

THE COLOMBO CHAPTER IN 2022: A Rocky Road to Recovery

Report by Somasiri Devendra – Vice President CSA Colombo Chapter

The Colombo Chapter was dealt a “double whammy” in 2021-22, when the Covid scare was upstaged by the economic crisis in the country. It left the Chapter reeling, unable to conduct regular lecture meetings or other activities. To make matters worse, some senior members were incapacitated by illness and the burden on office bearers increased; other senior members were fast approaching their “use by” date; there were some resignations; there were few volunteers to shoulder responsibilities and most members were happy merely to receive the Journal.

There was, however, a silver lining. A few would-be Members accepted our invitation and joined up in December 2021, making the Chapter wake up. In January the older members gathered to plan out strategy to revive the Chapter or to close it down. Revival was the accepted option, and a multi-pronged course of action was decided on, namely, to cut out deadwood, attract new members including younger members; to seek greater exposure in the Journal; and to bring the finances up-to-date. We were able to gather six more new members; include a new, younger member as Secretary; and to conduct a lecture meeting.

Much advice and assistance were received from Pauline in this exercise and Adam helped give us greater exposure through the “Colombo Column”.

On November 24th the lecture meetings were resumed with a talk by Dr. Gamini Goonetilleke, Consultant Surgeon, who spoke on “A Surgeon’s experience during the Sri Lankan civil war”. He spoke on the difficulties experienced as a professional working under unexpected conditions and with scarce resources. His style, presentation and honesty were greatly appreciated by a good gathering and the meeting was reported in the Press. Since the newspaper feature is reproduced elsewhere in this Journal, it will not be dealt with here. The meeting was the first arranged by the new Secretary, Avishka Senewiratne, who was particularly active in reaching out to potential new members. In fact, at the end of the day, several new members joined up and their names are reported in this Journal.

A new Committee was also elected with effect from January and a decision made to involve the new members in the activities of the Chapter.

At the lecture meeting the gathering congratulated the President, Asoka de Silva, on the honour accorded him by the National Science Foundation. On World Science Day, the Foundation awarded him a Lifetime Achievement Award for the popularization of Science education in the country.

On January 4th, the Committee members, and their families hosted, for dinner, no less a person than Hugh Karunanayake, the founder of CSA. Anandlal Nanayakkara was the gracious host to all. It was a convivial gathering of like-minded persons, with much pooling of memories and blending of voices in song. Hugh, it must be noted, was in good voice!

The Colombo Chapter seems to have turned a corner in 2022. Membership has increased and it remains to be seen whether this will make a difference. New leaders need to emerge and 2023 which should be the year when the initiatives on 2022 will bear fruit.

CSA Colombo Chapter Report of Meeting

**Held on 28 March 2023 at the OPA,
Colombo**

Speaker: Deshamanya M.D.D Pieris

**Topic: A Re- Examination of the Public
Service – Politician Interface in Sri Lanka**

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The Quarterly lecture of the Ceylon Society of Australia, Colombo Chapter was held on the 28th of March 2023 at the auditorium of the Organization of Professional Organizations in Colombo. The guest speaker at the lecture was Deshamanya M.D.D Pieris formerly of the Ceylon Civil Service and Sri Lankan Administration service who spoke on the topic ‘*A Re- Examination of the Public Service – Politician Interface in Sri Lanka.*’ The lecture brought together a diverse group of attendees from various age groups which also included prominent catholic priests.

The evenings proceedings started with the welcoming of Mr. and Mrs. M.D.D Peries the guest speaker for the day by the honorary Secretary, Mr. Avishka Senewiratne. Then the formal proceedings commenced with Hon. Vice President Somasiri Devendra. So, introducing the CSA to all attendees including the new members of the Colombo chapter which was followed by the formal appointment of Mr. Devishka Ranasinghe as the new Assistant Secretary of the chapter. Thereafter, Hon. Secretary Mr. Avishka Senewiratne formally introduced the Guest Speaker of the evening, Deshamanya M.D.D Pieris who was then given the podium to deliver his lecture.

Speaking on the quite relevant and timely topic of The Public Service - Politician Interface in Sri Lanka, Mr. Pieris started with how the wider public see the relationship between civil service and the politicians and how the reality is highly contrasting to their belief. He mentioned that it is the politician who has the greater authority and that the civil service is merely agreeing and executing what the politician says impeding any independent judgement.

To illustrate his point Mr. Pieris cited numerous examples from all over the world including powerful governments such as the USA and Great Britain. He stated how he observed that even in those great superpowers, the whole civil service is based around the authority of the politicians relating extracts from various published journals of how former US

presidents such as Richard Nixon and George Bush to former British Prime Ministers Winston Churchill and Tony Blair exercised great authority over their respective subordinates. He also emphasized that it is still the case with regards to the interface between the politician and the civil service elsewhere in the world including Sri Lanka.

He also touched on the role of the Journalists in shaping public perception of this relationship. He argued that the journalists can manipulate the public's understanding of the civil service and politicians, and that their reporting can have a significant impact on the public's trust in the civil service.

The focus of Mr. Pieris's speech then shifted to Sri Lanka, where he shared his own experiences in the Sri Lanka Administrative Service (SLAS) and the Ceylon Civil Service. He observed that Sri Lanka was not so different from the other countries he had mentioned, and that the civil servants in Sri Lanka also operate under a powerful group of politicians. He lamented the fact that disagreement is often equated to disloyalty, making it difficult for civil servants to act independently.

In conclusion, Mr. Pieris highlighted the importance of a healthy relationship between politicians and the civil service, acknowledging that it is vital for the success of a nation. However, he also emphasized the challenges of maintaining such a relationship in the current political environment, where the reality is so different from ideal text book theories. He further stressed that the interface between the Politicians and the Civil Service is complex, and that it requires a great deal of trust, mutual respect and cooperation to function effectively.

The one and a half hour lecture was then followed by an interactive Q&A session which allowed the attendees to ask questions and provide input on the topic. This session proved to be quite effective and engaging, which led to a lively discussion among the listeners and Mr. Pieris.

Thereafter, the proceedings were concluded by the Vote of Thanks by Hon. Treasurer Mr. Tony Saldin.

At the end of the formal proceedings, the Attendees were given the opportunity to purchase certain publications by various eminent Sri Lankans which included Deshamanya M.D.D Pieris's Memoir titled '*The Pursuit of Governance*'.

Afterwards all participants were provided with refreshments at the refectory, giving them a further opportunity to network and socialize.

All in all the quarterly lecture of the Ceylon Society of Australia, Colombo Chapter was a highly informative and engaging event. The guest speaker, Deshamanya M.D.D Pieris, provided valuable insights into the topic of the public service-politician interface and the Q&A session allowed for further discussion and debate. The event was well organized by the Exco of the CSA Colombo Chapter and the attendees found the event highly informative and enjoyable.

-Devishka Ranasinghe