

Racial Strife in Sri Lanka: The Role of an Intermediary

by

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The Problem

Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon) obtained its independence from Britain in 1948. It is a multi-racial island, southeast of the Indian sub-continent, with the Sinhalese constituting 72 percent of the population, the Sri Lankan Tamils 11.2 percent, the Tamils of recent Indian origin (referred to as Indian Tamils) 9.3 and the Muslims, the majority of whom are Tamil-speaking 7.1 percent.¹ On occasion, the Sri Lankan Tamils and the Indian Tamils unite for limited political purposes. The Tamil-speaking Muslims rarely combine with the Tamils. The Sri Lankan Tamils came as invaders or settlers from neighbouring empires in the South Indian mainland from prehistoric times to around 1070 A.D. and settled in a contiguous area of territory in the northern and eastern parts of the island. They established their own kingdom there which endured till around 1621 when the Portuguese occupied this kingdom as well as sections of the Sinhalese kingdom in the maritime areas of southwest Sri Lanka. Therein lie the beginnings of what is contemporaneously called the Sinhalese-Tamil problem.

Under British rule, the island was welded into a single administrative whole and Sri Lankan Tamils spread into the Sinhalese-speaking districts in search of employment in the public and private sectors as well as for commerce. Large numbers of the Sri Lankan Tamils live in the Sinhalese-speaking districts today and they are a trapped minority being hostages to fortune whenever racial disturbances occur as they have in 1956, 1958, 1961, 1966, 1975, 1977, 1979 and 1981. The historic enmity between the two races is invoked on such occasions.

The Indian Tamils live in housing in the plantations which are mostly in the central and south-central districts. They are an island unto themselves but get dragged into these conflicts. A good few of them are either stateless or citizens of India. The Sinhalese view them suspiciously as a Tamil Fifth Column and, sometimes, inarticulately, as the equivalent of the Sudeten Germans. A problem lies in that the government of India is concerned for the safety of these Indian Tamils when there is racial conflict.

At the time Britain was planning on independence for the island, the Sri Lankan Tamils conducted a great agitation for balanced representation in the legislature (fifty per cent of the seats for the Sinhalese majority and the remaining fifty per cent for the Sri Lankan Tamils, Indian Tamils and Muslims) through their principal political instrument, the All-Ceylon Tamil Congress.² They failed to persuade Whitehall. After independence, the Sri Lankan Tamils, now under the spell of a rival political party, the Ilankai Thamil Arasu Kadchi escalated their demands. Their leadership wished to convert the existing unitary constitution to a federalist one. They dwelt on their historic homelands and they harked back to the days of the Tamil kingdom of the pre-Portuguese period. The party's Tamil and English names left room for manoeuvre, the party claiming in the Tamil language to represent the ideal of a Ceylon Tamil state (the English translation of its Tamil name being exactly this — the Ceylon Tamil State Party) while in English it designated itself as the Federal Freedom Party of the Tamil-speaking peoples.

The Federal Party's charismatic leader, S.J.V. Chelvanayakam (the father-in-law of this writer) negotiated three agreements with Sri Lankan prime ministers or their representatives, in 1957, 1960 and 1965, basically compromises on the federalist solution. The prime ministers concerned could not honour these owing to strong pressure from militant Sinhalese Buddhist groupings. The Sri Lankan Tamil leadership for their part launched campaigns of non-cooperation and civil disobedience in 1956, 1958 and 1961 and refused to be party to the autochthonous constitutions of 1972 and 1978 (the independence constitution was British-imposed).

Given the Federal Party's campaign in the Tamil language for a Ceylon Tamil state, the party found no difficulty to switch to a demand for a separate sovereign state.³ During 1973-1976, there was a general coalescence of Tamil political groupings under the umbrella title of Tamil United Front (1972), later changed to the Tamil United Liberation Front (1976). In 1976, the Front at its first national convention, resolved to launch a non-violent campaign for a sovereign Tamil state to be named Tamil Eelam. The non-violent character of the movement could not be maintained for long. In April 1977, the Front's leader, a persistent advocate of non-violence died after a long illness. Since then, there have been incidents of sporadic violence, indicating sophistication in the use of weaponry and explosives. Soldiers, policemen and Tamil collaborators in the Tamil-speaking north have been killed by Tamil militants. The army and police have been violent in the north and action and counter-action have brought the island to a state of near civil war. The ever present danger, at any time, of a flashpoint situation is now a perennial fact of political life in the island.

The deterioration in Sinhala-Tamil relations began with laws disfranchising the Indian Tamil population in 1948-1949 by a post-independent Sri Lankan government. In 1956, the Sinhala language was made the one official language throughout the island. Its effects have not been meaningfully mitigated by subsequent provisions in legislation and

constitutional clauses for “the reasonable use of the Tamil language” in 1958, 1972 and 1978. The Sri Lankan Tamils complain bitterly of discrimination in favour of the Sinhalese in public appointments, admissions to the state-run universities and in respect of settlement of the landless in state sponsored colonisation schemes in the Tamil-speaking north and east of Sri Lanka.

At the general election of 1977, the Tamil United Liberation Front was returned as the largest opposition group in Parliament. By virtue of parliamentary convention, the Front’s new leader, Appapillai Amirthalingam, emerged as Leader of the official Opposition. The position gave the Front tremendous opportunities. Amirthalingam, now a seasoned campaigner, having developed through a period of more than thirty years under the tutelage of the late Tamil leader, S.J.V. Chelvanayakam, did not fail to exploit the situation to advance the claim for a sovereign state of Tamil Eelam at home and more abroad. Extremely articulate and persuasive, Amirthalingam had a ready audience in his international travels. He claimed that his Front had won the general election on the mandate for a separate state it had asked for from the Tamil-speaking peoples of the Northern and Eastern Provinces of Sri Lanka.

The new right-of-centre government headed by J.R. Jayewardene, Prime Minister 1977-1978 and Executive President thereafter, committed as it was to an open economy and the attraction of foreign investment and aid from the states of the western world found itself embarrassed especially in view of the wide coverage given in the international press to Amirthalingam’s utterances and to the Sinhala-Tamil problem. The situation was compounded by the escalating violence by Tamil militants and police and army personnel in the north. Widespread racial disturbances in 1977 worsened matters. The government of J.R. Jayewardene was not certain of the loyalty of the security forces, the latter having been extensively infiltrated by supporters of Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike’s Sinhala Buddhist-oriented United Front government during the years 1970-1977.⁴ By 1978-79, the government faced a crisis because of the Tamil powder keg. There was need for immediate remedial action. President Jayewardene was unable to communicate with the Liberation Front’s parliamentary leadership or to have a meaningful dialogue with them. A mediator-negotiator-intermediary had to emerge if the inevitable disaster was to be averted.

The Requirements for an Intermediary

Sri Lankan society is like most societies pyramidal in structure. Political transactions therefore invariably take place at the top and then find their way to the middle and base layers through usually members of Parliament and party faithfuls. The island’s English-educated middle class has a heightened consciousness especially because politics is closely interwoven with economic policies. A distinct feature is that this middle class is quite intimate with what goes on among themselves. Its members too must therefore be given the appearance that there is consultation and communication with them on political matters. It is in this way that

democratic and élitist participation is enlisted in the political process. The intermediary must therefore be known to, and must command the respect and attention of, the top and middle layers. I had that advantage.

The fact that I was away in a foreign (Canadian) university appeared to provide a romanticizing effect, distance lending enchantment to the view. Above all the isolation was reassuring to the actors in the arena. The intermediary would not want to compete in the gladiatorial contest. Furthermore a professor of political science (such as myself) is regarded in a different way from professors in other disciplines. Such a professor is expected to be aware of what goes on in the political world and to have solutions at hand for the pressing problems that beset the country. Partly this arises from the fact that the political scientist is confused with a constitutional lawyer. Be that as it may, the political scientist of senior ranking is like the medieval medicine man. And people at the apex are willing to give him a ready ear and listen to him. A society like that of Sri Lanka also treats inhabitants of the ivory tower with awe.

There is a benefit in being known to the contending parties. I was in close touch with the President of the Republic (J.R. Jayewardene) when he was in opposition. I had advised him on questions relating to the Gaullist-style constitution of 1978 of which the President had been the principal architect. I am also a friend of the leader of the Liberation Front, Appapillai Amirthalingam, from university days and was intimately acquainted with five other senior parliamentary members of the Front. The Front and its leaders were reinforced in their confidence in me because I am the son-in-law of their late charismatic leader and had been the latter's unofficial political and constitutional confidant/consultant during a period of some thirty years.

In a context in which the President of the Republic and the leaders of the Liberation Front were locked in mortal combat, there seemed no better person to act initially the role of a go-between. The stark fact of an ethnic explosion was staring them in the face. Between the President and the Front lay a seemingly unbridgeable gap. The President had endeavoured to initiate a dialogue with the Front's leaders. They would talk "nicely" to him (the President stated to this writer) and then go back and do just as they pleased. The Front complained similarly. The President they said professed good intentions but was not willing to make any tangible moves towards resolving the problems facing their people. He (the President) was inflexible on the question of a sovereign state or of even a compromise on it. He had devised a system of district ministers for each of the twenty-four administrative districts into which the islands divided, six of these being in the Tamil-speaking areas, but these ministers were more the agents of an Executive President than instruments for the decentralisation and devolution of central government powers. They did not draw their power from the people of the area nor were they accountable to them or their parliamentary representatives.

At first I had reservations of assuming the role. Preliminary discussions with the leader of the Liberation Front indicated rigidity on the question of

settlement of Sinhalese colonists in the historic homelands of the Sri Lankan Tamils. I was besides short of time as I had to return to my duties at the University of New Brunswick (Canada). In August 1978 therefore, I put into operation an alternative scheme. I secured the services of five prominent Tamil professional men (a banker, two former supreme court judges, a retired head of civil service, and one of the country's best civil lawyers) and intimated to the President of the Republic and the leader of the Liberation Front that this group of five was willing to act as mediators in the dispute. I then left for Canada.

The group failed to make headway. They were inexperienced in the ways of politicians. They were neither enterprising nor were they bold or daring or innovative; they lacked the capacity to persuade. They could not create the necessary confidence among the leaders of the Liberation Front. And the President was not willing to shift his ground because this group of professional men could not come up with a concrete alternative. In the end it was left to me (the political scientist) to take on the role of intermediary, problem-solver and confidant of the President and leader of the Opposition. But this required enormous self-discipline. In an intimate and inquisitive social set up as in Sri Lanka, it is difficult to keep things compartmentalised. The better policy was to be discreet if not tight lipped.

It is not easy for an intermediary to maintain an equilibrium in a highly volatile set up where today's undertakings and agreements could become worthless on the morrow. And this is all the more a reason for anxiety. Failure could result in the accusation that I had raised expectations which I could not satisfy. A sinking feeling therefore often seized me, the view that all was not working out well, the doubts and the gnawing consciousness that an impasse could exasperate a people (the Tamil-speaking) already in the depths of despair. At a certain stage when the exercise did not appear to make progress, I seriously considered abandoning my role only to be told by the leader of the Liberation Front (Appapillai Amirthalingam) that I should intimate to the President of the Republic (President Jayewardene) that it was because of him (the President) that I had been drawn into this exercise. The President of the Liberation Front (M. Sivasithamparam) for his part remarked: "We had no hope before you appeared on the scene; so the situation will remain unchanged when you depart the scene." But Sivasithamparam was emphatic in his assertion that the Front would launch a struggle, come what may, to achieve their objective. President Jayewardene for his part was always on top of things. His hopes never flagged. He was confident that a solution could be produced.

An intermediary must therefore not function in a singular capacity. The support and encouragement of one or two close friends is always helpful especially when things appear to go awry. There were two such persons in Sri Lanka ready at hand — a university professor of history (Dr. K.M. de Silva) and the son of a dear friend (now deceased), Dr. Neelan Tiruchelvam. The latter indeed became my *alter ego*. There were besides two ambassadors from friendly states who were very supportive; they urged me to hang in. They, in their turn, also talked to the President of the

Republic. A high official from the embassy of an influential Communist state tried to keep in touch with Dr. Tiruchelvam. At a later date, I met with the ambassador of this Communist state and he clearly outlined his country's position in the Sinhala-Tamil dispute. He was for an amicable settlement. He did not wish foreign powers to get involved.

To be away in Canada and to commute from there from time to time had its distinct advantages. A continuing presence could result in all manner of demands being made on me. The two parties to the dispute were being pressured by their respective constituents. Attempts were made by the high command of the party to which the President of the Republic belonged to water down the solution; the President however kept to his undertakings. On the other side, the lieutenants of the leader of the Liberation Front wanted me to insist on further concessions. An interminable dialogue would then have ensued. It was better therefore to secure agreement on the main outlines and withdraw from the scene. I could make the long distance phone call if there was bad faith or misinterpretation resulting from misunderstandings. There were many such occasions. And it was possible to iron out problems that way more effectively than if I were physically present in the island of sorrows. There were letters too sent from time to time. One such letter from the President of the Republic expressed deep distress in regard to controversial statements made by some of the Front's leaders. I then wrote to the Leader of the Liberation Front urging him and his colleagues to be more cautious and was reassured accordingly. The Front too complained to me about statements made by the President of the Republic and I brought these to the latter's attention.

Absence from the scene had also a further advantage. In an intimate society it is difficult to resist the importunities of intimates. The invariable request for a favour which could only be dispensed by a cabinet minister or by the President of the Republic himself was made from time to time, especially for transfers, promotions, early retirements in the public services. One's currency would be lost if one were involved in such petty trifles.

Guidelines

In seeking to devise a solution acceptable to the two parties, I felt I must observe certain guidelines. The formula must be so designed as to serve the interests of the contenders. There was a responsibility to the President of the Republic, for in the prevailing Sinhalese-Tamil conflict his political rivals should not have opportunities of accusing him or his party of knuckling down to the threats of the Tamil United Liberation Front. Account had to be taken of the fact that the leaders of the Liberation Front were in an equally, if not more precarious position; they had whipped up world opinion (the international press, the Tamils of South India and the expatriate Sri Lankan Tamils) for their cause; they had mobilised the massive support of the Sri Lankan Tamils at home; the charge would be levelled that they had caused a setback to the galloping momentum of the separatist movement if at this stage they entered into negotiations which would give them anything short of their demand for a separate Tamil sovereign state of Eelam. Herein lay the probability of an impasse.

Further, Article 2 of the Sri Lanka Constitution (1978) of which the President himself was the principal architect declared Sri Lanka to be a unitary state and Article 83 requires that any such proposal to amend be confirmed by a two-thirds majority of the total membership of Parliament *and* approved by the people at a referendum. This is a hurdle that can never be crossed; for the Sinhalese electors who are in a majority will not be party to the “division” of a country which they regard as their own.

I was therefore confronted with a nearly insoluble situation; the deadlock could only be resolved by my taking on the sole burden of proposing a design which will not interfere with the unitary character of the state, which at the same time would also provide a measure of autonomy and decentralisation for the Tamil-speaking areas. I would have to exploit my experience as a political scientist to lend that weight to the scheme. The Liberation Front could then claim that it was not a concession to their demand for a separate sovereign state but a device which provided some of its basics.

The President of the Republic for his part should be able to declare that the arrangement gave him the right to exercise full control over the autonomous bodies — and that it was possible to do this through his agents in the district, the District Ministers (though in fact he would never do this except in extreme circumstances). The Liberation Front should not embarrass the President or his party by claiming that the formula had given them the framework for establishing their separate state in the future. Such a posture would be counter-productive; it would rouse the ire of the Sinhalese people.

I had to persuade the leaders of the Liberation Front that what they would obtain may not even be a first step towards their goal but that it could meet some of their immediate objectives — settling Tamil-speaking colonists in the historic homelands of the Sri Lankan Tamils and thereby preventing Sinhalese from colonising these areas, besides providing employment opportunities for Tamil youth in development schemes. There was further the possibility that under the system of proportional representation (since no party might obtain a majority in Parliament) the Front could use their bargaining position in the future to secure more powers for District Development Councils. It was also necessary that the scheme should apply to all administrative districts (24 in number) so as not to create any impression that it was a special deal intended to satisfy Tamil demands for nationhood and sovereign status.

Above all there was a desperate urgency to work within a time frame, viz., (i) the Tamil militants and activists had to be restrained, (ii) the President of the Republic was at the time 74 years of age and only a person of his immense stature could assure the Sinhalese people that it was in their interest to accommodate the Tamils, and (iii) the scheme had to be implemented before the President decided to retire from public life; or else it could become the plaything of competing Sinhalese politicians in their national pastime of Tamil-baiting. Most importantly, an atmosphere of trust had to be created between the President and the leaders of the Libera-

tion Front; both parties needed to be persuaded that neither should exploit the ultimate outcome for narrow political gain.

The Solution

The growing internecine warfare between the two communities and the mounting tensions in the rapidly shortening intervals were like a cancer eating into the vitals of the body politic. Either it had to be arrested or the patient would become increasingly enervated. President Jayewardene was keenly sensitive to this, remarking once at a meeting where the chairman of the President's party, the secretary to the Cabinet and I were present (in October 1979) that "long after we are dead and gone this problem will be with us and we had therefore better solve it here and now". The remarks were made in the context of opposition from the chairman of the party (for political reasons) and from the secretary to the Cabinet (for administrative reasons) to a formula that had been worked out by the President and myself. That formula had oddly enough been thought of by the President in Sri Lanka and by myself while in Canada. The President stated that it had occurred to him in "a flash", in "a moment of inspiration".

The occasion for action was when the island had reached a point in June-July 1979 when it was on the brink of a total and unmanageable civil war. Panic was fast setting in. There were phone messages to me from leading personages in the Tamil Jaffna peninsula (which is in the north of Sri Lanka and has the highest concentration of Sri Lankan Tamils) to approach the President with a view to finding a solution. The leaders of the Liberation Front did not however make their entry at this point in time. An ambassador from a powerful western state had a letter (dated 13 July 1979) hand delivered to me at my residence in Columbo in which, among other things, he urged me to act as a moderating influence.

The immediate question was to find a way of dealing with a problem that would brook of no delay. Here I found the President of the Republic not merely cooperative but extremely intellectual at grasping the intricacies of a veritable political imbroglio. It was he and he alone who understood its ramifications in all its details not merely in relation to the immediate present but in terms of the future.

The President mentioned the possibility of a special committee of ministers from his Cabinet devising a solution. I argued that such a committee would be acting unilaterally as it would not have a representative from the Liberation Front; the President appreciated this response. The President then suggested a Round Table Conference to which representatives from all major political parties would be invited; he hoped that such a gathering could hammer out an agreed solution which could later not be exploited for mean and parochial party advantage. I dampened the President's enthusiasm pointing out that such a public conference would only provide a platform for parties to compete with one another in indicating to the Sinhalese ethnic majority how little they were prepared to concede to the Tamils; the President was convinced.

The President then asked me for suggestions. I put forward the following proposals: (1) a devolution and decentralisation of powers to each of

the 24 administrative districts (6 of which are in the Tamil-speaking areas) into which the island is divided; (2) the scheme should be based on the model of provincial councils as is in operation in the Republic of South Africa — and since the textbooks speak of the South African constitution as being neither strictly unitary nor federal, such a scheme would not violate the inflexible unitary provisions of the constitution of Sri Lanka; (3) each of the South African provincial councils had an Administrator as its head appointed by the South African government; the Sri Lankan District Minister would therefore be the equivalent of the South African Administrator; he would have to work with his executive committee; (4) once the scheme in its broad outlines was approved by the President, by his senior colleagues and by the leaders of the Liberation Front, a presidential commission of experts, and others from the major parties could work out the details; if the other political parties declined to participate, the commission could be constituted with experts as well as representatives from the President's political party (the United National Party) and from the Liberation Front. The President requested me to prepare a memorandum on the scheme which he said he would discuss with some of his ministers.

The memorandum contained the proposals already stated. There was also provision for an executive committee which would function as a cabinet, and an elected council. Emphasis was laid on the councils becoming autonomous bodies for purposes of promoting economic development. The President readily seized on the concept of economic development and it was he who coined the appellation "District Development Councils." The President also wished that the elected members in a council should not exceed the members of Parliament for the district who he said should be ex-officio members of the council. His reason was a sound one. The councils should as far as possible not have a majority which was in opposition to the majority party or parties in power. There would then be friction. Since the councils will be elected at the same time as members of Parliament, there could be reasonable certainty of a coincidence of interests. The President was also keen that members of Parliament should interest themselves in development at the grass roots level. The whole scheme appeared attractive to the President. The next day he informed me that he had shown it to five of his cabinet ministers and they had given it their approval. He would next have it considered at a forthcoming meeting of his Cabinet. The ministers supported the exercise in its entirety — the scheme, the proposal for a presidential commission and the decision to abandon the plan for a round table conference or a special committee of the cabinet.

The next stage was to persuade the opposition parties and the Tamil United Liberation Front to cooperate in the exercise. The leaders of the Liberation Front were the most important factor in the equation. I addressed the parliamentary group of the Front. Some members were sceptical but they were not unwilling to give the scheme a try. The group found it hard to accept the bona fides of President Jayewardene. They insisted that it was he who for party advantage wrecked the Tamil Federal Party's pact of 1957 with S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, the prime minister at the time. I replied that Winston Churchill had opposed independence for India but he

had sent the Cripps Mission to offer dominion status to that country during World War II. The group wished to know what would become of their demand for a separate sovereign state. I argued that they could do what the Indian National Congress had done. In 1929, the Indian National Congress had resolved to fight for independence. But the Congress later decided, without giving up its goal, to cooperate in the working of the Government of India Act of 1935, a measure which fell far short of independence. In the end the group decided that they would go along with the exercise as a measure which would democratise the country's local government system. In part, they responded positively because the Indian National Congress is their model. They nominated Dr. Neelan Tiruchelvam as their representative on the proposed commission. The other Opposition parties declined to participate.

Before the presidential commission was officially appointed on 2 August 1979, I was involved in considerable bargaining, discussions and negotiations between the two parties before drawing up a set of terms of reference for the proposed commission. The terms in the end proved acceptable to the President of the Republic and the Liberation Front. In this I was assisted by Dr. Neelan Tiruchelvam who by training and profession is a lawyer.

The commission had as its chairman, a retired chief justice, Victor Tennekoon, a Sinhalese Buddhist who had been appointed to the position by Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike when she was prime minister during 1970-77. Victor Tennekoon was by no means convinced that the solution proposed by the President was the best. Having a legal mind, he could not conceive of a scheme where the chief executive's (that is, the President's) agent, the District Minister, could work with an executive committee elected by a District Development Council. He therefore advocated that the council and its executive committee should act in an advisory capacity to the District Minister, a plan which would have been rejected outright by the Liberation Front. It is also probable that he as well as the Sinhalese members of the commission were under tremendous pressure from Sinhalese activists and militants.

The reluctance of Tennekoon held up the work of the commission for a considerable length of time. The commission issued its report only in February 1980, whereas the President had expected to have a report by the end of September or early October (1979). I had to leave for the University of New Brunswick at the end of August (1979) in time for the fall semester. The understanding with the President was that I would return for a month in October (1979) and finalize a bill to establish District Development Councils on the basis of the Commission's report.

In the end, the President and I, in the month of October (1979) prepared an unofficial report and thereafter legislation for the setting up of the councils. Dr. Tiruchelvam was helpful. The assistance of the Acting Legal Draftsman and the Attorney-General was made available to me on the instruction of the President. Sri Lanka's senior constitutional lawyer, Dr. Joseph Cooray, read through the document to make certain that there

were no problems in the proposed bill.

When I left Sri Lanka for Canada at the end of October, President Jayewardene was confident that legislation could be enacted in the beginning of 1980. He stated that he intended to bring the councils into operation on 13 April (1980), an auspicious day for Sinhalese Buddhists and Tamil Hindus (who constituted the overwhelming majorities in their respective populations) for it was the day of their new year. Unfortunately this was not possible because of the delay in the commission issuing its report. Legislation was finally enacted in August 1980. Thereafter further legislation became necessary to regulate elections to the councils. The councils came into being in July 1981.

The delay had its consequences. What might have been accepted in December 1979 or even April 1980 by the majority of Sri Lankan Tamils was jibbed at by the militant and activist youth of the community. They looked on it as being too little and too late. In fact the legislation was already too late by more than twenty years if the date on which the first pact (1957) that was signed between the Tamil Federal Party and the prime minister of the time is taken into consideration. Nevertheless despite the disappointments and frustrations in the intervening years (1957-1979), I was assured by members of the extreme wing of the Liberation Front that April 1980 would not be too late. By July 1981 however opinion had changed among sections of the Sri Lankan Tamils. An atmosphere of doubt and despair prevailed. The Liberation Front however went along with the legislation in the hope that something could be retrieved from the situation. The verdict of history could be something different.

Conclusion

Between the date of the appointment of the presidential commission in August 1979 and the inauguration almost two years later of District Development Councils in July 1981, a great many things happened to sully the air. A state of emergency was declared in the heavily Tamil populated Jaffna peninsula in the north of Sri Lanka⁵ just before the commission was appointed because of a series of killings of policemen and others by Tamil militants. The emergency only worsened relations between the two communities because of violence against the civilian population by the state's security forces. On the other hand without the emergency, the island would have erupted in dangerous civil war. The emergency ended in December 1979. But there was a recrudescence of political violence in the Jaffna peninsula. It reached a climax in Jaffna with the elections to the District Development Councils in June 1981. The army and the police perpetrated acts in Jaffna which can in living memory never be erased.

It was my vain hope that my role would be over with the inauguration of the councils. But the violence of June 1981 and the implementational aspects of the District Development Councils legislation resulted in further calls on my services. On the former, on 22 June 1981, the President of Sri Lanka wrote "We have now to re-build the fences that have been broken. I am waiting for your arrival." On the latter, the Leader of the Liberation

Front in a communication dated 19 August 1981 to the President stated: "I am sending this letter in order to recapitulate some of the matters Your Excellency discussed with Professor A.J. Wilson and agreed to." On 31 August 1981, an Accord which I negotiated between the President and the Liberation Front was signed by the President. An outcome of the Accord was the convening of a high level committee comprising the President, the Prime Minister, key cabinet ministers and the leaders of the Liberation Front, including Dr. Tiruchelvam. This committee has met at regular intervals since and issues in conflict have been satisfactorily resolved.

There is still scepticism among sections of the articulate Tamil intelligentsia as to whether District Development Councils will provide the Sri Lankan Tamils with the much needed autonomy which could be an alternative to internecine conflict and an all embracing popular movement for a separate Tamil state. The future can be determined but its determining depends on the way in which the Colombo-centred bureaucracy and ministers of the government adhere to the spirit of the law, not its letter. The President's continuing presence is indispensable. But after him? Remarks made to the ambassador of a super power in October 1979 still hold true: "You cannot expect me to solve a 2500 year quarrel between Sinhalese and Tamils in one week." On the other hand the senior diplomat of a friendly state struck a more optimistic note. In a letter to me on 25 February 1980, he wrote: "I am quite clear in my mind that the whole exercise was worth the effort, and the gallons of soda water you downed in my house is no price at all for what has been achieved. . . I put it to you that this is no small achievement. . ." Only time can tell.⁶

Footnotes

1. Government of Sri Lanka, Department of Census and Statistics, *Census Data, Ceylon Year Book* (Colombo, 1970), and *Statistical Pocket Book of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka 1980* (Colombo, 1980); *The Population of Sri Lanka* (Colombo, 1974).
2. For further information, see *Ceylon: Report of the Commission on Constitutional Reform Command 6677* (London, repr. 1955), also referred to as the *Soulbury Report* after its chairman, Lord Soulbury.
3. See A.J. Wilson, "The Tamil Federal Party in Ceylon Politics", *The Journal of Commonwealth Political Studies*, vol. 4, no. 2 (1966), pp. 116-37; also Robert N. Kearney, *Communalism and Language in the Politics of Ceylon* (Durham, N.C., 1967).
4. See A.J. Wilson, *Politics in Sri Lanka, 1947-1979* (London, 1979).
5. 785,000 (the vast majority of whom are Sri Lanka Tamils) out of a total Sri Lankan Tamil population of 1,424,000 live in the Jaffna peninsula.
6. See Robert N. Kearney, "Language and the Rise of Tamil Separatism in Sri Lanka", *Asian Survey*, vol. 18 (1978); W.I. Siriweera, "Recent Developments in Sinhala-Tamil Relations", *Asian Survey*, vol. 20 (1980); and Bryan Pfaffenberger, "The Cultural Dimension of Tamil Separatism in Sri Lanka", *Asian Survey*, vol. 21 (1981).