

# DR SAMAN KELEGAMA: SRI LANKA'S FINEST CHAMPION OF ECONOMIC REFORMS

THE ECONOMIC REFORMS AGENDA IS NOT ALWAYS POPULAR; IT IS SOMETIMES HIJACKED BY NARROW SPECIAL INTERESTS. BUT DR KELEGAMA SHOWED IT WAS WORTH FIGHTING FOR

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July 13, 2017

I am in no way qualified to write about the remarkable contributions made by Dr Saman Kelegama to Sri Lanka's academic and economic policy landscape. The manner in which he has enriched economic thinking in Sri Lanka and South Asia as a whole cannot be captured in a brief article of appreciation. So, I will confine my words to the impact that Dr Kelegama has made on the development of Sri Lanka's next generation of economists, and the legacy that he leaves behind.

My first encounter with Dr Kelegama, fondly known as Dr. K to all of us who worked for him, was when I walked into his office as a 20-year-old, fresh-faced undergrad. When I knocked on the door and walked into his IPS office on St. Michael's Road, he was peering at a document, behind a wall of books and papers, lost in his favourite space of economic theory and political economy. Without much of a fuss, he put me to work on one of his pet topics: economic integration in South Asia.

I was by no means Dr. K's first research assistant, nor his last. One would probably find that more than half of Sri Lanka's economists have been through a stint at the Institute of Policy Studies. The training and exposure received at IPS is always an excellent way to understand Sri Lanka's economic landscape and apply what one has learnt in academia to real policy.

Dr. K had a very gentle and almost imperceptible way of imparting his knowledge on his juniors. He was never one to micromanage or push you in a direction of his choice. He would provide subtle guidance and advice, and before you know it, you are approaching problems with a completely different mindset and finding solutions you never thought possible.

In this way, Dr. K's own analytical rigour in his approach to economic research has cascaded down, and was instilled in all those who have worked at the Institute. Over the decades, IPS has built a reputation as a centre for excellence in independent economic research in Asia, just as Dr. K would have wished.

One of Dr. K's finest traits was the trust and confidence he placed in his staff. He would always push the young ones to the front, effectively forcing us to build confidence and self-belief. Whether it was speaking at international conferences, having a seat at national policy forums or taking part in inter-governmental trade negotiations, Dr. K would either give up his position to a younger researcher or take someone along with him, ensuring that the knowledge was passed on and a young career flourished, and he would always be the first to celebrate their success.

My most memorable experience working with Dr. K was at the Indo-Lanka CEPA negotiations. The trade integration agenda was hijacked by narrow political and commercial interests, culminating in misinformed and unjust attacks by interested parties on IPS and on him personally. Behind the kind and gentle exterior was a man as tough as nails. In the midst of a highly charged political atmosphere, under stringent public scrutiny, Dr. K was determined to achieve what was best for the Sri Lankan economy: competitive markets to drive innovation and consumer wellbeing, with smart regulation to ensure fairness and justice within a robust institutional framework.

Throughout his career, Dr Kelegama championed the Sri Lankan economic reforms agenda, with a view to fostering competitive markets, be it through trade liberalization, competition policy, industrial reforms or others. While understanding the power and benefits of market forces, he was acutely aware of market failures, particularly in a developing economy with imperfect institutions and a large agrarian base.

Dr Kelegama articulated the need for smart, unobtrusive regulations to address market failure, strengthen forces of competition and contestation, drive productivity for the benefit of consumers, and enhance the living standards of all Sri Lankans. The economic reforms agenda has not always been a popular one, particularly among special interest groups, but it's an agenda that is worth fighting for and has precious few champions. Sri Lanka has sadly lost one of the finest of these champions.

We will miss him immensely. As individuals, we will miss a warm, kind and generous soul, and collectively as a country, it is an irreplaceable loss of an amazing mind that had so much more to contribute. But, Dr Kelegama's legacy will live on.

It will live on through the Institute of Policy Studies that he has built with love, care and incredible sacrifice, and through the minds of all those who have worked for him and with him. He has enriched the lives of a number of economists, who had the opportunity to stand on the shoulders of a giant, and there is no greater giant in Sri Lankan economics than Saman Kelegama.

Rest easy, dear Sir.