

Dullas Alahapperuma Outlines The Track Record



Politicians don't retire. They are made to retire, if at all. Dullas Alahapperuma was different. He 'retired hurt'. The political arena, however, has a way of un-retiring the voluntarily retired. He came back with a shout, this unassuming man did. In a political milieu where the only endowments that seem to count are wealth and connections, Dullas had what many would think is the poorer gift, the power of the word. This is a rare asset and one which was recognised and employed to good effect by Mahinda Rajapaksa. Today, as the minister in charge of a subject whose defining words are 'inefficiency', 'corruption,' and 'patronage', namely transportation, Dullas needs more than words to deliver what has always been thought to be undeliverable. He has a plan. He had a story to tell. We listened.

By Malinda Seneviratne

Let us begin at the beginning. Outline for us briefly your journey from the moment you switched from journalist to politician.

I was working as the News Editor of the 'Lakdiva' newspaper when the Southern Provincial Council was dissolved in May 1993. Mangala Samaraweera invited me to contest on the Sri Lanka Freedom Party ticket. He was the one who brought me into electoral politics, and although we have our differences, I am deeply indebted to him for this move. I secured the highest number of preferential votes. The Provincial Council was dissolved over the Franciscu incident the following year. I was re-elected in March 1994 and was appointed the Minister of Transport and also as the SLFP organizer for Kamburupitiya. The SLFP got 65.5% of the vote in Kamburupitiya at the August 1994 general election. This was the highest percentage secured by the party in any electorate, even better than the traditional stronghold of Attanagalla. As for me, I topped the list from the Matara District. It is pertinent to record that the SLFP had been out of power for 17 years. There were very few with ministerial experience; in fact, I was one of just 13 persons who had held such a post among those in our parliamentary group.

The record showed that you were not made a minister or even a deputy minister. In fact, one might argue that you were deliberately sidelined. Was there disillusionment as a consequence?

Yes, I was not made a minister. On the other hand, neither did I solicit for a ministry. Also, not being a minister or a deputy minister does not stop you from playing a useful and productive role as a people's representative. I joined with others to offer constructive criticism about policy issues. You might remember that we were called the Mulberry Group.

You are correct, however, about being disillusioned. The political culture and the absence of any coherent action that delivered something to the people disillusioned me. Our efforts with the 'Mulberry Group' notwithstanding, I was contemplating quitting politics altogether towards 1998-99.

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And yet you contested the general election in 2000. That would be contradicting this sentiment, wouldn't it?

If you remember that time, you might recall that I ran a unique campaign during that election. I wanted to explore the limits of what decent political practice could produce. My campaign obeyed the Election Law to the letter. There wasn't a single poster carrying my name, picture or number. There was no polythene either. The total cost of that campaign was Rs 64,000. I didn't treat potential voters even to a cup of plain tea.

It is an interesting fact that the wall outside my house carried everyone's picture but mine!

There were no leaflets, no advertisements. In fact, one candidate had distributed a leaflet under my name but with his preferential number! I distinctly remember a TV debate with the present Speaker, W J M Lokubandara where we were both asked to make final, wrap-up statements. Mr Lokubandara, in his inimical style, made sure that everyone knew what his preferential number was. The moderator then told me to reveal my number as well, in the interest of fairness. I refused.

I was able to convince all contending parties to come to a single stage and address prospective voters. This was a big achievement and a stark contrast to the bickering, mud-slinging and even violent culture that dominated the political scene. Without any campaign as such, without posters, leaflets or advertisements, the

people still returned me to Parliament, this time in the 4th place. I think I proved something important in this exercise.

Today, there is a strong anti-polythene ethic in our political culture and the leadership of all political parties subscribe to it. I've been involved in many election campaigns: two provincial council elections, two local government elections, two general elections and two presidential elections; and there has not been a single complaint about any untoward incident in Kamburupitiya. This is a significant achievement and I believe that the way I engaged politically has a lot to do with it.

And yet you chose not to contest in 2001. At the time you said that you were 'too white' for politics. Your argument was that politicians were essentially 'brown' or 'discoloured' and a 'white person' naturally shows them up. One can argue that politicians are no less brown in 2005 compared to 2001. So, what prompted this turn-around on your part?

To answer this, I have to go back to the 1994-2001 period. My conscience told me that the entire period was nothing but a monumental lie. There were grand plans to bridge the ethnic divide and heal a fractured people like the Sudu Nelum Movement, the project to restore the Jaffna Library to its former glory etc., but the little things were neglected. The kovil for God Katharagama in Matara was destroyed in 1983. It was rebuilt only last year. The Vel Festival was not held until this year.

There were issues within the SLFP as well. There was absolutely no room for dissent. No elections. There was no space or a process for younger people to grow, to develop and emerge as leaders. There was no democracy in the party. There was no room in the party for anyone except those who were willing to say 'yes' to the leader. There was no system for people to come up in the ranks. Naturally, the UNP made overtures and some people crossed over. That was how Ranil Wickremesinghe came to power.

There were other serious issues that troubled me. There was no development taking place. There was so much talk about conflict resolution but there was no movement in this regard. We couldn't construct a single tank. The first six years of President Kumaratunga's tenure was marked by inefficiency. After that it was all a lie. I freely acknowledge that I have to share part of the blame. I am pointing a finger at myself

as well, I admit.

We did our best as a group. We boycotted the votes of four ministries and we pressurised several heads of state corporations to resign. It was an honest and determined effort on our part but one which invited a lot of anger and malice. It was, all things considered, a regrettable time and I have more sadness than anger about all that.

I felt that the country was going backwards. Simultaneously there stirred in my heart and mind a different kind of rebellion. I had neglected my family. I had entered Law College, but hadn't been able to complete. I also wanted to learn Tamil. All this contributed to my decision to 'retire'. I didn't want to be used as a shield. I didn't want to put my signature to a corrupt, indecent act.

I Must Say That If It Is A Miracle That Trains Still Run And People Do Get From One Place To Another, It Is Because Of The Dedication Of The Workers, Whatever Their Faults May Be.

I left the island in January 2003, to study Political Science at the University of Iowa. I was there for a year and a half. Then came the 2005 Presidential Election; Mahinda Rajapaksa, who was the candidate of the United People's Liberation Front, called me. He wanted me to return to Sri Lanka and help him in his Presidential bid.

You must keep in mind that Mahinda Rajapaksa has always been a friend and in many ways a comrade-in-arms. When efforts were under way to do away with the Paddy Marketing Board, we opposed it together. Moreover, he, along with S B Dissanayake, had always fought on my behalf. That is how I was given a deputy minister post.

Mahinda Rajapaksa knew what my objections were. He knew I was disillusioned. He knew why I was disillusioned and why I decided not to contest in 2001. He knew I didn't want to be someone who makes up the numbers. So when he told me that I could actually work, that I could put to use my skills and energies, I could not dismiss it out of hand. I returned. I helped him in the campaign. I believe we ran a

good, positive and creative campaign which helped make him president.

I helped change the tone of the campaign. We took up the theme, 'Aluth Sri Lankavak' or 'A New Sri Lanka'. We were determined not to engage in mudslinging. I advised Mahinda Rajapaksa that his campaign should reflect his character. He is a man who doesn't engage in vilification of opponents; he doesn't make enemies and doesn't create unnecessary antagonisms. We destroyed some 40,000 posters that had a negative tone and came up with the line, 'madin nethuva godin enna' which deliberately moved away from the political culture of mudslinging.

It was a campaign that did not have the support of the party. In fact, important individuals in the party did everything possible to derail the campaign.

Later, I was asked to change my role from advisor to first member of parliament and then minister. I accepted because I knew this leadership was different; there was a political will to get things done and to make a significant change in the country.

You were not exactly 'rewarded' when the President made you Transport Minister, were you?

True. It is not a ministry that people want to take up. It is almost like a punishment transfer. No one wants this job. The President himself told me that this would be a hard job, that it would challenge me and that it might even destroy me. That was an observation that came not from a man wanting to punish me, but from someone who trusted me and had confidence in my ability to deliver.

Let's talk about 'transport'. What was the situation when you took over?

As I said, this is not the easiest ministry to handle even though it is one of the most important ones. Our transport system is one that harasses everyone. If you take the train service, all commuters are prisoners. They travel in discomfort due to inadequate numbers of buses and trains, are frustrated by traffic congestion, and once they arrive in office, require a couple of hours to recover composure and peace of mind necessary to do any useful work. Wimal Weerawansa got it right when he said that 'Sudu Mahattaya gets into the train in Matara, but when he reaches Colombo, he is Kalu Mahattaya'! Delays, lack of cleanliness and congestion all contribute towards a massive and negative impact on overall productivity.

There was rampant corruption. Let me give one example. Ten locomotive engines had been purchased from France at a cost of Rs 180 mn each. That would be equivalent to Rs 420 mn each today. That was a decision taken by the then president and not the minister, not the general manager of CGR and not on recommendations made by any competent authority on relevant technical fields. This is the kind of thing that as back benchers, we had seen and raised objections to. Even today, seven of these engines cannot be used!

The reason for all this is not hard to find. There had been no scientific study of issues that plagued the public transport system. There was no innovation, no professionalism. There was no vision.

Today, department heads and officials are the main decision makers. Political leaders cannot interfere. I was given only the framework, 'Mahinda Chinthana', and I was asked to deliver. So I studied the subject. I consulted the experts and the officials. Together we identified four issues: politicisation, lack of professionalism, corruption and a manifest lack of motivation to modernise the sector.

Let us start with the railways. What are the key problems and what measures have been taken so far to correct the flaws and move ahead?

This was a job-giving ministry. Patronage was the name of the game. Since 1979, all promotions in the CTB depended on whether or not a given individual was a member of the UNP trade union, the Jathika Sevaka Sangamaya (JSS). It was only for the 'greens'. And between 1994 and 2001, it was only for the 'blues', members of the SLFP trade union. Integrity, commitment and skills were irrelevant. This was the system that was in place for 28 years. This was the subculture that dominated the transport sector.

There was no professionalism to speak of. For example, the CGR has a running fleet of between 49-55 engines on an average day. There are 22 types of engines! In other words, you will find just one or two engines from a particular make. Where is the synergy here? Where is the 'streamlining'? The reason is clear. Politicians and not professionals made decisions and I am sure a lot of people made a lot of money through commissions!

This situation required immediate attention. So I put in place capable and qualified officials. Dr Lalith Gunaruwan was appointed as general manager, Railways; Dr Amal Kumarage as chairman, National Transport Commission, Dr Wijayamuni, and Dr Jayasiriwardena, one of only four PhD holders in this field, was brought into the

board of the SLTB. I brought in young professionals such as the CEO, SLTB, Dhammika Hewapathirana, who is a state counsel.

I found that no graduate had been hired by the SLTB since 1975. Remember, this is an institution that had Anil Munasinghe as chairman and Lal Jayawardena as director, Finance. We hired the first batch of graduates recently; 113 were sent to 106 depots as depot supervisors. These management trainees, I am sure, will make a huge difference in this sector.

Then there is the issue of corruption. This is a phenomenon that pervades the railways. We own 13,000 acres of land and this is more than what the Land Ministry owns! 2,300 acres, I found, have been given to various friends and family of relevant authorities. Some had been leased at the ridiculous rate of Rs 60 per month. We have now formulated a land policy and we intend to recover!

A foot of rail costs Rs 670, but it can be sold at Rs 15. This is a privilege enjoyed by the minister. I don't have to elaborate how this privilege can be employed to earn massive profits and to the detriment of the Treasury. I went to Cabinet and got rid of this privilege. Now this can only be done through a public auction. Accordingly, we got an offer of Rs 98 mn for small pieces of discarded/unused rail.

The railways in Sri Lanka are archaic. Recently, speaking at the Ananda College Prize Giving, I observed that if my grandfather were to be reborn today, he will recognise only two things: the appearance of a school classroom and public transport. I found a manifest absence of the need to change, need to improve, improvise and modernise. To give you an idea of how archaic the sector is, just consider the fact that the railway signal system is the same as was used 100 years ago.

The system is ancient and the officials are untrained. So we will be sending 400 to India for training in electrification, ticketing, e-booking, computerisation, IT systems etc. Again, in terms of human resources, the problem is that we are overstaffed and few are trained or skilled. CTB has 6,700 excess staff. Bus conductors have been promoted as depot managers. Their qualification? Having put up posters for this minister. Political patronage is what appears to have counted in these promotions.

We had at the beginning of the last century 1,600 kilometres of track; but today just 1,200. In 1975, we had 5,200 buses, but by 2004, this number had dropped to 2,400.

We have addressed all these issues in the past 19 months, that is, since I took over the ministry. I have not hired a single worker although this is a ministry that has a reputation and a culture for doing nothing to solve problems and doing whatever is possible to give jobs.

I must say that if it is a miracle that trains still run and people do get from one place to another, it is because of the dedication of the workers, whatever their faults may be. Today the unions cooperate with us. You might be surprised to know that there are 124 trade unions in the railways. To put things in perspective, we have only 55 engines. That would make 2.5 trade unions per engine. The majority of the unions are very supportive. They are extremely critical and this is a good thing. This is what we need.

I firmly believe that the leadership has to show the way forward in a situation where wastage and corruption are veritable subcultures. We are a 24-hour ministry that is extremely poor. For this reason, I have eschewed ministerial privileges. We have also obtained cabinet approval to work with the private sector and will accordingly build a carriage building plant and container depots.

President Mahinda Rajapaksa Delivers For The Ordinary People And Not Necessarily Only For The Elite, As Has Been The Common Practice For The Most Part Of Our Post-Independence History.

The transport ministry has to worry about other things besides railways. What is the situation in terms of overall transportation issues, congestion in urban areas, accessibility etc?

Yes. Over 800,000 people on average come into the City of Colombo on working days. They have to use three railroads and 12 roads to get into the city. Around 10% use trains, 20-25% use cars and other personal vehicles while 65% use approximately 15,000 buses to travel to and from the capital. Of the road capacity, the share of buses is around 20% and there is a serious mismatch when we consider the fact that 65% of the commuters use this mode of transport.

There is, then, a serious problem and a problem that will get worse unless solutions are found. We will soon implement a 'park and ride' concept. There are six key entry points into the city and the plan is to provide large parking areas for private vehicles such as cars and jeeps and to provide a super luxury shuttle service to various key points.

The bottom line is to understand the commuter's point of view. For the commuter, time is important. Safety is important. Comfort is important. Efficiency is important. The Transport Ministry is not about buses and trains only. For example three-wheelers transport 4% of all passengers. They are also important. The roads, the railways, the buses, trains and other vehicles are not only part of the problem, they are part of the solution as well as long as efficient systems are put in place, reviewed periodically and necessary adjustments made. Transport, moreover, is not a problem that is limited to Colombo or the main urban areas. Transport is about providing access, of allowing people and goods to move from one place to another with minimum hassle.

In this regard, we will be extending the Southern line from Matara to Katharagama. Work on the 27-km section from Matara to Beliatta will begin in September. The main obstacle, the bridge over the Nilwala, has already been completed. We have also obtained a line of credit from India, to relay the track between Colombo and Matara to make it suitable for high speed trains. This work will commence in January 2009 and will be completed in a year.

To put the nature of the problem in perspective, consider the fact that while we have railway tracks aggregating to 1,200 kilometres, we also have 900 railway crossings! This is a huge obstacle to 'doing' high-speed! Another important thing to remember is that one-fourth of this track, i.e. approximately 300 kilometres allows a maximum speed of just 10 kilometres per hour. We have to keep in mind that we need to switch from wood sleepers to steel ones, the former needing to be replaced every 10-12 years and the latter every 40.

There are hard decisions to make and make them we will. The Kelani Valley line brings in 6,000 commuters to the city every day, but this can easily be raised to 70,000-80,000. If this is done the congestion on the road will immediately become

less. The perennial problem that has hampered the development of this line has been that of squatters on the railway reservation. In some places the gap between the train and the roof of some of these houses is less than a foot. There is on average one death per month on this line. We have to enforce regulations pertaining to squatting on railway reservation. That would be a very unpopular move and politically very damaging as well, but it has to be done and I will do it.

On the larger political picture...are you saying that everything is healthy, wealthy, and nice?

Of course not! The President received a mandate and this mandate was reaffirmed in the various elections held since November 2005. This does not mean that the people have given the Government blanket approval. There are issues that need to be addressed. There are economic issues, some generated by global processes and some not. We still have to work out a methodology to resolve the outstanding grievances of Tamil people.

There is a problem of governance also. People talk about the 'Jumbo Cabinet' and here we have to understand that J R Jayawardena's constitution is largely to blame. There are practicalities that necessitate a cabinet of this size. Everyone knows the realities of the numbers game in parliament. Even the UNP knows that the electoral system makes it close to impossible for a single party to obtain enough seats to secure a parliamentary majority and consequently political stability. Governments are necessarily coalitions. The political leadership cannot afford to ignore this reality.

I readily admit that the worst type of character in our society is the politician. This is not, however, an inevitability. Neither is it uncorrectable. Our Leader has started a process of democratisation within the SLFP which includes the setting up of procedures to ensure that young people get the opportunity to come forward, make a mark and take up leadership positions. At the last local government elections, 67% of SLFP candidates who were elected happened to be under 40 years of age.

Politics remains a dirty game, all things considered. Any regrets about coming back to be among the 'brown coloured' lot?

To be honest, I did not return because I had any faith in the SLFP. No, I came back because I believed that Mahinda Rajapaksa had a plan, had vision and integrity. My faith in him has not diminished. He remains a self-made man, a man who is in touch

with the earth and the people. There may be flaws, but he remains committed to a social transformation powered by the understanding that 80% of our people are rural in residence and/or in outlook and has not given reason for any of them to revise the thought that he is 'one of us'.

The example of the Eastern Province is indeed noteworthy. The people of that area have become owners of the political process. The development that is taking place in the East should be a revelation to everyone.

The President is a practical man. He knows what has to be done and will go ahead and do it, instead of engaging in endless, and in the end meaningless, ideological debate. He delivers for the ordinary people and not necessarily only for the elite, as has been the common practice for the most part of our post-independence history.