



Ananda College Old Boys' Association

## *Olcott Oration 2010*

### **Moderating competing narratives: the challenge of recasting Sri Lanka's image abroad\***

by

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at the

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\*The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL)

**Moderating competing narratives:**  
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## ***1. Introduction***

I am deeply honoured to have been invited by the Ananda College Old Boys' Association to deliver the Olcott Oration 2010.

It is at moments like this, that one feels so deeply humbled, conscious of the fact that you owe so much, to so many - particularly those who nurtured you in your formative years, who shared your youth in a joyous way, who guided and supported you in work and in life. I feel deeply touched to see so many of them, in this audience today.

The man whom we remember today, Colonel Henry Steele Olcott was born in New Jersey in the USA on 2 August 1832. Having served as a military officer, and subsequently practicing as a journalist and lawyer, Col. Olcott founded the Theosophical Society of America in 1875. He came to be inspired by accounts of the '*Panaduravadaya*' led by Ven. Mohottiwatte Gunananda and was distressed by the plight of Buddhists in then Ceylon, in the face of over three and a half centuries of domination by European colonial powers.

Col. Olcott and Madam H.P. Blavatsky declared themselves Buddhists, and headed to our shores to help. According to historical records, they landed in Galle on 17 May 1880 and took panchasila at the Vidyananda Vihara in Galle. After discussions with the venerable monks and assessing the situation, according to Prof. C.V. Agarwal of the Theosophical Society, Adyar, Chennai, "Col. Olcott devised a three-pronged strategy to arrest the prevailing decadence, namely-Buddhist education, well planned propaganda and sound organization."<sup>1</sup>

In the years that followed, Col. Olcott, in addition to being responsible for the revival of Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka, was instrumental in founding 'the Buddhist English Academy', what we today call Ananda College, with the stated intention - to provide English language education to Buddhist students, who would otherwise have had to go to a missionary school in order to get education in the English medium. This was a time, according to Agarwal, when the British colonial administration was supporting some 805 missionary schools, as against only 2 Buddhist schools. Given the solidarity he built with Ven. Hikkaduwe Sumangala, Anagarika Dharmapala, D.B. Jayatilake, it could be argued that by the time of his death on 17 February 1907, he had ignited among Sri Lankans, both the passion and the organization required to struggle for independence.

In selecting a topic for today, I wanted it to be relevant and also constructive. In my choice "*Moderating competing narratives: the challenge of recasting Sri Lanka's image abroad*", while I continue with the theme of the challenges facing our country articulated by two senior distinguished Anandians who preceded me in delivering the Olcott Oration, I will deal explicitly with its external dimension.

Senior Lawyer Mr. Gomin Dayasiri in the Olcott Oration of 2007<sup>2</sup>, focused on the inherent contradictions faced by the campaign of the LTTE for "Tamil Eelam" including their insincerity shown at the so called "peace talks", and predicted the inevitability of the defeat of that organization. Mr. Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, Secretary/Defence in the Olcott Oration of

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<sup>1</sup> "Revival of Buddhism and Theosophists", *Ceylon Daily News*, 18 February 2010

<sup>2</sup> "*Peace Process: National And International Implementation*" by Mr. Gomin Dayasiri, Senior Attorney-at-Law, Olcott Oration 2007 held at the Kularatne Hall, Ananda College on 18 January 2007.

2009<sup>3</sup>, provided us an intimate account of how the LTTE was defeated, and the emerging challenges arising from the end of the conflict that needed to be addressed on an urgent basis. My attempt today is to reflect on how this victory in restoring peace and security in Sri Lanka can be consolidated, through recasting Sri Lanka's image abroad.

I wish to emphasise at the outset, that the views expressed today are my own, and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL).

## **2. Context**

In a very basic sense, although an 'image' is a reflection of 'reality', we know all too well that images can be manipulated in a manner that distorts the message conveyed to an audience. In reality, there is no single image, but many images of the same object, each one reflecting different narratives, some more dominant than others are.

I start from the premise that despite the significant amelioration in the 'reality' in post-conflict Sri Lanka, there has not been a commensurate improvement in Sri Lanka's 'image' abroad. As External Affairs Minister, Prof. G.L. Peiris was to observe recently at a joint workshop of the Regional Centre for Strategic Studies (RCSS) and the Centre for Security Analysis (CSA) on 27 October 2010, "Sri Lanka's achievements in constraining the negative consequences that arise in the aftermath of the internal conflict has been inadequately recognized by the world". He was to add, that these achievements are "not fortuitous or accidental, but the result of properly structured policies". But unfortunately, this is yet to be appreciated in some quarters.

Therefore, at this time when Sri Lanka is well positioned to reap in full measure, the fruits of freedom from terror and leapfrog into the future, it is necessary that we make a conscious effort to recast our image to better reflect the changes on the ground. This is not to suggest that we do not have shortcomings. However, notwithstanding whatever internal issues we may have, it is in the common interest of all Sri Lankans to ensure that the dominant image of the country is a more positive one.

*To this end, in my presentation today, I will first seek to capture the current status and possible motivations of the constituencies that shape Sri Lanka's image abroad. I will then try to offer some thoughts as to how we might engage these constituencies in a meaningful manner - understanding their strengths and attacking their points of vulnerability. I will also argue that to succeed in our effort to regain control of the dominant narrative on Sri Lanka, that we also need to learn how to "bracket" issues we disagree on internally, as ones on which we need to work harder to iron out our differences, without trying to converting them into foreign policy issues and taking them beyond the water's edge.*

I remain deeply conscious that my views as to how Sri Lanka can recast its image constitute only a point of view, one that others, who perceive matters from different perspectives, must necessarily moderate. My only hope is that we begin a process of forward thinking on this issue in an objective manner, which would serve Sri Lanka's best interests.

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<sup>3</sup> "Future Challenges Facing Sri Lanka: Security, Reconciliation and Development", by Mr. Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, Secretary, Ministry of Defence, Olcott Oration 2009 held at the Kularatne Hall, Ananda College on 14 November 2009.

### ***3. Constituencies that shape Sri Lanka's image***

Broadly speaking, one can identify five distinct constituencies that shape Sri Lanka's image abroad: first Western governments – which I define from a politico-cultural standpoint, as countries that are geographically located in North America, Western Europe, as well as Australia and New Zealand, second, Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) – these include both International NGOs, as well as local NGOs who are dependent on foreign funding, and hence often adopt policies dictated from outside, third, Sri Lankans abroad, particularly those living in Western countries; fourth, Foreigners visiting and doing business with Sri Lanka, and fifth, the international media.

It must be noted that each of these five constituencies weave different narratives on Sri Lanka, which successive Governments of Sri Lanka have had to grapple with. While being informed by this past, today my focus will be on the challenges that lie ahead. I do so conscious that, unlike in the earlier period, we also have a historic opportunity of succeeding; that of not having to fear whether our carefully laid out plans could be derailed by the next bomb.

#### **a) Western Governments**

I justify my differentiation of Western governments from governments elsewhere, not only because their actions receive greater media attention and contribute to image formation, but more so because other countries that engage Sri Lanka, better understand the nuances concerning developments in the country, than most Western governments do.

Although much of the current criticism of Sri Lanka emanating from the West is posited in terms of what is referred to as the “last phase of the conflict”, it would be fair to say that most issues arose over a longer period of unprecedented turbulence in Sri Lanka's contemporary history due to a fundamental difference of perception, as to how the GOSL should deal with the LTTE. Most Western governments' believed that there was no military solution to the conflict and that the LTTE must be engaged in talks at any cost. Some even had the audacity to suggest that the LTTE was invincible, and that it would be unwise for the GOSL to try to confront them. A complicating factor was that some others were seeking to find a role for themselves in Sri Lanka's quest to resolve their own problems, regardless of the efficacy of their contribution.

However, having had the benefit of the experience of his four predecessors in negotiating with and confronting the LTTE during their respective terms, and having gone the extra mile to engage the LTTE in 2005/2006 the first year of his own administration, President Mahinda Rajapaksa can hardly be faulted, as all of his predecessors did, for seeking to militarily defeat the LTTE. That he succeeded, carrying the people of Sri Lanka and influential neighbours with him, was what defied the theory - that terrorism cannot be militarily defeated. Ever since, some Western countries have been unwilling to do what all good scientists do - that is to acknowledge that when facts no longer fit a theory, it is the theory that must change.

Despite many of the concerns that had earlier given rise for some Western countries to pass strictures on Sri Lanka having been largely addressed over the last 18 months (i.e. all child soldiers recruited by the LTTE released, 90% of the IDPs resettled, more than a third of the former LTTE cadres rehabilitated and re-integrated into civil society, restoration of livelihoods, infrastructure development and recommencement of the electoral process etc.),

the continuing external pressure that is sought to be exerted on Sri Lanka is highly unwarranted and indeed offensive. What is particularly troubling is the lack of objectivity by some Western governments in their assessment of the Sri Lanka situation, relying to a large extent on questionable information provided by parties with vested interests, who constitute a vociferous minority- some INGOs and academics, sections of the media, as well as the pro-LTTE Tamil diaspora.

Notwithstanding the dilemmas confronted by the Sri Lankan State, a democracy seeking to defeat terrorism being no different from other theatres of conflict, the absence of a common set of parameters within which one could have judged questions of necessity and proportionality in dealing with terrorists, has complicated the different narratives that have been written in the aftermath of the conflict in Sri Lanka. It is ironic that this happens, despite no tangible evidence having been placed before the world to date, to support the allegations levelled against the Sri Lanka government, at a time when incontrovertible evidence is emerging from certain other theatres of conflict of such atrocities and gross human rights violations that have been committed, but glossed over due to the political clout of such States.

#### **b) NGOs**

We are aware that NGOs yield considerable influence on the decision making processes in the West. From a Sri Lankan perspective, while I am conscious of the fact that one must not paint all NGOs with the same brush, and admittedly there are many who played a significant role during the long years of the conflict and its immediate aftermath, the activities of some NGOs operating in Sri Lanka at present and of those making pronouncements from abroad on the situation in Sri Lanka, leave much to be desired. While the purported intentions of these NGOs may seem noble, their actions leave one with the unmistakable impression that rather than helping Sri Lanka move forward, their primary pre-occupation appears to be to advance their own agenda.

If one was left in any doubt about this tendency, the recent refusal to present evidence before the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) by at least three such INGOs – the Human Rights Watch (HRW), Amnesty International (AI) and the International Crisis Group (ICG), reinforces the impression that they prefer to voice allegations from afar, rather than subjecting them to scrutiny. It is particularly unfortunate that they should do so, given that the LLRC was established on 15<sup>th</sup> May 2010 as a domestic process to address the emotional trauma of the decades-long conflict and to lay the foundation for reconciliation, a step that has been encouraged and welcomed widely both nationally and internationally.

It is also significant that while the joint letter by HRW, AI and ICG, received wide international coverage, the response by the LLRC, and later the Ministry of External Affairs received scant attention. Nor have I seen any acknowledgement from the many, who for long have kept complaining, on the far reaching interim recommendations made by the LLRC- concerning those in detention, relating to private land in the former conflict areas, disarming any armed group carrying illegal weapons, transacting official business in one's own language, and facilitating livelihood efforts, the implementation for which the Government of Sri Lanka set up an Inter-Agency Advisory Group (IAAG), Such actions cast serious doubts about assertions being made by these NGOs.

State entities and others who choose to rely on such unsubstantiated allegations, while ignoring the patently positive developments taking place on the ground in Sri Lanka, show up as being rather naïve.

It is no secret, that in the current post-conflict situation, with the drying up of international funding for NGOs working on Sri Lanka, rather than grapple with this reality and become relevant within the new context, many NGOs unfortunately seek to paint a bleak picture of the ground situation, to sustain continued international funding for their own survival.

### **c) Sri Lankans Abroad**

Of its over 20 million population, Sri Lankans abroad constitute roughly 15%. Over a million of them represent a migrant work force in many parts of the world, mainly the Middle East. The rest, belonging to all ethnicities of Sri Lanka, mainly reside in the Western hemisphere, Australia and New Zealand. Of these, estimates suggest that Sri Lankan Tamils constitute well over a million, of which a bulk are refugee claimants and constitute sizeable vote banks with considerable leverage within those political systems.

With respect to the influence the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora wields, it is important that we should neither over-estimate nor under-estimate their capacity. We must remember that Tamil diaspora activism originated in some western countries in the late 1970s, very much before the LTTE gained a monopoly over the Tamil separatist struggle in Sri Lanka. This is evidenced by the resolution adopted on 9 May 1979 in the Massachusetts State Assembly proclaiming its support to the Eelam Tamils, and later the Governor of Massachusetts Edward J. King designating 22 May 1979 (the Republic Day of Sri Lanka) as “Eelam Tamils Day” in Massachusetts. Therefore, it is not surprising that their activities should survive the demise of the LTTE.

In fact, one can argue that, with the baggage of the LTTE which came to be condemned as one of the world’s most ruthless terrorist organizations off their back, the Tamil diaspora has inadvertently been given a new lease of life internationally. Particularly significant in this regard is the role being played by the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Tamil youth, who never experienced the real horror of the conflict suffered by all Sri Lankans over the past 30 years, but who see this opportunity as one to be exploited as ‘political entrepreneurs’, as many other diaspora communities who realize their electoral relevance in these countries, have done in recent history.

How the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora are using this new found space to re-invent themselves varies. A bulk of the Sri Lankan Tamil population living abroad are using it to eschew extremist ideas and to seek to re-engage with their roots in the North and the East of the country. This is evidenced by the large number of Sri Lankan diaspora Tamils who have returned to their homes and are investing in Sri Lanka.

However, there is also still a vociferous minority among them, who are intent on seeking to vilify Sri Lanka and thereby prolong the struggle. Among these actors too, serious divisions have begun to surface as to who should remain supreme. By all accounts it is the Nediyan faction led by Mr. Perinbananayakam Sivaparan, which has inherited control of the organizational and financial assets held by the LTTE and its front organization activists, and thereby controls organized criminal activity, human smuggling and money laundering that continues to be perpetrated by the remnant LTTE activists abroad. The Global Tamil Forum (GTF), whose key figure is self-styled Fr. Emmanuel, who once infamously equated Prabhakaran to Jesus Christ, concentrates on propaganda and is increasingly becoming the public face of the Nediyan faction. A third faction is headed by US based lawyer Mr. V. Rudrakumaran, who heads the so called ‘Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam’

(TGTE), which seeks to maintain a politico-diplomatic facade of a continuing struggle for “Tamil Eelam”.

Even as terrorism has become a thing of the past in Sri Lanka, activities of these organizations pose a considerable challenge to the Sri Lankan state in the post conflict period. They offer expatriate Tamils, many of whom have entered Western countries illegally and who in the normal course of events are likely to be repatriated home given the restoration of normalcy in Sri Lanka and the UNHCR’s declaration that Sri Lankans should no longer automatically qualify for asylum, an excuse to remain in those countries where they had sought asylum by vilifying Sri Lanka and keeping the pot boiling in the eyes of the world.

#### **d) Foreigners visiting and doing business with Sri Lanka**

This category includes institutions such as international lending institutions, and groups such as businessmen, investors, tourists, academics etc., who through their engagement with Sri Lankan society contribute to the formation of Sri Lanka’s image abroad and hold considerable power in fashioning an alternative narrative on Sri Lanka. They have the unique advantage of being detached from both the machinations that might be plotted by external elements against Sri Lanka, and the internal party politics that divide our society.

The parameters they use to assess developments in Sri Lanka are more objective. They will appreciate what many Sri Lankans might already have forgotten; that not a single bullet has been fired in the name of counter-terrorism since 18 May 2009, that one can move freely across all parts of the country, the high degree of political stability the country enjoys, the mega investment being made for development of infrastructure, that the economy is growing at 8.5%, that foreign reserves at an all time high, that the Colombo Stock Exchange remains Asia's best performer in 2010, that Lloyds and other insurance firms have formally lifted their war-risk classification, that all major credit agencies have upgraded Sri Lanka’s ratings and that tourists are arriving in droves and this the sector has registered a 44% growth up to September this year.

#### **e) The international media**

We know that good news, especially from the developing world, rarely makes headlines as the tendency among news agencies is to highlight negative stories. Even so, the nature of consistent negative projection of Sri Lanka in the international media is highly exaggerated compared to the reality on the ground. Particularly in the present times, as Sri Lanka has gone off the earlier headlines prompted by the conflict situation, to fill copy, many of the reports of international media organizations datelined Colombo, are increasingly seen to be drawing on local media reportage which is heavily polarized.

In the larger picture, this is very detrimental, because the audiences abroad, who see and hear these as summaries and sound bites, cannot separate the wheat from the chaff, unlike the local audiences, who absorb them in a more informed context, sometimes with a pinch of salt. In the hands of a sub-editor, often a young intern, fresh out of school with little or no appreciation of the ramifications that can follow by inserting a catchy headline, an isolated killing, an arrest, a judicial ruling that attracts attention, a public protest or a strike by a trade union can get projected as though the entire country is in turmoil. Other than for a few reports that specifically focus on the economic sector, most of these reports also do not reflect the quantum change that has taken place on the ground. This is from two years ago, when the Sri Lankan security forces were reported to be fighting pitched battles in the Wannai jungles and



were unlikely to succeed, to one year ago when the country was struggling with very little help to restore normalcy in the Northern Province and to re-settle some 300,000 displaced persons and the suggestion was that the Government intended to keep these persons *ad infinitum* in what were offensively described as “concentration camps”.

There has been no admission by these prophets of doom that they were badly off the mark in their reading of the situation in the past, nor any intellectual humility to acknowledge that they could well be over-stating their case even now. As a result, the Sri Lanka that is projected ‘out there’ by the international media is clearly not what the average citizen in this country, or a foreign visitor to the island experiences ‘over here’.

#### ***4. Modalities in recasting Sri Lanka’s image abroad***

Given this context, how do we set about the task of recasting Sri Lanka’s image in a manner that while multiple narratives will continue to remain, the dominant narrative takes into consideration the ground realities, reflects the commonalities we have rather than overplaying the differences, and above all is credible.

I make no pretence that I have a ready answer to this question. However from my exposure to these issues initially as a journalist, and subsequently as a diplomat, as well as in my continuing academic pursuits particularly as a student of diaspora politics, I will endeavour to share with you my thoughts on the subject, in the hope that it could serve as a catalyst for others to also join the debate, in finding the ‘best fit’ that suits Sri Lanka’s current needs in terms of image projection.

##### ***a) Engaging constituencies abroad***

Pro-actively, this would require tailoring messages to address the different constituencies I have mentioned. I believe that while the GOSL no doubt must play the pivotal role in this task, an equally important part could be played at least with respect to some constituencies by others, who also come into contact with them, in order to generate the required transformation we so badly need if we are to succeed in recasting our image abroad. In this regard, each of us, who travels abroad, interacts with those visiting the country or even makes a presence in internet chat rooms mainly frequented by those in the West, whether we agree or not with the Government of the day, has a special responsibility to safeguard Sri Lanka’s image.

##### ***- Western Governments***

While we cannot assuage the imaginary fears of some, all Sri Lanka, like any other self-respecting country can do, is to go the extra mile to address their concerns when they are even marginally genuine, and to respectfully indicate to these parties why some of their demands are misguided and unrealistic and is not in the national interest. Sri Lanka must also remain ready to continue to engage with these parties as long as it could, but it is under no pressure today to capitulate to unreasonable demands.

At the same time, the GOSL is conscious that the post-Nanthikadal scenario is as much a challenge to foreign governments, as it is to the GOSL. Several ramifications are visible. Even as pro-LTTE Tamil activists and their front organizations rapidly adjust to remain below the radar in the West, recent prosecutions/convictions in the US, UK, Canada, Australia, France, the Netherlands and several other countries have shown the extent to which such activists remain ***a threat to the national security*** of these countries. Further, besides the

danger posed by some of them who have received military training in the jungles of the Vanni and could work in cahoots with other global terrorist organizations, the increasing **radicalisation of second generation Tamil youth** in fast mushrooming Taliban Madrassa type 'Tamil Cholai' schools run by the LTTE and its front organisations, is a matter of great concern. Such institutions which are ostensibly 'language schools' funded ironically by some provincial and city governments of Western States, further aggravate the challenge faced by their own governments. It is youngsters indoctrinated by such institutions who took over the streets of London, Paris and several other Western capitals last year in the final days of the military operations against the LTTE, as well as attacked the Sri Lanka Embassies in Oslo, the Hague and Paris. The ongoing controversy that surrounds the human smuggling operation involving Sri Lankan Tamils who were aboard *MV Sun Sea*, which recently arrived in Canada as well as the subsequent arrest of over 250 potential asylum seekers in Bangkok, suspected to have been preparing to head to Canada, has also brought into sharper focus the extent to which the **generosity of Western governments has been exploited over the years by Sri Lankan refugees**. That this happens at a time when there are serious socio-economic ramifications arising even within the Western society on account of the abuse by migrants of the generosity of hosts, suggests that the honeymoon enjoyed by bogus Sri Lankan asylum seekers, 70% of whom according to a recent Canadian official survey, go back to Sri Lanka for holidays, is about to end.

Therefore, notwithstanding some governments as well as regional and international organizations succumbing to demands from NGOs and the pro-LTTE Tamil diaspora to continue a policy of keeping pressure on Sri Lanka, an emerging trend is discernible, that others are gradually re-thinking their strategy, and in fact working hard to build bridges with Sri Lanka, both in terms of economic, as well as security cooperation. An important factor that is probably weighing on the minds of those policy makers in western capitals, is that by over playing their hand to appease these interests for electoral and other considerations, they are not only losing whatever leverage they had with the GOSL on the very issues they claim to be concerned about, but also stand to lose out on benefitting from the development trajectory Sri Lanka is poised to take in the future.

One could expect that this realization will soon lead to an overall re-calibration by the West of its strategy and tactics adopted concerning relations with Sri Lanka. The forthcoming commencement of the 2<sup>nd</sup> term of President Mahinda Rajapaksa, whose party also commands a near 2/3rds majority in Parliament, would be an appropriate moment for the West to re-think its strategy, and engage Sri Lanka in a more respectful and constructive manner.

- *NGOs*

As far as NGOs, the problems witnessed in the post-tsunami period, are re-surfacing today, with the complication that additionally these INGOs through less in number, are more entrenched in the country having enjoyed a free run for over 30 years when there was a conflict situation, which required much humanitarian work. Today we need less humanitarian assistance and greater developmental assistance.

It may be difficult for these organizations to accept that the situation has changed and that their roles too must necessarily change. No longer are they intermediaries between parties to a conflict - from helping to transport food and other supplies as well as the sick, to ensure orderly exchange of remains from the battleground. Today they need essentially to complement the work that is being done by the GOSL in a post-conflict environment, where

reconstruction and development takes precedence. Either their inability or refusal to accept this stark reality, has presently led to misunderstandings and disagreements between NGOs and the GOSL.

There is no doubt that the answer to the dilemma we face requires greater differentiation between NGOs on the part of GOSL, as well as better coordination between the government authorities and NGOs operating within Sri Lanka. Additionally, screening of NGOs to ascertain whether the organization as well as its staff are qualified and experienced enough to engage in the work they wish to undertake, and greater accountability on the part of NGOs themselves, can help improve the relationship.

- *Sri Lankans Abroad*

It is abundantly clear that today, the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora is no monolith. There still remains a virulently hostile minority within the community, that largely for instrumental reasons seek to perpetuate the struggle. But with the brute force of the LTTE a thing of the past and its international network in disarray, there are a multitude of voices emerging from within the Tamil diaspora, willing to stand up to the rump elements of the LTTE and to be heard. Some key former operatives of that organization have also chosen to go through a process of “transformation”, and become responsible citizens.

The GOSL has already shown itself to be adept at differentiating between these categories. There are no holds barred in going after those within the diaspora, whose actions are bound to seek to perpetuate terrorism in whatever guise – and the success of these efforts is evident. At the same time, GOSL has made it clear that it does not intend to demonize or even isolate the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora, and that it understands that majority among them had to act as they did, under duress from the LTTE. The GOSL has also shown keenness to engage in a dialogue with them in the changed atmosphere, with a view to harness their talents and resources towards the betterment of Sri Lanka, particularly the Northern and Eastern Provinces, which have seen little economic development during the 30 years of the conflict. This approach was most eloquently articulated by President Mahinda Rajapaksa, during his address to the 65<sup>th</sup> Session of the UN General Assembly in New York on 23 September 2010, when he observed, “a great deal has been said by those beyond our borders about our Tamil community. Let me be clear, no nation on earth can wish Sri Lanka’s Tamil community more good fortune than Sri Lanka itself. To the misguided few, I say, do not allow yourselves to become an instrument of division, hate and violence, to be used as an enabler for hatred to be reborn in another form. Rather come, let us join hands and break the bonds of mistrust to rise to new horizons. Sri Lanka recognises the challenges we face, among the greatest of which is healing the wounds of the recent past.”

In this context, Sri Lankan Missions abroad are an important catalyst in reaching out and engaging the Tamil diaspora, and helping in changing their mindset, which has been unfortunately conditioned by being bombarded by 30 years of propaganda by the LTTE and its fellow travellers, that have sought to demonize Sri Lanka.

At the same time, even though military victory has been achieved over the LTTE, it is important that the broader Sri Lankan diaspora community, cutting across ethnic, linguistic and religious lines, who internationally played a valiant role complementing GOSL efforts in countering LTTE propaganda in the past years, should not yet consider that the war is over. They must understand that the battle for Sri Lanka’s image abroad has in fact intensified. It is

today being played out in a theatre, in which, if united, they can play an even more effective role, in projecting the better qualities of Sri Lanka to the world. In doing so, unlike in the past, today there is the advantage of having worthy interlocutors to engage abroad, with Tamil diaspora groups previously estranged with the Sri Lankan state, increasingly visiting the country to assess the ground situation and decide how best they could be party to the reconciliation and development process. This is also not uncommon, when one reviews literature on the manner in which some diaspora has acted, in post conflict situations, where they have become an important force in reconciliation and development.

These developments have prompted some countries, who in the past may have found it convenient to use 'diaspora influence' as an excuse to bring pressure on Sri Lanka, to fast realize that continuing to appease the extremist elements of the Tamil diaspora is counter-productive. Consequently, they too are nudging diaspora groups to build bridges with their home communities back in Sri Lanka.

It is inevitable that most Western governments will soon have to come to a conclusion as to "who speaks for the Tamils of Sri Lanka"- whether it is those in the diaspora who are unrepentant, militant and continue to seek an independent 'Tamil Eelam', or whether it should be those peace loving Tamils living both in Sri Lanka as well as abroad, who are ready to move on with other communities that share this country in solidarity. It would be fair to say that while the former continue to live the dream, the latter are the ones who are living the change. Rapid socio-economic development in the conflict affected areas, restorative justice and reconciliation, and consensus on the extent of power sharing within Sri Lanka, will soon make obvious the answer to this question.

*- Foreigners visiting and doing business with Sri Lanka*

We must be careful not to take this particular group for granted, because just as much as they would provide positive accounts of the situation while they witness such, they could also give a negative picture, if Sri Lanka falters. In order to continue to attract this interest, we must formulate an appropriate regulatory framework, undertake labour market reforms, make the public sector more efficient and accountable, re-orient our educational system to be more responsive to modern needs and encourage the private sector to be more socially responsible.

Even as we tirelessly work to bring investment, promote tourism and open up new markets for Sri Lanka, we should engage in these activities in a manner that also secures Sri Lanka advocates, who could be converted into a robust and independent counterpoint to those vested interests that continue to vilify Sri Lanka. To this end there is a need for greater public-private sector collaboration not only for rapid economic development in Sri Lanka, but also for using those engaging in these sectors in a strategic partnership in re-branding Sri Lanka and recasting Sri Lanka's image abroad.

This task must also be complemented by Sri Lankans who travel abroad and interact with external audiences in their day-to-day lives; as businessmen, students, tourists, as well as in chat rooms. They can all serve as communicators of the change that is taking place in Sri Lanka, and re-inforce a positive impression about the country abroad. We must create the buzz that Sri Lanka needs at this point, if we are to counter the negative stories that continue to dominate the international projection of Sri Lanka. In generating such a buzz, I believe that just as much as we converted the opportunity presented by the boycott of matches played in Colombo during the 1996 Cricket World Cup by some teams, into a referendum on the

resilience of Sri Lankans only weeks after the Central Bank bomb blast, we must use the forthcoming Cricket World Cup in the sub-continent and the tremendous attention it will focus on Sri Lanka, to our advantage to regain dominance of the narrative on Sri Lanka. Judging from how they have been playing in recent days in Australia, our cricket team too appears to be gearing itself up for a repeat performance, which indeed would help this cause.

- *International media*

Based on the insights they gather, journalists make assessments that they share with the public. While one recognizes the fact that journalists are not without opinion, and sometimes that these may not be to our liking, we are justified in demanding that they make every effort to be balanced in how they present facts, allowing readers to decide an issue for themselves. They must also ensure that their bosses who edit their copy and draft headlines half way across the world, are equally professional. In my view, doing anything less, would undermine the esteem of journalists, the credibility of the organizations they represent and leave the audiences they serve badly misinformed.

On the part of the GOSL, there is also need for greater engagement with the media, keeping in mind that after all it is a handful of foreign correspondents reporting out of Colombo to the world, that in an immediate sense sets the agenda and posits the image of Sri Lanka that is seen globally. We must also be realistic to appreciate that not all follow these rules with the same vigour and when transgressions are committed, to deal with them, but in a manner that we 'do not throw the baby with the bath water'.

***b) Bracketing internal disagreements***

While each of the earlier categories are important in their own right in shaping Sri Lanka's image abroad, one must remain conscious that none of them can be fully relied upon to bring about change, as their dynamics depend largely on factors external to us, and are beyond our immediate control.

It is in such context that we must return to the basic premise, that if Sri Lanka is to regain its former positive image, tarnished by over thirty years of internal strife, that it is within Sri Lanka that we must first moderate the competing narratives we present to the outside world.

If the Tamil separatist elements led by the LTTE, succeeded in externalizing what was an internal problem in Sri Lanka in the early 1980s, by taking advantage of regional and international circumstances, the responsibility now falls on all those who wish to see a united, peaceful and prosperous Sri Lanka, to take advantage of the post-conflict circumstances in the country, to collectively internalize the process of rectifying our image problem abroad. This is not a moment for those of us who love our country to remain as mere bystanders, for such opportunities do not often present themselves to us.

I recognize that this is difficult and that there are differences of opinion amongst us on some issues, as it should be in any democracy. However, I think it is time that we evolved a consensus and desisted from seeking to exploit domestic issues as foreign policy issues, which will result in Sri Lanka continuing to be vilified abroad. Let us not forget that great nations that have succeeded in forging ahead against many drawbacks, are those that have been able to leave domestic issues at the water's edge.

Let alone the moral argument that doing otherwise would be unethical or even unpatriotic, all major political parties of Sri Lanka, having at different times in our recent history faced

international vilification, partly as a result of the opportunism of political opponents, who had sought to externalize domestic issues, should be conscious that it is also not in their self interest to do so. Given that it is not foreign audiences that elect governments in this country, there is ample empirical evidence to suggest, that it has not worked to the advantage of those who seek to externalize issues - in fact, it has backfired.

This is why, in my opinion, it would be preferable for us to identify and “bracket” issues we disagree on, as ones where we need to work harder to reconcile our disagreements internally, but at the same time take a principled position, not to allow them to adversely affect the image of our country abroad. Such bracketing”, is something we constantly do in our daily lives - within our homes, offices, as well as the religio-cultural communities and organizations we belong to, where we close ranks on issues for a higher purpose. My appeal is that we do so now, in order to protect the image of our country.

### ***5. Conclusion***

Amidst a host of other narratives, recasting Sri Lanka’s image abroad in a more positive light through re-gaining control of the dominant narrative on Sri Lanka, is not easy. That is why at the outset, I described it as a challenge. But then, as I was taught by Col. Rajapaksa in this hallowed institution, challenges are there to be overcome.

However, for us to succeed as a country in this task, we must not leave it to the government and the bureaucrats alone to do, and become mere arm chair critics. We must, each to the best of his/her ability, share the responsibility, for regaining control of the dominant narrative on Sri Lanka abroad.

In doing so, we can take inspiration from the fact that the situation we face today, is not very different to the challenge that prevailed when in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Colonel Olcott and other founding fathers of Ananda College, as well as other educational institutions founded by the Buddhist Theosophical Society, sought to prevent Sri Lankans being exploited by the colonialists through their ‘divide and rule’ policy within Sri Lanka – on the basis of class, caste, race, religion and language. They travelled the length and breadth of the country calling for unity, a moral resurgence, better education and the need to achieve self sufficiency.

This does not suggest that people even at that time, agreed on everything. They too had to “bracket” some issue. But by doing so successfully, they managed to bring Sri Lankans of all classes and castes, across the ethno-religious spectrum, straddling the capitalist-Marxist political divide, to unite in fighting for a common cause, that of upholding the integrity of the nation in the eyes of the world, which led to our eventual emergence from the yoke of colonialism.

On this day, when we remember Col. Henry Steele Olcott, the founder of Ananda College, let us resolve not to allow the modern day equivalent of the forces of ‘divide and rule’ operating from abroad, whoever so they may be, to exploit us. Let us take control of our destiny, as our forbears of Ananda College did, nearly 125 years ago.

In doing so it is fitting that we be guided by the motto of Ananda College;  
*“Appa mado Amata Padan” ( Let us act without delay)*

May the blessings of Ananda be with you!