

My Pleasure To Serve My Country

Posted on



Lakshman Hulugalle, Consul General of Sri Lanka for New South Wales and Queensland.

As Consul General of Sri Lanka for New South Wales and Queensland in Australia,

Lakshman Hulugalle has many years of experience promoting the country's interests. As the former director-general of the Media Center for National Security, he successfully disseminated information globally and navigated swathes of media scrutiny on Sri Lanka's war against terrorism with tact and composure. Embarking on his new role amid the pandemic in 2020 to serve Sri Lanka single-mindedly once again, Mr. Hulugalle has already gathered together Australians and Australians of Sri Lankan origin to accelerate his plans for the country.

Speaking with Business Today, Mr. Hulugalle said that he focuses on bringing suitable investments and investors to Sri Lanka while promoting Australian tourists to visit the country. As the pandemic wanes, he hopes that with borders opening and fewer restrictions to travel, Australians would confidently come to Sri Lanka for business and leisure with the assurance of a safe internal environment where ensuring the security of the visitor is paramount. Reiterating his commitment to fulfilling the role entrusted to him by the president, he said that he would harness the politician, administrator, and diplomat's potential in him to accomplish the utmost as consul general representing his country's policies and protecting its interests.

By Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane. Photography Menaka Aravinda

As the Consul General for Sri Lanka in New South Wales and Queensland, would you describe the nature of your appointment and its duties?

There is no difference in the appointment of an ambassador or consul general. In some instances, there's only one envoy an ambassador, high commissioner or consul general, along with the staff serving at the center. A few countries in the world like the USA, Australia, China, Russia, Japan, Italy, and Germany have consulate offices with a consul general, apart from an ambassador or high commissioner, to facilitate the work of the central office given the enormity of those countries. The office in the center is the embassy or the high commission, and the consulate offices are in the surrounding states. However, the powers and the privileges of an ambassador, high commissioner, and consul general are the same. Australia, for instance, is a very vast country, and the Sri Lankans and Australians of Sri Lankan origin live across a vast territory. Therefore, Sri Lanka has three offices, the high commission in Canberra and consulate offices in Sydney and Melbourne. The high commission coordinates with the central government. As consul general, I

oversee two of the biggest states in Australia, Queensland, and New South Wales, which make half of Australia. And I coordinate and work with the governments of New South Wales and Queensland.

How does your appointment differ from that of the Sri Lankan High Commission in Canberra, and how do you work as a collective entity to secure the country's interests?

Whether the office is in Canberra, Melbourne, or Sydney, all three envoys work in unison. The high commissioner and the consul generals' engage in taking decisions collectively on behalf of the country. We differ only in carrying out day-to-day work duties, where we arrive at our own choices. But we espouse the same policy in terms of promoting the interests of Sri Lanka. I'm a representative of the president and the government of Sri Lanka in New South Wales and Queensland. Likewise, the other two envoys in Canberra and Melbourne represent the president and the country. We tread the same line in terms of pursuing national issues and advancing national interests.

When you speak of day-to-day work, given that you work for two of the biggest states in Australia, what is the difference in the daily tasks that you carry out?

Currently, the workload in the consulate office in Sydney has reduced drastically due to the pandemic and the lockdown. On a regular working day, though, the consulate office attends to a plethora of services, such as registration of birth, death, and marriage, processing applications for dual citizenship, visa, and passports, police clearance certification, attesting documents, and authorizing of Sri Lanka pension payment for those residing in the two states. Every Sri Lankan living in either of the two states coming under my purview in need of official confirmation must come to the consulate office. I serve nearly 80,000 Sri Lankans in New South Wales and Queensland, whereas Canberra's office serves only 6,000 Sri Lankans. Melbourne, of course, has a considerable Sri Lankan population of more than 100,000 residents. Our duty, while being the same, where we differ is in the workload. As the consul general for New South Wales and Queensland, I represent the economic capital of Australia, that is Sydney, which has an international airport and port, plus many important financial centers, which makes my role bigger than that of the high commissioner in the center. For instance, when I served as deputy high commissioner and acting high commissioner for Sri Lanka in Canberra in 2014 and 2015, we had around four to five visitors daily with a staff of 18.

The consulate office in Sydney has only 14 staff members serving two big states in Australia. Canberra's workload is less because most Australians of Sri Lankan origin are working in the government. In contrast, Sydney has the highest number of professionals from Sri Lanka employed in a plethora of high-ranking positions. Although fewer people come over for official work due to the lockdown, the consulate tells me that at least five to ten people come to the consulate daily. On a typical day of operations, the Sydney consulate office receives at least 75 people for a day.

If we look beyond the traditional role of diplomacy as the foreign affairs of a sovereign State, which some have dismissively described as 'flowerpot duty' of ceremony and protocol, how dynamic and different has it become today, especially if it's perceived as a business where many stakeholders stand to benefit?

The ceremonial functions are a must for a diplomat. And the protocols are equally important. I am a representative of the president, the government, and the country; hence my presence at functions, whether state or otherwise, is part of connecting with individuals with power and influence and can impact Sri Lanka positively. Because diplomatic protocol works differently in the two countries, some instances demand shrewdness and sensibility. A foreign ambassador or envoy serving in Sri Lanka has the privilege of reaching the highest echelons of power in Sri Lanka through a telephone call. But it is not so in Australia. The diplomatic protocol in Australia dictates that an ambassador, high commissioner, or consul general must go through a desk set up in the foreign ministry to seek an appointment with a lawmaker or government representative giving the reason for the meeting. It is they that decide the date and the time of the meeting.

Fortunately for me, as an appointee external to the Foreign Service, I have the liberty to break specific protocols to meet certain individuals in positions of power. After assuming office in Sydney on the 8th of August 2020, I met the governors-general and ministers and other important officials in the two states. In the meantime, I came to know of an Opposition Member of Parliament representing the Labor Party in the New South Wales parliament sympathetic towards the LTTE diaspora. Hugh McDermott had been a sympathizer of the LTTE Diaspora in Sydney for a very long time. Before me, two political appointees who had served as consul general and an officer who had also served for a short period had failed in their attempts to meet him.

McDermott had been a regular invitee to the Mahaveerar day celebration or any celebration held against Sri Lanka by the LTTE diaspora, where he had been a prominent speaker. His support of the LTTE diaspora is vital because members of the Tamil diaspora are pretty well-known and influential members of his electorate. So the general notion that prevailed was that he was inaccessible. When I took over as consul general, I was determined to meet him, although my attempts did not receive a positive response. According to protocol, I had to seek an appointment through the parliament of New South Wales. It so happened that one day, Hugh McDermott was in attendance at a state function that I was also invited to, which allowed me to introduce myself. I revealed that I was keen to meet him since he has taken a keen interest in Sri Lanka, although my attempts to get an appointment to meet him had been unsuccessful. I pointed out that he must receive factual information on what's going on in Sri Lanka and what happened during the war. He was, of course, taken aback. When I offered my visiting card, he said he hadn't brought his card, indicating that he didn't want to meet me. It was a brief meeting of five minutes, and as he was leaving to attend another function, I requested a photograph with him, which he couldn't refuse. We uploaded the picture to the official website of the consulate.

Subsequently, without my asking, McDermott gave me a date and time for a meeting with him in parliament, which I duly intimated to the foreign ministry in Sri Lanka. As I tried to meet McDermott on many occasions, the president and the foreign secretary said that if there's a likelihood of a meeting with Hugh McDermott, it will only happen during my tenure. I view their words as an expression of confidence in my personality and public relations skills.

It so happened that two days before our meeting, McDermott had presented the genocide education bill in parliament, which the Canadian parliament also passed. However, despite its presentation, his proposed bill was not accepted or seconded or taken a vote in parliament. When we met two days later in parliament, he had allocated only 20 minutes for me, but our meeting got extended to 45 minutes. I knew that I would not be able to change the mind of a man who had been supporting the LTTE diaspora for 12 years in one meeting. Since he has been interested in Sri Lanka, I told him that I want to give him factual information about the country. I also told him that I know the events during the war's end as the principal spokesperson for the defense ministry and the government. The war, I said, was not a war against the Tamil people, rather a fight against terrorism. He received an account of the subsequent development work carried out in the

formerly war-ravaged areas, and it was encouraging to see his interest in what I had to say. After a while, there was a little bit of thawing in the relationship, where he adopted a friendlier approach. He revealed that his wife likes Sri Lanka and Ceylon Tea. His favorite is whiskey, he said, so we agreed to meet again over a drink. I think I managed to establish a relationship with McDermott at our first meeting.

Four days after our meeting was the Mahaveerar day celebration in Sydney organized by the LTTE diaspora, where a crowd of over 500 Tamils was expected, with Hugh McDermott as an invitee delivering the keynote address. After meeting with me, McDermott avoided attending the ceremony, and I view his absence at the heroes' day celebration as a breakthrough and victory for me and the country. Had I waited to follow the established protocol procedures, my meeting with McDermott may not have taken place at all. My political acumen and experience aided me in convincing him for a meeting, and that's what every diplomat should be doing for the country. As a diplomat, one cannot blatantly break protocol rules, but certain situations demand ingenuity and navigating beyond the protocols to meet people that matter to Sri Lanka's interests.



Upon my return to Sydney, I will be presenting him with tea and a tea set from the Sri Lanka Tea Board. I am also taking books on the war written by unbiased and independent writers to provide accurate information and data. My stand is that he is certainly free to speak, but he must do so truthfully. I gently cautioned him that he would become a nonentity among the people should he give out incorrect information. As a diplomat, I believe that I have achieved something significant within a short time.

I have also met the governor and premier of New South Wales, the minister of finance, the minister of skills development and vocational training, who is also the multicultural minister, and several other officials. Having visited the country twice before taking office, the finance minister of New South Wales is very fond of Sri Lanka. Being familiar with the country's geography, he's very keen to help Sri Lanka. In the meantime, I connected multicultural minister Dr. Lee with Dr. Seetha Arambepola, the State Minister of Skills Development, Vocational Education, Research, and Innovation. That introduction resulted in the Vocational Training Authority receiving IT equipment worth more than six million rupees through the Australian High Commission in Sri Lanka. I am also on a mission to award recognition for vocational training qualifications given to highly skilled and talented young Sri Lankan men and women by vocational training centers in Sri Lanka that Australia doesn't recognize. If I could obtain the TAFE certification for Sri Lankan vocational training institutions, at least two to three thousand skilled men and women will secure employment in Australia. I have already initiated correspondence in this regard, and I hope my dream will be a reality.

Given that the global political and social systems are evolving and facing new challenges, how important and relevant is diplomacy as a tool to protect national interests and secure prosperity?

My role at the Media Center for National Security (MCNS) as the director-general under the defense ministry from 2006 to 2014 was crucial. It was a time when the war was at its peak. When I joined the MSNC, the media's predominant go-to source for information was the LTTE-run website or channel. That was because there was a lack of authentic information disseminating in the country and out of the country. But in establishing the MSNC, the common notion was that the government was trying to impose censorship and provide only government's authorized information. But under my leadership, I managed to win the hearts of foreign and local journalists and media institutions and the foreign missions in Sri Lanka and our local missions abroad. They had confidence that I was providing the world with accurate

information. Ours was a round-the-clock operation, and hence by seven every morning, I sent out an email of the incidents that had taken place in the last 24 hours, including the number of deaths, killings, and areas captured and the work of the NGOs and the relief efforts. After a few months, all the stakeholders accepted the information that the MCNS was providing. MCNS was the sole voice giving information about the war in Sri Lanka to a global audience. And in time, all came to believe in our information as accurate.

My term at the MCNS was a good experience for me in winning people's trust and confidence in Sri Lanka and around the world. That has been in good stead as I serve as the consul general for New South Wales and Queensland. As I work with New South Wales and Queensland governments, they must have faith in me because, as a diplomat, one cannot bluff around. A diplomat has to be knowledgeable about Sri Lanka and Australia and acquainted with a meeting or discussion subject. Because, unless prepared and well-read, one cannot be a good envoy. For instance, as a diplomat, I cannot meet the finance minister and promote trade. I have to provide the subject I wish to discuss at the meeting along with my profile. Sometimes some diplomats make a bilateral or official meeting a private affair by meeting over a cup of coffee. Even at an official meeting, one can take a little time to speak on personal matters such as family, but first, as a diplomat, I need to live up to the expected standards. For instance, the governor of New South Wales is the former attorney general, so she's not a mere political appointee. As a commonwealth country, her appointment was by the Queen. And with her credentials, she doesn't speak ignorantly or unduly, and hence I can't bluff by providing a rosy picture of the country devoid of facts. I have to do a great deal of homework before an official meeting. I learned those tricks of the trade from serving at the MCNS.

If I may elaborate further, on the day Prabhakaran died in the operations in Sri Lanka, I was surrounded by journalists in my room asking different questions. I was committed to my job in the MCNS, working from seven in the morning till ten in the night, so I knew what I would tell journalists. I remember one foreign journalist asking me about the status of Prabhakaran's funeral. Prabhakaran, I said, will be treated like a terrorist. This same journalist kept asking the same question 12 times intermittently, and I responded, saying that my response would be the same even if he were to ask the question a hundred times. I told him that Prabhakaran might have been a leader to the terrorists, but he was a terrorist to the country. Under such circumstances, one's personality matters in dealing with difficult situations.

That has given me the confidence to serve in my present capacity. Many people get into the Foreign Service with inadequate exposure. The politician, administrator, and diplomat in me work together, striving with esteem in my current capacity as consul general.

Image building is essential in diplomacy. Sri Lanka, too, has had to engage in critical image-building exercises abroad robustly. Having headed the Media Center for National Security during the height of the conflict, how have you promoted Sri Lanka's image and mediate in changing prejudiced assumptions among the lawmakers and political representatives in New South Wales and Queensland while reconciling the interests of all sides? What has been the thrust of those engagements?

The challenges were different when the government of Mahinda Rajapaksa came into power in 2005, and I was appointed the director-general of the MCNS. The challenge was more significant then, as the government was battling to end a 30 years' war, but we contained that challenge to Sri Lanka. But today, the challenge is global. The COVID-19 pandemic is a worldwide phenomenon faced by developed, under-developed, and developing countries. I took over duties as consul general at the peak of the pandemic in 2020. Besides the regular day-to-day work, I have to promote Sri Lanka as a tourist destination and bring investments and investors into Sri Lanka. Of course, my priority is to focus on attracting investments into the country. I arrived in Australia at one of the most difficult times economically for any country, thereby challenging my attempts at getting investors to come to Sri Lanka in a pandemic situation. Australian borders have been closed for over a year, barring Australians from leaving the country and restrictions to entry, which means that businesspeople cannot travel. So it's evident that no businessperson will invest in Sri Lanka over a zoom meeting or an email.

On the other hand, I have been able to bring potential investors together into a business council that was hitherto absent when I arrived in Australia. The new business council operates differently from the earlier outfits. The consul general is no longer its chairperson and the trade counselor the secretary. Sri Lankans and Australians constitute its membership. When the consul general and the trade counselor hold the leadership of the business council, the entire outfit collapses when the former leaves. I will be the consul general may be for a maximum of four years, or it's most likely that I may even have to return to Sri Lanka at any moment. I have gathered a good set of forty to fifty Australian businesspeople to join the business council with this reality in mind. There are 42 members in the business

council, with 18 Sri Lankans living in Australia for three to four decades. Out of the 60 members, four Australians have businesses and factories in Sri Lanka. We planned to launch the business council in July with Honorable Dr. Ajith Nivard Cabraal over zoom. Unfortunately, the lockdown forced us to postpone the launch. With the launching of the business council, I'll be the winner if I could bring four good investors to Sri Lanka during my time.

Further, while explaining my priorities as consul general when I met finance minister Honorable Basil Rajapaksa, I also conveyed the concerns of the Australian businesspeople. He assured me that he and his ministry would personally attend to any investor intending to invest in Sri Lanka from Australia. They will not be sent from pillar to post for approval but dealt with directly by the finance ministry. But such investors have to bring the money and not expect Sri Lankan banks to loan them money or get the project approved here and then go back to canvas for cash. The funds must accompany the investment. That's the assurance I was looking for as, from the eight rounds of meetings that I had with potential investors, their concerns were that when they come to Sri Lanka, they have to visit various institutions. And they are fed up with it. In Australia, anyone can initiate a business over the counter or via email. We are trying to promote the Colombo Port City for investment, which provides an excellent opportunity for future investors from Australia. On my return to Australia, when I tell members of the business council of the personal assurance given by the finance minister of Sri Lanka, I'm sure it will boost their confidence and increase our chances to attract investment. Australian business people are keen to come to Sri Lanka as they are confident of the security in the country. However, they need assurance as they don't want to be pursuing politicians and officials with bribes. I can undoubtedly bring investors to the country now that Sri Lanka has taken the correct decision to facilitate ease of doing business.

In terms of promoting Sri Lanka tourism, given that 11 percent of tourists to Sri Lanka are from Australia, it would be an achievement to increase that number to 20 percent. The country handled the first two pandemic outbreaks very well, although we have faced issues with the third and fourth outbreaks. Nevertheless, the security and safety internally is a boost for us to attract tourists from Australia.

Australians love Sri Lanka. But we must step beyond the old attractions, such as promoting Sigiriya, Anuradhapura, and Polonnaruwa to attract tourists. We have to introduce new products, such as casinos, which many parties will not support but certainly oppose. We must understand that people travel for pleasure and

enjoyment, so providing what they want and demand is vital. In Australia, the biggest tourist attraction in Melbourne is the Crown Casino. They have opened a center in Sydney as well. We can maintain the culture and historical products, while at the same time provide other areas of entertainment.

Sri Lanka needs to earn foreign exchange, and tourism is one of the best avenues. Australians value the beach and know that they can reach different climates in Sri Lanka within four hours. We have to promote our conventional tourist products while injecting new life into the package that we offer them. I'm waiting for both countries to open borders, which I'm hoping will happen in December. If so, Australians would come to Sri Lanka provided we are in control of the pandemic internally.

What are the new tourism products that the Australian tourist would desire?

Naturally, tourists want to enjoy themselves on holiday. Promoting new products like sea sports such as in the eastern beaches and seas is essential. At the same time, the love for Sri Lankan food is well known. But foreign visitors have this notion that our food is not safe. So promoting organic food will provide a good market among visitors. Hotel facilities are good enough, but those facilities should be what the visitor wants and not forced upon the visitor. We have to change the way we show our historic sites. For instance, until recently, visitors to the Taj Mahal weren't allowed to view it at night, which they are allowed to do now. Similarly, we can promote Sigiriya differently rather than stick to the same way of taking visitors to the rock's summit during the day. In promoting casinos, we know that every visitor will not be gaming in a casino; it will be a separate section of the basket of tourism products that we offer visitors. Now that we are promoting the Colombo Port City for investment, investors will likely be coming into the country, which provides an excellent opportunity for casinos to thrive. As a nation, we must be cognizant that we have no choice but to go with the global trend. A history of 2,500 years cannot go alone in promoting and increasing tourism and tourists and foreign exchange earnings. Of course, we are proud of our history and culture; but at the same time, we have to strengthen our economy and secure a future for our country.

What has been the biggest challenge in recent months to promote bilateral relations and trade due to the pandemic? In your opinion, what is the potential for bilateral exchanges between the two countries in terms of trade?

When I speak with governors and senior ministers, they have high regard for Sri Lanka. They often speak highly of two South Asian leaders, Imran Kahn of Pakistan and Gotabaya Rajapaksa of Sri Lanka. When I enquired the reason for their perception, they said that although these two men came to power through a political party, they are more than just politicians. They are also professionals who have proven themselves in different roles. Oxford-educated Imran Kahn won the ICC world cup for Pakistan. Likewise, Gotabaya Rajapaksa won the 30 years war that everybody predicted was unwinnable. We do have a great future as our president is highly regarded by other world leaders. Australian leaders and lawmakers are waiting to visit Sri Lanka. The governor and the finance minister of New South Wales are waiting for the borders and the airports to open to visit Sri Lanka, which I see as an excellent opportunity for the country.

I was in Australia when President Gotabaya Rajapaksa decided to ban chemical fertilizer and switch to organic farming. Fruits cultivated in Sri Lanka are delicious. Living in Australia for the last eleven and a half months, I haven't eaten a single Cavendish banana, the only variety available there as it's tasteless. Despite Sri Lanka's delicious range of fruits, Australia doesn't import a single fruit or even vegetable from Sri Lanka because we don't follow organic farming methods. True that certain people criticize the president's decision, but the decision taken by the president to use only organic fertilizer for the cultivation of vegetables and fruit will open a market in Australia. Once we are 100 percent committed to organic farming, we can command a big market in Australia. That would be an excellent opportunity to increase trade between the two countries.

The reason for bringing this example is to demonstrate that a typical politician would never take such a decision as they would think of the voters and the next election, but a good leader and administrator will be decisive in their decision. It may not be a popular decision immediately, but it will still be a good decision. People like us living outside Sri Lanka value such initiatives. Unfortunately, while the decision is correct, the dissemination of information regarding the initiative could have been done better. For example, when I was in charge of the MCNS, I was the sole individual with authority to speak about the war and provide information to the country and the world, and this happened under the leadership of Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who was the secretary of defense, while Mahinda Rajapaksa was the president. We collectively decided what we would speak about in the week ahead, and we followed through with the decision. We sent only one opinion to the world. Similarly, had the decision to halt chemical fertilizer and switch to organic farming

been explained by a single spokesperson at the right time before it fell into disarray, the process may have taken off smoothly. Today when we view what is happening internally, no proper individual is giving the correct information. I explained this scenario to the president, who accepted my view. But I believe that for every decision there is a solution.

As the debate surrounding the KDU bill goes on, we all know that Sri Lanka needs private medical colleges. There's much foreign exchange flowing out of Sri Lanka into countries like Australia as many students pursue education abroad. In this light, we have to explore how best Sri Lanka could exploit opportunities therein. A good example is Monash University in Malaysia. A student who follows education at Monash University in Malaysia receives the same qualification as the one given by Monash Australia, which is at a lesser price in Malaysia. If we have a branch of Monash University in Sri Lanka, parents will spend Sri Lankan rupees to obtain the same degree for the child while saving foreign exchange. Today, Sri Lankan students following degree programs at foreign universities are doing so virtually. But parents are paying the same amount they paid when the child was physically attending classes. We must consider those options when we need to save foreign exchange and harness opportunities to earn foreign exchange.

There is a reason for saying that people need to be aware of the rationale governing a decision. It helps them to understand that there is a better way to do something. I'll explain this with a simple example from my younger days. When I was visiting my aunt in Ibbagamuwa as a schoolboy, I remember going to the Rice Research and Development Institute located close by in Bathalagoda, where I met Dr. Weeraratne, who in 1968 invented the BG-8 variety of seed paddy. This new variety of seed paddy can provide a high yield per acre, around 120 bushels of paddy from an acre. Fertilizer was not in predominant use during this time. I believe straight fertilizers allowed farmers to adjust fertilizer application to obtain maximum yield, which began in the early 1990s. Today farmers cultivate the BG-8 variety and other hybrid varieties of seed paddy with the help of fertilizer to get a better yield. But, Dr. Weeraratne didn't invent the BG-8 seed paddy to provide it with chemical fertilizer for growth. The problem is that even people in the ministry of agriculture are unaware of the history surrounding the seed paddy found by Dr. Weeraratne, which was not fertilizer dependent. If I can remember this information that I received as a schoolboy, experts and scientists with the agriculture ministry would know much more than I. The point is, a politician trying to explain and justify organic farming will not convince the people as they have ceased to trust

politicians. We must have the right individual to convey the right message, where knowledge is a critical ingredient in explaining a decision to the stakeholders. Similarly, when we attend bilateral talks, we should know what we are talking about and possess a piece of thorough knowledge.



When promoting the Colombo Port City for investment, it's essential to enable it based on Sri Lanka's strategic location. Australia is four hours and thirty minutes ahead of us, while London is four hours and thirty minutes behind us, so between Australia and London, there's a difference of nine hours when business takes place. Given our central location, Australians want to come to Sri Lanka, which they desire to use as a hub, a status we should promote and accelerate. Moreover, concerning expertise and professionals, Sri Lankan IT personnel and accountants enjoy tremendous acceptance in Australia. Macquarie Bank is Australia's biggest multinational independent investment bank, whose CEO is Sri Lankan-born Shamira Wickramanayake. She had left Sri Lanka 32 years ago to live in London and moved to Australia, who is today the highest-paid CEO in Australia. When I met her, I learned that she had not visited Sri Lanka in nine years, so I invited her to join us

during our intended trade delegation visit to Sri Lanka to meet the president. Being an investment bank, Sri Lanka can benefit from a relationship with one of the highest-ranking officers serving in the bank. That shows that we have the talent, but outsiders grapple with how best to approach Sri Lanka. This position demands the diplomat to be the negotiator and dealmaker at bringing commercial ventures. And some diplomats who don't do their job but only enjoy their time in the foreign country miss out on tremendous opportunities to further trade and economic cooperation.

How have you used your office in getting support from New South Wales and Queensland to help Sri Lanka in its task to control the pandemic?

I have already managed to garner support to assist Sri Lanka's pandemic efforts. I was able to do a lot with the help of Sri Lankans living there in the last two months. Having spoken with Honorable Namal Rajapaksa, he organized with Honorable Dr. Sudharshini Fernandopulle, the State Minister for COVID 19 Control, Primary Healthcare, and Epidemics, who requested the consulate for pandemic assistance. We have around 110 Sri Lankan organizations in New South Wales and Queensland. They came together to send 350 surgical beds and oxygen cylinders. In addition, we also sent other medical equipment requested by particular hospitals through individuals living in Australia. Sri Lankans who are Australian citizens and permanent residents were very keen to help their country and hence came together to contribute to this worthy cause. Even before the request came from Sri Lanka, they asked me what they could do to help Sri Lanka in the pandemic. Before my assuming office, Sri Lankan students in Sydney had been experiencing a food shortage before their repatriation, and the consulate had distributed nearly 1,200 parcels of dry rations among the stranded students, another initiative fulfilled by Sri Lankans living in Australia.

How do Australians and Australians of Sri Lankan origin view Sri Lanka from a distance?

What you watch and read from outside Sri Lanka is vital in shaping views. While the media in Sri Lanka are aiding the government and the country, they are also causing damage to the country's reputation abroad. A good example is the numerous protests held in various parts of the country, which received wide media publicity. In Australia, people are allowed to stage a protest only with permission from the police, with a time slot and limits to the number of participants. When they show thousands of people protesting in front of the president's office in Sri Lanka,

people living outside assume that they are going against the government. And that is not good publicity. Several Sri Lankans in Australia have been inquiring about the shortage of milk powder and are very concerned after reading and watching media coverage on the subject. I have expressed my concerns to some media institutions as we individuals living outside find it hard to justify and explain. We have to remember that foreign governments peruse every news item and day-to-day happenings. Hence, the media is doing significant damage to our image outside, and we feel the impact quite severely.

And to what extent has the pandemic affected the implementation of programs planned by the consulate, and how should the country navigate in the future to accelerate economic cooperation with Australia?

Right now, the pandemic has dramatically affected the implementation of many planned programs, especially in promoting investment and tourism. As I said before, no business person will invest in Sri Lanka via zoom or through email. Travel restrictions are holding back much work. We could have gone ahead with many bilateral talks had the situation been better.

I am aware of the desire of several Australian leaders to visit Sri Lanka. When I met the Honorable Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa this time, he too expressed his wish to visit Australia, which would be an excellent opportunity for Sri Lanka. President Gotabaya Rajapaksa visited Canberra for two days when I served in the Canberra office, so Australian leaders expect people like him to visit the country.

Australia is financially important to us. And we can learn from Australia in conducting trade and other economic transactions with countries outside. For example, Australia openly sides with its western allies against China, which has led to some diplomatic wrangling between the two countries. However, Australia hasn't allowed that to affect its trade with China. China is the biggest buyer of iron ore from Australia. If China stops buying iron ore from Australia, the market in Australia will collapse as China is the world's largest producer of steel. If Australia ceases selling iron ore to China, the quality of steel products will tumble. Something similar did happen when China stopped buying wine from Australia, which is considered one of the finest, and as a result, the price of wine has dropped. But, the two countries don't mix their trade and diplomatic policy, which Sri Lanka needs to follow. Any difference on a diplomatic level with a foreign country should not affect trade. As the Australian economy is robust and powerful, Sri Lanka needs to reap from such advantaged countries by accelerating more bilateral contact and talks.

Unfortunately, the pandemic is preventing us from going forward. Australia is stringent when it imposes a lockdown and regulations. They stick by their decision and impose a fine on any individual violating the rules. I strongly advocate promoting Sri Lanka in Canberra, New South Wales, and Queensland to develop economic cooperation with Australia.

As more and more Sri Lankans plan to pursue education in Australia, how do you plan to coordinate and assist the Sri Lankan missions in Canberra and Melbourne to facilitate their passage and entry into Australia?

Currently, students with visas are not allowed into Australia. Only permanent residents and citizens are allowed into the country. Nevertheless, going into the future, I plan to promote Australian universities to establish branches in Sri Lanka. And I want the Australian government to accept our university education. Sri Lankan professionals in IT, doctors, engineers, and accountants hold very high positions in Australia. That is because Australia knows the value of our education standards and the IQ levels of our educated citizens. Therefore, Australia grants entry to such high-caliber individuals. But I want qualified Sri Lankans to serve Sri Lanka.

Australia, we allow foreign exchange out of the country. By promoting Australian universities to set up here, we can encourage Australian students to learn from Sri Lanka for a lower price, which should be the standard. That will also result in students from Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan choosing Sri Lanka for higher education. This way, we can not only stop foreign exchange from going out, but we can also earn foreign exchange.

When the pandemic restrictions are over, I intend to submit a proposal from the consul general of Pakistan in Australia to initiate a flight from Sydney to Karachi via Colombo and from Karachi to Sydney via Colombo. Such an initiative has several advantages, such as an opportunity to increase airline earnings and provide a service to the people of Pakistan. In the future, if Australian universities do set up branches in Sri Lanka, this will give easy entry to students.

What do you plan to do as Consul General for Sri Lanka in New South Wales and Queensland in the future?

My main concern is to work towards enhancing the relationship between Australia and Sri Lanka. Australia has a sense of trust in our leadership and the government,

which indicates future support. As I reiterated earlier, I'm also keen on promoting Australian investment in Sri Lanka. I met an accountant in Colombo handling the accounts of several Australian companies, which means it's cheaper for Australia to hire our talent because we are more reasonable and affordable while obtaining the same standards of service. That is an excellent opportunity given Sri Lanka's central location, allowing us to use the time difference to our advantage. We can be the next business hub like Singapore or Dubai if we leverage the Colombo Port City. And I intend to promote Sri Lanka tourism in Australia. With more tourist arrivals, there will be a build-up in confidence in the country. During my period in office, I want to continue and grow the excellent relationship between the two countries. President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, during his two-day visit to Canberra, met with Scott Morrison, who was the border minister. He gifted two-speed boats to Sri Lanka, and he is the prime minister of Australia today. I'm sure a request from our president would garner a positive response from Australia. To get that support, we have a tremendous role to play while serving as diplomats in Australia to showcase the excellent work that is taking place in Sri Lanka. Once we overcome the pandemic, I'm sure we can do much more. I'm constantly conscious that the purpose of sending individuals like me to represent the president and the government is to serve Sri Lanka.