



A Learner's View on Dr. Saman Kelegama

By Shashithanganee Weerawansa

Shashithanganee Weerawansa

Ms. Shashithanganee Weerawansa is a lecturer in Economics at the university of Colombo over a decade. In addition to her qualification in Economics she also holds a Master in Business Administration. She has wide experience as a lecturer serving local and foreign degree programmes of the University of Wales, University of London, University of Southern Queensland, University of Monash etc. Shashi has many publications to her credit, on a wide range of Economic and Management related subjects.



At the outset I must mention that I did not have a close association with Dr. Saman Kelegama but have been a silent admirer and follower of his speeches.

Since many academics and friends have written tributes on this great economist with detailed information about his professional achievements, I thought that I should express my thoughts on him from a different angle: a 'third umpire' view as an outsider rather than as an academic. Moreover, Dr. Kelegama has made his mark as an international scholar who doesn't need any introduction. It is an impossible task to incorporate all of his achievements to a short tribute.

I first happened to listen to Dr. Kelegama on an International Trade-related topic when he delivered a lecture at the Senate Hall in the College House, Colombo University, more than a decade ago.

I was at first mesmerized by his voice and then by the knowledge and the clarity of the in-depth arguments he presented. The arguments he brought out in his speeches served to not just lure the audience into agreement, but also to equip it to probe into the matter and understand the pros and cons objectively.

Dr. Kelegama had the ability to impartially analyze any matter without be-

ing biased towards or against existing political ideologies, enabling his audience to understand the true nature of his topic. He struck a clear balance between positive and normative economics.

Thereafter, I hardly missed his presentations or speeches: be they as chief guest, keynote speaker, guest lecturer or in any such capacity. I always made it a point to attend them as I strongly believed that I could gather a repertoire of knowledge from them. At each instance they were meticulous, to-the-point, and contained a lot of facts and figures.

Dr. Kelegama's critical evaluation of economic issues was accurate and commendable; his articulation of subject matter was often coloured by coherent and simple explanations, making it easily understood even by persons without an economics background.

It is no easy task for an intellectual to deliver lectures on a wide range of topics to a broad audience of people who are not specialists in the discipline. His ability to do so, blended with his fluency of language, enabled him to perform this task to perfection. Dr. Kelegama knew his onions and at the same time, was clever enough to simplify serious economic theories so that a wide range of audience could understand.



Dr. Kelegama's critical evaluation of economic issues was accurate and commendable; his articulation of subject matter was often coloured by coherent and simple explanations, making it easily understood even by persons without an economics background.



Undoubtedly, Dr. Kelegama has been the most sought-after figure in Sri Lankan economics fora. The University of Colombo always invited him for its main economic seminars: be they international conferences, the South Asian Economic Students' Meet (SAESM), or the Sri Lanka Economic Research Conference, in light of his expertise as guest speaker.

This was due to the trust the Department of Economics of the University of Colombo had in his wisdom to retain the interest and command the attention of his audiences while elaborating on contemporary economic issues. As such, organizers of events were guaranteed a full house. Participants of such fora never felt that their time was wasted when an eminent economist of his caliber had added colour to the event, making it a resounding success.

In these fora, many a question would be posed to Dr. Kelegama. I have never seen him disrespecting a single question irrespective of how appropriate they were or were not. When most presenters undermine questions fired by the audience; interfering halfway through with an attitude such as "I know what you mean" and answer hastily, Dr. Kelegama faced all those posed to him positively in the right spirit.

This characteristic spoke volumes of Dr. Kelegama's strengths. He made sense, touching on most current and pertinent economic issues. His academic qualifications, complimented by the eloquence with which he spoke on economics knowledge and enhanced by the diligent application of economic theories to the real world, guided policy makers in making great strides. He was an intellectual with global qualifications blended with a local pulse. Despite obtaining all his higher education qualifications abroad, he always inculcated them with local flavor.

Whenever I researched an economics-related area for the purpose of teaching, learning or research, I often came across Dr. Kelegama's contributions on a wide range of topics. It is hard to understand how a professional in high demand could spare time for such huge volumes of contributions.

The views he had aired were not mere words spoken for the sake of contributing but had up-to-date findings presented in a simplified manner with facts and analytical underpinning. Of course his diction is lucid and simple, and could be understood by non-specialists in the subject. This crystalizes his dedication, commitment and love for the subject in which he had immense knowledge.

He produced many academic publications, and was a regular contributor to leading newspapers and academic journals. A versatile character who enjoyed sharing his wide knowledge with the new generation, Dr. Kelegama served on many private sector boards, government institutions, advisory committees, professional organizations, commercial banks and charitable organizations.

Dr. Kelegama was a household name among economists in South Asia, particularly at South Asian Economic Students' Meet (SAESM) in which the University of Colombo has been a regular participant. Since I have been involved with SAESM for the past ten years I have had first-hand experience of Dr. Kelegama's popularity in the region. Economists in South Asia had high regard and respect for Dr. Kelegama. Each time we came across fellow economists in South Asia, the first thing that they would inquire about from us was Dr. Kelegama and IPS at which he had been the live wire. The Sri Lankan economy and Dr. Kelegama's IPS were synonymous to most economists in South Asia.

This is ample testimony of this great economist's tremendous popularity internationally, and reflects how he impressed economists in the region with sound arguments and presentations.

It was a rare occurrence that one could be an expert in many areas of

the discipline. Dr. Kelegama was one such individual who had the competence to intellectually contribute to many economics-issues such as international trade, industrial economics, public enterprise reforms, regional integration, privatization, trade liberalization, exports, apparels, tourism, human development and many macroeconomic issues; each contribution having critical underpinnings to the matter concerned.

One must have a genuine interest and a passion for the country to be thorough enough to address its burning economic and social issues. Here his dedication to uplifting the economy was clearly evident. His effort and commitment to staying up-to-date on many economic issues permitted Dr. Kelegama to always give the most solid answer to questions from the audience. Also, he presented a balanced view of any topic he spoke of, and never tried to impose his ideologies forcibly. It was left to the audience to decide what was right and wrong.

Dr. Kelegama is a born economist gifted to our country with special abilities as a writer, speaker, listener, and analyst having humility, simplicity, compassion, patience, courage and loyalty to his credit.

With excellent academic qualifications, and in being a good practitioner all in one person, he is an amazing creation. His untimely death creates a big vacuum and causes an irreparable loss to world of economics. At a juncture Sri Lanka needs committed intellectuals to uplift its economy, his death is a great loss to the nation.

None could forget his immense contribution as an academic or his praiseworthy efforts towards the country's economy.