

Sajin De Vass Gunawardena: The Rebel With A Cause

Posted on



He is controversial or so it seems. His name resonates within the political sphere of this country. He is known as a doer, with a 'nothing is impossible attitude'. Sajin de Vass Gunawardena popularly known as Sajin has an alternative viewpoint, which enables him to venture where others fear to tread. He is the Coordinating Secretary to the President, Member of Parliament and Monitoring MP for the Ministry of External Affairs. Sajin spoke to Business Today on the multi-faceted nature of politics and the thought provoking aspects of perception and interpretation of a situation. He is truly the rebel with a cause.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe

Photography by Menaka Aravinda And Mahesh Bandara

Who is Sajin de Vass Gunawardena?

I am a normal citizen of this country. After my initial schooling I basically started working.

My first job was at Hayleys at NYK Shipping Lines' Maritime Agency. I like the shipping industry. From there I went on to Evergreen Shipping Lines and that is where I started my professional life. I have always had this thirst that I had to do more with myself. Therefore, I became involved in politics at a very basic level even at that time, as a member of the UNP. From there onwards I ventured out on my own into business as one needs to be fundamentally financially strong to do anything in this country. For almost 20 years on one side I have developed my businesses over a period of years and quite strong in that respect.

Anyone Can Get Anything Done Provided That The Will Is There. Therefore What I Believe In Is That You Must Agree With What You Have To Do And Your Conscience Must Be Clear In Terms Of What Is Being Done Is The Correct Thing.

I have been involved in active politics for the last 15 years. Especially with the emergence of the personality of His Excellency, the President Mahinda Rajapaksa, I have been associated with him for almost 15 years and have been involved in the thick of politics. I have foreseen with him where the country is heading and thought to myself that it is time that I came into the main fray of politics, which I did. I have completed almost one year as a Member of Parliament and looking back I am quite satisfied in terms of how I have started and where I have come to be today.

You are young considering your role in the political landscape for the past few years, can you tell us how you came to this position?

Well, young in terms of age, but with a maturity and experience of 15 long years or more in different levels of the structure in the hierarchy of politics. The credit of giving me the opportunity of entering into politics, building me and moulding me as a possible politician and as a person who can contribute something to the country and to the system of governance goes to His Excellency the President Mahinda

Rajapaksa.

I started actively working for His Excellency in 2001. Step by step I have progressed and I have gained a vast amount of experience in terms of international affairs, local politics and economic development because I have been with His Excellency every step of the way and that experience is something that one cannot ask for. It is that strong footing, strong foundation that has made me a person who is today basically capable, mature and experienced enough in handling the responsibilities that have been assigned to me by the Government.

There Is No Exact Time To Start Whatever You Want, If It Benefits The People And Brings Value To The Country, Anytime Is As Good To Begin.

You are known as a ‘doer’, a person that can get anything done, do you agree?

Anyone can get anything done provided that the will is there. Therefore what I believe in is that you must agree with what you have to do and your conscience must be clear in terms of what is being done is the correct thing. I believe in my life personally and otherwise that everything that we do must be result oriented, there must be an end result that we want to achieve and once you set your mind to that and once you engage and determine exactly what your goal post is, its just a matter of getting it done.

As the key player in the establishment of Mihin Lanka, what are your thoughts on the progress of the airline today?

At the time we established Mihin Lanka, there was much political adversities and a large hue and cry was made about the establishment of the airline. I have to first go into a brief history. Now the irony of the matter is that the very same people who basically criticised me and called me a rogue, thief and a corrupt person -there was not a day in the Parliament while I was the CEO of Mihin Lanka that my name was not mentioned – are all silent today. I am in the Parliament now. In fact in my maiden speech I said that if there is anything that anyone wants to ask from me or any accusations for that matter they are open to come and speak to me. They are open in the House to question me and I am there to answer. But they are quiet now. That itself shows that it was mere cosmetic politics that they were playing.

Now in terms of Mihin Lanka when we started everyone knew that it was under

capitalised. We required 1.5 billion rupees for a period of one year but we only received 250 million rupees as capital. The strength of the airline, which people didn't realise is that an international airline was set up with 250 million rupees, we did more than 30 frequencies a week and we brought in a revenue during the first year of 2.8 billion rupees. And it is that revenue that basically contributed towards setting up the airline as well as the capital and the equity was not there. We had a three-year business plan where we were to break even in three years time and that has happened now.

The Government later recognised the potential and infused the required equity and the airline today is making 418 million rupees as operating profit. That is the graduation of the business. You cannot start a business today and expect profits the next day. In any business you make a loss in the beginning, especially in the aviation industry.

We have to look at things critically if we want to progress. Airlines around the world experience capital erosion; every airline when you look at their yields, due to the rising fuel cost and other expenditure there is a capital erosion every year. The Government of Sri Lanka must recognise this aspect and capital erosion of both SriLankan Airlines and Mihin Lanka have to be looked at. Long-term sustainability of any airline is dependent on profitability; operating profitability on your root structure is one thing. But to have your fundamentals in place you must address the equity erosion happening on an annual basis. All international airlines do that.

Would It Make Sense For SriLankan Airlines To Curtail Their Services And Concentrate Only On South Asia And South East Asia? No. We Want Sri Lankan To Go To The World.

Therefore having taken these aspects into consideration Mihin Lanka has a great future. Ideally what Mihin Lanka should do is concentrate on increasing their fleet. With permanent peace dawning in the country, more tourist are visiting Sri Lanka. My view is that Mihin should stop the four to five hour runs and concentrate on the short runs, basically the flights that are of one to two hour durations; we have the shuttle service so Mihin can feed from within the region – the South Asian region and the South East Asian region – in and out of Sri Lanka. I am confident that if they look at the airline in that perspective with a well developed business plan and funding, Mihin will become one of the strongest airlines in the region in years to come.

At that time did you think it was a right decision to establish Mihin Lanka?

Well, any time is a good time to make the right decision. When you take decisions, especially those that affect the people of Sri Lanka, that affect the accessibility of Sri Lanka, this is where the difference in governance can be seen between the UNP government and the government led by His Excellency the President Mahinda Rajapaksa. The President foresaw the future. We were on a target. We had a road map for Sri Lanka; finish the war, bring credible peace and develop the country including infrastructure. Furthermore when you take the decision based on the global perspective, with adequate infrastructure being developed domestically it yields results.

It may be the case that Mihin was set up during difficult times but results are sown in time to come. That is exactly what happened with Mihin Lanka. As you know Emirates was here with a ten-year management contract, and the whole country knows what was left after they left. SriLankan Airlines is just coming out of that rut. Now they have reduced their losses by 60 percent, and they are just turning around.

In that scenario, there was a strong need for a budget airline in the country. Forget the funding, equity and working capital aspects and look at the operational aspect of the airline during these eight months to now. We had an average cabin factor of 71 percent. This is amidst all the negative publicity that we got. Everywhere there was a negative campaign against Mihin Lanka. With all that negativity we still managed to achieve a 71 percent cabin factor. We created new markets. We created traders who were travelling back and forth. As result of our 71 percent cabin factor SriLankan never suffered in their cabin factor. So the market was there. You have to take bold decisions. At the end of the day it adds value to the country, by having two airlines.

The Pressures That You Get And The End Results That Are Expected Out Of Those Pressures, What Other Countries Expect Of You And What They Expect Sri Lanka To Be; All These Things Have To Be Viewed In A Sense Of Protecting This Country, The People And Our Sovereignty.

Of course commercially SriLankan Airlines and Mihin Lanka should be more integrated in terms of joint operations; unfortunately that is not happening yet. But when the time comes, they will see the value of it. But to answer your question, there is no exact time to start whatever you want, if it benefits the people and

brings value to the country, anytime is as good to begin.

Mihin Lanka came into being when Emirates was moving out, so why didn't we take that into account?

Well, it was a different market. Other countries for example Singapore and Thailand have budget airlines, why? Because there is a complementary market that you can develop. Now if you look at SriLankan Airlines they have a huge network. It is the network traffic that basically keeps it going and they are not dependent on Sri Lanka alone. They cater to a larger global market.

The ideal sense would be in terms of cost and yields, that ideally some day Mihin Lanka should do the regional routes and SriLankan should concentrate on doing the long haul flights where we expand our horizon, expand our routes to new countries. We have to span the world. The time will come when SriLankan will have to be widespread in Europe and Asia. They are flying to Canada on a code share basis so these are markets that we can get. We have people travelling and today the product of SriLankan should not be confined to only Sri Lanka. They have developed it to such an extent that they can work in any part of the world. Now, taking that into consideration and the future of the industry this is where the strength of Mihin Lanka is, where they basically do all the regional flights. When the Mattala Airport is completed we will have a different policy in terms of catering to Southern India and South East Asia so you have to identify segments and business models that will cater to the global market.

Would it make sense for SriLankan Airlines to curtail their services and concentrate only on South Asia and South East Asia? No. We want SriLankan to go to the world. Go to Australia, to Johannesburg, to Moscow, to Canada, to New York why cant we do that? We can do that. Provided that the framework and the structural model is in place.

Personal Perceptions Of What Foreign Policy Should Be...Differs From Personality To Personality. Opinions May Differ But It Is The Collective Responsibility Of The Government To Achieve What We Want To Achieve.

My personal view is that, instead of SriLankan purchasing narrow body fleet, ideally Mihin Lanka should be doing that. SriLankan should concentrate on the wide bodies. They should use the network, the pool of resources that they have and the traffic flow where both airlines are complemented. Therefore the decision that the

Government took, at that point of time, created a new market, created additional revenue minus the investment, basically there was a short fall in equity. And it will strengthen our aviation capabilities and accessibility which plays a major role in development in the global environment.

Don't you think that currently SriLankan and Mihin are overlapping?

No it is not. You can say that it is overlapping if either airline has suffered a loss in their cabin factors. Have they? No. SriLankan has increased their cabin factor. Mihin is running at its capacity. So how can they be overlapping? Today they are pooling their resources. The Mihin crew is taken from SriLankan and then engineering services are also provided by SriLankan, so there are economies of scale happening there as well. My theory is that it should happen more. There should be commercial integration between both airlines. There should be more involvement in that. I will give you a good example, we just finalised an aviation bilateral agreement with India where we have acquired more frequencies especially to Delhi. Now if we do two Delhi flights a day say one by Mihin and one by SriLankan who loses? It comes into the same system. But you have two different markets. So it is not a question of overlapping. If they sit down and look at how one can complement each other, which they have done; for example SriLankan does not go to Dhaka, Mihin started going to Dhaka. I see Mihin bringing passengers from Dhaka who in turn transfer to SriLankan to go to Male. Therefore it is a complementing facility more than an overlapping.

Let Us Give Them The Time That They Deserve And The Respect That Sri Lanka Deserves In Terms Of Handling Its Own Issues.

Why did you get such a negative reaction?

Politics. Do you think the Opposition wants to see us doing well?

I have invited them on many occasions for a debate with me. I am open even now, anytime. I know the factual situation, they too know the facts but it is basically pure, simple politics. Just to sling mud. I don't think you can expect the Opposition to be happy about the success of the Government. It doesn't happen that way and one disgruntled UNP politician who had vested interests and basically wanted a share of SriLankan airlines was making a big noise.

They have the opportunity, as I am in the Parliament everyday to question me. They

can ask me 'these are the offences you have done, these are the corruptions that existed please answer.' I am ready to answer. One year has passed and in every speech that I make I remind them but there is not one single question raised.

A Huge Achievement In Today's Global Context Where We Have Been Able To Totally Eradicate Terrorism. This Is By Far The Greatest Achievement In The World During Our Time Period.

You are also the Coordinating Secretary to the President, you hold immense responsibility. What can you tell us about this aspect of your many responsibilities?

I am a Member of Parliament, Coordinating Secretary to the President and I am also the Monitoring MP for the Ministry of External Affairs.

In terms of Coordinating Secretary I have held this position since the time His Excellency was the Leader of the Opposition, which is from 2001 to date. My role as Coordinating Secretary has no specific boundaries; whatever needs to be looked into I attend to it. But more recently, for the last two to three years I have been focusing on External Affairs. I am the conduit between the President's Office and the Ministry of External Affairs.

We Work In The Villages. Our President Is As Close To Every Man's Heart As He Can Be. That Is Where The Difference Is.

As you know foreign policy is a very delicate subject. In today's context foreign policy and in terms of defending the sovereignty of Sri Lanka, diplomacy alone is not applicable. It is a very delicate situation that needs proper understanding, perspective and adherence to a policy that keeps our focus, which keeps changing on a daily basis because the issues we have to face today are not the same tomorrow. In that sense it is my duty to assist in ensuring that we are on that track, that we are basically attentive to it, that there is harmony between the two institutions and be result oriented in what we want to achieve.

As the Monitoring MP for the Ministry of External Affairs, can you tell us what your role entails and what is being done to strengthen our foreign relations?

Sri Lanka has historically and even at present had very strong foreign relations in

that sense. We are a very civilised nation, we have introduced democracy long before certain other nations and so from the perspective of the Foreign Ministry we do maintain very good relationships with most other countries. We follow a non-aligned posture in terms of our policy. We are reactive to what happens and we generally have strong relationships with all the countries we work with. But of course since of late as you know certain countries are more assertive than the others. We stand our ground and in the best way, diplomatically, show them that what we are doing is right.

The Notion That The Ministry Is In Disarray, I Do Not Agree With That, It Is Absolutely Not. Once Again It Is A Matter Of Interpretation. What Is Right To Me Is Wrong To You...And It Is What You Achieve In That Process That Is The Tangible Result.

In today's context it is very difficult to say what needs to be done because the pressures that you get and the end results that are expected out of those pressures, what other countries expect of you and what they expect Sri Lanka to be; all these things have to be viewed in a sense of protecting this country, the people and our sovereignty. Therefore it is a very complicated process. You cannot say this is our policy and we are going to stick to it. It has come to a situation, which is not unique to Sri Lanka alone and is applicable to other developing countries as well, we have to be reactive now. It is not what you present nor is it what the people of that particular country wants, it is not the aspirations of the people, it is not the progress that is taking place nor is it the overall situation that exists in that country that matters. Certain countries have perceived themselves to be the custodians of rightful governance in the world. Are we to fall in line with that?

That is the question that is answered by the people of Sri Lanka by their franchise. The people of Sri Lanka has adequately answered that on so many occasions in this country, through the many elections that we have had, so that is the decision that we must respect even in terms of formulating our foreign policy and I believe despite many criticisms levelled against us by so many people during this difficult period, even during the war and even now in the post-war period we are handling matters to that extent on behalf of the people of Sri Lanka so that has to be remembered.

Indulging in foreign relations, indulging in foreign policy and taking Sri Lanka forward in the international forum, at times are perceived to be on behalf of the Rajapaksa family and not on behalf of the Government of Sri Lanka but that is

wrong. The Rajapaksa family is also working on behalf of the people of Sri Lanka. In that sense we have been able to achieve much more than others. Not only in terms of presenting our view across but, look at the development that is taking place with international aid and the exposure the President has received in the past few years. Of course we have country specific relationships. At the end of the day we must see what is good for Sri Lanka. We can't listen to one and get angry with another. No, that is not our way. We will look at the advantages that is derived out of such a relationship to Sri Lanka. Our foreign policy is based on reciprocity as well.

Shouldn't Sri Lanka be more proactive as opposed to only being reactive?

If You Understand The Impermanent Nature Of The Post And You Work Within That Framework Then No One Needs To Get Upset. Politics Is Not A 100 Metre Race It Is A Marathon.

Quite so Sri Lanka is proactive but to be proactive there must be a right and a wrong. There must be reasonability. Right and wrong must be judged in an unbiased manner across the board, as objectively as it can be but we are not in a right and wrong game. That is where the difference is. We are definitely proactive, one has to be reactive as well when the time comes, but fundamentally our policy is being proactive but how it is perceived and if we are pre-judged and an agenda created on that basis, then does being proactive matter? That is the situation we are facing today.

Party leaders from within the Alliance blame the Foreign Ministry for failure, your thoughts?

When you look at foreign policy is there one policy that we can say that is correct? It is not so. Personal perceptions of what foreign policy should be, how one should conduct its foreign policy, what it should achieve out of that policy and what your target is, differs from personality to personality. Opinions may differ but it is the collective responsibility of the Government to achieve what we want to achieve. Therefore, foreign policy is not something you can write and say this is the policy, and dictate the terms because you are engaging with your counterpart. It is a process of diplomacy and negotiation, it is a process of consultation and in that sense you steer the ship as you go along to achieve your end result. Perhaps it is a little naïve to say that the Foreign Ministry is not achieving its objectives in fact we are. And we have come this far. Who is to judge what is right or wrong and furthermore what do you expect from a Foreign Ministry? What is the tangible result

you can see, it is the intangible result that basically exists, a positive approach, a positive policy effectiveness; it is not tangible, it is intangible especially in the current context with the various issues that we are handling at the same time. One can have a different view but that is democracy.

We Have To Look At This Without Emotions And The History. If Every Time We Go To Speak About This We Come To The Table With Emotions And History, What Are You Going To Achieve?

Considering the events that have happened in the recent past, where Sri Lanka is facing pressure internationally, what is being done as damage control?

The Darusman Report; basically that panel was setup by the Secretary General to advice him. It is not a UN panel. It has not been endorsed by the UN Charter, it has not been endorsed by the Security Council. Therefore it is similar to me appointing two or three people to advice me on some matter. They compiled a report, which has glaring flaws in it. On the one side look at how the Darusman panel was appointed, they took seven months in terms of determining what they thought they had to advice the UNSG on. In the report they say they spoke to approximately 4,000 people who gave evidence. Then they go on to say that this is of a very highly confidential nature. Therefore, in terms of the disclosure of people, who gave such evidence, the information will be locked up for 20 years, after which a review will be done. Then in their own report they say that this panel is not of an investigative nature. So here you see on the one side, approximately 4,000 odd people who have evidence, number two they are not of an investigative nature, number three therefore we have no way of ascertaining whether this is credible evidence or not. And at the end of the day they say 'please hang Sri Lanka'. Please hang the Rajapaksas. Now isn't this a blatant violation of the fundamentals of natural justice. We are willing to engage.

The damage that has been caused is not for Sri Lanka, not for the people of Sri Lanka but it is a dent in the UN process. This is my personal view. We have a process in this country. A very strong legal system, we have accountability and a very strong law of evidence, we have a process. If a citizen of this country gets up and says that our legal structure is inadequate, then we are open for discussions on that. But in terms of damage, the damage is more to the UN process than to Sri Lanka. Simply because the report is flawed in every aspect. You cannot determine in seven months what has happened having spoken to some people and expect

action based on that, there must be accountability. When they want accountability from Sri Lanka, then there must be equal accountability on their part, in terms of taking responsibility. A more transparent responsibility. If they want the Sri Lankan Government to act on that report, it must be credible. When it is fundamentally flawed, when it violates all norms of natural justice how can it be done. Basically what is the damage they have caused to Sri Lanka, especially between the communities? Maybe that is what they want. We are after 30 years of war we have to bring the communities together and that is the process the Government is undertaking.

Considering what you have said, what is being done to counter this report?

One, we would like to categorically differentiate the Darusman panel from the United Nations, we are a member of the United Nations so our engagement in the UN will continue as it is, there will not be any change in that.

As far as the panel report is concerned when it is fundamentally flawed what would you expect a democratically elected Government to do? We have a local process; we have established a Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Committee (LLRC). Give them the time that they deserves. I have seen, the LLRC has gone around the country and they have spoken with the people. They have taken evidence and transcripts of it are available online. That is how transparent the process is. Therefore give it the time that it requires. These are the two main issues that people talk about, in terms of accountability.

This Is Where I Keep Coming Back To The Same Point Lets Not Live In The Past. Lets Not Live In The Emotions. Lets Not Live With The History.

With regards to the Darusman report, we are capable of having our structure and process address these issues. The purpose of setting up the LLRC was to advice the Government of Sri Lanka in terms of how the reconciliation process and the accountability process must be addressed. So give them that time. They have asked for a couple of months to finish their report and then let us see what their findings and recommendations are.

Can three people sitting in New York or where-ever in the world talking to god only knows whom to determine what is right for Sri Lanka? It is the Sri Lankan people; it is the Sri Lankan process that can basically determine what is good for Sri Lanka.

Let us give them the time that they deserve and the respect that Sri Lanka deserves in terms of handling its own issues.

We see much negative publicity on Sri Lanka, but we do not see Sri Lanka engaging with the international community to counter such adverse perceptions. What are your thoughts on this?

Well you can engage them till the cows come home, but once again it is who is right and who is wrong. It is not a right or wrong game. You continually engage with them and they say the same thing. When they have pre-conceived notions and have different objectives, engagement becomes a one-sided game.

However we do engage with them, with the foreign media and other countries. We put our perspective forward and physically they travel around Sri Lanka. There are Diplomats who go around enjoying the country our culture and beaches but when they come back they start criticising Sri Lanka again. How are you to handle such a situation?

Today, we need to look at the global context, I look at it from that perspective. The West has pre-conceived notions of what they want this world to be, what they want Sri Lanka to be, what they want developing countries to be, of what they want the people of those countries to be. If they say that Sri Lanka should respect the rights of self-determination of the people, the same principle should apply to them, which they fail to realise. They often forget that when they point one finger at Sri Lanka four fingers are pointing at themselves. Therefore engagement has no bearing on the subject at all because it is a preconceived notion.

Can anything be done to change that perception?

We are able to be like this because we are definitely doing what we can, we are engaging with them. We have many countries that are supportive towards us in terms of this whole process; it is a continuous engagement and lobbying. There are countries who are supportive of Sri Lanka and who are sympathetic to Sri Lanka. There are countries that say that Sri Lanka should be given the time that they need. We are at the point of take-off, I would basically say give Sri Lanka a chance. We have had 30 years of war and blood shed, we have finished all that, put that behind us. That is a huge achievement in today's global context where we have been able to totally eradicate terrorism. This is by far the greatest achievement in the world during our time period. Let us go to the next step now, the next step is

reconciliation and economic advancement and we are getting there. Give us the time to get there.

Again, certain sections of society point at the Foreign Ministry as a failure. What can you say to them?

People have preconceived notions on what the Foreign Ministry should be and what the Foreign Ministry should do. But it is easier said than done.

Now, I can say that the Leader of the Opposition can perform better, but he thinks he is performing very well. So is it my view or his actions that determines his performance at the end of the day? He has won all the battles he is strong as he can be, but I think he is not performing as the Leader of the Opposition but does that matter? Because the end result has been achieved. Perceptions can vary, we entertain constructive criticism but taking all that into consideration what is required is the end result and that we have achieved.

Look for example at the EU Parliament resolution, which was brought against Sri Lanka, we managed to come out of it. We won that. Is that a failure? No that is a success. We lobbied very hard, we showed the facts and we showed what progress has been made. We asked for the time that is required for the process to go forward. When we have managed to come out of that situation, isn't that a victory? Isn't that a reflection that the rest of the countries understand what Sri Lanka needs? That is progress.

I must also incidentally say that the LTTE Fronts that exist in the UK have written a letter to some of the Conservative MPs who had supported us at the EU Parliament, threatening them. Now these are the LTTE Fronts, the organisations in the trans-national government writing to Conservative MPs who supported Sri Lanka in her efforts, writing to them and threatening them saying that in the next elections they will make sure that these particular MPs will be deprived of the nominations from the Conservative party. Then who is running the Conservative party? How can the LTTE Fronts tell the MPs that they will be denied nomination, are they running the Conservative party today?

Isn't that an achievement for the Sri Lankan Government? The fact that a letter was written threatening the Conservative MPs that they will be denied nominations at the next British elections by the LTTE Fronts. Isn't that a victory for the Sri Lankan Government? Isn't that a victory for foreign policy and for this Ministry? It is.

The bona fides of these organisations are now open, we have proved beyond reasonable doubt what is happening, the factuality of it.

How come the positive achievements are not highlighted?

That is always the case. When you do well is it always publicised? No it is not. People buy newspapers to read something sensational and negative. If you write something positive all the time then what happens? No one wants to take the paper. So that is human nature. The Government is very vocal in what we do. But I would agree with you to a certain extent that we are behind in our publicity. When you look at the two parties that governed this country the SLFP and the UNP administrations, the UNP does little but has more exposure, but we do more and we have less exposure, so that is something that we have to rectify with time to come, most definitely.

The most important thing however is that, we as an SLFP led coalition government do not depend on what appears on the headlines of the newspapers to govern this country and to win elections. We work in the villages. Our President is as close to every man's heart as he can be. That is where the difference is. In actual fact the mileage that we get is not reflected in the media. As it should be it is in the minds and hearts of the people in the village. They know what is happening and they can see. That is where the difference is. Whereas in the UNP administration the actual amount of development that they did when you compare to what we have done in the last seven to eight years; we have reached about 70-80 percent whereas they were 30-40 percent. I am talking in terms of what matters to the village. In terms of rural development, so the Opposition needs more exposure and use the press for that purpose. We don't do that. There is democracy in the country once again, if you take one paper if there are ten articles, 11 are negative. That is what it is.

Internationally there is good exposure as well. But of course what is picked up in our press is only the negative aspects of it. Today you take CNN, Al Jazeera and BBC there is a certain flow; at the end of the day they create the situation that is my perception. It is those networks that create the situations they take the whole thing forward. Media is such a powerful tool in the global context today. Can Sri Lanka be part of that? There is so much happening, look at the Middle East, and the turmoil in Libya and Syria. Look at Egypt, the situation there is becoming worse now. In such a scenario the time that is allocated to Sri Lanka at the moment is minute in that sense. But of course as a country we do whatever we can. To have a global media presence is very expensive. We also have to think; if we spend that much can we

derive the results we are expecting? So that is why it is more important that we concentrate on a more domestic process, our immediate neighbours around Sri Lanka so that we speak as a region. For example SAARC is moving with a common agenda.

The Foreign Ministry has been in disarray not only now but for many years now both locally as well as our diplomatic missions. What are your thoughts on this and what is being done to rectify this?

Well, to answer that question you need to take a bird's eye view on this. I will tell you a story. I was behind in my Algebra in school, I found it a little tiring and was a bit lazy to do Algebra. There was this particular Maths teacher who told me one day, 'you are like the worm,' I asked why sir?, 'when you get an apple you go straight into it and when you get inside, you do not know which side to turn, you don't know which way to come back you get stuck there. But if you are perched on a tree you first look at the apple from afar from various sides then you know you go inside from here and come out from there.' Now I look at the Foreign Ministry from that perspective. I see the entire apparatus in terms of our missions, our infrastructure and our capabilities that we have, we must understand that there are certain drawbacks in the system. These are institutions that have been here since independence so from time to time it must change. We must be more productive, we must be more result oriented, task oriented and we must cater to the needs of the day, possibly the hour. And I must say we have capable staff. Motivation is required and that is being addressed at the moment and whatever we are achieving, it is as a whole team effort.

The notion that the Ministry is in disarray, I do not agree with that, it is absolutely not. Once again it is a matter of interpretation. What is right to me is wrong to you. What is wrong to you is right to me. And it is what you achieve in that process that is the tangible result.

The Honourable Minister of External Affairs Prof G L Peiris is one of the best-suited ministers this ministry can have. This is of course no disrespect to the previous ministers, they have all done justice by the country, perhaps some more than the others. Foreign policy is a very delicate subject, it is a matter of understanding, its how you dissect a situation. Foreign policy and diplomacy come to play when there is a disagreement and when there is an alternative view being considered; now in that sense there is no better person who has the power of articulation and intellect to project what we stand for, project what we have done and to interact with an

unbiased nature in terms of achieving results than Prof G L Pieris and I am very happy to have got the opportunity to work under such an academic and such an intellectual personality. Under the direction of the Hon Minister I have the opportunity of learning and gaining experience on a daily basis. As I said if you have an open mind and if you work in that spirit there is a lot we can learn from the Honourable Prof G L Pieris.

In the various positions that you have held you have met many world leaders, let us say controversial leaders, can you tell us about the experience and also what you have learned from these leaders?

Controversial for whom? When you say a controversial leader, controversial for whom? Is it for Sri Lanka or a particular nation or a particular bloc of countries? Then, just because they are controversial to a bloc of countries does it mean that we should have the same interpretations? No. A world leader, any leader of a country is a person who has been democratically elected. And every leader that has been democratically elected deserves to be recognised as a franchisee of the people and you cannot differentiate from country to country, just because one country doesn't like the other or because one personality doesn't like the other. That is the stand that we take.

Yes of course I have met many world leaders while accompanying His Excellency the President on so many visits during the last seven to eight years. From the President of Iran to the Prime Minister of Japan to the President of China, to Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and so many others. We have seen how personalities approach Sri Lanka and we have seen how they work and how articulate they are. I have learned a lot in the process as I have gone through the process myself.

As Coordinating Secretary to the Opposition Leader, as Coordinating Secretary to the Prime Minister and then subsequently as Coordinating Secretary to the President I have gone through all these processes. I have met all these people and learned and observed from what they do and engaged in the process. That has also helped me to expand my thinking, my horizons, and it has become a strength to manage my day to day affairs.

As a politician from Ambalangoda, Galle where you were elected both as a Provincial Councillor and subsequently as Parliamentarian can you tell us about this aspect of your work?

I must thank His Excellency the President who consented to that view and gave me the opportunity. I felt that I should first be elected as a Provincial Council member because that is at the grassroots level and I strongly believe that if one should be in politics that is the point to start with, which I did. I received 71,000 votes, in merely a three-month campaign. I campaigned only for three months because my entrance to politics was three to four months before the elections. I feel that it is a remarkable achievement to receive 71,000 votes especially from a district that is complicated in its diversity in terms of politics as well as life and economy.

I understood the district and I visited 896 Grama Sevaka Divisions. In my Provincial Council election campaign when I visited each and every Grama Sevaka Division and I have spoken to the people and basically understood the district of Galle, the issues that the people are facing and the infrastructure development that needs to be done.

Winning elections is not an easy task; one must understand the aspirations of the people. What is expected of them in terms of developing their livelihoods on a daily basis. That aspect I understood very correctly and very adequately by travelling the entire district. But of course travelling is one thing understanding is one thing but as an MP who represents an electorate it is very difficult to do work in terms of the entire district but I try to contribute as much as possible and basically live up to the expectations of the people who have voted for me.

At the time that the decision was made for you to contest the Provincial Council elections some had questions or maybe felt cautious, in your mind why do you think that is?

There is a story in Sinhala – it is at the tree that bears fruit that stones are thrown, for fruits that they can break. Maybe people would have perceived that this is not a good thing. People who criticize will always criticize, those who want to criticize a personality will do it for anything, but I feel they got their answer, 71,000 votes, which stand as a fact. In terms of my achievement politically, as a beginner, I stood for elections amidst all those accusations against me. Amidst the finger pointing, amidst the negativity that you just mentioned. What was the verdict of the people? 71,000 votes that speak for itself. Also, if you are not criticized then you may not be doing much.

In the system you are a junior how do you manage to survive with so called seniors?

You must know exactly where you are in the ladder, I have just entered politics and only one year down the road of active politics. I have been given great responsibility and I am still learning. It is a learning process and in that respect if you know exactly what your role is and if you don't allow that to go into your head. The most important thing is that I remind myself that the office that you enjoy, the political power that you yield and the work that you do and the responsibilities that you have in the sphere of politics, you are here by choice of the people and you are here by choice of the Head of State. In the game of politics and in the process of politics nothing is permanent if you understand that I can be seated here now and in the afternoon be taken off whether it is by the Government or by the President, whether it is by my Minister or whether it is by my people who put me here. If you understand that fact well you have nothing to worry about. You take nothing with you, you do as much as you can and in some cases you will see the result and in some cases you don't. If you understand the impermanent nature of the post and you work within that framework then no one needs to get upset. Politics is not a 100 metre race it is a marathon.

Speaking of the political process - negotiations with the Tamil parties - especially the TNA is one of your main responsibilities. Can you tell us how the progress is at this point?

I am a member and Secretary of the committee that was appointed by the Government, to speak to all parties, whether it is Tamil and other parties in terms of arriving at a proper devolution process. The process is going quite well, there is no ambiguity as far as we are concerned in our requirement. But I must say one thing now that we have had six rounds of discussions with the TNA, and the EPDP as well; what I say here does not represent the view of the Government and I must be very clear on this. This is Sajin de Vass Gunawardena speaking, my personal feeling, as a citizen of Sri Lanka I have a right to express myself; I have seen the TNA making statements and negative accusations during the last couple of weeks. I have many Tamil, Muslim and Tamil speaking friends and I ask them this question. Is the TNA the sole representative of the Tamil community in this country?

I have nothing against the TNA, I am very friendly with them and I have a very unbiased and uncluttered mind in this whole process. When I speak to the Colombo based Tamils, they just laugh at it. They don't give an answer, why can't we have a larger process with greater participation. Lets take the argument that the TNA represents the people in the affected areas. However we must not forget that more than 52 percent of the Tamil population living in Sri Lanka live outside the North. I

believe very strongly that reconciliation and devolution must not be linked with ethnicity. What are we trying to achieve? On the one side they say, the Government must approach reconciliation in its proper perspective, genuinely, so the people can feel it. But then the TNA brings in ethnicity. Now the whole purpose of reconciliation is to be non partisan in terms of ethnicity. Therefore let us look at it like that. The TNA must also look at it like that. At the end of the day, whatever the Government does it is with a common objective, towards deriving the benefits to the people of Sri Lanka.

The Government Has Done Everything It Can But It Is Then The Onus Of The Private Sector To Invest.

I have seen many letters and articles stating that the North and the East must be developed. Yes true, as soon as the war finished, we had a victory, what did the TNA want? Devolution. Right after the end of the war, displacement was about 300,000. What do you think was important for the 300,000 people, devolution? Is that what is important for them? For 30 years they were incarcerated, 30 years they were under the gun, 30 years they lost their children to the LTTE as combatants, what do they want? Devolution? No, they want a decent livelihood, they want shelter, health, education and infrastructure. That is exactly what the Government did and is doing. It is a step-by-step process, because at the end of the day the benefit should be derived by the people of that region. Not by the politicians. The politician must work to get the benefits to the people. The tangible benefits. See when the TNA comes and says, for example, please give us more autonomy, we have not denied them that autonomy, when did the centre deny them the autonomy. For the last 30 years they couldn't have elections there why? Is it because of us? No. There was a man with a gun behind the head of every man, every child and every mother that prevented democracy, so much so that the people of Jaffna, the people of the North and East were prevented from having democracy, autonomy and governance. Even the TNA was restricted, they couldn't say anything, and they were restricted for the last 30 years. We have to look at this without emotions and the history. If everytime we go to speak about this we come to the table with emotions and history, what are you going to achieve? We too can say that thousands have been killed, by the LTTE; bombs, attacks and killings but, do we come with that to the table? No. That is the past that has happened. We can't forget that as a Government but what is being rooted is reconciliation.

On the aspect of rehabilitation and resettlement you can see that the number of people displaced has gone down from approximately 300,000 to 11,000 and this

11,000 are not contained in a camp they have free movement; they go out during the day to work and they return in the evening. The impeding factor in terms of completing the resettlement process is demining. We do not want people to go out and then get caught to land mines. Therefore time is required for that and while the Government is addressing this aspect they are also developing infrastructure.

The rehabilitation process in terms of the LTTE ex-combatants there are many programmes in place. India has given a commitment for 50,000 houses and the work will start soon. It is just a matter of time. You cannot just wave a wand and make things happen. It is a process. Under the stewardship of Honourable Basil Rajapaksa the Ministry of Economic Development is doing everything possible for livelihood development so it is a process where one is linked to another you can't have resettlement sans development.

The people need shelter and education. Most of the schools that were under the military in the North and the East have been given back as schools. People should visit these areas. I am not saying it is a rosy picture and that everything is working 100 percent. There may be areas that the Government needs to look into, there may be areas that the Government has to progress upon but give us a chance to do that. Don't throttle the people of this country, which is what is happening now. By trying to throttle the Government they are throttling the people. The majority of the people of this country support the Government, we have won many elections with large majorities. The people are with us today, they were with us yesterday and they will be with us tomorrow when it comes to the sovereignty of this nation. All I am saying is don't throttle the people of this country.

You have to be objective towards achieving reconciliation. In the guise of reconciliation if you are looking at separatism if you are looking at achieving more political power for you, at the expense of the cause that has to change. In terms of the process I believe that whatever is being worked out at the end of the day, the benefits must be derived by the people of Sri Lanka. And let us not look at this with ethnicity. We only complicate matters more and more when you think of ethnicity.

We need to be more responsible in terms of how we approach it and it is not something we can sit down today and say 'we have agreed now let us walk away.' No. We are talking about the lives of people. We are talking about future generations. They must not forget all the people of Sri Lanka; and the responsibility of any Government whether it is the Mahinda Rajapaksa administration or otherwise, it is our responsibility in total. And at the end of the day whatever

happens governments can talk, parties can talk, they can agree on so many things but finally who decides? It is the people.

One must be objective in that sense. Industries need to be developed and factories constructed. We need specialised skills in those areas. The Government is trying to do that and on the other side there are people who protest. Has the majority community, the Sinhala community decided that all the Tamils should go to the North? No. My neighbour is a Tamil, my neighbour is a Muslim, what is the issue? But politically there are certain elements that want ethnic segregation to happen coupled with devolution. Now do the people of the North and East have the financial capability to develop their own industries? No, we must bring in more industries and more opportunities for them. A good example is child combatants. 111 child combatants were taken for rehabilitation out of which 70 have sat for the GCE A/L recently of which two were selected to the Medical Faculty. This is just two years down the road after the end of the conflict. They were shooting and holding guns before! This is exactly what we are saying as a Government. The reconciliation process, should not be linked to ethnicity. This is my personal view. The Tamil National Alliance, if they are genuine for the cause of their people they must come without the baggage, without the history, without the emotions. The objective should be in achieving the maximum possible in every sphere, not only for the Tamil man but for all who basically live in this country.

The TNA is known to be a proxy of the LTTE. The TNA does not represent the entirety of the Tamil population. What the people want and what the TNA are asking for differs. What are your thoughts on this?

Yes, we have already started talking to the EPDP, then we will start talking to all the other minority parties. We have also spoken to the other parties in the Government. We are an alliance – the People’s Alliance – we have already spoken with the other constituent parties as well. It is not an exclusive process everyone has to be inclusive in this whole set up and fundamentally people accept that a certain type of devolution should take place. The Government has recognised this, the Government has always been saying that we are willing to go on the 13th Amendment plus one. We are very clear on what we want. But one thing has to be very clear. What the LTTE was going to achieve by way of the gun, we cannot give democratically. Thousands of people’s blood was shed (by the LTTE) to protect the unitary and sovereignty of Sri Lanka.

The unitary state and the sovereignty of this nation must be protected. Are we that

large a country that you can break this country into pieces and say you take this and you take that? No. We do recognise there should be certain aspects of delegation, certain changes should be done, that is all recognised. But as you said, being proxies of the LTTE, perhaps not through their will but for the fear of life, why I say that is the LTTE has killed more Tamil people and leaders than Sinhala leaders.

Today, one thing that I keep debating in my mind is that why there are not many Tamil people participating in the political process of this country. Not only in the North what about Colombo? What about the rest of the country? Because that is the history, that is what the LTTE has done to them. They have basically sent them into the wilderness of politics. That has to change now. Quite rightly when you look at it from a political perspective, TNA is afraid of that. If there is a wider political participation of the Tamil speaking community things can change. Lets not keep the people of the North as they are forever. Let them come out of that. Let there be more political interaction. Let there be industries coming up there, let that area be developed, let them have the freedom to make their own economic choices, in terms of their livelihood developments. Lets not leave everything for 16 Members of Parliament to determine what is right for the larger community. The Government wants more participation, a larger voice to come out. You ask any of the Tamil business people in this country whether they are unhappy with this Government or with the country or with the people. There maybe one or two having genuine concerns, I interact with them. And then where we see an issue we rectify it but largely when you run a business, does the Sinhala man make more profits than the Tamil man? Is that how it happens? It doesn't, it has no bearing in today's context. This is where I keep coming back to the same point lets not live in the past. Lets not live in the emotions. Lets not live with the history.

If we look at the private sector, how do you see it progressing?

The private sector has open access to the President and the Government. Most of the policies whether it is the Budget or whether it is a larger macro situation or whether it is a monetary policy or the fiscal policy are decided in consultation with the private sector and the business community in this country. And you can see the results that are being yielded. If you talk to my good friend Ishara Nanayakkara, LOLC, they never had it so good. John Keells, they have never had it so good, you take Carsons, they are doing well. We have now permitted companies to do foreign borrowing. We have liberalised our economy, we have relaxed exchange control, this is what the people must understand, this is what our opponents, our people

who criticise us must understand.

As a Government, you need to be not only proactive but reactive as well. During the war, we had to tighten our belts, we had an objective and we had a target and a timeframe to achieve that. After that with the economy changing and liberalisation setting in; now our foreign currency balances, basically every two months we are adding a billion dollars into our foreign exchange reserves. We have permitted companies to go and do foreign borrowing. We are now enticing companies to go and invest outside Sri Lanka. The consistent policy of the Mahinda Chintana is the onus of development is on national productivity. Not to say that you are closing the country to the rest of the world, but the emphasis is on increasing production, which we have done. Why is it that we could withstand the global recession that is still taking place? If you go to Europe you can see that. Being a 20 million population, why is it that we could withstand the global recession? It is because of the correct macro and micro economic policies that we undertook. As a Government you must know to open up when you want and close up when you want in the larger interest of the country.

As a Government your primary responsibility is to the people of this country. The private sector understands this very well and we have been reactive to their requirements. The Central Bank has gradually brought down the interest rates which induces investments, we have surplus in balance of payments, foreign exchange reserves are in surplus and economic growth is more than eight percent. Unemployment figures are coming down. But I still feel that we must cater to the unemployed youth sector now. We must get them into a more production oriented process. That aspect is still pending, but the Mahinda Chintana has addressed that and the Ministry of Economic Development is now step-by-step getting into that process. The only link that the private sector has with the Government is good governance and correct policies. In Business Today, where Susantha Ratnayake says that 'this is our last chance', you have to give him credit for saying that. The Government has done everything it can but it is then the onus of the private sector to invest.

What about the reduction of corporate tax and other taxes, how will this affect investment and development?

That is another point. If you look at the tax regime that we follow, the duty exemptions and incentives are given to encourage investment. On the other hand the infrastructure has developed to such an extent that today investments will be

drawn here not merely as a result of a duty or a tax exemptions. Tax exemptions are required in terms of large strategic investments but we have built something more than that. A sound economy, that basically provides the comfort and security required for investment in this country. Then there are large markets that can be explored from here. The entire South East Asian region is the market that is basically being catered to.

The simplification of the tax regime in terms of corporate tax is to induce, which we have done and I don't see anyone complaining about that. However as a citizen of Sri Lanka and as a person who managed many companies, I have a complaint. I believe the financial sector of this country is making far too much money. There has to be development lending and risk lending, which are not happening.

When I look at the newspaper every morning I see, profit of four or five times in billions. There is no issue in making these profits but there is a small and medium scale sector that needs help, that needs borrowing and that can be a risk component. Surely if you make ten billion profit, could you not allocate two to five percent as risk lending? This is my personal view. I might be criticised for this once again, but it doesn't matter. My personal view regarding this is that the Central Bank is not doing its job properly. They must introduce regulations to banking institutions that require a minimum of 10 - 20 percent from its total portfolio and it must be distributed geographically in the country. Not 100 million to one or 200 million to another.

During the UNP administration my father was the Chairman of the National Development Bank and by the time he was appointed they had already signed for the privatisation of the bank. He had to basically undertake the process of privatisation with the World Bank. That is one of the worst steps that the UNP administration took. Furthermore, the dismantling of the DFCC. Today they are all commercial banks. The Government of course has set up Lankaputhra and the Regional Development Bank, but they will take time, as they need huge capital resources to reach the standard and have capital adequacy for such lending.

Today even countries such as Japan and USA, have development banks. Commercial banking is different so we need to reassess that aspect. The financial sector of this country must take more responsibility in assisting people and entrepreneurs. Choosing what is better; to make billionaires and millionaires, lending hundreds or thousands of millions to safeguard your portfolio and your returns, you have a very good recovery process but at the same time, it is the onus

of the financial sector to nurture entrepreneurs.

There is great difference between a millionaire or a billionaire and an entrepreneur. When you visit the provinces of this country you find entrepreneurs, people with good ideas and skills, but they need support. For example in Ambalangoda there is a family who often seeks my help. They were involved in light course fishing. Incidentally they had experienced a loss of income and had no way of making a living. They asked for assistance to purchase a boat, which would cost about 1.5 or two million rupees. They had gone to DFCC, NDB, Peoples' Bank and BOC to no avail. They all would have requirements such as accounts with the bank for one year and so on. This reminds me of the famous Chinese proverb that says; don't give the poor man a fish a day but give him the rod, so that he can fend for himself and maketh an entrepreneur of himself. That is how we must begin to think and act. That is how the banking sector of this country must start thinking.

I Believe The Financial Sector Of This Country Is Making Far Too Much Money. There Has To Be Development Lending And Risk Lending, Which Are Not Happening.

Give two million rupees and have the boat as collateral. They will start paying back, learn responsibility, become productive and contribute to the economy. That risk the banks can well afford to take. I would like to appeal to my good friend the Governor of the Central Bank Ajith Nivard Cabraal to look into this. To urge banks to impose some sort of mechanism where every bank undertakes the responsibility of building entrepreneurs and risk lending. This approach will yield results within the short term and will contribute largely to a increase in the GDP as well as productivity of the country. Not forgetting reducing unemployment and improving livelihood and life style.

Many things are said about you, both good and bad; what is your perception on this?

I am yet to come across something good. Apart from the people I represent in Galle and some of the people I know. Generally, good doesn't take you that far but bad does. Therefore my conscience is clear and I do what I should do to the best of my ability and taking into consideration the larger interest of the people of this country. I am very loyal to the Government that I represent but of course I must say that I believe very strongly in the fact that what I'm doing is right. At the same time while I am in the process if someone comes and tells me I am wrong I am willing to accept

and I will argue my case. There are times that I lose but then I reflect upon myself.

Where-ever there is a controversy, the first name we see is yours. Why is that?

Well, once again controversy is a matter of interpretation what is a controversy to you may be an opportunity for me. But I think that also speaks of my personality because however bad it is, however bad it looks however bad the outcome may be I look at it once again from a result oriented point of view because one must engage. As a responsible member of this Government if I look at every issue thinking 'how will it affect me personally' and if I am not being honest, if I am not being objective to the Government that I represent and the people who elected me then I cannot do my job. Therefore for me there is nothing controversial, there is nothing bad and I will approach anything if I am asked to do that. I will try to see the positive side of it and to be reactive and to engage and try and get a positive result at the end of the day. Therefore once again what is controversial might also be an opportunity. If I am successful in resolving a issue that was viewed as being 'controversial' the benefit of the same is to the people and Sri Lanka.

If we move on to your family, your father Abeydeera de Vass Gunawardena and brother, Manoj Gunawardena are well known names in Sri Lanka, can you speak a little bit about your family?

Well my father has been a Government Servant for 38 years and he has retired now. He has been a Leftist and was a member of the LSSP, and very strong supporter of Colvin R De Silva. I too got the opportunity when I was small to interact with the late Colvin R De Silva and our families have been very close. I have learnt a lot from him in terms of being brought up in that manner that he has been. He started his life in the Army so he is quite regimental and he brought us up in a very strict manner. I was the most undisciplined character in the entire household. Possibly a rebel without a cause. But that has ended positively I am ever so grateful for the up brining that we got. This is something that I try to instil in my children now, my parents were responsible in terms of making us understand what the realities of life from our small days. We used to live within our means.

Now my father being a government servant couldn't afford to educate both myself and my brother abroad. Me, being the rebel I quickly gave way to my brother. He went to Melbourne and studied at Monash graduated and came. Those are the strengths that I have today. Because we have lived within our means, we developed

and since I went out on my own and developed my business I have come to where I am today. But for a moment I am not ashamed to say that we have come through that process. Now that is the strength that one has in going forward. I must say that I learnt a lot from them, which I am ever so grateful for and to.

I have the best wife in the whole wide world. She is very understanding and supports me and gives me the space that is needed for me to indulge in my politics and matters of the State. In today's context it is very difficult to find a life partner who would understand the pressures of being a politician. I am grateful for her support and understanding. I have two boys the eldest is six and the youngest is just one year now. We have a very good family life and very good understanding. All of this at the end of the day contributes to one's success in life. I have promised my family that I will try my very best to increase the time I spend with them. It is a New Year resolution.

Your brother Manoj Gunawardena, is the current CEO of SriLankan Airline. He is seen as a political appointment whereas he has been with the airline for 30 years and has earned the position as CEO, but it is he who is resigning from SriLankan. What are your thoughts on this?

The fact that he is the CEO of SriLankan Airlines has nothing to do with me nor with politics. At the time that Emirates left he was the Head of Worldwide Sales, which is equivalent to the Head of Commercial and is next to the CEO. So at that point of time the Government thought the best option was to appoint him as the CEO as he was doing the job anyway.

Because We Have Lived Within Our Means, We Developed And Since I Went Out On My Own And Developed My Business I Have Come To Where I Am Today. But For A Moment I Am Not Ashamed To Say That We Have Come Through That Process. Now That Is The Strength That One Has In Going Forward.

My brother joined SriLankan Airlines in 1982 as a cargo assistant. I remember he did his A' Levels and fell short of two marks to go to Medical Faculty, he wanted to become a doctor. But he couldn't enter the Medical Faculty and as there was some issue at the private medical collage he was not accepted. Then he went and joined as a cargo assistant, now the cargo assistants job is to supervise the loading and unloading of the passengers cargo. In 1982 I remember he used to work for 14 to 16 hours a day. He has come up from there. He has been with the airline for 30 years.

He himself took the decision that the time has come to move on. For 30 years he was in one single organisation, he never shifted from that and he has told me on many occasions when I have asked him why he doesn't go to another airline 'no I have started here and I will finish here. I will never go to another airline'. He must be tired. 30 years of working in one place and he has gone to the top. He has been their CEO for three and a half years and his contract as CEO is finishing in July and he has opted to move out. One has to respect that. And you must know when to go.

It is absolutely not a political appointment because when you look at SriLankan airlines when he was CEO, the entire board needs to get credit as well. They have done a herculean task in terms of changing that airline and the direction it was going. From what Emirates handed over to us; when SriLankan airlines was given to Emirates, so many years back we owned 16 aircrafts it came back minus, nothing. All the aircrafts were on lease. It came back with no reserves no profits, absolutely nothing. Frequencies have been changed, there is better utilisation of aircraft and better utilisation of routes. The loss has come down by 60 percent and with the re-fleeting that is taking place now and the new routes that are being explored and embarked on and with increasing foreign travel in terms of tourism and business travel to Sri Lanka, the airline is definitely going to go places in years to come. He has that credit to him as the CEO of the airline. And even if you ask me I would also rather leave when I am at the top. Every man has a cycle and I am talking in my sense. You have to decide whether you have to go when you are riding the wave or you want to tumble and come out and say that I am finished. That's it.

What plans do you have for the future?

The future is not hazy any more, the future is very clear we have a job to do. We have a collective responsibility and I speak as a Member of Parliament and an integral part of the democratic process that this country represents. We definitely have to play our individual roles and I personally feel that the role of a Member of Parliament must change. We have to bring people closer together. The onus of taking development to our particular electorates are with us. Not as a large part and parcel of the Government. Yes the Government does infrastructure development and other development aspects in terms of economic activity as part of the process. However, we have a larger responsibility of getting involved in that process where we take the private sector into the village. That is on the one side. If we have that concept and if all the politicians represented at whatever tier whether it is Pradeshia Sabha or Parliamentarians we have much work to fulfil and for the people of this country.

I Will Fulfil What I Have To Do To The Best Of My Ability In Keeping With My Conscience And What Is Right For The People Of Sri Lanka.

This year I witnessed another development; we celebrated the Sambuddhathva Jayanthi, Vesak; I have a Muslim friend whom I invited for dinner and he said that he will get late as he was taking his children to see the Vesak celebrations. Now that is what this Government has achieved. That is where we have to play our part. As politicians and as citizens of this country we definitely have a role to play. Have you heard before of a Muslim person going to see Vesak? That is the feeling that has been created in this country today. Freedom, patriotism and the need to feel together. In that sphere I will do my utmost towards working towards those objectives and whatever the Government seems fit to give me to handle including the controversial matters.

Final thoughts?

I must thank His Excellency the President for giving me the opportunity to be part of this administration and giving me the opportunity to firstly work with him for the last 15 years and giving me the opportunity to develop myself. I never said this publicly and I will take this opportunity to say that I am grateful for the trust and faith that has been bestowed upon me and in the work that I do. I will fulfil what I have to do to the best of my ability in keeping with my conscience and what is right for the people of Sri Lanka.









