



## BUSINESS TIMES

### Dr. Saman Kelegama: A legacy that lives on in his purpose and his people

By Anushka Wijesinha

Appreciation

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Dr. Saman Kelegama was a once in a generation individual. Everyone who interacted with him in any way would have memorable recollections of him in different contexts. While I could never do justice writing about his many achievements in, and contributions to, the economics profession in Sri Lanka and South Asia, this article of appreciation is a personal reflection on the impact he has had on me, like he has had on many other economists of my generation.

#### Last Interaction

It was about a week before Dr. Kelegama's tragic and untimely passing and I was due to speak at a session on trade relations between Sri Lanka and India. I anticipated push back and I wanted to be better armed. "Who better to ask than Dr. K?," I thought and hurriedly emailed him with my query. Although he had just returned from the airport, he promptly emailed me back with the relevant information and signed off with, "Hope I am not too late". My remarks at the session were greatly enriched by his incisive insights. The next day I called him to give him a debrief. He answered with a loud and welcoming, "Hallo Anushka! How did it go?!" (I can almost still hear the booming enthusiasm in his voice that day). We proceeded to speak for an hour about the forum, about wider political-economy issues around the forthcoming trade agreements, we shared our frustrations about institutional weaknesses, and he suggested what more the private sector must do to strengthen the narrative around trade liberalisation. As always, he listened patiently, asked sharp questions, and shared interesting anecdotes. He knew the journey towards fostering a competitive economy driven by trade and investment was a long one, but I admired his resolve to keep on going.



Dr.Saman Kelegama

For me, this occasion encapsulated all that Dr. Kelegama was. Dr. K – as we fondly referred to him (only after leaving IPS though!) – always had time for ex-IPS staff, was always interested and never impatient, was always enthusiastic about economic issues, and was constantly concerned about the state of affairs in the Sri Lankan public policy arena.

#### Institutional strength

Sri Lanka has been very bad at preserving and strengthening institutions in recent times. It was one of the things he talked about during a conversation upon my rejoining the Institute of Policy Studies in 2009 (after being an intern under him in 2005), and as we kicked off our work on the Presidential Tax Commission. Dr. Kelegama was a firm believer of the important role that quality institutions play in determining a country's growth prospects. An extension of that was how he built, preserved and strengthened the institution he spent the better part of his career in – IPS. His deep commitment to ensuring the credibility, integrity, and independence of IPS, and weathering all kinds of political climates, was remarkable.

He demonstrated admirable consistency of economic thought, amidst shifting ideological tides through the years, thereby firmly placing the IPS as the leading think tank in the country and a highly respected research organization in South and South East Asia. He oversaw the building of a wonderful home for the

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IPS, amidst the leafy environs of Independence Square. He often remarked to foreign visitors that "we are located in the intellectual quarter of the city", as we were down the road from the leading public boys school (indeed one of his alma maters), a public library, the national archives, Colombo University, and public research institutions like the ITI, NSF, and SLAAS. While he must have surely been proud of the physical institution he built and led, he was most proud of its people.

### People first

As anyone currently or formerly at IPS would attest, he cared deeply about his staff. I clearly recall many occasions – particularly at year-end staff parties and start of year fellowship gatherings – where, in his brief speeches, he would say something along the lines of, "Of course we now have a building we can all be proud of, but ultimately what matters is the people. The people of IPS are the ones who make this institution".

One of the most defining legacies of Dr. Kelegama would be his contribution to fostering Sri Lanka's next generation of economists. He gave us the space to think, to pursue our research interests, to do new things, and to get exposure at the highest levels of the policy process. I recall how, after just a couple of months at IPS, he nominated me to attend a conference in India and deliver a presentation in his place. This occurred several times over the following years, and it was the same with many other young economists at IPS. The faith and confidence he placed in his young staff was truly admirable. I recall how he gave us (myself, together with Deshal de Mel at that time) a free hand to start and curate the IPS blog ('Talking Economics') and took a great deal of interest in our efforts to expand IPS's social media presence. He would often inquire, "When is the next blog article coming out?", or "How is our Facebook doing?"

### Fostering young talent

Like many IPS staff today and in times passed, he pushed me to gain overseas exposure quickly – presenting in various international conferences and being part of regional research projects. For someone who was acutely conscious about guarding the reputation of the institution, he gave new recruits and young researchers remarkable leeway to, and confidence in, representing the institution both at home and overseas. This was most noticeable at South Asian forums. Year after year we would see the same faces from South Asian research institutions – mostly older men. But from IPS there would always be an array of young economists – men and women – confidently delivering presentations to audiences of South Asian economics luminaries. Many times they would remark, "Saman always encourages young talent doesn't he? We see fresh faces coming up all the time". It is not surprising that Sri Lanka's research and private sector landscape is dotted with a new generation of economists who have been nurtured by him, and are all extremely saddened by his sudden passing.

### Diligent and nuanced

Dr. Kelegama was one of the most hardworking individuals I know. As I am sure his beloved family would attest, he spent many hours even on Saturdays and Sundays attending to pending work. When on his numerous flights for overseas engagements, when all the cabin lights had been turned off, I would notice him with his light on and tray table down preparing diligently for the workshop, conference or seminar ahead. Despite his busy travel schedule, official duties, and corporate engagements, he found time to edit new research volumes and co-author new research papers. In fact, he was due to bring out an edited volume on taxation in Sri Lanka in August, for which I had gladly contributed two chapters. Despite a plethora of responsibilities, he made the time to give meaningful feedback – whether it was on improving the focus of a paper or spotting typos in a blog. And to top it off, he had an impressive sense of detail and nuance – whether it was a politically sensitive sentence in an article, unnecessary white space in a page of the annual report, or delivering a carefully worded phrase in a public forum.

### Tactful and calm

Dr. Kelegama was a remarkably gentle and generous soul, and well known for being a compassionate leader. In his work, his demeanour was always endearing, and his calmness and clarity of thought was his greatest asset. Amidst the most frustrating of discussions with detractors of India-Sri Lanka trade, or politically charged meetings with aggressive industrialists, Dr. Kelegama kept a cool head and interacted firmly and skillfully. In the most recent phase of FTA-related meetings, it was striking how even the harshest critics would respect his responses – it was impossible not to, as he would always provide a sensible and balanced perspective. Because of this ability, he was often placed on the firing line. Yet, he tackled these situations tactfully, despite the trying circumstances. One of the things that would have affected him the most was the way in which he was attacked personally, for the work he was doing on behalf of Sri Lanka as its lead trade negotiator on the three forthcoming trade agreements. While he would never show it publicly, I know that he did at times feel let down and felt he was fighting the battle alone. All of us can do more to ensure that what he was fighting for – to expand Sri Lanka's trade and investment prospects and build a more competitive economy – is carried on.

### "I Hope I Am Not Too Late"

For over two decades Dr. Kelegama continued to impress upon the need for policy reforms, at every opportunity he got; he argued for sensible economic policies that are based on markets and competitiveness but also anchored to social inclusion and political realities. His legacy lives on in the dozens of Sri Lankan economists he supervised, mentored, and continued to work closely with. His legacy lives on in the sense of inquiry he inculcated in them. It took his untimely demise to remind us all of the ideas he was promoting, for our country and our region.

But I keep recalling his last email – "Hope I am not too late".

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Like dozens of others who had the good fortune of knowing him and working with him, I will miss our “Dr. K” immensely. I will miss his mentorship, insight, and wise counsel. In him, our country had an unparalleled voice of rational economic thought and a champion for reform. Let us not wait till it’s too late to realise the goals he was working towards.

(The writer is Chief Economist at the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce).

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