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Dr. Saman Kelegama: A truly remarkable human being

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By Ashani Abayasekara

I can distinctly remember the first day I met Dr. Kelegama, fondly and respectfully referred to as ED by all of us at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS). It was 4 August 2009 and I had just joined IPS as an intern to work under him.

I had of course heard much about Dr. Kelegama's brilliance as an academic and researcher, particularly from my lecturers at the University of Peradeniya. I did not, however, know about him as a person and so it was with much trepidation that I entered his room that first day. My fears were soon put to rest as he began speaking in his gentle voice, warmly welcoming me to IPS and asking many questions about my background. It was this gentle demeanour, along with many other similar qualities of his, which have created a lasting impact on me. (<http://static.ft.lk/ftadmin/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/03211829/DFT-15.jpg>)

The first task ED assigned me was to write an essay on the tea sector in Sri Lanka. He gave me two weeks to complete the task but would call me in regularly to check on how I was progressing. During these meetings he always made it a point to inquire on how I was managing at IPS, apart from the work itself. I can still remember the joy I felt when, upon completion of my second task, he left a handwritten note indicating how pleased he was with my work just before he left for an overseas trip. What struck me was the humility of such a high-ranking and busy person in leaving a note of appreciation for an intern.

When I was offered a permanent position at IPS but wanted to try out teaching for a year at the university, ED was very understanding and encouraged me to do so. I eventually rejoined the IPS in 2011 and had the privilege of working closely with ED for close to four years. While the workload would sometimes be considerably heavy, the way in which he assigned work – gently and humbly asking us to help him in meeting his commitments – made it impossible to ever say no to him.

The sweet smile that always accompanied a request was an added bonus! More importantly, he would never fail to express his profuse thanks and appreciation for work done, no matter how busy or stressed he was.



The late Dr. Saman Kelegama

Enabling employer

I will always be grateful for the countless opportunities he provided for my own personal and professional growth. He had the unique ability of identifying the strengths as well as areas for improvement in each individual he came into contact with and gently encouraged you in developing weaker areas.

Being a shy and introverted person who hated public speaking, I was overwhelmed when he asked me to go overseas and present at conferences on many occasions. When I had no confidence in myself, he instilled his own confidence in me and encouraged me to overcome many fears. I strongly believe that it is this overseas exposure which subsequently gave me the confidence to pursue my Master's in a foreign country.

I was touched when he wrote to me personally to condole with me when my grandmother passed away soon after I left for my Master's. I was equally touched when he wrote to me towards the end of my course, asking me to come back to IPS. I'm so glad that I did and that I was able to work under him in the final months of his life.

After his passing, we have been hearing much about the loving husband and father he was to his family. Given the enormous amount of responsibilities, not only within IPS but at countless other organisations and committees as well, it is both amazing and heartening to learn that he also made time for his family. This is after all what truly matters. Indeed, it is not his impressive qualifications, outstanding career nor expertise that many of us at the IPS now talk about, but about his precious qualities as a human being – his integrity, humility, gentleness and kindness.

While it is immensely hard for us to accept his untimely and sudden departure, I am eternally grateful for the privilege of having known him and draw comfort in the assurance that he is now free of worldly strife and in a better place.

Rest in peace dear ED, my first and favourite boss. Thank you for always believing in me and for making such a difference in my life. You will forever remain close to my heart.

In closing, the words spoken by St. Paul towards the end of his life come to my mind: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." (2 Timothy 4:7, the Bible).

Dr. Kelegama was a consummate warrior who never quit in his efforts to do the best for his country. Not only did he “fight the good fight”, but I believe that he also “finished the race” and “kept the faith”. His relatively short life was lived to the fullest, fulfilling far beyond what anyone could conceive, fully accomplishing his calling in life. He never tired in doing his best, even in the face of opposition, and had faith that good would someday overcome evil. Let us follow in his footsteps and carry on his good work to the best of our ability. This is the least and the best we can do for this truly remarkable human being.

(The writer works at the Institute of Policy Studies).

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