

Give Us The Opportunity



He is a novel thinker with strong ideologies. Born and educated in Wennappuwa, he started his political journey in his village to serve the people. Hector Appuhamy, MP and Monitoring MP for the Ministries of Sports, Foreign Employment and Power and Renewable Energy has a keen understanding of the Puttalam Electorate. Through this understanding

comes a drive to implement bold projects that will uplift the District and the livelihood of the people. He believes that politicians with relevant skills need to be provided the right opportunities. Hector Appuhamy is confident that with the right strategic direction and political leadership, the country's potential can be realised.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe and Keshini De Silva

Photography Mahesh Bandara and Menaka Aravinda

Who is Hector Appuhamy?

I am a politician, and an individual who has dedicated himself towards the betterment of the country. I am interested in innovation. I dedicate about 20 hours a day towards the well-being of the people. I have, however been disappointed with certain things that are taking place in the country and wish to make my contribution to develop the country.

Why did you decide to enter into politics?

It was, in a way, an unexpected incident. After I left school, I studied for a Diploma. Subsequently I worked in a place where I received the opportunity to collaborate with foreign countries. While I worked with these countries, I witnessed many things. Moreover, my family had also been involved in politics, supporting former MP Don Festus Persera for a long time. Thereafter, in 1994, after the UNP was defeated I realised that the party's support base needed to be rebuilt, especially in electorates such as Wennapuwa. In line with this interest, I joined the UNP in the capacity of secretary for the Wennapuwa Seat. I had no inclination towards entering politics at that time. However, as I continued to work for the party I encountered an ideological dispute with the leaders of the party. I did not approve of some of their activities and policies. Therefore, I decided to join the party as a means to present new ideologies. I had witnessed that some politicians were working toward fulfilling their own political agendas and pleasing other politicians, rather than working towards the betterment of the country. That was the point at which I decided to venture into politics.

I Am A Politician, And An Individual Who Has Dedicated Himself Towards The Betterment Of The Country.

I Am Interested In Innovation.

While being a secretary, I had been involved in establishing many societies at the village level. Therefore, I had a good understanding about the people in the village, their ideas and the manner in which they operated. Subsequently, I was appointed Chairman of the Wennapuwa Pradeshiya Sabha. I was in the Pradeshiya Sabha for four years. I acquired a good understanding on what should be achieved at the Pradeshiya Sabha level for the betterment of the country as well as its responsibilities. Later, I was the Opposition Leader of the Wennapuwa Pradeshiya Sabha. Subsequently, I was elected to the Provincial Council. I learnt about administration and politics in the provincial council system, its duties, laws and regulations, and what should and should not be done. After that, I became the Organiser for the Opposition, and was then elected to Parliament. Therefore, I am familiar with the political system from the grassroot level.

I learnt greatly in Parliament, especially with regards to its procedures and working committees. I developed relationships with foreign organisations and this helped me further in my learning. Therefore, I understand what needs to be practically done in the country. It is at this point that you have to battle in terms of how to do what is right for the country or not. I am at this point.

You started from the village and then gradually rose to this position. You currently represent the Puttalam District, which is quite diverse. Could you speak about this area?

I was born in a village called Bolawatte in Wennappuwa, I studied at St Joseph Vaz College Wennappuwa, and it is in Wennappuwa that I live even today. Puttalam District has five seats and 16 Divisional Secretariats. Puttalam District starts from Wennappuwa as does the North Western Province, while the final point of the District is Puttalam. The five electorates are Wennappuwa, Anamaduwa, Nattandiya, Chilaw and Puttalam. From my education to politics, I have done everything in Wennappuwa. Likewise, I was in the Wennappuwa Pradeshiya Sabha and was elected to the Provincial Council from the Wennappuwa Seat. This Seat is different to others as there is a large contingency of businessmen and individuals engaged in foreign employment. They work in countries such as Italy, Germany, France, US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Sweden. In addition to that the area has fishermen, state employees and

farmers.

In Nattandiya, there is a larger business community, in addition to a significant population of fishermen, state employees and farmers. In Chilaw, it is different with a larger population of fishermen, farmers and state officials. Then, Puttalam is far more progressed in terms of the industries, salterns, cement factories, power generation, fishery, agriculture and tourism. In Puttalam, you can cultivate seeds that will grow anywhere in the country. The geography of Puttalam is also unique as it is positioned near the sea, lagoon, reservoirs, rivers and Willpattu National Park. Puttalam is the only other district that has a peninsula (Kalpitiya) in Sri Lanka, in addition to Mannar and Jaffna. I believe that Puttalam is one of the most beautiful places in Sri Lanka.

Anamaduwa has a high population of villagers whose livelihood is based on agriculture. Therefore, when you compare Anamaduwa and Wennappuwa the social fabric is quite different, despite these areas being in the same District. The daily cost of living in Wennappuwa is higher than that in Anamaduwa. There is less activity in Anamaduwa and there is even a difference in how people dress between both areas. Their breakfast, lunch and dinner as well as social functions and customs are slightly different. For example, in Anamaduwa if they make a small earning, that is adequate for the day because they have less external activities and they enjoy a serene and simpler life. Whereas Wennappuwa is very busy, and the people do not have much time and they have a different definition of enjoyment. That is the diverse social nature of this electorate.

I understand the electorate because I was born in Wennappuwa, started my political journey in Wennappuwa, and was then the Organiser in Puttalam. I have been politically active in Wennappuwa, Nattandiya, Anamaduwa, Chilaw and Puttalam. This is the reason I have a busy schedule. Although I have learnt a lot, I am disappointed that I am not given the opportunity to work for the benefit of the country.

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Why do you say that?

I have witnessed that many politicians are engaged in a farce. They merely focus on the short term and are only thinking about issues that affect them. From the leaders of the country, there is little interest in innovation and novelty. Sri Lanka is a beautiful island, which was known as the pearl of the Indian Ocean, yet have we showcased this to the world? Has there been a plan and Government spending in this regard? There is much that we are yet to discover about our island. I believe that if we work towards this we will be able to easily solve many of the issues in the country. However, we need politicians and officials who are intelligent and have a good thinking.

I believe the country has been destroyed by politicians. It is not what the media says, they are focusing on frivolous issues. The reality is different. In politics, it is the Parliament that enacts all the rules and regulations in the country, allocates budgets and creates policy. It is Parliament that compiles the rules and regulations for administration. However, the leadership has always been given based on seniority. Either it is inherited by the children or relatives of a former politician. Or they are given to those who have been active in politics for a long time. The important ministries are allocated to such politicians. Those who have skills and abilities have never been granted these positions. There maybe a few who have the skills, however when you consider Parliament we must make use of all 225 members. Therefore, duties must be allocated accordingly. Leaders of the country must identify these skills and abilities; that is leadership in my opinion. Unfortunately, leadership in Sri Lanka is based on either hereditary politics or length of service in the party. That should not be the case. There needs to be a leader who transparently sees through it all and skilled persons are appointed to right position. Or else, those better suited for the position remain on the sidelines, while the person who should be on the sidelines is appointed to the position. That will have no benefit on the country. That is what I mean when I say politics destroyed the country.

It is not because politicians are enjoying luxuries; those are amusing stories. Vehicles and other privileges are normal facilities in a country. Today, Sri Lanka provides the lowest salary to politicians in the world. Therefore, we are holding the wrong end of the stick, where people including the media are destroying society with misleading discourse. The real reason for destruction is that it is those who are unsuitable for a position who receive high appointments while

those with the suitable skills are on the sidelines. For example, many committees have been appointed, and their results should be assessed. It is through such analysis that decisions should be made. Decisions made in the past cannot be changed. It is the system that needs to change in our country.

How can the political system be changed?

If leaders think in the right way, then the political system of the country can be transformed. When we appointed the incumbent President in 2015, that was our aim. We found a leader who, like us, was down-to-earth and lived amongst the people. We searched for a leader who represented the people, country and all political groups. However, that was not the case.

The President is yet to meet and discuss with us about the requirements of the country, future measures that need to be taken as well as the industries that should be developed with new innovations.

The situation must be rectified. It is not an easy task, especially now. This is because, within this predicament, different groups have emerged with varying ideals. Therefore, the country has taken a step back. Moreover, the work ethic of officials, be it in public affairs or companies, is a hindrance. Rules in the country seem to have been made to hinder progress. There are no laws to support new initiatives. The Government, ministers and politicians have always tried to claim credit for the personal achievements of people. The Government has not worked in unison to provide benefits to the people.

For the country to be taken forward, economic prospects need to be considered. A beautiful country such as Sri Lanka with a pleasant climate could have been easily showcased to attract the richest tourists and businessmen in the world. The country is surrounded by the sea and there is a large fishing industry, however we are yet to develop programmes to improve and expand on the techniques of fishing and farming. Instead, various laws and regulations have been enacted to hinder livelihoods. In terms of agriculture, there are many export crops that can be grown in Sri Lanka, yet these have not been acted upon. We are not making use of our resources. For example, milk powder is being imported to Sri Lanka despite there being the expertise and opportunity to produce milk powder in Sri Lanka. The challenge today is that those with the knowledge are suffering, while unsuitable leaders sit in air-conditioned rooms and make questionable decisions.

If we could sort this out, then the country would be able to move forward.

In Terms Of Tourism, I Can Confidently Say That Nothing Has Been Done. We Have Maintained The Tourism Industry In Sri Lanka Based On Relationships Built By The Sri Lankans Working Overseas And Our Relations With Other Countries. The Government Has Not Introduced A Plan Or Programme For The Tourism Industry.

What are your thoughts on the potential for tourism in Sri Lanka?

In terms of tourism, I can confidently say that nothing has been done. We have maintained the tourism industry in Sri Lanka based on relationships built by the Sri Lankans working overseas and our relations with other countries. The Government has not introduced a plan or programme for the tourism industry. From Jaffna to Hambanthota and Kataragama, the hill country, Trincomalee and Puttalam; when you consider these areas there is a significant geographical difference. Along with this geographical positioning there is a serene natural connection along with the ocean and unique locations. When you consider the climate, Nuwara Eliya for example, offers a cool climate in which one can live comfortably; it is not freezing cold. There is potential in the country's unique climate, lagoons, national parks and reserves.

Puttalam is located in close proximity to the airport, and thus the area is ideally positioned to develop to a tourism village, which would be quite beneficial for the country. We could have constructed an airfield in Puttalam, which is not a very costly project. These are innovations. We could have made this a hub with connectivity to Polonnaruwa - Kurunegala - Habarana; Jaffna and the North; Anuradhapura as well as with connectivity to the airport. Moreover, considering the lagoon, sea and Wilpattu National Park, Kalpitiya is a hotspot for dolphins and whales, and it has a beautiful coral reef. It is also the best kitesurfing destination in Sri Lanka. This area has transportation channels through the land, sea, lagoon, canal, river and reservoir. Therefore, this is a beautiful natural landscape that can be easily developed. We can develop tourism hubs in Sri Lanka, and one such hub could have been Puttalam. I have been campaigning for this even within the present Government, but to no avail.

It has been three and half years since I was elected to Parliament. Yet, the Government has not made any use of me. Time has merely passed and I am quite

disappointed. They should have made use of our knowledge and strengths. There are many like us who have skill and have not been given an opportunity. None of the officials in Ministries today are engaged in innovation. They are merely engaged in prolonging old systems and menial administrative tasks. They are stuck within a frame. They will not step out of their comfort zones to assess and implement projects that would be useful to the country. Other countries are far ahead of us. We have lost because of our selfishness. On the other hand, our ancestors accomplished a great deal for the country; there was innovation, considering the manner in which they made use of the rivers, seas and forests. Our customs, food, attire, environment and relationships have been changed in a superficial manner. The businessman today lament on the lack of opportunities that we have lost through our own volition. It is a grave error resulting from questionable governance. A few of us cannot change this, we must all work together.

The media is merely concerned about the underworld, Constitution, National Government; and they feature articles on politicians who utter absolute falsities. When a person accused of theft is leaving court proceedings, they will interview him. When these are the main news features in Sri Lanka, how can the country move forward? Do they even allocate a little space to discuss new innovations and opportunities? They do not present anything educational or spread knowledge to society. There are multiple reports on the seizure of marijuana, toddy and arrack, but there is no analysis on the social structure in Sri Lanka. There is no point in merely seizing contraband, it is merely sensationalized in the media for awhile. The social structure of the country needs to be changed through a transformation of the people's ideologies. Substance abuse cannot be stopped through force. Instead, it must come from within and we must work towards changing the social structure and economic structure for the benefit of the people. It is then that their mindset will automatically change. Our mistake is that we do not have the right process.

Kalpitiya Has A Unique Geographical Position And Has Great Potential. However, One Issue Is A Lack Of Water Facilities.

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Kalpitiya can attract high-end tourists, everyone accepts this. Although private companies have considered the area nothing has come to pass due to a lack of land and infrastructure. This has been in discussion for 20 years or so. What can be done?

Kalpitiya has a unique geographical position and has great potential. However, one issue is a lack of water facilities. It is a facility a country as developed as Sri Lanka can provide. Power and road infrastructure are essential for development. Moreover, there should be a Government appointed committee dedicated towards the development of that area in collaboration with other industries. This is a serene area with transport potential from the land, sea and air. For example, we could transport a traveller from the airport to Puttalam via a small aircraft if we had an airfield in Puttalam. Thereafter, it is about establishing connectivity to the rest of the island. Without adequate infrastructure investors will not see the potential for a return on investment. Authorities attempt to palm this off to someone, without adequately preparing the area.

Puttalam has many economic opportunities such as prawn farming. Can you elaborate on this?

The prawn farming initiative faltered because we did not establish the market for the product. This should have been mediated. They did not allow the production of feed for prawn farming in Sri Lanka, because those who import the product have their tentacles in the administration. However, this could have been manufactured in Sri Lanka using local raw materials. We could have done this properly if we identified and analysed the market. In Sri Lanka, the price of goods fluctuates with no formula. Therefore, the person who started prawn farming does so in fear until they reap a benefit in four month's time. He has no confidence in the longevity of the industry. Firstly, confidence in the industry needs to be developed and facilities need to be subsidised; then the industry would have taken off. For example, adequate water and waste management are not allocated for factories and people protest when the water is contaminated. They suffocate the businessman to obtain compensation for themselves. That is how the system in Sri Lanka has evolved. We need a constructive action plan.

If we were given the opportunity for at least six months, we would be able to transform the locale of Puttalam and uplift the area. We can connect many countries. There are Sri Lankans who have been residing overseas for many

years, who have obtained citizenship and have the monetary capacity to invest. However, there has been no measures to connect with these people and provide them the opportunity to give back to Sri Lanka. We could have developed Puttalam as one of the best tourist locations in Sri Lanka and possibly even in the world. We could have even had a passenger ship from Colombo to Puttalam when the seas are not rough. We could at least attract Sri Lankan holidaymakers. We could take vacationers from Colombo to Puttalam. If we cannot try something of that nature, then what is the point in this country?

We Could Have Developed Puttalam As One Of The Best Tourist Locations In Sri Lanka And Possibly Even In The World.

Former residents of Puttalam, who now live and work in Europe, send money back to the country. The Government has done nothing for these people. When they build houses, they provide a means of income to the sand miner, mason, carpenter and construction equipment renters. One house provides a livelihood for many. However, instead of supporting them, they are usually the victim of land fraud. Or the Government has not provided the right documentation, and they have to spend a lot of time on acquiring the documentation, even resorting to bribery. Thereafter, once the house has been built, obtaining utilities such as water and electricity is a huge process. They get exasperated. After all, they have gotten used to the systems overseas and hope for something similar in Sri Lanka. If someone who has earned overseas hopes to invest in Sri Lanka there are many barriers against them. Or else, people try to extort money from them. Many survive on the foreign exchange these people bring to the country. For example, young couples working in Europe find difficulty in finding someone to care for their children in Sri Lanka while they work. The Government should have created a programme to establish childcare centres. There are many new methods, facilities as well as technology that can be used. Moreover, as the Government has not planned system to help them care for their parents, these people sponsor their parents to Europe as well. Thereafter, instead of building a house in the island for their families, they spend their money on immigration. As a result, Sri Lanka loses foreign remittances. There is no one who we can speak to about this in the Government as a whole. There are many like me who have the capacity to think, who are merely stuck in unproductive positions. We need novel thinkers. We should have created a system where a person who earns overseas has the ability to live comfortably in Sri Lanka. However, as there is no proper plan or

system, many leave the country, and they do not want to come back to Sri Lanka due to the issues in the country.

I Am Working Towards Achieving Many Plans, And I Am Determined To Open The Eyes Of The Leadership To Urge Them To Provide Us The Opportunity To Work For The People, Especially In Puttalam.

Puttalam District is multicultural and harmonious. Could you comment on this?

Puttalam is a very important District. I have studied the area to understand coexistence. All main religions, Buddhism, Catholicism, Islam and Hinduism are observed in this area. There are other minor religions also practised here as well. The culture and social structures of these groups have been woven into the character of the area. Moreover, in Sirambiadiya, there is an African ethnic group. They live together as one. Many Muslim businessmen in Colombo have come from Puttalam. Therefore, we are able to connect to many countries, especially the countries that represent these ethnic groups. We can also build tourism in the area through China, India and the Middle East. Tourists from the Middle East are key, and I have observed their habits of recreation and spending. We can easily make watersports an attraction by utilizing the lagoon and sea, with separate propositions for Sri Lankans and international tourists. There are ventures that can be tied with tourism. Examples are marine fishing, freshwater fishery and prawn farming. This community offers a lot to the country. There are multiple uses for the area and its geography. There is connectivity through the canals and rivers. If a passenger takes a ship to Kalpitiya from Colombo, he can take another boat to the Puttalam town. Through the lagoon and river, they can head to Willpattu and its bungalows. King Vijaya himself landed in Thambapanni in the Puttalam district.

The islands off Sri Lanka can be used for tourism development as well. When I travelled to Bangkok, I could travel by bus and return by ship. Similarly, in Puttalam they can travel by boat and by air. There is a supportive community with religious groups who contribute and work together easily. It is sad that we are not making use of these opportunities. We are making an effort to open eyes. This Government should make a change and provide responsibility to the District. Each District has a chairman, and we requested professional staff and a few

resources to survey the District. Subsequently, we would be able to sit with the president and prime minister, and provide a report on the area as well as make suggestions on what can be done to develop the area. They have all the country's resources at their hands. Then, according to the country's priorities, these plans may come under different ministries. We can develop the area through unison and new innovation. For the betterment of the island's tourism industry we should link the main destinations such as Trincomalee, Jaffna and the South. The resources will be shared appropriately. When responsibility is assigned, then leaders emerge. The President is then able to identify what is being and what can be done in these Districts. If the Chairmen were allocated duties with a monthly analysis -12 progressive steps, one for each month, then we would have reached the target at the end of the year. In terms of agriculture, we could have a separate group to consider what can be exported to Europe and America. These are the initiatives that should be considered to increase exports. The Districts would then have targets. Unless initiatives of this nature are implemented, it would be difficult to take the country forward.

I have been speaking in terms of Puttalam due to my experience in the area. But there is great potential in other areas across the island as well. Opportunities need to be provided and there needs to be a proper system.

Future plans?

I am working towards achieving many plans, and I am determined to open the eyes of the leadership to urge them to provide us the opportunity to work for the people, especially in Puttalam. If we get that opportunity, we will definitely see these projects through. I am also the monitoring MP for the Ministries of Sport, Foreign Employment and Power and Renewable Energy. I am working towards many planned initiatives within this capacity as well.

My wish is that the younger generation will be fortunate enough to live in a developed and prosperous country.

