



**Address to 'We Sri Lanka', organised by the
Association of Professional Sri Lankans in UK**

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***Nurturing Plural and Inclusive Societies: A Perspective from the
Commonwealth***

Mr Rohan De Alwis,
High Commissioner Nonis,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Ayubowan, Vannakkam, Assalam-alaikum, Good afternoon,

I am delighted to be with you today and must thank the Association of Sri Lankan Professionals in the UK for inviting me to address this important event.

I feel particularly privileged to be offered a platform by your association today. 'We Sri Lanka' is not just an evocative name, but a noble endeavour. It focuses on values that are of abiding relevance in any society, but are of course especially relevant to your own mother country – of pluralism, inclusiveness, reconciliation and tolerance. I must therefore start by congratulating the Association of Professional Sri Lankans in the UK for the commendable work it is doing to build bridges and foster a sense of community.

I have to confess that when Don Jayasinghe first contacted me about speaking to this forum, I approached the proposal with some trepidation. I am familiar with issues of post-conflict rehabilitation and reconciliation and also with Sri Lanka itself, but personally cannot claim to be an expert on either. And we all know how high-risk and sensitive it can be for an outsider to be seen to be preaching or offering prescriptions about how to put one's house in order!

But alongside that trepidation there was also a sense of professional excitement and attraction, for several reasons. As a Commonwealth official, and especially in my current role as Director of Political Affairs, I have an interest in the promotion of Commonwealth values in our member states. I also have a vested interest in working for the success of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) that Sri Lanka will host in just over a year from now, for which I have a major responsibility as the Conference Secretary; indeed I returned only three weeks ago from our second CHOGM planning mission to Sri Lanka. As an erstwhile Indian diplomat, the travails and accomplishments of our immediate southern neighbour have always been of interest, even though I never enjoyed the pleasure of a posting in Colombo

or of dealing directly with Sri Lanka. Last but not least, as an individual I have always been fascinated by the beautiful island that can lay claim to having inspired the word 'serendipity'.

I therefore grasped the opportunity to share some reflections with you today on the theme of 'Nurturing Plural and Inclusive Societies' and to offer some perspectives from the Commonwealth.

Let me begin by saying a few things about the Commonwealth itself, an organisation that, sadly, is not always fully understood or appreciated even among our own member states, but one that is a significant player and definite force for good in today's world.

The Commonwealth today has 54 members and a population of 2 billion people, representing over a quarter of the international community. Sri Lanka (Ceylon) was one of the eight founder members of the modern Commonwealth, which came into being as a result of the London Declaration of 1949. The 54 members span the globe, covering all the continents and oceans. We have large states like India, and tiny states like Nauru and Tuvalu. We have island and landlocked states, developed and developing nations. We claim one of the five Permanent Members of the UN Security Council, five members of the G20 as well as a large number of least developed countries. Small states constitute a majority of our membership. Virtually every ethnic group and every religion is represented.

It is self-evident, therefore, that I work for an organisation that is an incredible mosaic in itself, which works on the basis of inclusiveness and consensus, not of power politics or majority rule. The Commonwealth is a living example of unity in diversity. So much so that when the iconic Nelson Mandela became President of South Africa in 1994, he famously remarked: *The Commonwealth makes the world safe for diversity*.

Nelson Mandela was, of course, speaking as the first democratically elected leader of the so-called 'Rainbow Nation' and against the backdrop of the repugnant system of *apartheid*. South Africa is special in any context, but is by no means the only ethnically or culturally hybrid society in the Commonwealth. So is India, or Malaysia, or Kenya, or Mauritius. So too is Canada, or the United Kingdom – you Sri Lankans in the UK are living proof of that. And of course, so is Sri Lanka. Indeed there are many countries in the Commonwealth that face the challenge of managing diversity of one kind or another.

I say all this about the Commonwealth at the outset in order to establish the organisation's credentials, and my own for that matter! Managing diverse societies is a common preoccupation in the Commonwealth. Pluralism and inclusiveness are core Commonwealth principles.

Small wonder, therefore, that the Commonwealth is a values-based organisation. Its values were last set out in the 2009 Affirmation of Commonwealth Values and Principles, which is soon expected to be supplanted by a Charter for the Commonwealth, currently in the final stages of consideration. Those values include democracy, human rights, tolerance, respect and understanding, the rule of law, gender equality, freedom of expression and good governance. They also include social and economic development, access to health and education and space for civil society.

The 2009 CHOGM also set out the Commonwealth's core principles: consensus, common action, mutual respect, inclusiveness, transparency, accountability, legitimacy and responsiveness.

Inclusivity and pluralism are, therefore, central to the Commonwealth ethos.

Let me turn, in that context, to Sri Lanka itself.

Sri Lanka is not the only country that has been through traumatic civil conflict in recent history. In the Commonwealth itself, there are other examples. I have already mentioned South Africa. I can also readily cite Sierra Leone and Rwanda. There are yet other examples of authoritarian military rule in the past, such as in Ghana and Nigeria, when atrocities were committed. Outside the Commonwealth there are examples in Liberia, Chile and Argentina. More recent examples of civil conflict include Libya and Syria.

The United Nations defines transitional justice as the full range of processes and mechanisms associated with a society's attempts to come to terms with a legacy of large-scale past abuses, in order to ensure accountability, serve justice and achieve reconciliation. These involve a number of judicial and non-judicial mechanisms. The aims of transitional justice processes are to resolve the divisions in society caused by the human rights violations; to contribute to the healing process for victims and witnesses; to determine legal accountability; and/or to establish a historical record of the conflict and to educate. Wider institutional aims might be to restore the rule of law, democratise security institutions by promoting human rights, and to promote a stable peace. One key principle is that all of this needs to be inclusive and must have the participation and carry the public legitimacy of the people who have been wronged.

One key point to recognise here is that no two country situations are alike. So there can be no 'one size fits all' approach to post-conflict reconciliation or transitional justice. But common to all approaches is the desire to repair the damage done to societies to the fullest extent possible, as well as to prevent the recurrence of atrocities. Also common, at least in theory, must be a sincere desire to ascertain, publicly proclaim, confront and deal with the truth.

It is significant to point out that most truth and reconciliation mechanisms in post-conflict societies have dealt with the legacy of past abuses by former

governments. It is relatively rare for a government to establish post-conflict mechanisms that sit in judgement on its own actions.

The establishment of Sri Lanka's Lessons Learned & Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) was an important development. The decision by the Government to make the report public was also widely welcomed – and I understand the report has now also been translated into Sinhala and Tamil.

On 19 December, Commonwealth Secretary-General Kamalesh Sharma said the following in a public statement, which I quote in full:

We applaud the intent of transparency with which the Government of Sri Lanka has tabled the full report before Parliament and made it public, as well as the stated commitment of the government to respect the conclusions and recommendations of the report, which we are confident will see implementation in an objective, even-handed and forward looking manner. We welcome the assurance given on the transparent and rigorous application of the law of the land.

While noting that the Commission was established to examine lessons learnt from the conflict and to promote reconciliation, we trust that with the assurances given, the report will also serve to advance the cause of accountability, as genuine reconciliation and accountability go hand in hand.

It is for the Government and people of Sri Lanka to chart their country's way forward after the military defeat of the forces of terrorism. The Commonwealth, as a partner of Sri Lanka, which is a founder member of the modern Commonwealth, remains ready to assist the government in dealing with the challenges of building a harmonious and sustainable peace.

There is no doubt that the military defeat of the LTTE was a major achievement. Not many countries in the world can claim to have defeated terrorism.

But it is equally known that winning a war is a far cry from winning the peace. The scars of war take long to heal. And they will never heal if the underlying feelings of alienation and marginalisation are not resolutely addressed and every Sri Lankan, of whatever ethnicity or religion, does not feel that he or she is able to live a life of dignity and fulfilment in their own country. The wounds will also remain fresh if accountability is not established to the extent necessary and justice is not seen to be done.

The implementation of the LLRC recommendations is key to the building of a durable peace in Sri Lanka. In that context, it is noteworthy that Sri Lanka now has a National Action Plan for the implementation of the LLRC Report, as well as a National Human Rights Action Plan. When the Secretary-General visited Colombo last month, he held discussions with the Chair of the Task Force that oversees implementation, Mr Lalith Weeratunga, Secretary to the President. It

was agreed that the Commonwealth would support implementation of the LLRC report, in consultation with the Government of Sri Lanka, including sharing Commonwealth experience on reconciliation.

The Commonwealth has already agreed with Sri Lanka to launch a youth entrepreneurship project near Thirukkuvil in the Eastern Province, in collaboration with the Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry of Sri Lanka and the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Skills Development. This project includes exploring opportunities for commercial banks to support young business creators and job creators in areas affected by the conflict.

The Secretary-General's visit also resulted in agreement on Commonwealth collaboration in other areas, such as strengthening the Sri Lankan public service, the Office of the Elections Commissioner and the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka, as well as local government. In addition, the Commonwealth and Sri Lanka will work to establish a pilot project on Sports for Development and Peace in the North and East, as well as a cadre of trainers to implement a 'Youth Ambassadors for Peace' project. Expertise will be provided in the field of legislative drafting, as well as for capacity strengthening of the media.

There is no doubt that a lot is being done in Sri Lanka to rebuild conflict-ravaged areas and to rehabilitate those uprooted from their homes and hearths. The clearing of mines, the building of infrastructure, the resettlement of internally displaced persons and the return of economic growth are tangible realities.

At the same time, one needs to recognise that rebuilding and rehabilitation are not the same as reconciliation. The former involves providing homes and livelihoods. The latter involves winning hearts and minds. A durable peace will not come only from building roads, hospitals and schools and generating employment. It can only be built on the foundations of providing political space and representation, the application of the rule of law and the protection and promotion of human rights. It requires appropriate devolution of political powers, empowerment of both the majority and the minorities, and – if I may exercise some licence with Nelson Mandela's famous phrase – by making Sri Lanka truly safe for diversity.

The elections recently held in the Eastern Province were a welcome development. I know from my recent visit to Colombo that elections in the North are also eagerly anticipated and it is widely hoped that these will follow soon. We know also that the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Dr Navi Pillay, has already sent a team to Sri Lanka and will be visiting the country herself soon. Her visit will provide an important opportunity to focus on the concerns that continue to be expressed about issues relating to human rights and political representation.

In November 2013, Sri Lanka will host the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. I know that there are still groups and individuals out there who are campaigning to deny Sri Lanka the role of playing host to Commonwealth leaders, citing lack of accountability and genuine reconciliation and cataloguing various concerns. All I can say is that is a conscious decision was taken in 2009, in their wisdom, by Commonwealth Heads of Government to have their 2013 summit in Sri Lanka, a decision which they reaffirmed in 2011.

What I will also say, however, is that the CHOGM will be the largest summit meeting held in the country since the Non-Aligned Summit of 1976. The eyes of the whole world will be on Sri Lanka as Heads of Government, Foreign Ministers, business leaders, civil society, youth, and the global media all descend on the country for the space of a week. In the year-long window of opportunity that exists between now and the CHOGM, Sri Lanka will no doubt wish to make rapid progress with its post-conflict rehabilitation and reconciliation efforts, especially the implementation of the LLRC Action Plan, the National Human Rights Action Plan and the country's voluntary commitments to the UN Human Rights Council under the Universal Periodic Review. Otherwise there is the risk of the spotlight of the international media assembled for CHOGM focusing on Sri Lanka's domestic issues, rather than on the challenges that Commonwealth nations face collectively.

CHOGM 2013 is a golden opportunity to showcase Sri Lanka to the Commonwealth and the world beyond as a nation that has emerged decisively from the trauma of conflict and discord, moved away from polarisation towards harmony and concord, and is a country that is truly at peace with itself. Let that opportunity be firmly grasped.

Bohoma-stuti, Nandri, thank you.