

Gentleman In Politics

Posted on



A man who has successfully represented his electorate of Ampara for 35 years, Minister P Dayaratne has won every single election since 1977. He has witnessed the ever-changing political landscape of the country and has remained a gentleman in politics. A rarity. Having been part of the Gal Oya Irrigation Scheme and Mahaweli Development Project, Minister P Dayaratne holds tremendous experience. He has worked under all five Presidents of this country and he is currently the Senior Minister for Food Security in the UPFA Government. An entire book may not be enough to tell his story...

By Udeshi Amarasinghe | Photograph Mahesh Bandara and Indika De Silva

You have been a Member of Parliament since 1977 representing the Ampara district, what can you tell us about your journey over the 35 years?

It has been very interesting. Throughout these 35 years I have never had any regrets or second thoughts as to why I entered politics. I have always enjoyed being in politics. At times I feel it was foolish of me to have resigned from my post in the Ceylon Electricity Board, but I moved on and I really enjoyed working in the ministries that I was assigned to. I have been in charge of many ministries during this 35 year period.

The ministerial portfolios that I have held have mainly been on technical subject areas. My first appointment was as the Minister of Power and Energy, which was during President J R Jayewardene's time, then Land, Irrigation and Mahaweli Development, which were all technical subjects. I was also the Minister of Social Welfare, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction for a period of three years. I enjoyed my appointment as the Minister of Health even though I was not a medical practitioner. Many of our leaders have felt that it is best not to appoint a person as a Minister who has specialised in that particular subject. But, it was different with me. I was in charge of the Ministry of Power and Energy and I was very happy. I was the Deputy Minister from 1981 to 1987 and then I was appointed as the Cabinet Minister of Power and Energy.

I must say that we did not have any problems at the Ceylon Electricity Board at that time. There were no strikes, no power shortages and we were not bankrupt nor were we in debt. At the time I left we were making profits.

In 1989 when President R Premadasa came into power, I was assigned the Ministry of Land, Irrigation and Mahaweli Development. I was quite surprised because usually we find out our appointments only at the time we read our pledge in the presence of the President. I have never canvassed for positions in my life, whatever positions that I received have been those that were deemed suitable by the respective Presidents.

I enjoyed working at the Ministry of Land, Irrigation and Mahaweli Development as I was in charge of an area that had the single largest irrigation scheme in Sri Lanka. It had one reservoir and one downstream area and it was the largest reservoir in Sri Lanka. There will not be any larger reservoir in the country in the future. The work in the Ministry was quite interesting, because it had under its purview, Irrigation, Lands, Forestry, Wildlife and several other institutions.

At the time of taking over the Ministry from the late Hon Gamini Dissanayake in 1989 there was still quite a large amount of work to be completed. We developed the proposal for the Samanala Wewa project while I was the Minister of Power and Energy though it was changed later on, after I became the Minister of Land, Irrigation and Mahaweli Development. The main work was done by the Mahaweli project. Even during the time when I was the Minister of Power and Energy, Mahaweli was doing most of the hydro power stations. Hon Gamini Dissanayake who was a very close friend, built the power stations and handed it over to my Ministry.

From 1994 to 2001 the UNP was in the Opposition. We were in the Opposition for the first time since 1977. It was a good experience to be in the Opposition because we were able to see how the governing party worked.

Ampara Is The Largest With The Highest Population, Which Covered The Gal Oya Project Area And Also The Undeveloped Areas Of The District, Including Maha Oya And Padiyatalawa. Working In Those Areas Was Equally Challenging.

Previously, there were five MPs for the entire district of Ampara. We had the first past the post system, which was there till 1989. We had three other electorates in the district viz Kalmunai, Pottuvil and Sammanthurai. Ampara is the largest with the highest population, which covered the Gal Oya project area and also the undeveloped areas of the district, including Maha Oya and Padiyatalawa. Working in those areas was equally challenging.

Gal Oya is the most successful irrigation system in the country. A civil engineer looking at a geological map can always say where a tank can be built. Kennedy the Englishman who was in charge saw the importance of this project, where there would be a shorter dam with a big reservoir with a large river flowing through, and a large downstream area, where the water can be fed by gravity. Normally you do not pump water, it has to flow right down to the sea level. He saw this and as such the irrigation system was planned with all the necessary studies and surveys done. By 1946 all the necessary data was available to design the dam and the entire irrigation system.

Hon D S Senanayake, had been the Minister of Agriculture for a very long time. It was his dream to build this irrigation system. He started working on this in 1946. He sent our team to the USA led by Dr Kahawita to Colorado, USA to study that particular project, as well as the design of the dam, power stations and the downstream area. The project was completed and people were to be settled in the area from 1952. Around 15,000 families from all over the country were settled and every district has representation in Ampara.

There were those who said that the project was unsuccessful such as the likes of Leftist MPs, Dr S A Wickramasinghe and Dr N M Perera. But we would have made more than ten times the cost of the project. The total cost of the whole project was 800 million rupees. Today you cannot do a project like that for 80,000 million rupees.

After I became the MP in 1977, the majority of people came to me with issues relating to water shortages for agriculture. This took a lot of my time because the problems were never ending and we had to look at this in a macro way. Hon Gamini Dissanayake appointed a committee to probe into this matter. There were many

things to be done. Consequently, rehabilitation work of the Gal Oya scheme was started where adjustments were made to the structures such as anicuts and new channels were added. And only then did the Gal Oya Scheme become the most successful project.

If we take the last 'Yala' season, Anuradhapura, Kurunegala and Polonnaruwa had problems with water but Ampara had sufficient water for irrigation. For the first time as a pilot project we introduced water management practices in this large irrigation scheme. We formed farmers associations for the first in the Gal Oya region. Then from the distribution channel downwards it was handed over to the farmers. They are controlling the supply of water and they are very strict. They issue the water only during a particular time and the farmers have to do their work during that period. By doing so, the wastage of water has been minimised. The project was a success. Earlier the farmers did not realise the value of water. The maintenance related to the entire channel system have to be kept up to a suitable standard in order to deliver water efficiently.

The principal of water management has been introduced to Kaudulla, Kantale, Minneriya and all the major schemes in the country. We have major schemes as well as minor irrigation schemes in the country. The major ones come under the Irrigation Department and the minor schemes come under the Agrarian Services Department.

How did you enter politics?

I actually entered politics by accident, I never expected to be a politician. I completed my degree in UK at the University of Brighton. I was in the UK from 1961 to 1965 and upon returning to Sri Lanka I took up a job at the Gal Oya Development Board. Fortunately, one of my friends at Brighton was the son of the Chairman of the Gal Oya Development Board, who in fact had been the first civilian to become the Inspector General of Police. Upon retirement he was appointed as the Chairman of the Gal Oya Development Board. Canada provided the technical assistance to the setting up of power stations in the Gal Oya project. As they had completed the power station as well as the distribution network they were to leave the country. Therefore fortunately for me there were a few vacancies available.

Once I returned to Sri Lanka within a period of one week, I reported to work. At that time there was no direct bus service to Ampara, you had to first go by train to Batticaloa and from there by bus to Ampara. However, there were regular flights to Ampara. Even today you don't get a regular flight from Ratmalana to Ampara, but then, Air Ceylon had a Dakota flying every other day with a frequency of four days a week. The flight was in the morning and it would return the same day flying via Batticaloa, Trincomalee, Jaffna and back to Ratmalana.

The Gal Oya Project Took Example From The Massive Multi-Purpose Scheme - The Tennessee Valley Project In The USA.

My first trip to Ampara was by an airplane. I was received well. The Gal Oya Development Board, actually administered the entire area and there were no Government institutions except for the courts of law. Irrigation works, roads, telecommunication, electricity and every other infrastructural need was provided by the Gal Oya Development Board. The Board had a General Manager who functioned almost as a Government Agent. He had all the powers of a GA including the allocation of land. As such, it was very easy for them to work. That is how many of the massive multi-purpose development schemes were implemented. The Gal Oya Project took example from the massive multi-purpose scheme - the Tennessee Valley project in the USA. The Gal Oya dam too was constructed by a US company, where civil engineers constructed the dam and the main channel. The project was completed in a very short time.

The Tennessee Valley Project was the largest multi purpose project in the US. They had everything; irrigation, power and developed area for agriculture. I visited this project because we were doing a similar scheme on a minor scale in our country. I was appointed as an assistant electrical engineer, and the power station was completed soon after. If you compare it with present day structures that power station was quite small. I became the chief engineer within a year or so with very little experience to look after the generation, transmission and distribution of power to the whole area. Step by step these activities - starting with irrigation - were handed over to the relevant ministries and departments.

The distribution of electricity was assigned to the Department of Government Electrical Undertakings (DGEU). Within an year the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB)

Act was passed in Parliament and all activities with regard to generation, distribution and transmission for the entire Island including the Gal Oya project area was brought under the control of CEB. I was absorbed into the CEB, because I had the necessary qualifications. I was an engineer in the Ceylon Electricity Board until 1970.

During the 1970 General Election, Hon Dudley Senanayake was the Prime Minister. During his tenure they wanted to have an election again. They were calling for nominations and one of my friends asked me, "why don't you contest?" By that time I was generally moving about with people and I had a good relationship with the main temple in Ampara. I became the President of the Buddhist Society in Ampara. We started building the stupa in the town at that time, therefore I was quite active in religious matters in the district. At that time the MP for Ampara was Mr Senerath Somaratne. He too was a friend. There were four people vying for the nomination including a lawyer working in the Ampara courts. So when a UNP supporter asked me to contest for the UNP, I said that would be the last thing that I would do, but I ended up contesting!

My father was from Piliyandala in the Kesbewa electorate and he was a leading UNP supporter at that time. Nowadays you see supporters going for meetings and making speeches. He was not like that, he was a silent but a strong supporter of UNP. Every candidate and politician used to come to my house. They would come and have discussions with my father. Anyhow, when I was asked to contest, I was not very keen. I was 34 years of age at that time.

Then, Hon Dudley Senanayake visited Batticaloa to select candidates for the election. I was told by a local UNP member that the Prime Minister would like to see me. Well, I could not say no, so I went with them. When I met Hon Senenayake, he asked me to contest for the Ampara electorate, it was a very big surprise for me. Then I said, 'sir I'm not sure whether I can do it and at the same time I'm still unmarried and I have to ask my parents.' I had to say something as I could not just refuse him. He asked me to go to Colombo and obtain permission from my parents and also to go to Sirikotha to become a member of the UNP. I had to say 'yes' and the very next day I came to Colombo. My father was completely against it.

I had to leave my position at the CEB and when I handed in my resignation to the Chairman, he said I was a fool to leave a permanent job to go into politics. But I said that I had given my word to the Hon Prime Minister. The Chairman accepted my resignation and wished me luck.

It was my first time on a political platform and May Day was my very first meeting. I had never spoken on a public platform for politics before I contested in the July 1970 election and I lost. Only 17 members including Dudley Senanayake and J R Jayewardena were elected from the UNP to Parliament. I had lost the election and I had also lost my job. I came to Colombo, and while I was seeking new employment, I wrote a letter to my opponent in the Ampara district, Mr Senerath Somaratne who was the Deputy Minister of Land, Irrigation and Power and also to the Minister asking for my job back as they were in charge of the CEB as well. The Deputy Minister said it was a policy matter and that he cannot make a decision, that was the end of it. The Minister too did not reply.

During that time we used to meet Hon Dudley Senanayake at least twice a week as he too was quite free after the election defeat. He helped me to find a job in the private sector. I was fortunate to get employment at Walkers as they were one of the leading engineering companies in the country. The salary too was good. I was sent to India for a training. I worked in almost all the branches in the company. They were engaged in air conditioning, electricity, estate engineering and importation of vehicles. Walkers used to import Austin cars to Sri Lanka. There was a lot of activity. However, companies such as Walkers were gradually destroyed by successive government policies.

Ampara was a difficult district to handle as its distance from Colombo was quite large. Ampara, is more than 300km from Colombo and at that time the roads were so bad and travelling was not that easy. While I was working at Walkers, the young people in Ampara approached me and asked me to come and organise the electorate. This was a difficult thing to do as I had a permanent job in the private sector and to organise an electorate, which is one of the largest in the country was no simple task.

There Was No Telephone System Like Today. Hence Postal Services Were Used To Organise Meetings And Give Notice In Advance. Even Though

Communication Was Difficult We Were Able To Get Everything Done And Organise Well.

I travelled to Ampara by train and bus till 1973. I used to travel there during weekends. Once I was transferred to a branch in Kandy, it became easier for me to operate from there. I had a company vehicle so I used to travel to Ampara during the weekends and visit different villages. There was no telephone system like today. Hence postal services were used to organise meetings and give notice in advance. Even though communication was difficult we were able to get everything done and organise well.

We organised party branches in almost every village. It was hard work. Before the General Election of 1977 my supporters took a count of the people who would support us. What they did was they took the voters lists and marked the three parties in different colours, UNP – green, SLFP – blue and MEP – red, as those were the important parties.

By about May 1977 my supporters had collected the data and they informed me that I was going to win the election by 8,000 votes. At the General Election that followed I really won by 8,400 votes. We were well organised, there was no exaggeration on the data. They just found out accurately who was going to vote for us. During the 1970 election I lost by about 4,000 votes, but in the next election I won by 8,400 votes. That is a big change. That shows the existence of a large floating vote in that electorate. The Government was extremely unpopular and that was why they secured only eight seats from the entire country at the 1977 General Election. I became a MP and Hon J R Jayewardene was the Prime Minister, until he became the President in 1978. When he was the Prime Minister, he introduced the District Minister system. I was made the District Minister for Ampara.

As District Minister, I Worked In All The Electorates. The First Major Experience I Had Was The Cyclone That Hit The Eastern Province, Which Included Ampara, Batticaloa And Trincomalee Districts.

After entering the Parliament...

I was made the Chairman of the District Coordinating Committee and I used to chair the meetings. The district had four different electorates and a meeting was held once every two month. I learnt a lot from these meetings about the needs of the district.

As District Minister, I worked in all the electorates. The first major experience I had was the cyclone that hit the Eastern Province, which included Ampara, Batticaloa and Trincomalee districts. Worst damage was to Ampara and Batticaloa. It was like a tsunami at that time. Sri Lanka had not experienced anything like that before. Everything was destroyed. At that time J R Jayewardene was the President. He and almost all the ministers visited the affected areas. Rehabilitation work was carried out. The GA was very active, he worked very hard to rebuild the district.

In 1981 there was a small cabinet reshuffle that included, Power and Energy, Telecommunications and few other ministries, which many did not know in advance. When I was speaking to Hon Gamini Dissanayake one day, he asked me as an electrical engineer whether I would be interested in being the Deputy Minister of Power and Energy. I said of course, but that I had to continue as the District Minister as well. Within a week I was made the Deputy Minister of Power and Energy and I continued as the District Minister concurrently. This continued for nearly six years.

At This Time Our Engineers At The CEB Were Predicting A Power Shortage In The Future, This Was Based On Statistics And Information Gathered Systematically. And, They Were Right. I Believed We Had To Do Something In Order To Prevent A Severe Power Crisis In The Future.

My Minister was President Jayewardene and as such I was virtually functioning as the Minister. He never had anything to do with Power and Energy. I did everything and he signed the cabinet papers. There would be times when the Secretary of the Ministry would consult him on very important issues. We worked in this manner till 1987.

At this time our engineers at the CEB were predicting a power shortage in the future, this was based on statistics and information gathered systematically. And, they were right. I believed we had to do something in order to prevent a severe

power crisis in the future. Though the Government started talking about this, by 1986 the Mahaweli project was nearing completion and all other power stations had been completed. Then the Samanala Wewa project came up and a feasibility study was done by Russia for the Samanala Wewa project. We had to seek assistance from various other sources to implement the project. Japan came forward to assist us. In 1987 we started work on the Samanala Wewa dam. By that time I had been appointed as the Cabinet Minister for Power and Energy.

Becoming a Cabinet Minister

This actually happened after the Parliament bomb attack where a grenade was thrown inside Parliament premises. Hon Lalith Athulathmudali was severely injured and one District Minister Abeywickrema was killed. There were two front rows and then the head table. I was seated in front. The grenade was thrown from behind. It fell on the table and rolled on to the other side where Lalith Athulathmudali was seated. When President Jayewardene went to visit Lalith in hospital he had recommended to the President to appoint me as the Cabinet Minister for Power and Energy. Once when I called him at the hospital, he told me that very soon I would be appointed as the Minister. I asked him how he knew that and he said that he suggested it to the President. Within about two weeks I was appointed as the Cabinet Minister for Power and Energy. That was in 1987.

It was during this time that the engineers predicted that there would be severe power shortages not in the immediate future but in years to come. They said that if we did not think about alternate sources of power other than hydro power we would run into trouble. But in 1987, when I looked at the statistics and being an electrical engineer myself, with the growing demand for energy we had to seek alternate sources of energy. At the rate the demand was increasing we needed more power stations. Until the Samanala Wewa power station was commissioned there were no other power projects to start work on. Upper Kotmale was abandoned, due to protests from the estates. There was no other large hydro power scheme left except Uma Oya, which was smaller. All this put together was not sufficient when you think of the demand of the future. And the engineers saw this in advance. They said by 1996 there was going to be a serious power shortage. I kept telling this to the Cabinet and in Parliament whenever I got an opportunity that we should proceed with a coal power plant.

The original proposal was to have a 300MW power station, which would be increased to 900MW later and this was to be in the Trincomalee harbour area. It was the best place that we could think of in the country, because ships could come closer to the power station and unload coal directly on to conveyer belts, which in turn would be unloading coal at the yard. We started working on it. A Swiss company did the feasibility study and we asked them to proceed with the design of the power station. Then the protests started, people who knew nothing about coal power plants and how they worked started protesting. They made baseless arguments. I had seen many coal power stations in UK, Japan and China. While the protests were going on, terrorist activities also increased in the area. At that time President Jayewardene called me and said, 'Dayaratne you go slow on this' he never asked me to stop it. He said with the escalating terrorist problems, even though we could visit the area now we might not be able to do so later and it actually happened that way.

With the 1989 election, the first-past-the-post system came to an end. The Proportional Representation system was introduced in its place. Three of us, as a team engaged in election work together. We were always seen together, we travelled and went for meetings together. And the three of us won. I was number one, the Chairman was number two and the other person was number three.

As I was already the MP of the area, I was better known in the electorate than the others. The three of us won in 1989, 1994 and in 2000. Then in 2001 we included a Muslim candidate with the two of us, however he did not win. Only two of us won and he lost by 300 votes. If he got 300 more votes, three of us would have won. But the third person in our original trio entered Parliament through the National List. In 2004, I entered Parliament and one other person also won. You will not find that kind of unity anywhere in the country today. In 2005 I joined the SLFP.

During the war the Ampara electorate was severely affected. There was a massacre of the bikkhus in Aranthalawa, and I have personally seen over 13 massacres. The boundary of the electorate runs from Lahugala to Dehiattakandiya, which is about 160km long. There were massacres in Lahugala, Deegawapiya, Aranthalawa, Kumana and Gonagala, where 52 civilians were massacred. They rarely used guns. It was always machete type of weapons. When the Aranthalawa massacre took place I was in Colombo and Prime Minister Hon Premadasa advised me to go there

immediately. I was provided with a helicopter and I went to Aranthalawa. It was around nine in the morning when I reached there and the bodies were being taken to the hospital. There were some who survived. It was one of the worst situations I had to face in my entire life. Thousands of people were gathered and they were emotional and out of control. They were shouting and abusing us, as at that time whenever there was a problem they would always blame the politician.

I Must Be Frank About It, That No One In The Cabinet Was Interested In Energy. They Did Not Think About It Seriously, Because They Probably Didn't Understand The Severity Of The Situation.

In 1989, Hon Ranasinghe Premadasa became the President of the country and he paid attention to housing more than anything else. I must be frank about it, that no one in the Cabinet was interested in energy. They did not think about it seriously, because they probably didn't understand the severity of the situation. They didn't realise that with the increase in demand for electricity, there was no way of generating enough power to meet the growing demand. They continued with the existing capacity and suddenly realised that there was a serious shortage for which nobody could find a way out other than importing emergency generating plants.

That is the fastest way to generate electricity to meet the demand. These plants will work day and night but are very expensive. These are all right for emergency purposes, but not for base power supply.

I kept telling them because before 1989 I was the Minister of Power and Energy. After 1989, although I was in the Cabinet someone else was in charge of power and energy. But I personally used to tell him to start work on the coal power plant. But they never took it seriously. Had the Government started work on a coal power plant in 1989 we would have had the first coal power plant in operation by 1996 to meet the shortfall at that time.

Then by another three years time another 300MW would have come up. Then we would have met all the power requirements in the country. When the proposal to develop the Norochcholai power plant came up I was in the Opposition but I kept on talking about the pending electricity shortage. Then in 2001 the United National

Party formed the government. We started talking about it again but there were a lot of protests from within.

The Bishop of Chilaw, was strongly against it. Hon Karu Jayasuriya as the Minister of Power and Energy was very keen to see the project move forward. But the media canvassed against it. I don't know how people come to the conclusion that coal power is not suitable for us, but then what is the alternative? The whole world is going for green energy, but it is a slow process. You can't achieve that quickly and it requires large amounts of money and it is not timely for a developing country such as ours to venture into green energy. US can go for a 100MW wind farm. There are places where they have 300 to 400MW wind farms, which costs them millions in dollars. Once fitted, the energy generated by these farms of course will be very cheap. But the initial cost is very high. We already have 30-40 MW of wind power in this country.

Today We Have A 24-Hour Supply Of Electricity. That Is Actually A Luxury. I'm Prepared To Undergo Even A Power Cut For Two Hours A Day. By Doing So If There Is An Adverse Effect On The Economy Then We Have To Curtail Where There Is A Wastage Of Electricity.

There were many people; politicians, civilians and clergy opposing coal without knowing what it is all about. Coal power stations at the beginning were not that clean. But now there are clean coal power stations. Japan has achieved this where they have 99 percent clean coal power stations. I have seen them. Then in China too they have clean coal power stations today, where the various by-products and residues are collected and made use of through different processes. Therefore it is not harmful today to have coal fired stations in any place.

Today we have a 24-hour supply of electricity. That is actually a luxury. I'm prepared to undergo even a power cut for two hours a day. By doing so if there is an adverse effect on the economy then we have to curtail where there is a wastage of electricity. Some places are illuminated throughout the night, these should be stopped. Then, street lamps are on throughout the night, which are only in the city. The majority of Sri Lankans still live in rural areas, how many villages have street lamps?

When I was assigned the Ministry of Rehabilitation, Reconstruction and Social Welfare, we would go by helicopter with the Army. Then, during the ceasefire we were able to visit all the places in Jaffna and we started our work. We did quite a number of interesting projects, which included bringing the displaced people back from South India.

When I was appointed as the Minister of Health, the Ministry prepared a master plan to develop Jaffna, Killinochchi, Batticaloa and Trincomalee hospitals. We supplied a large number of equipment for these hospitals.

While holding the portfolio of health I was able to build the best state run hospital in Ampara. I give credit to the man who gave leadership to maintain very high standards at this hospital. Dr Lanka Jayasinghe was the man who provided this leadership. Dr Lanka Jayasinghe has been there since 2001 and he continues to serve as the head of the institution to date.

After President Mahinda Rajapaksa Took Over, He Realised That The LTTE Could Only Be Defeated Militarily And Once That Was Done The War Would Be Over. He Was Successful.

Joining the SLFP

In 2004 I won the election and retained my seat in Parliament. This was a period of change. I did not agree with Prime Minister Hon Ranil Wickremesinghe's way of settling the war.

After President Mahinda Rajapaksa took over, he realised that the LTTE could only be defeated militarily and once that was done the war would be over. He was successful.

Now that the two provinces are separate, the Eastern province has representation from all three communities, Tamil, Muslim and Sinhalese.

By the latter part of 2006 we had about 25 UNPers who were against the views of the Party Leader in relation to how the war should be ended. We saw the successes that had already been achieved by President Mahinda Rajapaksa. We thought it was

best to support him and 17 of us joined the SLFP in January 2007. I was appointed as the Cabinet Minister of Plan Implementation and continued in that position till 2010.

In 2010 I contested the General Election under the SLFP ticket and once again retained my seat in Parliament. Then I was assigned the Ministry of State Resources and Enterprise Development. 24 different state-run organisations came under this ministry that were completely running at a loss and some had been closed down. Rehabilitating these organisations was a great challenge. As a technical person this was very interesting. There were estate companies, which were bankrupt and had debts going up to 1,000 million rupees, they had not even paid EPF to their workers.

There were two organisations, which were making profits. Those were the Mineral Sand Corporation and Lanka Phosphate Limited. Chilaw Plantation under the Ministry purview was also making profits.

There were two sugar factories in Hingurana and Kantale. Hingurana was handed over to a joint venture company with the Government. The investment needed to make these organisations profitable was going to be huge and the State would not be able to provide the funds required. As a result Gal Oya Plantation Company was formed and it is doing well. We are producing sugar for the first time in 15 years and about 500-600 tonnes of sugar is being produced. It is expected to increase the production to at least 10,000 tonnes. Gradually by about the third or fourth year after commissioning, the company will be able to produce about 20,000 tonnes of sugar, which is a very small percentage of the national demand for sugar. But if Pelawatte and Sevanagala work hard, we can produce about 150,000 tonnes. Kantale is totally inactive and will take many years to be rehabilitated. Kantale was commissioned in the 1950s and the machinery was brought from an Eastern European country. The factory has to be totally replaced with new machinery. Its main asset however is that it has the largest area suitable for cane cultivation.

I did not know what it was going to be like after I joined the SLFP but I contested in the 2010 elections. On one side the UNPers were angry with me for joining the Government and on the other side the SLFPers were not happy about me joining them. I felt as if I was placed between two worlds but I won at the election and that

was because the people were with me. If I was different from what I am, I would never have won this election.

There was a function in Ampara to celebrate my 35 years in politics. It was attended by a large gathering of people from all walks of life. I do not think there would be such a crowd presence anywhere else where there was equal representation from both main parties. The Hon Speaker was the Chief Guest at this function. Several Ministers, MPs, Provincial Council Ministers and many well-wishers attended the meeting.

Minister of Food Security

The aim of Food Security is to provide all people at all times physical, social and economic access to adequate, safe and nutritious food that meet their daily dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. Food Security has to be achieved both at national and household level.

At the national level food is available in the country. There are no marked scarcities of food except in short spells due mainly to factors like climate change, global warming and environmental constraints. Incessant rain during monsoons, for example, cause heavy damage to agricultural production both by destroying ripening crops and by destabilising human activity.

Mahinda Chintana Development Programme recognises that ensuring food and nutrition security as a priority requirement in improving the standard of living of the people. I as the Senior Minister of Food Security aims at coordinating activities related to food production and distribution handled by several ministries.

The Government has taken many steps to improve agricultural productivity in the country to increase food production. The Government also promotes multiple cropping and diversification in the agricultural sector. Many steps have also been taken to minimise, post harvest losses, especially in vegetables and fruits. Vast improvements have been achieved in the livestock and fisheries sectors. Food imports have been adjusted to meet emergency situations like seasonal surpluses in production and shortages due to poor harvest conditions. Every attempt has been

made by the Government to keep food prices at affordable levels.

How has politics changed, over the 35 years?

I would say that the behaviour of the politician has deteriorated significantly over the years. Quite a lot of money is spent on election campaigns. The proposal for the new system, which is similar to the first past post system may change things around but the proportionate representation really changed politics for the worse. The over spending and bad behaviour has transcended from the Parliament down to the Provincial and Pradeshiya Sabha level as well. Some Pradeshiya Sabha candidates have spent more than what I spend for the entire General Election. Everyone is spending money to get into power. Many people get into politics to make money, a good majority of them want to make money and not serve the people. I keep telling them that they have come into politics not to earn money but to serve the people. This situation will change once suitable amendments are made to the electoral system.

Consumption of liquor has increased. Then violence during election time has also increased, I have never faced violence in any of my election campaigns. I have always been against violence. In 1970 when we lost, quite a number of my supporters underwent a lot of hardships. Now we find that many supporters of MPs opening liquor stores. It is a gift to MPs and their supporters. Sometimes a man who lost will get one and the person who won will get two. At the time I went to Ampara there was not a single liquor shop.

Today there are over 15 liquor shops in that area, and none of those have been approved by me, usually it has to be approved by the local MP. After mathata thitha was started, no permits were given for liquor shops. They were trying to transfer some of the permits from different areas. But I immediately informed His Excellency the President and he stopped it on two occasions. In Ampara there are enough liquor shops to supply to the entire community. They keep on drinking. The worst is the Sinhala area, because it is in the Sinhala area that you find all the liquor shops. There are no liquor shops in Samanthurai, Kalmunai and Pottuvil. I am not talking about the entire country I am speaking about the Ampara district, which I represent.

It Is Only Hon Ranil Wickremesinghe And Myself Who Have Completed 35 Years. Well, When You Say Humble, I Have Always Been Like That.

How have you remained humble and a gentleman in politics?

There is one person who has been in Parliament with an unbroken record and that is Hon Joseph Michael Perera from the UNP. He entered Parliament in 1976. But in the recent elections he entered Parliament through the National List. He has contested seven elections, but he has not completed 35 years. It is only Hon Ranil Wickremesinghe and myself who have completed 35 years. Well, when you say humble, I have always been like that. I am a friendly and an amiable person. I can work with any person irrespective of his standing in life. That is very important especially in politics. I have been able to continue unhindered and win seven consecutive elections because the people supported me and voted for me. I am always available to the people to discuss their problems irrespective of whether they are in the Government or in the Opposition.

I always listen to their problems, whether I am in the Opposition or a Cabinet Minister that does not matter. Throughout the 35 years I have visited my electorate regularly. I would be in Ampara for one week and the next week I would be in Colombo for Parliament sittings. Even if I am unable to provide a solution they are happy when I listen to them. They have no one, after voting a man to power and making him a MP and then a minister, you have to be available at any time to talk to them. I do not have anyone else answering my telephone throughout the past 35 years. I have one telephone number, which I have not changed over the years and the country knows that number.

That availability is very important and also your capacity to listen. Sometimes people might annoy you and when uneducated people come they might speak to you in harsh language. It all depends. There are some people who come drunk and you have to have the patience to deal with them.

The private sector is very different. I know that because I have been in the private sector. As a politician you have to be very tolerant. That is why I have lasted this long. And, to a certain extent luck also matters. I was assigned the best ministries that I can think of. To start with Power and Energy, then Land, Irrigation and Mahaweli Development followed by Rehabilitation, Reconstructions and Social Welfare, Ministry of Health and Nutrition, Ministry of Plan Implementation, Ministry of State Resources and Enterprise Development and now Food Security. I never asked for these ministerial portfolios but the respective Presidents assigned them to

me.

My father was a disciplined person, he did not drink and he did not engage in violence. He never tolerated that kind of behaviour. I would say it is my family background and upbringing that has enabled me to be who I am today. My brothers and I were brought up in the same manner and we studied at Ananda College. My wife has been a great asset and a tower of strength to me who has always given the support and courage to meet the challenges in my life together. My three children have been equally supportive to me in pursuing my political career. Although not following in my footsteps into the political arena they have imbibed in them the traits and attributes that have made me what I am today. Always humble and gentle.

Final thoughts.

I am extremely happy about the manner in which His Excellency Mahinda Rajapaksa is managing the development work in the country. Once upon a time, people used to say that taking loans would mean that you are mortgaging the country to foreigners. Today this situation has changed.

His Excellency The President Won The War And Placed Development On A Fast Track, With A View Of Making The Country, The Wonder Of Asia. In That Sense Our Country Is Very Lucky.

During the last 30-40 years the main thing people would ask their MP is for electricity. We have come up to more than 90 percent today. It's a great leap forward when compared with the SAARC countries. India is still at about 50 percent. During the time I was the Deputy Minister of Power and Energy, electricity was available to only nine percent of the population, that was in 1981. But today 90 percent of the households have electricity. Exactly ten times more.

Rebuilding highways, construction of expressways and developing infrastructure in the country is proceeding at a rapid pace. Pipe borne water is supplied to 40 percent of the population which compares high with neighbouring countries. Communication and ICT development in the country has made rapid progress. Perhaps the country has more telephones than people!

In the country, inflation levels have dropped. Growth levels remain high. Unemployment levels have dropped, per capita income is on the rise. Healthcare indexes are quite high compared to SAARC countries. Tourism sector improvements are encouraging. We have achieved these development targets because His Excellency the President won the war and placed development on a fast track, with a view of making the country, the Wonder of Asia. In that sense our country is very lucky.





