

Dr Chris Nonis: Rather Than Just A€~Iâ€™™

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With a plethora of experiences from diverse sectors ranging from medicine to international affairs to business, Dr Chris Nonis has worked and lived in both Sri Lanka and Britain, and as such he is ideally placed to take up the position as the Sri Lankan High Commissioner to Britain. Currently the Chairman of the Mackwoods Group, the lessons he has learnt from his parents and grandparents have enabled him to acquire multifaceted skills and knowledge. Through constructive dialogue and discussion with diverse personalities he has learnt to be non-judgmental of people and believes that Sri Lankans have the responsibility to utilise this hard earned peace to respect pluralism and diversity, where selflessness is more important, and where one should think more about others rather than just 'I'.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe
Photography Menaka Aravinda

Who is Chris Nonis? How would you describe yourself as a person?

I would describe myself as someone who has developed an understanding and respect for the dignity and diversity of people irrespective of their background. The invaluable life experiences of living and working in different countries in multiple sectors, including the public health sector in the UK, in academia, international and civil society organisations, as well as the private sector in Sri Lanka, and engaging with people of diverse backgrounds, has given me a broader perspective of life. In addition, my work as a doctor has taught me a degree of empathy, sensitivity, and humility and to be non-judgemental. I am open to change and see the value of change as an opportunity to improve oneself and gain from different experiences. I am an optimist, and dare to dream, but I am also a realist, and accept my limitations.

You come from a family that has been a prominent member of the mercantile sector of this country for 170 years. What can you tell us about your childhood and how you became who you are today?

My early education was in Sri Lanka, and when my parents moved to the UK, I did my O'Levels and A'Levels in the UK. I studied medicine at Royal Free Hospital Medical School, University of London, and also obtained a First Class Honours degree from Imperial College, London. I spent my electives at Harvard Medical School in Boston, USA and completed my postgraduate studies at Addenbrooke's Cambridge, Brompton and Hammersmith. I also

maintained a keen interest in both International Affairs and business, having come on my first Board at the age of 18.

It is predominantly because of the profound influence that my parents; my late mother and father, as well as my grandparents, have had on me that has made me who I am. They always wanted us to have as broad an education as possible. They also taught us that whilst one should have ambition, that ambition should never be at the expense of another. In essence what they taught us is that whilst we should work hard to achieve success, we should always maintain as paramount our principles and values. That is what has kept us in good stead and that is probably what has made me who I am. At the same time we have always had a strong faith and realise that despite whatever one achieves, we have sufficient humility to understand that there is a being greater than us.

In Essence What Our Parents Taught Us Is That Whilst We Should Work Hard To Achieve Success, We Should Always Maintain As Paramount Our Principles And Values.

You are a physician by profession, but you are also the Chairman of the Mackwoods Group and hold numerous posts in various organisations. How do you balance it all?

Yes that is always a challenge. But another aspect that we have learned over the years is to be able to compartmentalise different areas. It requires absolute focus to do the best we can on one task at a time, and that is how we try and achieve a balance.

When one looks at Mackwoods, it is a diverse organisation. The sectors are very diverse. What can you tell us about this experience?

A defining strength of Mackwoods is its heritage, which reflects stability, and integrity, and also resilience in the face of adversity. The Mackwoods Group has developed over the 170 years into a very diverse organisation, but actually if you take a long hard look at the strategy it has been one of selective diversification within each of our domain areas of expertise. Furthermore what has kept the Mackwoods Group going forward is that it has been consistently led by successive generations who have all been professionals in their own right, and have preserved the principles and family values of the group. That was one aspect that my grandparents insisted on even before we began to think of joining the company. They always wanted us to be able to stand on our own feet. Therefore my eldest sister Kshama became a teacher, my second sister Nirmali became an accountant and also Co-Chairman of Mackwoods, I became a physician, and my youngest sister Shelley became a

lawyer. In such a way my parents always insisted that we should be able to stand on our own feet first and prove ourselves before we take on a role in the company. That is the reason why we have managed to maintain it and also maintain our name, partly because our parents and grandparents insisted that we obtain a formal and professional education first. Today Mackwoods is engaged in seven sectors. We are in healthcare, agribusiness and plantations, import-export trading, power generation, ICT education and software development; hotels and leisure, and more recently we entered the financial services sector with our stockbroking company.

When you look at these seven sectors, how has the progress been so far, especially if you look at the company's journey over the 170 years?

If you look back at our roots, when William Mackwood set up the company in 1841, it was originally set up as a merchant and agent, as a trading company representing European interests in Sri Lanka. Mackwoods epitomises quite a unique business model in that it has not only survived for all these years but also managed to consistently expand despite the vicissitudes of the world wars, the global financial crises and even the entirety of the conflict in Sri Lanka. Part of that is because we were a diversified conglomerate, so one sector could also provide a hedge against another and that is what has seen us through. In addition, we have always been open to innovation and change. Mackwoods is also structured with very strong teams and good capacity within different people who lead the various sectors of the Group.

Medicine Also Gives You A Far More Empathetic Outlook At People That You Begin To Understand Not Only Where They Are Coming From But Also Why They Do The Things They Do, Which Are Sometimes Not Obvious.

Do you still practice as a physician?

I practiced extensively in the UK working within the National Health Service. Having developed my career in the UK I then decided to come back to Sri Lanka to assist my mother as she was developing health problems. I had always promised her that I would return home. I am qualified to practice here as well but instead of engaging in private practice I participated in conducting occasional free clinics in rural areas and that gave me enormous satisfaction though it was a far cry from what I was doing in the UK in cardiology. It was a great joy to go out to the periphery, and it still gave me equal if not better satisfaction. However with my other commitments I am no longer able to do this, but am still prevailed upon frequently to give opinions. Medicine taught me a degree of compassion and empathy for people. It taught me to develop a greater understanding of human beings,

and what makes them 'tick', and also a sensitivity to people. Medicine also gives you a far more empathetic outlook at people and one begins to understand not only where they are coming from but also why they do the things they do, which are sometimes not obvious. It also makes you far more understanding because you also realise behind all the great successes of people, there have also been many difficulties, and many sorrows and that gives you a better understanding of who people are. Working as a doctor in the public sector has also taught me how one should treat everyone equally irrespective of their background, whether socioeconomic, race, or religion. I feel that has been the most important lesson learnt.

What can you tell us about your experience as the Deputy Chairman of the Royal Commonwealth Society (UK)?

I have always been very interested in international affairs and that again is predominantly the influence of my parents who always encouraged us to learn much more than just the career we were following. They were always extremely widely read and encouraged us to do the same. During the last 15 to 20 years during my time in the UK, I was involved in several international committees, which was as a result of that interest, and have participated in conferences, and delivered addresses on international issues in the African sub-continent, Asia and Europe.

I also became involved with the Royal Commonwealth Society (RCS), which is one of the oldest Commonwealth organisations, and subsequently went on to be its Deputy Chairman. I also serve as Trustee of the Ramphal Centre for Commonwealth Policy Studies which too has given me valuable insights. The RCS has been a forum for advocacy, dialogue and debate, and what the Royal Commonwealth Society has done, especially at its headquarters in London, is that it has provided a platform for heads of state, international leaders, academics and diplomats to speak about compelling imperatives across the Commonwealth countries and has always been a strong protagonist for change. For example, during my early days the RCS campaigned heavily for Nelson Mandela's release and for the end of apartheid. In fact Nelson Mandela, following his release, gave his first speech in the UK at the RCS. Over the years it has provided a platform for over 40 heads of state to deliver addresses. We have robust and challenging dialogue and debate. Therefore engaging with and having dialogue with them has given me a very interesting perspective on international relations.

Having so much experience in international relations and diplomacy, what do you think Sri Lanka can do differently?

Following 28 years of bitter conflict we have finally achieved peace under the leadership of His Excellency President Mahinda Rajapaksa. We have also achieved the political stability which would ensure that there will be a consistency in policy. However, it is incumbent on all of us in all strata of society to build an inclusive and pluralistic society in order to make this hard earned peace a durable one. This is probably the greatest opportunity that Sri Lankans have to unite; all communities and all races, whether it be Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim, Burgher; all religions –Buddhist, Hindu, Christians, Islam – to build the pluralistic society so that we can make that peace sustainable. It is not so much about “what can Sri Lanka do”, it is “what Sri Lankans can do” and should be doing. Each of us has a part to play. Every one of us must develop a degree of forgiveness and reconciliation and what we would like to do as a cohesive nation state – then, we will truly flourish. This is not incumbent on just one person but on each and every one of us. I always believe that. I firmly believe that each of us as Sri Lankans has a part to play and can contribute towards unity and building a better future for our children . It is only then that we will be truly driven by selflessness, where one should think more about others rather than just ‘I’.

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How have the various roles that you have held strengthened you for your new appointment as the High Commissioner to Britain?

The key strengths that I have is that I have been in several sectors: public sector, civil society, international affairs, academia and the private sector, and I have lived and worked in both countries. I think this unique combination, and the depth and breadth of understanding that I have derived from this, will help me to take on this challenging role at this critical juncture.

What can be done to build Sri Lanka’s image in Britain as well as the West as a whole?

Our relationship with Britain has a very long history, and there is a commonality of values between the two countries. We have had an enormous reservoir of goodwill over the last 150 years and what we need to do is build on this, leverage on our commonalities and also further develop the understanding between the two countries. We also need to highlight and articulate the very real progress that is being made in the country in the post-conflict era.

If we move on to talk about your mother, Mrs Sriyani Nonis has been an exemplary figure to many women in Sri Lanka. What was it like growing up with such a strong

lady? Would you say that who you are today is what you have learnt from her?

Yes, my mother was a very unique person, kind and compassionate yet with tremendous inner strength . This is how she was able to run a large conglomerate as a female in this male dominated arena, and always maintaining her values. She ran it with great sensitivity and she used to constantly remind us that all our employees have families too; she instilled in us faith and spirituality, how to be caring, and she taught me the beauty of simplicity, how powerful leading a simple life can be, and that everyone has an enormous beauty within them, whether they are able or disabled, wealthy or poor, they all have a contribution to make in life. She urged us to provide ourselves time to see that in life; she always encouraged us to do that and I witnessed how she ran the charity fund that was set up by my late Grandfather. In fact that was the first Board that I was appointed to at the age of only 18, between school and university. At that young age we think we can save the world and are rather idealistic, and so they wanted me to learn to appreciate life and to learn what real poverty is.

I had promised my mother I would return to Sri Lanka and be with her, and when I made the decision to return to Sri Lanka everyone else was going in the opposite direction out of the country, and people could not understand how I could leave a secure environment and career and return to a country in conflict. But as a result, I was able to spend valuable time with my mother for over two years, before she passed away, and this was the best decision I made in my life.

Look At The Nature Of The Sri Lankan People, We Are A Fairly Resilient Group Of People... I Am Passionate About The Ability Of Sri Lankans To Get Together To Rebuild The Nation.

When we look at the 2011 Budget, many pro private sector revisions and tax reforms. How has that affected the Group?

Certainly, the budget was business friendly and provided an excellent platform for increased private sector participation in economic growth. The Mackwoods Group, with diverse business interests in many of the thrust areas of the national economy, will certainly leverage on the opportunities and incentives that have been announced in the budget. The budget was significantly development oriented, and addressed several structural reforms that will help the private sector. The conducive macroeconomic environment and the proposals for tax reform and foreign exchange liberalisation included in the budget will contribute to increased domestic and foreign investment, a sine qua non for Sri Lanka to both sustain its high growth rate and achieve growth with equity.

Would you agree that the private sector has been somewhat slow in gaining pace after the end of the conflict?

The private sector is now developing the confidence to invest. Particularly over the last year, we can see the development of a macroeconomic environment conducive to investment. If you look at the state of the economy today, we have a GDP Growth rate of over 8%, single digit inflation, single digit interest rates, an appreciating rupee, a narrowing of the fiscal deficit, and increased foreign reserves. These together with a fairly robust legal and regulatory framework will give us many opportunities for economic development in the future, particularly in the private sector.

In addition to the improvement in our country ratings, recent Sovereign Bond issues have been several times oversubscribed, and these are both independent indices of confidence in the improving domestic macroeconomic environment.

It has only been two years since the war ended. Are Sri Lankans and the world in general expecting too much? What are your thoughts?

Look at the nature of the Sri Lankan people, we are a fairly resilient group of people, especially in the face of adversity. A perfect example of this is the rapidity with which we recovered from the devastating tsunami within a few years. This resilience is one of our greatest assets, the resilience of the Sri Lankan people of all races and religions. Given sufficient time and space we will develop this again in a few years, with the commitment and the resolve of each and every one of us to build a truly pluralistic and inclusive society. I believe that we will do this and prove that we are capable of living in peace and making that peace a durable one.

Final thoughts?

I realise fully that the role I am due to take on as Sri Lanka's High Commissioner to Britain will be quite a challenging one, and my hope is that I am able to make even a small contribution towards Sri Lanka and our people. Our ultimate aim is to rebuild the nation. I am passionate about the ability of Sri Lankans to get together to rebuild the nation. What we all have to do is to develop that degree of flexibility; the degree of understanding between each other. We need to be able to give much more, and this comes with mutual respect and understanding of the diversity of each and every one of us; and in turn, we provide each other with dignity. If we have that in our minds continuously, and if we develop a far greater understanding of each other, we will be able to live in peace and harmony.



