

GL Perera

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Executive Director / Consultant (Rtd) - Engineering & Technical Services

Board of Investment of Sri Lanka

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Many great minds in our country have quietly made sea-changing contributions to our economic and social prosperity - without asking for appreciation, popularity or undue financial gain. The flip side of such virtue is that we are never made aware of the extent of their positive contribution to our lives. Galhenage Lionel Perera, better known as GL to his friends and colleagues, was indisputably a rare example of this calibre. At a time when Sri Lanka was desperate to emerge from crippling socialist policies that could only be overhauled through free trade, foreign investment and employment - the Greater Colombo Economic Commission (GCEC) was formed with a handful of multidisciplinary experts to make this change a reality. As the Chief Engineer of the GCEC - later renamed the Board of Investment of Sri Lanka - GL Perera led a team of designers, engineers, architects and technicians to plan and build the Katunayake Free Trade Zone in 1978. Expanding across 500 acres and built to international standards at the time, this was the base that attracted global investors to bring in millions of US Dollars to Sri Lanka and continues to do so now. The success of this resulted in the construction of the Biyagama and Koggala Export Processing Zones (EPZs) in the mid 80s and early 90s. A further nine EPZs were constructed and established under his management of the Engineering, Technical & Environmental Services of the BOI. Once the EPZs were in operation, GL Perera and his Team were responsible for the smooth administration of the Zones in collaboration with the resident businesses.

He played a key role in President R Premadasa's '200 Garment Factories Programme' where, within two years, his Team identified land, approved building plans and provided the infrastructure for the garment factories. They also ensured the establishment of safe working conditions, security and welfare facilities for factory employees wherever the GCEC/BOI was involved. GL Perera made many constructive contributions to these areas across 25 years, both here and when

representing Sri Lanka at international forums - he was a Civil Engineer who had a good understanding of governance and macro-economics; he understood the wider context to which his work contributed. With his language skills, multicultural awareness and eye for quality, Investors and international organisations, including United Nations Programmes, worked in partnership with him and his team seamlessly and with ease.

After his official retirement from the BOI, G L Perera was asked to direct the construction of 5 EPZs, almost simultaneously, due to his track record of high integrity and technical competence. After the opening of the Wathupitiwela EPZ in May 1999, he and his Team were commended by the President for the expeditious manner in which the infrastructure had been built. This was a general characteristic of the work completed by the Engineering and Technical Team throughout G L Perera's leadership - having no unnecessary delays or unresolved problems.

GL Perera's soft-spoken gentlemanly style was not to be mistaken for lack of strength or authority. His Team members, without exception, fondly and respectfully remember him as a strong, broadminded, progressive and fearless leader who encouraged personal development and played a prominent role in their own career advancement. "He allowed us to make our own decisions, and we did, because we knew Mr Perera will support us and even take the blame if anything went wrong. This gave many of us a chance to gain knowledge and experience, and to grow into confident leaders ourselves in time to come."

"He never jumped into conclusions or bulldozed others at meetings...always waited for his opportunity to express the pros and cons of an idea by first summarising everybody's views. He maintained friendly relationships with everybody and had a good rapport with investors too. It was a great environment for us to work in." - D G Munasinghe, Secretary General / Executive Director - Central Region, BOI (Rtd.)

GL Perera was a graduate of the University of Ceylon. In 1962 at age 23, he joined the State Engineering Corporation in its year of inception. As a Junior Engineer he was sent to Kelaniya for his first assignment as the Resident Site Engineer for the building that was to house the Tyre Corporation. He quickly progressed in his work and returned to Head Office as the Assistant Chief Engineer in charge of Contracts & Estimates, working under Mr Basil Chitty - Chief Engineer for Planning, Production & Development. Mr Chitty recalls, "He was a hardworking Engineer, trustworthy and dependable, and discharged his duties to the entire satisfaction of his superiors, including the Chairman. I have lost a dear friend. He was my best friend."

A Royalist at heart and to the core, GL Perera belonged to the Royal College 1950 Group that boasts the membership of a generation of prominent doctors, lawyers, engineers, businessmen and experts in many fields. True to his personality, he was the Secretary and life force behind the Group

- he kept the classmates regularly in touch through social events and projects to enhance the wellbeing of their school.

A car enthusiast since the age of 10 (surely before Sri Lanka had a legal age for driving) two of his best friends, Dr Basil Goonewardene and Dr Gef De Silva remember him driving around in a Hillman Minx in the 1950s, being in the centre of fun and frolics during their teenage and university years.

"I joined Royal Primary in the late 1940s in mid term. It is a terrible experience for a newcomer to join a class in the middle of the year once everyone has already formed friendships and is unwelcoming towards 'intruders'. It was GL who first spoke to me and made me feel welcome in the new surroundings. GL was my only salvation and helped me get over the difficult period. We were together at various stages from Royal to University and then at the State Engineering Corporation. He always did the needful to get the crowd together, and just as the RC 1950 Group, GL will be sadly missed by his friends at SEC too. It will be extremely difficult to replace him." - Swinton Fonseka, Chartered Engineer.

When GL Perera was living in England during the 1970s, one of his positions was as the Chief Engineer at the site that was to house the University of London - UCL Faculty of Law, where his daughter studied 20 years later.

His most important achievements were probably within his personal life. He fell in love with his wife, Vijitha Jayakody, at the age of 16 - he was struck by her beauty and serene demeanour while dropping his sisters to Visakha! As many men would agree, it's not easy to win a battle with a mother-in-law for the hand of her daughter in marriage. He never gave up for fifteen years and finally married her in 1971.

"As a Father and Grandfather he was in his element. That was his natural role. Most of our valuable childhood memories were created by him, with my Mother's support - probably because he had the foresight to know what would matter to us in decades to come. Education and perfection in our chosen fields were non-negotiable. Paying our bills on time, fixing what is broken (instead of throwing it away!), facing life today without procrastinating, enjoying the Arts and being open to multicultural experiences were the simple principles he passed on to us," his daughter remembers. "He was there for everything. He knew how to do everything!"

When his wife passed away nearly 11 years ago, he singlehandedly supported his children who were going into the next stage in their adult life, seeing his Son through a path that took him from a career in criminal law to the Judiciary, marriage and parenthood, and similarly for his Daughter. He was diligent in making sure his children were useful to society and efficient in handling their own responsibilities.

"ThathaSeeya was the smartest person I know. With his help I did achieve quite a lot of things," says Michael, his 9-year-old grandson, who shared his grandfather's love for Maths and Music.

It isn't possible to articulate or capture the heart that was bigger than life and loved life, the gentle, genuine kindness towards anybody in any circumstance, the exemplary patience, the bright sense of humour - all stemming from an unassuming intellectual brilliance that never wavered.

After a brief illness which he bravely fought for seven months, Mr GL Perera passed away to his next life on 4th April 2017. He leaves an unfillable space in the lives and hearts of his Son, Daughter, two Grandsons, family and friends. At the time of his passing, he had made sure that everything was complete and in order, so that his family could carry on conveniently from when he moves on.

He didn't believe in meaningless rituals - his wisdom and acute social observations didn't allow him to be anything other than a pragmatist. As a Buddhist, he probably didn't know all the words to chant Lord Buddha's Karaniya Metta Sutra! But he lived his life demonstrating the practice of each tenet of this powerful sutra on a daily basis. Therefore we cannot imagine that he is on any other path in his Sansara than the one leading to supreme Nibbana. May his life inspire the next generation to be simple, happy, respectful and responsible. May this give him further merit towards his journey.

"We value GL both in life and death. May his sojourn in Sansara be short and swift." -
I S De Siliva, Senior Attorney-at-Law

"GL was a true friend and a gentleman. I have never seen a mild, simple, well mannered person like him in a long time. May his soul rest in peace." - N Naguleswaran, Engineer & Businessman

"It is the night of our Old Royalists' Association in the UK - Blue & Gold Ball 2017. I will think of him and raise a glass, to thank him for keeping us all in touch over these many years." - Earle Amarasekera, Royal Air Force (Rtd.) / Banker

"Dear Lionel - Your school friends thank you for your lovely contribution over a long period to our Royal College Batch of 1950, and stand to attention as we recite in unison - May you attain

the Supreme Bliss of Nibbana." - Basil Goonewardene - Surgeon Commodore, Former Deputy
Director Medical Services, Sri Lanka Navy
