

It was 16 years ago that I first met Lakshman Kadirgamar. In 1995 I was the new Parliamentary Undersecretary of State at the British Foreign Office and he was the Minister of Foreign Affairs, here in Sri Lanka.

An accomplished lawyer, sportsman and politician, there was virtually no subject on which he did not have an informed opinion or an interesting anecdote.

In the time that we worked together we became close colleagues as well as good friends. He was a kind, thoughtful and brave man who enriched public life with principle and integrity.

My involvement in Sri Lanka began during a visit to Vavuniya.

I remember standing outside a refugee camp where a little boy, perhaps three or four years old and with a very badly damaged left leg, held his hand out through the gate.

I remember the look, to this day, on his face - innocent, hopeful but sad.

I asked the official with me what we in the UK were doing to help. And the answer was “it is not our sphere of influence”.

And that is the instant when I decided to try to help a country which has fascinated and frustrated me ever since, but where the friendships I made have endured.

Since that time political opportunities have presented themselves and have been missed when personal or partisan interests have taken precedence over national interests.

Too much time has been wasted, too many chances missed, too much blood spilled.

Lakshman Kadirgamar is remembered for his ferocious condemnation, globally, of the violence perpetrated by the LTTE on ordinary Sri Lankans.

As a Tamil himself he understood better than most the complexities of the internal political dynamic.

When asked once by the BBC if he was a traitor to the Tamil people as Foreign Minister in a largely Sinhalese government he said ‘people who live in Sri Lanka are first and foremost Sri Lankans, then we have our own race and religion which is something given to us at birth’.

He fully understood the very significant personal risks he was taking by choosing a life in public service. We often talked about those very real risks but those of you who knew Lakshman will remember a man who was not easily diverted from his chosen path.

From his involvement in student politics (where he was President of the Oxford Union) to his formidable legal career or in his sporting commitment (he was also an Oxford Blue) he was not a man to be pushed around – as Shane Warne will testify.

At the beginning of our work together I remember clandestine meetings in hotels where the venue would be changed at the last minute and where there were always seemingly endless seas of body guards – such was the security threat.

Of course, there was widespread suspicion in London and Colombo about our motives.

Why would a junior British Minister care so much about a former colonial island on the other side of the world? What was the real agenda? What were the Foreign Minister's real motivations and what did it mean for the internal political dynamic of Sri Lanka?

No-one at the time seemed prepared to believe it was simply about the well being, safety and future of the ordinary people of this country.

There was so much suspicion that I remember on one occasion being asked by Lakshman to arrive in an airport nearby and be ready to travel to Colombo at short notice if he thought it politically prudent to do so.

I ended up spending 5 days in a wet Bangkok, (playing tennis with my staff and buying unnecessary amounts of sports clothing) – before deciding no call would come and heading home. Such were the frustrations we endured in that period.

Between 1996 and 1997 we worked tirelessly on what came to be known as the Fox Accord although the Fox/Kadirgamar Accord would have been more apt given his co-stewardship of the process. But such was the mark of the man, seeing the Agreement enacted was reward enough for him.

It was designed to create a framework within which political contacts could be made with the LTTE without the risk of being undermined by public exposure.

The government gave a commitment to disclose any contacts with the LTTE to the opposition who in turn gave a commitment to treat these in full confidence.

Lakshman and I genuinely believed this might, at some point, create a mechanism for a political settlement if the LTTE were ever to renounce violence and seek political solutions to the division in the country.

Ranil Wickremesinghe gave his support and encouragement to the process and President Chandrika Kumaratunga signed the agreement on the day that I returned to the UK to fight the 1997 General Election.

It was an election we knew even at that point we would lose. And we did. The incoming Labour government showed little interest in Sri Lanka or in taking forward the political process we had begun.

The agreement subsequently withered on the vine, to my very great sadness, and the cycle of violence brought more misery, more violence and more death.

It would be another decade before I set foot in Sri Lanka again. That decade was painful to watch – even at a distance. This country was convulsed by violence and terror.

Too many mothers' sons and daughters never came home from a bloody internal conflict which consumed too much of the economy and held this country back from the international opportunities enjoyed by so many of your neighbours.

In Colombo, too much energy was spent on fruitless political rivalries when it could have been spent in the pursuit of peace and prosperity for the people.

Then in June 2007 I met Foreign Minister Bogollagama at the International Institute for Strategic Studies meeting in Shangri-La in Singapore. And he encouraged me to return to Sri Lanka to see first-hand the political developments that have taken place and in November 2007. I had the chance to visit a number of parts of the country and to meet with a wide range of political representatives.

The political situation had changed. A large number of senior UNP members had joined the central government and the JVP, from its original beginnings, had made advances.

How would the changes in Sri Lanka have been greeted by Lakshman Kadirgamar?

He believed in a future where Sri Lanka was united and where all citizens were equal, irrespective of their ethnicity or religion, and offered an opportunity to live without fear and share in the country's future as it emerged from the shadows of terrorism.

He believed in an independent judicial system complemented by political reform and underpinned by a free press. It was his unswerving belief in these which made him such a compelling and internationally respected political figure.

He would have undoubtedly welcomed the defeat of the LTTE, one of the most brutal terrorist organisations the world has seen. It was, we must remember, an organisation where children were forced to become soldiers or even suicide bombers and where violence and murder were seen as legitimate tools.

But his commitment to the principles of accountability before the law meant that he was never a man who believed that the ends always justify the means.

He would have expected, as I do, allegations of violations of international human rights and humanitarian law by both sides at the end of the conflict to be taken seriously and to be fully investigated and any individuals responsible to be brought fully to account.

He would have expected, as I do, the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission to examine all the evidence and make final credible recommendations to the Sri Lankan government.

Those recommendations will play a key role in strengthening the process of accountability and support peace and, perhaps even more importantly, reconciliation as this country moves forward.

I hope and expect that we will see that type of progress when the LLRC reports in November.

The two of us often talked late into the evening about our hopes for peace in Sri Lanka but we shared a view that peace is not simply the absence of war.

A genuine peace requires other positive attributes.

It requires freedom from fear, freedom of expression including a free press and broadcast media and the freedom to dissent within the law.

It requires an inclusive political solution that addresses the underlying causes of conflict and takes into account the legitimate grievances and aspirations of all the people of this island.

These are the challenges which today's politicians here must face and the principles they must uphold and defend if the aspirations of Lakshman Kadirgamar are to be achieved.

But the aspirations he held for Sri Lanka went well beyond the domestic agenda, which is all too often the focus of international attention. He wanted his country to play a full role in regional and global politics.

I wonder what he would he have made of the global strategic picture today?

The world looks very different from South Asia than it does from Europe.

Too many in Europe today still remain focussed on the structures and dynamics of the second half of the 20th century, failing to recognise and adapt to the global shift that has occurred in politics as well as economics.

The world maps on the walls of European capitals place the Greenwich Meridian at the centre – technically correct, but betraying a very Eurocentric and antiquated view of the world. If you visit Congressmen in the United States they have Pacific in the middle.

And not only that, the political institutions of the European Union remain consumed with building their own structures and power – rather than looking outward at how the world is changing – pursuing rigidity rather than embracing flexibility.

The immediate obsession in Europe is with debt and default – an understandable focus given the exposure of European countries to the financial crisis which continues to unravel.

Yet future challenges are often unaddressed. Of course the problems here are different but no less challenging.

Sri Lanka has a role to play in maintaining the international stability and security that, as an open, trading nation, the United Kingdom's national interest requires.

Economic prosperity is the well-spring of strategic strength. It always has been. Power and influence have always followed economic trends.

Over a quarter of the world's 100 richest cities are in this region – in the top 30, there are twice as many here as there are in Europe.

Asia is already one of the key centres of global power in the 21st Century – and we're only a decade in.

How the balance of power in this region develops – in close co-operation and in healthy competition – and how countries of this region choose to exercise their responsibility – matters not only to you but to everyone across the globe, including us in the United Kingdom.

But progress in the region remains uneven and the proceeds of development and economic growth do not always benefit the people of the region in equal measure.

In many places the challenges of poverty, disease, and the provision of basic services remain significant.

Respect for fundamental human rights, which underpin healthy societies and help unleash human potential, is not universal.

Ethnic and religious divisions and tensions smoulder in many places, as Sri Lanka knows to its very grave cost.

Not too far away, in Afghanistan and increasingly in Pakistan, these forces have created an epicentre of conflict, into which over the last decade, the international community has been drawn.

And while, across Asia former communist countries modernise and evolve, embracing the energy of capitalism, embracing the opportunities of globalisation, playing positive roles in the maintenance of regional security, in places like North Korea the old dangerous dynamic remains.

One thing is clear, in this connected globalised world many of the threats we face are not confined to one country, nor even to one region, they spread across borders and extend across oceans, they go beyond ethnicity and religion.

Perhaps when Francis Fukuyama wrote his now infamous book, he should have called it "The End of Geography", not "The End of History".

To meet the challenges of this new world West and East, North and South must work together.

And it is not only the challenges of economic and political development on which we must work together, the security challenge requires joint strategies and joint action too.

We can already see encouraging examples of this being put into practice today.

In Afghanistan, which I last visited only two weeks ago, a wide international coalition of 48 countries is assisting the Afghan Government to resist the Taliban-led insurgency, build their indigenous security and deny safe haven to those intent on exporting trans-national terrorism.

Of course, that process must include Pakistan, and Pakistan too requires our support as it battles similar threats on its own soil.

The lesson we have to learn is that trans-national terrorism does not respect boundaries or borders.

The brand of violent extremism peddled by Al Qaida and its extremist allies and affiliates are not confined to one part of the globe, nor do they target one country, one faith, or one system of Government.

We all have a stake in confronting terrorism wherever it surfaces, whether it be in New York, London, Mumbai or Colombo, however difficult that challenge is and however long it takes.

We also have to be responsible for the way in which we confront terrorism and be held to account for it. The same is true in countering the scourge of piracy.

As an island nation, maritime security remains of fundamental importance for the United Kingdom, just as it does for Sri Lanka.

International action is gathering pace with multi-national forces already operating in the Gulf, off the Horn of Africa and elsewhere.

The UK has also applied to join the Regional Co-operation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against ships in Asia. We recognise the challenge is a global one.

Sri Lanka is located in a pivotal position in the Indian Ocean with major international shipping routes between the Far East and the Gulf within 25 miles of your coast.

In Trincomalee, Sri Lanka has a formidable strategic asset in this struggle that has yet to be fully realised.

So there is significant potential, for Sri Lanka to play a greater role, in issues such as counter piracy.

In this increasingly interconnected world it is not only the physical transfer of goods and services we have to protect.

The effect on the economies of this region of a well-planned and well resourced cyber attack on trans-national commercial networks and institutions would be catastrophic, and would have an impact on us all. There would be no hiding places.

We face today the war of the invisible enemy.

That is why the United Kingdom is mainstreaming cyber security across all parts of Government at home, and why cyber security is regularly high on the agenda in discussions we have with partners in this region.

And then there is another threat. Because nuclear proliferation is another area in which we must continue to co-operate and ensure nuclear non-proliferation becomes the rule, not the exception.

We have a direct interest in working together to address the nuclear programmes of North Korea and Iran.

But we also have an interest in strengthening the international rules-based system in order to reduce the risk of future proliferation, help declared nuclear states build trust, de-escalate tensions, and bring down, not build up, nuclear arsenals.

In all these areas isolation or unilateralism is not an option for the future. It is a relic of the past. The responsible exercise of power requires partnership.

As the influence of Asia grows, so too does the requirement for more nations to take responsibility for building the regional and international stability and security that is needed if our citizens are to remain prosperous and protected.

The last 12 months has seen significant developments in regional security here with the continuing evolution of ASEAN and the establishment of the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus.

I have no doubt that this trend – of increasingly effective and developing institutions – will continue over time. They need to continue.

I believe that as we continue with a global economy that is interconnected we will need multilayered security so that we can respond using the right means for the right occasion – through multi-lateral organisations yes but also through smaller coalitions or bi-lateral relationships, often based on historic experience.

This is what we might describe as a “building block” approach to defence and security and it is part of the United Kingdom’s new strategy of enhanced engagement in this part of the world, as it is across the globe.

CONCLUSION

I often say that politics is a binary proposition – shape the world around you or be shaped by the world around you.

I know which choice Lakshman Kadirgamar would have made. He would have believed that moral conviction with tenacity of purpose and the will to see it through was the right course to chart.

We can leave those who come after us many things – knowledge money, security. But the greatest is hope.

Let that be Lakshman's legacy to Sri Lanka and beyond.