation of this problem in the first place. If there had been more common understanding between the two major political parties in this country perhaps this problem would have been resolved years ago but we were playing politics with the future of our society, and as a result we are all paying the price for this. There has to be national consensus and to this end, the JVP should not be marginalized because they represent a point of view. However, when approaching a consensus-



Moragoda meeting The World Bank President James D Wolfensohn.

building process, all parties must be sincere. Unfortunately, the compelling evidence today points to the unlikelihood of this occurring.

Finally, uniform and unadventurous? The essence of politics is leadership and hence, politicians are not meant to be entertainers or impresarios. Former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore was once told by his political advisors that he was not popular. His response was that he was not there to be popular, but to be respected. It is my aspiration to be respected.

▶ You mentioned the book of speeches you published. Some may consider this a little premature considering your young political career. What was the rationale for publishing it?

I believe that as a politician it is my obligation to communicate and set forth my ideas and positions. I am not afraid to place on record my beliefs and stands on issues important to our nation. Since I was involved in two important and in some ways controversial areas, namely the peace process and the economic reform process, it was in my view a responsibility for me to explain the thinking behind our government's approach. Part of my role as a public figure is to stimulate dialogue and debate on important national issues and to educate the public on complex and critical issues that affect our nation's future and development. In fact, even in this interview many of the questions that you are putting to me are addressed in my book. In most countries, it is considered normal for political figures and leaders to regularly put out communications of this nature. I hope that this becomes the convention in Sri Lanka as well.

After the election, I traveled around the country on a listening campaign which was called: 'Gamen Gamata' (Village to Village) in which I sought to engage ordinary people from the rural areas in dialogue to exchange views, opinions and criticisms. Some of these discussions were televised over a period of six months. During this exercise, it was clear to me that the ordinary folk have a great deal of common sense, intelligence and in-depth understanding of the challenges facing our society. In many ways, they understand the sacrifices that need to be made better than the elite in this country seem to realize. However, they are suspicious of their political leaders.

Since independence, politics in Sri Lanka, barring a few exceptions has been dominated by a few privileged families. But increasingly, the ordinary person, as a result of better awareness through education and access to a wide range of media sources has begun to question the status quo. The average citizen knows whether a politician is lying or telling the truth.

Therefore, it is important that we communicate in as many ways as possible with the public. However, we must be aware that people conditioned by their past negative experience will continue to be skeptical, even when your intentions are sincere. For politicians, gaining credibility is an almost impossible challenge.

In fact, as part of my efforts to continue my dialogue with the public, we are in the process of publishing another book of a selection of my weekly columns that have been carried in the *Lankadeepa* newspaper over the past seven years. Many of these columns question the status quo in our society and I hope will stimulate debate among thoughtful people who are interested in bringing about constructive change to our society and country.

▶ As the former minister of economic reform, what is your overall assessment of Sri Lanka's economy and its fiscal policy?

I believe that the reason for our poor economic management over the past 50 years is the lack of national unity. Policies are easy to create, however, getting society to work together is a bigger challenge. One can design the best policies but if society does not get together, one cannot implement them. As far as the economy is concerned, every government since Independence, has tried in their own way to do what they thought was best but were unable to unite our society or achieve a broad consensus.

Today in the globalized environment, Sri Lanka's economic driver has to come out of our geographic position as the gateway to the Indian subcontinent. Sri Lanka on its own is not a viable economic unit. We have the human resources and some basic natural attributes, but all these assets have to be harnessed in a well thought-out strategy that seeks to exploit our extremely advantageous geographic location. As Hong Kong is the economic gateway to China and Dubai is to the Middle East (and even to South Asia), Sri Lanka can be the door into the Indian subcontinent.

In this century, India and China will be the fastest growing economies in the world. We have a Free Trade Agreement with India, which during our time, we began to upgrade into a comprehensive economic partnership agreement (CEPA). To achieve our objective, we cannot have the most expensive electricity and telecommunications prices in the region. Nor can we afford to have inflexible and outdated labor laws. We need to be competitive and that requires political courage and determination as well as the ability to communicate to our population at large that we need to make fundamental and tough changes to our economic priorities.

The apparel industry is facing a tremendous challenge at the moment. Sri Lanka's garment business was originally built on the quota system into the US but today it is being phased out. For a US retailer, importing a garment from



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Meeting Kofi Annan, United Nations Secretary General.



Meeting the President of the United States of America, George W Bush.

China would in most cases be 50% cheaper and the lead-time 10 days less than it would be from Sri Lanka. How can we compete if we don't look at the bigger picture?

As far as fiscal management is concerned, any government would have to make tough choices in order to get our deficit under control. The post-tsunami economic challenges have further increased the pressure. Although a lot of international support can and has been obtained, this does not make up for the fact that we have to get our own house in order. Pressures on inflation and the exchange rate are already being felt and of course, the high oil prices are having a serious impact as well.

▶ You mentioned the possibility of Sri Lanka being a gateway to India. Which industries do you see as potential growth sectors and how can the government and private sector give them the necessary impetus?

In respect to becoming the gateway for the Indian sub-continent and the regional hub, one obvious growth sector is tourism. Tourism has already taken off and will continue to do so as long as there is no threat to the ceasefire.

The apparel sector is facing challenges with the phasing out of the MFA. We have some world-class apparel producers in this country and I feel they will be able to develop further, but the government will have to offer whatever support the industry needs to remain competitive. By support I do not mean funding but assisting at a policy level to obtain better entry opportunities for goods into foreign markets.

We should be optimistic about the services sector too. Take logistics. We are small enough to become a very efficient hub. In this regard, during our time in office, we removed the visa requirement for Indian tourists visiting Sri Lanka. We felt strongly that this link with India is something we should consolidate and this move would boost tourism, which it has. Today we have many middle class Indian tourists coming here and many are spending more money than European tourists. In addition, we were able to work with the Indian government and we were able to increase the flight connections in and out of India. Besides direct Indian and Sri Lankan traffic, we are becoming a hub for international passengers and to a more limited extent, for cargo as well.

There is potential in the IT-enabled services sector, such as business process outsourcing. We cannot compete with India in IT because they have the critical mass when it comes to skilled and employable expertise. We have to find niche sectors to compete in as Singapore has done. There is no point going head-to-head in competition with India or China because they have the economies of scale that we simply don't have. However, we require a change in our education system, heavy investments in physical infrastructure and of course to achieve this, a secure and stable set of long-term policies in which foreign and local investors have confidence.

▶ After the tsunami, much hope was placed for reconciliation of the ethnic conflict. In some ways it has created more divides and contentions. How do you think the country can move forward?

It's very easy to criticize. There is an old saying that you shouldn't criticize someone unless you have walked in that person's shoes. The challenges faced regarding reconstruction by those in office are enormous and unique. But without national unity, little can be achieved.

I think the problem here is that we have politicized the whole issue. We have again begun a clash about who is right or wrong. The ideal approach would have been for all the political parties in this country to have united and conceptualized a common framework to meet this challenge. That moment seems to have passed. I myself was hopeful that this tragedy could be an opportunity to unite as a nation and I said so publicly soon after the tsunami struck. However, unfortunately, we in Sri Lanka do not seem to have the courage to make the sacrifices that are required to make such a vision a reality. Unfortunately, while politicians and special interest groups clash, the affected people continue to suffer.

Unity is required not only at the national level, but also at the district and village level. Here, too, there are divisions. The real misfortune of Sri Lankan politics is that 40,000 deaths have become an opportune platform for politicians to exploit. Prior to the tsunami, we had over 90,000 deaths in the context of the northeast conflict. Those, too, served as a political playground. 90% of the people who

“I sincerely believe that we have the true potential to become a great and successful nation, a prosperous country with a society that truly values decency, which has respect and tolerance for each other, that considers our diversity in every sphere to be a strength, not a weakness. I firmly believe that this can be achieved, but not through policy debates or by looking for outside help. The answers have to come from within.”

died in the war and in the tsunami were ordinary people. Sadly, the political culture is such that it is on ordinary citizens' tragedies that we as politicians survive and prevail. Unless you change this culture, my fear is that real change will come in a much more violent form than we can imagine, and there will be a reaction similar to what we experienced in 1971 and 1987 and of course, the violence in the north/east.

I do not believe in demonizing the JVP because I feel that the JVP's entry into democratic politics is a positive development. However my fear is if they cannot deliver prosperity to the people with what are obviously very naïve, misguided and unfeasible policies, they too, will become irrelevant and a non-democratic and destructive force could emerge.

This political impasse has led many people today to the conclusion that there is a need for an authoritarian leader with a firm hand. I too, respect strong leadership provided that we do not move outside a democratic framework. However, the danger is, that rather than a Lee Kuan Yew, we may end up with a Hitler. Hence, it is important that all politicians be aware of the fragile situation that exists today.

▶ Although Sri Lanka boasts high literacy rates, the education system in Sri Lanka is in crisis with corruption in government school admissions, indiscipline in universities and high unemployment amongst graduates. As a politician who places great importance on education, how do you think this situation can be rectified to benefit future generations?

Again this calls for consensus of all political parties on a common long-term education policy. I don't believe any single government can address this extremely contentious issue alone. We require a complete overhaul of the education system and a common education policy should be formulated and implemented.

Any parent in Sri Lanka can claim to be an expert on education. In Sri Lanka the average parent would starve in order to send their children to school or even to buy a new uniform or pair of shoes for school. This is one of our strong cultural values. As a result today, most parents who do not have the luxury of sending their children to private or elite schools are cursing their political leaders for the humiliation they have to endure in order to obtain a decent education for their children. A society which loses hope in the prospects for the next generation is a doomed one.

I feel that the private sector has an important role to play at every level in education. This can be seen from the various examples around the world. We can learn much from the education system in India, especially from states such as Tamil Nadu.

Much work on educational policy has been carried out in Sri Lanka by successive governments with the support of multilateral organization such as the World Bank and the ADB. Fundamentally, the case against too much emphasis on education is based on the issues of equity and opportunity. Obviously, money should not be the criteria for access to education. However, as a result of the breakdown of the system, money has become the criteria. Today, only the privileged few who can afford it, circumvent these circumstances by providing private tuition, sending their children to private schools, and for higher education abroad, leaving the less privileged to suffer the consequences of a dilapidated education system. This is creating a knowledge and literacy divide that is leading to the emergence of an educated, unemployable, angry and resentful group of young people with nothing to lose.

In developing a policy framework, efforts should be made to encourage private education at all levels while investing heavily in the state sector. We must also ensure that sufficient scholarship opportunities are available for deserving students to enter private sector institutions. The hypocrisy is that many of those policymakers who are so vociferously opposed to the creation of private education institutions are often the very people who send their children abroad for their education.

It is a positive development that the President herself has taken over the education ministry. I believe that the head of state should take the lead in reforming education. Since the leader of the opposition, Mr Wickremesinghe, served for many years as educational minister, I believe that this may be a good opportunity for the government and the opposition to work on this important issue together.

In my view, the provincial councils should not be in charge of the administration of the education system. We must have a system where the central government sets the policies and where as much decision-making capacity as possible is devolved to the school level with the parents and teachers getting involved. Over-centralization does not help because it is difficult to take decisions from Colombo for a local school. The involvement of stakeholders such as teachers and parents is vital to creating an effective and corruption-free education system.

▶ As a politician who was personally involved in the peace negotiations, what are your apprehensions and opinions in this regard at the present time?

There is a new team in place and I do not feel comfortable in trying to second-guess what they are trying to do. As an opposition party, the most responsible approach we can take is to constructively support the peace process if

and when the government seeks our assistance. The UNP government was able to negotiate a ceasefire agreement with the LTTE which has now lasted three years and to set the framework for a comprehensive peace process. We were also able to win the economic and moral support of the international community for the process of rebuilding the country in the post-conflict stage. The present government, then in opposition, made one of their platform issues their opposition to our approach and framework for peace. The very fact that these have been left intact, I think clearly vindicates that we had been taking the correct path.

► **What is the mission of the Milinda Moragoda Institute for People's Empowerment and what are your values with respect to the community service projects you have undertaken?**

I created the institute in order to put into practice the tenets of my philosophy. It has always been my belief that in order for Sri Lanka to develop, the people must express their views while taking responsibility for and facing the consequences of their actions. Civic values and social responsibility must be nurtured to reach this goal. In order to achieve this, people must have self-confidence. They must feel that they can work positively towards changing the lives of themselves, their children and their community. At the same time, the political culture which has prevailed for too long in this country is one which encourages dependency of the people on those in power and fosters a mentality where hand outs are expected from politicians rather than self-help. It is important to teach people that democracy is a two-way process where we as political leaders have our responsibilities and duties while citizens, too, have theirs. Thus, the aim of the projects sponsored and initiated by the institute are those which develop individual and group skills, strengthen religious and social institutions in local communities and which at the same time stimulate unity and cooperation amongst members of the community. The goal of the institute is the empowerment of people and all projects have to fit into this framework. Since Colombo South (Colombo East and West) is my constituency, activities at present are concentrated in this area. They are small scale projects, which directly impact participants. In all projects, funding is conditional and contingent upon the participation of local community members.

One of our earliest projects was to restore derelict children's playgrounds in underprivileged and overcrowded areas. I had noticed during my first campaign for Parliament that many playgrounds had become overgrown and littered with broken glass and abandoned. Some had become the refuge of drug addicts. If our children do not have a safe place to play, how can they develop? On the other hand, the overcrowded living conditions of these areas in which the children and their parents live, as well as the economic and social pressures experienced by these families, create further tensions between them. The playgrounds thus provide much needed breathing space to both parents as well as to children who are free to run and play. Hence the name of the program, '*Sanastilla*'.

Another early program was providing English lessons in underprivileged areas. Classes are held in community centers and temples and are free to participants. This program, called '*Apeksha*' or 'Hope' has proven to be quite successful and is in great demand. During my visits to those areas when I was involved in the peace negotiations, I noticed that a large number of mines had been buried during the conflict in many public areas including schoolyards. We therefore decided to start a de-mining project in joint collaboration with two Indian NGOs, since we wanted to undertake a project in the north and east that would contribute towards bettering peoples lives. This was one of the first locally initiated de-mining programs in Sri Lanka.

A further initiative of the institute was the facilitation of a program called '*Sabana Sevana*', which I undertook when I was in government. This was a program to set up formal offices for the grama sevakas. Grama sevakas are the first point of contact that the public has with government. Whether it is to register a birth, a death, or to obtain a driver's license, verifying welfare benefits, etc, the grama sevaka is involved. While traditionally the grama sevaka was a well-respected post, today many grama sevakas have lost their dignity as they have been largely neglected. I discovered that many grama sevakas did not even have official and separate offices and that if they did they were often in a deplorable state. In order to restore the dignity of this position, we decided to provide offices which would give identity and pride to the grama sevakas. This again, was to nurture respect for institutions at the grassroots level. In the same vein, we have made a conscious effort to have classes and events at Buddhist and Hindu temples, churches and mosques to help encourage interaction between community members and religious institutions as spiritual values are an integral part of my development philosophy. All these programs are conducted on a non-partisan basis, since the philosophy of the institute places a large emphasis on de-politicization and consensus building. In addition, we have another foundation which is called '*Sanastilla*' which carries out a series of social and public service programs.

► **What is your vision for the country and where would you like to see it in five years time?**

I sincerely believe that we have the true potential to become a great and successful nation, a prosperous country with a society that truly values decency, which has respect and tolerance for each other, that considers our diversity in every sphere to be a strength, not a weakness. I firmly believe that this can be achieved, but not through policy debates or by looking for outside help. The answers have to come from within. Dr Mahathir was once asked what his responsibilities as a leader were. His answer was very simple. He said that it was to give the Malaysian people confidence in themselves and their own abilities. Many politicians try to engage in divisive politics by instilling fear and resentment of societal groups that may be different from theirs. True leadership and statesmanship is the ability to unite rather than divide. There are no short cuts or quick fixes to development. A nation's progress stems from its society's values, self-confidence, social solidarity as well as from strong and visionary leadership. ■