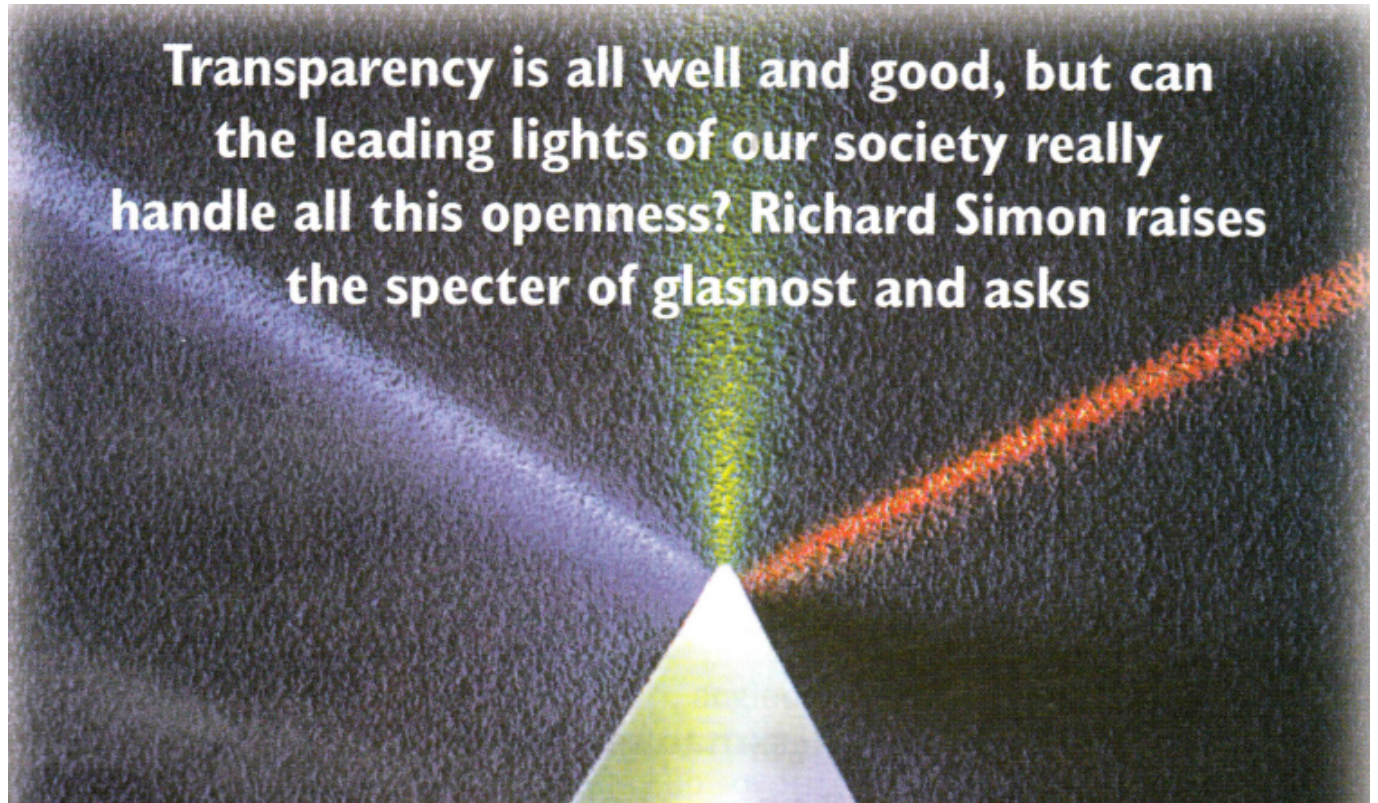


Is it clear yet?

Posted on



Recently, I took a job in the field of public relations. It's a discipline new to Sri Lanka but hey, everyone knows what public relations is, right? That wicked instrument of social manipulation widely favored by sound-bite- masticating Western politicians and filthy capitalist corporate swine, in which the truth is stretched to the legal limit, salted here and there with a few downright lies, and fed through the media to the poor old public in order to ripen them up for exploitation. At least that's what my radical friends believe, and since I took this job they've been looking at me as if I'd sprouted horns and a tail. Judging by the kind of response I receive when I tell people at parties what I do, lots of people think like that. Academics recoil, arty females in wraparound skirts shudder. NGO types are the worst tell them you're in PR and their nostrils pinch together like they've just found a gecko turd floating in their whisky. First they come over all high-minded and moral-'of course, what you're really doing is sub-verting the fragile Third World democratic process, then they try to pick your brains for techniques of persuasion that might induce villagers in Visa-beejagama to start using the expensive toilets they've just been gifted with, courtesy of

Finnish government funding, instead of just crapping beside the elu as their forefathers have done since Dhatusena's time. You can't win.

Too bad, you say, but what has all this to do with transparency? Well, if it were just academics and arty females and the rest of the po-faced pinko set that thought public relations was about lies and manipulation, you and I and the rest of the sane and sensible world could sleep easy in our beds. I mean, who cares what that lot think? But far more disconcerting, even chilling, is the fact that many prospective clients I meet in my line of work seem to be under exactly the same misapprehension. The difference is, instead of being repelled, they can't wait to get in there and start manipulating. When they find out that public relations isn't about turning people into puppets but about telling the truth and building trust, they are first baffled, then wrathful. Is this what we're paying you guys for? Telling the truth? Building trust? Why didn't we just hire a priest?

Now these are powerful people, bureaucrats and

money men and captains of industry and so forth. What they do and say affects you and me profoundly. For decades, they and their predecessors have run Sri Lanka as a conspiracy of patronage and mutual back-scratching, each helping conceal the others' venality, corruption and incompetence. The last thing they want is to let the public know what they're up to, because if the public ever found out, it would tear down the temples of culture and commerce and government with its bare hands. The entire rotten edifice of our society would crumble, and then where would they all be-the university dons whose scholarship wouldn't win them a graduate grant from a decent Western college, the religious dignitaries who practice bigotry by day and sodomy by night, the businessmen who couldn't hope to turn a profit without the collusion of some sticky fingered politico, the NGO chiefs who buy Pajeros for themselves with aid money meant for starving children, the semi-literate journalists drunk on power without responsibility, the artists whose pathetic daubs and botches are hailed by clueless critics as fine art? These people, Sri Lanka's so-called great and good,

would fry under the searchlight of public scrutiny. They can hardly be blamed for not being keen on it. In fact, transparency or glasnost or whatever you want to call it is a concept with which we Sri Lankans have never been comfortable. Read Robert Knox on the King of Kandy's highways policy and you'll see what I mean. Nor did the colonial powers change things much when they came along-what they did with their conquered territories was nobody else's business, certainly not the natives'. The brown sahibs who took over from the British inherited that attitude as well. Of course, since they were functioning in a putative democracy, they had to tell the public something, but it wasn't hard to bamboozle them with

racist fables, Socialist clap trap and xenophobic tales of foreign bogeymen just waiting to pounce on sweet little Sri Lanka and tear her limb from limb. It worked like a charm.

So the idea that the public actually has a right to know about issues affecting it is really quite a novel one in our society. By declaring an era of 'transparency', our President, bless her, has flung open a Pandora's box. How will our nation, founded on myth and impregnated with falsehood and denial, deal with the freaks and monsters now pouring out into the light of day?

We'd better find some answers fast. Public relations could be one of those answers, but not in the way most people imagine. You see, public relations is a manifestation-a symptom, if you prefer-of democracy. Dictators and con-artists don't use public relations; their communications tools of choice are propaganda and bullshit, both of which we've had plenty of in this country since well before 1948. Public relations only become necessary when organizations, institutions and individuals whose words and deeds affect the public actually have to face that public and explain themselves. This presupposes a society whose members know and care about what is going on in the world beyond their front yards; a society whose members, acting individually or in groups, can actually affect the policies and actions of those with economic and political power. In other words, it presupposes a society in which public opinion actually matters.

We don't have a society like that, yet. And if the network of old chums who've been battenning on the jugular of Mother Lanka for the past fifty years or more have their way, we never shall. But the current and unprecedented popularity of 'public relations' among the wealthy and powerful suggests that they have seen the writing on the wall, and are getting a bit nervous.

Because, as Mikhail Gorbachev and his successors found out, glasnost has a way of snowballing until it becomes an irresistible force. Open the door of the Backscratchers' Club a crack, and pretty soon the light is pouring in, along with the entire population rioting joyously in its radiance, sweeping aside the bribe fattened dinosaurs slumbering in their easy chairs, the liars and cheats trying to hide their maculated carcasses under the snooker table, the cultural Mafiosi around the bar whose closed-shop tactics have kept real talent out of academia, the arts and the media. forever. The day is coming, and they know it.

I can't wait. And smile to myself every time I find myself sitting across the table from yet another big- wig who thinks public relations can help him cover up his incompetence or his crimes. Because the very fact that I'm there at all means he's woken up to the realization that, pretty soon, the public will be able to make him or break him. And all the PR

techniques at my disposal won't save him unless he's prepared to make an honest commitment to truth and transparency. In fact, they'll only hasten his downfall. The true revolution, when it comes, will not be won by gun toting militants, gibbering ideologues, members of the pink brigade or hordes of the great unwashed. It will be won by the worldly-wise, the openminded, the technologically hip, the democrats and qualitocrats and meritocrats. And, of course, by those who really understand public relations.