

**Australia and Sri Lanka – a strong and enduring partnership**

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**27 August 2015**

**(Check against delivery)**

President of the Sri Lanka Association of Australia Awards Alumni, Mrs Indrani Sugathadasa, members of the Association Executive Committee, alumni, ladies and gentleman.

It is a great honour to be invited by the Sri Lanka Association of Australia Awards Alumni to speak to you all today.

I would like to thank the Association and the Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute for making the event possible.

Over the course of my posting in Sri Lanka I have given numerous public addresses from Australia Day to graduation ceremonies, to the opening of development projects in communities around the country.

On each of those occasions I have talked about the relationship between Australia and Sri Lanka, and on each occasion I've focused on the most relevant aspect for that particular audience.

Addressing a gathering of Australian alumni, that task becomes a little bit challenging because you, as an audience, are a diverse and distinguished group, and each of you will have a very different experience of engaging with Australia.

So today I will reflect on the wider scope of the Australia-Sri Lanka relationship with a focus on our development cooperation, our trade and investment relationship and our strong people-to-people links.

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My address today is titled "Australia and Sri Lanka – a strong and enduring partnership".

In the best traditions of public speaking, when drafting this address, I was looking for a good quote to reflect the theme of partnership. When I first started in the Foreign Ministry many moons ago, I had a book of quotable quotes which I would use when I was tasked to draft a speech for a senior colleague. Now it's much faster to go straight to the internet.

To my dismay, my google searches revealed few useful or interesting quotes which use the word "partnership". Most of those I found were about marriage, business, cricket and law and none of them really seemed to fit the bill.

Dictionary definitions of "partnership" were also a bit dry and not at all evocative of the way I think about the relationship between Australia and Sri Lanka which is marked by its historical ties, dynamism, diversity, dialogue and, perhaps most importantly, the shared understanding and engagement between people across many fields.

But then I came across a quote from Aristotle which says "Friendship is essentially a partnership".

Particularly at this pivotal moment of Sri Lanka's political life, this quote feels like a decent starting point. To me, Australia and Sri Lanka are more than just partners, we are friends and partners, bound together by numerous and diverse ties which go back a very long way.

Australia and Sri Lanka, which was then known as Ceylon, established diplomatic relations in April 1947 when the Australian Government appointed the Honourable Charles W. Frost as Commissioner, and opened a diplomatic mission in Colombo. Commissioner Frost was appointed High Commissioner at independence on 4 February 1948, thereby formalising the diplomatic relationship.

But Australia's ties with Sri Lanka pre-date this event by at least a century and go right back to the days when Ceylon was a regular port of call for sailing ships, then steam ships, and finally ocean liners travelling between Europe and the Antipodes.

Australians have always been great travellers and as far back as the nineteenth century there was a regular flow of people going to and from the new colonies of Australia back to the “old country.”

In the twentieth century, it became a rite of passage for many young Australians to travel to Europe to discover the “old world”, and even as recently as the early 1970s much of this travel was by ship.

You can't underestimate the significance of this sort of contact. It gave Ceylon – later Sri Lanka – a very early place in Australia's understanding of the world. Images from post-cards sent from brief stops in Colombo, stories of tropical heat, colour, spices and culture from those who had travelled, and the inevitable souvenirs which they brought home, all built up a picture of a country which was part of our story.

Indeed, my own great grandmother – a formidable woman called Alice Jessie Hill - called in at Colombo on a trip to England in 1949 and, while she was here, bought a brass paaththare – for those few in the audience who may not be familiar with this, it is a brass alms bowl, often adapted as a decoration and held up by brass elephants.

This paaththare was a feature of my childhood, and it sat in pride of place on the sideboard at my grandmother's house in Adelaide for many years – a talking point about an exotic island in the Indian Ocean. It was a very meaningful moment of connection when, soon after I arrived here I saw paaththares in use at the Gangaramaya Temple. I am now the proud owner of my own paaththare, and it will always be a reminder to me and my family of our own Sri Lankan connection.

These early experiences of Sri Lanka were not just limited to private travellers.

In November 1914, ships carrying the first contingent of the Australian Imperial Force which had been formed by the Government of Australia at the outbreak of the First World War, called into Colombo en route to Egypt. The AIF comprised 20 000 men, including members of the Light Horse Brigade, who fought initially at Gallipoli and later were dispersed to fight in France and Belgium on the Western Front.

Many veterans of the First World War also passed through Colombo on their way back home. While some were to continue their journey and be reunited with their loved ones in Australia, sadly a number died of wounds during their voyage or after being off-loaded in Colombo. On 25 April this year, we marked the centenary of the ANZAC Day landings in Gallipoli and we paid tribute to three Australian veterans of that campaign who are buried at Borella cemetery.

Australian troops also served in Ceylon in the Second World War and there are many veterans buried in Colombo and at Trincomalee.

Australia and Sri Lanka both share a great love of cricket. We have a longstanding tradition of playing cricket together and this goes back well over a century. In 1890, the Australian team *en route* to England for the Ashes played in Colombo against a local team. The Australians continued this tradition of stopping off in Ceylon and playing games against local teams in 1893, 1896, 1912, 1926 and 1934 and so on until international air travel replaced sea travel.

Those who stopped here and played against local teams included the legendary Sir Donald Bradman. Indeed, Colombo was the first overseas cricket venue at which Bradman played in March 1930 – he scored 40 runs before being out, hit wicket (one of only two occasions in Test and First Class cricket when he got out this way).

## **People-to-people links**

Our people to people links go in both directions. Australia's Sri Lankan born community now numbers well over 100 000. We have had a constant flow of migration from Sri Lanka to Australia since independence. Some of this has been a natural progression from the many students who travelled to Australia to study, but we have also had a steady flow of family, business, skilled and other migration over the years. Our community is diverse and includes Sinhalese, Burghers and Tamils. It contributes to all aspects of Australian life and enriches our diverse and multicultural society.

As a result there is today a long list of eminent Australians who have Sri Lankan heritage: from State Governors to Chefs, to literary award winners to global leaders of the legal fraternity such as our esteemed friend Judge Weeramantry.

## **Genesis of the development relationship**

Australia has been a strong development partner of Sri Lanka since shortly after independence, and the history of our engagement on this front is embedded in the history of the Commonwealth.

Just over 63 years ago, the first meeting of - as they were then known - 'British Commonwealth Foreign Ministers' was held in Colombo.

It was the first international conference attended by Australia's External Affairs Minister Percy Spender, and he came with a brief which contained some new thinking about Australia's relationship with the Asia region.

Spender presented a resolution to the Colombo meeting which recommended that the Commonwealth Governments consider a project of economic coordination whereby each contributing member would provide material help to the countries of Southeast Asia.

After much discussion and debate in Colombo, then Sydney and then London during 1950, the 'Colombo Plan' was born.

The Plan was an important vehicle for transmitting aid and know-how from the developed countries to developing regional countries.

Over the years there has been a diverse range of contributions, from technical assistance, to scholarships.

The Colombo Plan was the predecessor of Australia's strong development cooperation relationship with Sri Lanka.

As part of this cooperation, there has been an uninterrupted flow of students travelling to Australia to study. Thousands of Sri Lankans have completed degrees at Australian universities and are today applying the skills and knowledge they acquired, both at home in Sri Lanka as well as across the globe.

Some senior leaders of this auspicious network established the Sri Lankan Australia Awards Alumni Association and kindly organised today's event.

### **Modern Era of Development Cooperation**

As Sri Lanka continues its economic growth and benefits from more trade and investment with other countries, Australia's development cooperation will increasingly focus on attracting trade and investment flows and supporting new businesses in the most remote and poor communities across the country.

We have already started to do this. In the Northern Province our aid funds have helped establish new businesses in poor and remote communities that supply products to global markets. One example is a processing facility that supplies tinned crab meat to the US market. The facility is owned by a fishing community in Kilinochchi. It is operated by an international export company "Tabrobane Seafoods" which employs women from the local community.

Our aid funds have also built a processing facility that supplies high quality fruit and vegetables to the Middle East. This facility, like the crab factory, is owned by a community farmer cooperative in Kilinochchi and is operated by a Colombo based export company. In both cases the risk and profits are shared between the community and the private sector, and in both cases, women are important and equal if not leading partners in the project. We hope that these examples of equitable partnerships between local communities and the private sector can be replicated in other sectors and in other locations in order to generate wealth and build social unity.

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We hope to expand our development cooperation to encompass tourism and labour skills development. We want to assist Sri Lanka to establish new market niches and diversify the economy.

Tourism is the fastest growing sector of the economy but careful planning is needed to ensure that the investments in this sector achieve both strong economic and social returns.

We intend to offer grants and business advisory services to help develop local businesses that increase employment and income opportunities for poor women and men in rural and urban areas. And we look forward to doing this in close cooperation with the economic reform efforts of the Sri Lankan government.

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Australia wants to contribute to a strong, prosperous and stable future for Sri Lanka.

And that includes, making a practical contribution to Sri Lanka's reconciliation efforts.

Australia supports the Sri Lankan Government's democratic reform and good governance agenda. We will continue to encourage the Sri Lankan government to maintain its commitment to this agenda, to the improvement of human rights, to meaningful progress on reconciliation, including accountability, and to continued engagement with all relevant stakeholders including the diaspora.

These are important steps that will help build a future based on trust and respect. They are issues that need to be dealt with in a timely, transparent and consultative manner.

We will also continue our practical contribution to inclusive development and growth which are important elements of the reconciliation process. Our future contributions will build on past cooperation which has long been focused on helping to ensure that Sri Lanka's prosperity is shared by all its people.

Since 2009, Australia has contributed over 100 million Australian dollars or 9.6 billion rupees to support reconstruction in war affected areas. We have helped families to rebuild their homes and livelihoods. We've supported local governments to re-establish the delivery of fundamental services and to generate new sources of revenue. We've partnered with organisations that are providing much needed disability and psycho-social support, and with international organisations such as the Asia Foundation which is working closely with the Northern Provincial Council to develop its bilingual capability and legal unit.

In the area of legal capacity building, which is also important to reconciliation efforts, Australia's Attorney General's Department earlier this year hosted a Witness and Victim Protection study tour for a Sri Lankan delegation. The Victorian Federation of Community Legal Centres and the Asia Law Institute of Melbourne University are currently hosting a study tour for an eminent local lawyer who intends to establish a legal aid centre in support of Sri Lankan women.

We have also contributed technical support for the Ministry of Resettlement's development of a resettlement action plan and we have offered our assistance in other areas to the national government.

### **Trade and Investment**

As people who know both countries, you – the Australian alumni - have an important role to play in helping build the bilateral trade and investment relationship.

Trade and Investment are essential components of modern diplomacy. With both Australia and Sri Lanka's economies showing strong sustained growth, there is great potential in this part of the bilateral relationship.

This is a particularly exciting time for Sri Lanka's economy and a number of Australian companies are exploring opportunities to trade and invest here.

Our trade and investment relationship has shown significant growth over the past two years. In 2014, two-way trade in goods between Australia and Sri Lanka has reached AUD 420 million. This is an 18% increase in trade between the countries over the prior year. Add to that a further AUD 410 million in services trade and the relationship is looking healthy. But there's much we can do to increase two way investment from the current stock of AUD 270 million

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I want to talk today on three areas in which we'll be focusing our efforts in the coming years - tourism, agribusiness, and education.

**Tourism** is a major and growing part of our relationship.

Australians are an adventurous lot and we are visiting Sri Lanka in ever greater numbers – 62,000 last year, and growing at almost 15 per cent per year for the past five years. In return we see many tens of thousands of Sri Lankans visit Australia each year, both to catch up with family but also increasingly as tourists. There is so much potential to grow our two-way tourism relationship – and to have fun doing it. I've certainly enjoyed my contribution to Sri Lanka's tourism industry over the past three years, most recently with a visit to Habarana, Mineriya and the East Coast with my family.

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In the **agribusiness** sector, Australia has already made a significant contribution to Sri Lanka's agricultural output.

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We are helping to build the dairy industry in Sri Lanka through a five year, US \$30 million project, supported by the Australian Government's Export Finance Insurance Corporation (EFIC). The project links Australia's agricultural resources and expertise with Sri Lanka's goal of increasing the nation's fresh milk supply and becoming a self-sufficient dairy producer.

Under this project, Sri Lanka's National Livestock Development Board engaged the Australian company Wellard Rural Exports Pty Ltd to supply dairy cattle, infrastructure, equipment and management with a view to increasing the size of the national dairy herd and raising the daily average yield from 3 litres of milk per cow to a number nearer to Australia's 26 litres.

**Sustainable fisheries** is another area in which Australia has a lot to offer. Australian companies have expressed interest in sharing technology and know-how to assist the development of Sri Lanka's fisheries sector.

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Australian expertise can assist the local tuna industry to improve the catch, and adopt new technologies in tuna farming, barramundi and broader aquaculture to maximise the value and sustainability of fish stocks.

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Sri Lanka's target of 2.5 million tourists in the medium term will lead to continuous growth in demand for **high quality food and beverage** – including wine - in the tourist sector.

Australia has been a longstanding food and beverage exporter to Sri Lanka. As visitors to Australia, I'm sure you know well the quality of our produce. There is further potential to expand supplies from Australia across groceries, dairy, meat and the wine portfolio to service local retail and hotel operations in Sri Lanka.

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Our trade in **education services** is flourishing and Australia continues to rank amongst the most popular education destinations for Sri Lankan students. Around 6000 Sri Lankans are currently undertaking studies in Australia. Over the past year we have seen further growth of on-shore education provision with new partnerships, articulated courses and, in October last year, the opening of our first campus in Sri Lanka – the Swinburne Nawaloka College.

And I want to make particular mention of the Australian government's New Colombo Plan which is for the first time is bringing Australian university students to Sri Lanka to advance their education and build new networks with business and civil society. This an exciting personal project of our Foreign Minister, Julie Bishop.

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All of this gives a flavour of the range of opportunity in our trade and investment relationship. But there is still a lot of untapped potential. And it is important that Sri Lanka maintains transparent and consistent business friendly policy settings to attract investment from Australia and elsewhere.

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### **Too many issues**

As I mentioned at the start, it's not possible to explore the full range of the bilateral relationship in a single speech. I could talk at length about our work together building multilateral and regional architecture as partners in ARF, IORA, and other institutions.

I could mention our important cooperation in Maritime security – and I note the port visit to Colombo this week by the Australian Navy Frigate HMAS Melbourne, mirroring the visits of yesteryear, but also signalling our healthy navy to navy cooperation.

And I could talk further – as I have on other public occasions - about our close and ongoing cooperation with Sri Lanka to combat the shared issue of people smuggling - an insidious crime which risks the lives of vulnerable people and threatens the integrity of national borders. This issue remains a very high priority for the Australian Government and we continue to value greatly the strong cooperation we enjoy with the Sri Lankan government in this area.

But time is against me.

So let me just say these are all important components of our bilateral cooperation as regional neighbours, and they are areas on which we will continue to focus in coming years.

I quoted Aristotle at the start of my speech and his words on friendship and partnership.

Australia and Sri Lanka are close friends and partners, we have strong cooperation and a genuine warmth and engagement which has grown and strengthened consistently over the past 67 years.

The relationship sits within Australia's priority region, the Indo-Pacific. This is where our foreign, strategic, development and economic energies will be directed in the coming decades. I am confident the Australia-Sri Lanka relationship will be a showcase of enduring cooperation across all of these fields.

As I've described this evening, the ties that bind us – across many fields of endeavour - truly exceed the sum of their parts. You, the Australian alumni, are a valuable part of our partnership and our friendship, and you are essential to the future strength of this relationship. I look to you to continue making your contributions in your various fields.

For my own part, as Australia's High Commissioner to Sri Lanka over the past 3 and half years, it has been a great privilege to have had a role in sustaining and building on that partnership with you all.

When I depart early next year, I will take great pride in looking back at the further steps we have taken during my term here, while knowing that our strong and enduring partnership and our friendship will continue to grow and flourish in the years ahead.

Thank you.