

A close-up portrait of Ranil Wickremesinghe, a man with dark, curly hair, wearing a dark suit jacket, a white shirt, and a patterned tie. He is looking slightly to the left of the camera with a neutral expression.

**RANIL
WICKREMESINGHE**
A Political Biography

DINESH WEERAKKODY

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RANIL

WICKREMESINGHE

A Political Biography



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RANIL WICKREMESINGHE

A Political Biography

DINESH WEERAKKODY
EDITED BY PANEETHA AMERESEKERE



Foreword

We live in expectation of tumultuous political upsets, as has been seen in the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States and the outcome of the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom. As Vladimir Lenin put it, 'There are decades when nothing happens; then, there are weeks, when decades happen.'

Sri Lanka has had more than its fair share of such upsets.

One advantage of political biographies is that they enable a personalised vantage, a constant thread through historical events. There is arguably no better person through whom to view the past four decades than Ranil Wickremesinghe. It is easy to pick out the highlights: Member of Parliament at 28, four times Prime Minister, a Leader of the House, and a ministerial career in the portfolios of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Minister), Education, Youth Affairs and Employment, and Industries, Science and Technology.

From the outside, the role of the politician is about cynical power, control and the trappings, reminding one of James Freeman Clarke's observation that 'A politician thinks of the next election; a statesman thinks of the next generation'.

What is less discernible at first glance is the hard work, the late nights, the smoke-filled rooms, the constant argy and bargy, and personal intrusions – the endless sweat, tears and toil required to make things happen in the political world. The need for these qualities is precisely why so few politicians stand out. And in an era when public trust in politicians is low, and similarly venerable media sources under threat from fake news, it is refreshing to read a history of a politician who has stayed true to his democratic principles, not only in performing his mandate as government, but by patiently ensuring the essential role of a "loyal", but an effective opposition.

Doing so requires a long-term commitment and stance, overcoming any desire to gain short-term domestic political dividends; a clarity and constancy of purpose, not an urge to be loved. As Bernard Ingham wrote in this regard of Margaret Thatcher, 'She was a politician with the courage to follow her instincts. And she never ceased to find a way forward to a better world, not by smarm or flattery, but by a fierce determination.' And as her former press secretary said of the 'Iron Lady' on her death on April 8, 2013, 'This week has shown how she came to be respected, not least paradoxically by those celebrating her death. If she had not counted for something, they would not have bothered.' Thatcher's contribution to politics in Britain was significant in part because she was the daughter of a shopkeeper, and injected issues over class and substance

over identity in the nation's politics. She was seen as divisive precisely because she could not be pigeonholed and because she sought people to make choices, not simply to seek lame consensus. As she put it in 1969, "it is wrong to talk of 'taking the big issues out of politics'". Or as another tough lady in politics, South Africa's veteran anti-apartheid parliamentarian Helen Suzman, put it: 'Like everyone else, I long to be loved. But I am not prepared to make any concessions whatsoever.'

Such iron will and firm leadership are, increasingly an anathema in a consensus-driven, media-ridden, carefully choreographed world, yet all the more notable when it occurs. What is surprising is how little people do to make a lasting mark on the wellness of all – a community, a country, a world – in their short earthly sojourns, even though they may receive so much more than they risk in return. What holds them back? Why so self-defensive and lacking in imagination? Why, so few Trumans, willing to take the tough stand, Thatchers, willing to break the class and glass ceilings, Martin Luther Kings, ready to walk in the valley and suffer, or Gandhis, trodding barefoot to dine one night with Muslims and the next with Hindus. These are paths available to many; why, in a time of peril and possibility, do so few leaders walk them?

Sri Lankan politics is not well known outside of the island's borders, save a recent history of insurgency, terrorism, and military victory. Yet the challenges of economic management, development, growth, jobs and inequality seem remarkably familiar to those visitors to the island, steeped in emerging economies. Whether history will adjudge the military campaign of the 2000's a success ultimately will depend on the abilities of politicians to create a national sense of unity of purpose, deliver a development plan, and implement it. Ranil Wickremesinghe, who steadfastly has believed in a united Sri Lanka and a negotiated settlement, will now be key, in translating the military victory into development for all.

Thus Dinesh Weerakkody has performed a remarkable service beyond Sri Lanka with 'Ranil Wickremesinghe – A Political Biography'. Read it and learn of the value of leadership in making critical national choices and using power wisely.

Dr Greg Mills

Author of 'Why Africa is Poor' and 'Why States Recover'

Johannesburg

March 7, 2017

Editor's Note

To find a gentlemanly and able politician is like trying to find a needle in a haystack. But Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe is one of those few politicians who combine, both. Dinesh Weerakkody in his book "Ranil Wickremesinghe - A Political Biography" succinctly highlights this fact.

Dinesh, in his endeavour to first understand the makings of Ranil, the political creature, starts by dwelling in to his background, beginning with their family inheritance Lake House, a veritable political powerhouse since independence and lasting up to its takeover in 1973.

Ranil's father the late Esmond Wickremesinghe played a dominant role in the political affairs of Lake House until his premature retirement from this once venerable institution in 1966, two years after being one of the principle figures in the toppling of a government showing dictatorial tendencies, by democratic means, not that much dissimilar to what his son replicated 50 years later.

The second stage of Ranil's political life captured by Dinesh was his entry into Parliament in 1977, literally on a platter, due to the government of that time messing-up the economy. Thereafter, his political wisdom and knowledge displayed even as a young MP at 28 and in a mere 16 years later, to be suddenly catapulted to be the second most powerful person in the country due to circumstances beyond his control, is another highlight.

Meanwhile, the third stage of Ranil's political life captured in this book was the 20+ years that he was in the political wilderness (save nearly 2½ years in-between), a record, where Ranil functioned as Opposition Leader for two decades, after enjoying the fruits of political power for an unbroken period of 17 years since 1977, where, in the last of those two plus years (December 2001 to February 2004), he reached almost the zenith of his political life.

And the fourth and last important point of Ranil's political character succinctly captured in this book by Dinesh, an individual who has known and worked with him closely for nearly 25 years, is that he describes Ranil's wisdom and the foresight to walk in partnership and unitedly with another politically

likeminded person, plucked out from Mahinda Rajapaksa's camp, to fight the biggest ever political force that the country ever faced, probably bigger than the southern or northern terrorism that the country previously faced, post independence, and win, not by the bullet, but by the ballot.

This book is certainly a must read for all lovers of political history and of democracy.

Paresha Ameresckere

Senior Journalist

March 2017

Preface

It is my privilege to present my sixth book to my readership. My fifth book, *The Great November Revolution* was published in November 2015. However, this book is very different to the rest. This book is about a politician whose public life spans four decades but who still remains an enigma to those who do not know him well. The writing of this book is something that I began in 2010 with the purpose of bringing out his unseen side through a personal account. The image that emerges from the book is of a highly refined and deliberative man, one who holds progressive views but without a show of passion, unlike other politicians, and who values building consensus over bashing his opponents, merely for short-term political gain. So far his career has followed that ethic. Ranil to me is a man who believes in the community helping themselves. He comes from a background that values Sri Lankan systems. Unlike many of his contemporaries, and those who have followed, he believed strongly enough in the strength of the local education system to go to the University of Colombo for his degree rather than to a foreign university.

It was in 1990 that I was first introduced to Ranil Wickremesinghe by my father-in-law Minister John Amaratunga, Ranil was then Minister of Industries. He had begun the process of corporatization. United Motors was put on the market followed by Ceylon Oxygen. His vision for the public sector got me interested in his work and I would correspond with him on and off on many subjects. Some time later Ranil wanted to meet my illustrious uncle, the late Justice Dr A.R.B. Amerasinghe, to get some advice on a legal matter. I suggested we meet at my house in Borella. By this time the UNP was in Opposition. Ranil had taken over the UNP and he was the Opposition Leader. After the meeting John mentioned to Ranil that I would like to get more involved in the UNP, Ranil invited me to help him set up the professional groups. It was at this time, working with him, that I saw he had a strong sense about people, their culture and their different interests. Underneath his stern and often aloof exterior, I very frequently saw curiosity, discipline, dedication, humility and consideration. It was easy for me to connect with him because he was well read and valued knowledge. Since then, it has been a rewarding experience to work for Ranil both in opposition and in government. Additionally, I have acted as both his driver and security guard, to cart him around to meet people at the dead of night, under cover, not really knowing the risk I was putting him through and myself.

Ranil is surprisingly a very simple man, who never throws his weight around. He is only interested in getting a job done well, and that was his reputation when he moved to other ministries as well and even before, in respect of the previous ministerial portfolios he held, prior to industries. Therefore, I trust

this book will give a much more complete and revealing picture of the man, his character and what he stands for as a political leader and his desire to take Sri Lanka from where it is, to where it has never been.

I thank all those who helped me to put this book together, specifically Lalin Fernando, Chandra Schaffter, Paneetha Ameresekere, Jehan Perera, W.M. Fernando, Andrew Samarathunga, R. Reffai and Harry Jayawardane.

I dedicate this book to the late Ven. Sobitha Thera and his generation of locally rooted social and intellectual leaders who have shared a common set of universal values and who put Sri Lanka back on the world map in a way that we can be proudly Sri Lankan.

Once again, I thank my readers and greatly value their suggestions and criticisms of my effort, which would no doubt enable me to bring out more and better publications in the future.

Dinesh Weerakkody
Colombo Sri Lanka
March 2017

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14th July 1991

Mr. Dinesh Weerakkody
41, Athletes Road
Colombo 15.

Dear Dinesh,

It is an pleasure with thanks to receipt of your letter dated 1st July 1991 conveying your congratulations on my appointment as Prime Minister of Sri Lanka.

It is very kind of you to have remembered me. I need your cooperation and assistance in our effort to achieve peace, harmony and prosperity.

With kind regards,

Yours sincerely,

Ranil Wickremesinghe
Prime Minister



His Excellency Maithripala Sirisena President of Sri Lanka

Two years ago, Ranil and I, having so much at stake to lose, even our lives, succeeded in forming a Government of National Unity.

We became joint partners in a kind of venture unique to our country. Today, we have succeeded beyond expectations, forming a stable Government and our development plans are on the right track for a way forward. We passed the 2017 National Budget with a two-thirds majority in Parliament, an example to the world of the progress of the committed partnership between us and the parties we lead.

We do have occasional disagreements in our angles of view when confronting a situation, which, however, is really a positive feature of a good partnership, for it strengthens attempts of having a relook and a closer focus for an ultimate conviction to find the best solution, for the sake of the greater good of the people and of the country.

Ranil and I are committed to ensure that the system of good governance and economic rationality are implemented in our minds, in the law and on the ground. We share a common vision of having a pluralistic and a non-racist policy in which our diverse ethnic and religious communities feel at ease with a conviction that they are one family of the motherland.

In Ranil, I am convinced I have a political partner with a plan for a peaceful and prosperous Sri Lanka and with an equal determination to make our dream a reality. I wish to congratulate and thank the author of this book Dinesh Weerakkody for providing us, in these pages, the evidence that we have an extraordinary politician and statesman in our Prime Minister, the Hon. Ranil Wickremesinghe.



Ven. Galaboda Gnanissara Thero Chief Incumbent of the Gangaramaya Temple

From his early years Ranil Wickremesinghe was quiet, humble and unassuming. He did not move much with friends; instead he found solace in solitude. He is not one to engage in wrongdoings, injustice or malpractice. These characteristics have defined Ranil Wickremesinghe as a professional and as a leader.

As we consider Sri Lanka's history and before we speak of her heroic sons, we must remember Helena Wijewardene and Don Philip Wijewardene. The couple had nine children, and being a resident of Hunupitiya since 1954, I came to know them all well. Of the nine, D.R. Wijewardene spent most of his life in Hunupitiya. His eldest daughter Nalini, who was Ranil Wickremesinghe's mother, spent most of her childhood at the Gangaramaya Temple in Hunupitiya. The late former President J.R. Jayewardene too was of the same family, his mother being Helena Wijewardene's daughter. I have known Ranil Wickremesinghe during his childhood, youth and ascent to Government.

On the request of J.R. Jayewardene, Wickremesinghe contested the 1977 Parliamentary Elections from the Biyagama Electorate. Subsequently, he was appointed Minister of Youth Affairs and Employment, becoming the youngest appointed Cabinet Minister in the country and also the most skilled.

Elected during a time of youth unrest, Wickremesinghe used many methods to guide the youth on to the right track in order to bring about calm amidst chaos. In the early 1970s, most Sri Lankans sought overseas jobs that required very little skill. Through the policies that Wickremesinghe implemented, he was able to transform this situation. His action plan resulted in the creation of professionals, such as those born during Colonial times, and it was then that skilled Sri Lankans sought employment overseas.

Subsequently, Ranil Wickremesinghe was appointed Minister of Education. His tenure was focused on solving the issues faced by university graduates. He did not care for differences based on ethnicity, religion, cast, creed or political views. Equality or neutrality is what the Buddha preached. However, in this mortal world it is difficult for one who is neutral to be popular. This was the case with J.R. Jayewardene as well.

I was fortunate to play an active role in the close relationship between Ranil Wickremesinghe and late former President R. Premadasa. Until my introduction, Premadasa was not very cordial with the Senanayake and Wijewardena generations. Yet, before his assassination, Premadasa understood that Wickremesinghe was suitable for

leadership and made necessary provisions for his progression. After Premadasa was assassinated by the LTTE, Wickremesinghe became Prime Minister. He should have become the President, however due to shortcomings of the United National Party, D.B. Wijetunga took on the responsibility as Head of State after securing the UNP's approval. Despite Wickremesinghe being a clear candidate for the subsequent 1994 Presidential Elections, again due to shortcomings and weaknesses on the part of the UNP leadership, Minister Gamini Dissanayake was selected as the UNP Presidential Candidate. He was assassinated before contesting the election; and at this point the candidacy should have been given to Wickremesinghe. Unfortunately, Srimala Dissanayake was selected as the UNP Presidential Candidate. She was defeated. Due to these incidents, the political providence due to the UNP was lost.

Chandrika Kumaratunga became President when the UNP was powerful. As the country was in a state of financial despair during her governance, she called for early elections and Ranil Wickremesinghe was elected Prime Minister. One and a half years later, the economy turned around.

Ranil Wickremesinghe came into power in 2015 at a time when many things in Sri Lanka were approaching ruin. When Premadasa became President, he famously said that due to terrorism and mismanagement, among other issues, there was only five million rupees in the Central Bank of Sri Lanka and he worked to revive the economy. He received an understanding of the GST and economic development at the Gangaramaya Temple. The benefits of the GST (Goods and Services Tax) in supporting the Government was eventually realised, and the GST that was at 1.5 per cent during Premadasa's Government increased to 12 per cent during the tenure of President Mahinda Rajapaksa. He later reduced it to 11 per cent and this led to a weakening in his Government. When the UNP came into power, the GST, or VAT (Value Added Tax) as it is called today, was increased and this was condemned. However, people do not understand, or have forgotten, that although there is development in the country, this involved much foreign debt. If they understood this there would have been no protest against the increase in VAT. As preached by the Buddha, those who earn must benefit while ensuring they make their contribution to the development of the country. Amidst the protests, if a businessman stood up to point out the correctness and suitability of the move in considering the present economic predicament, the country would not have been misled.

The GST or VAT, Employees' Provident Fund (EPF) and Employees' Trust Fund (ETF) are secure funds. However, certain Governments have used these funds irresponsibly. As a result, the country has faced bankruptcy and the cost of living has increased. Ranil Wickremesinghe's Government promised that wages will be increased in line with the cost of living, and they have fulfilled the promise, even though such an increase is not feasible in the country's present economic position. This is after all a time when the country has been burdened with debt, lost EPF and ETF funds, had its economic resources allocated to overseas companies and seen successful ventures halted. However, the work force has been ungrateful and it is not even interested in understanding the dire situation of the country. Instead of criticising others they must work hard. The Paddy Lands Act was enacted to ensure development through agriculture. Although the farmer was donated an asset the next generation has forgotten this. It is ironical that Sri Lanka's biggest issue now is a shortage in rice.

Wickremesinghe is not one to steal or engage in underhand dealings; I say this with conviction as I know him well. Unfortunately, certain efforts to conceal the country's bankrupt state has left room for wrongdoing. The Buddha preached a life without debt, thus, the greatest harm to the country is the debt we have accrued. At present, the greatest accusation against Ranil Wickremesinghe is the Bond Issue. We will never believe that Wickremesinghe did anything with intent. We should never forget the history of the country, we must be attentive to the present and we must plan for the future. As the country is not following these key aspects we seem to have fallen into a blazing pit of fire. The Buddha too preached about profit and loss; criticism and praise; and happiness and sadness. It is my conviction that Ranil Wickremesinghe has comprehended the Ashtaloka Dhamma. Therefore, he is able to absorb all criticism and he is intelligent enough to forge ahead to ensure the prosperity and development of the country.

Sri Lankans must understand facts, they must read history and they must work together to introduce solutions to calamities such as the drought we currently face. Together with an intelligent, dedicated and strong leader such as Ranil Wickremesinghe we will most definitely be able to ensure that a prosperous period dawns upon Sri Lanka.



Malcolm Cardinal Ranjith Archbishop of Colombo

I met Honourable Ranil Wickremesinghe way back in July 1979 for the first time when he was a young Parliamentarian and Minister of Youth Affairs in the Government formed by His Excellency the late President J.R. Jayewardene. He attended the wedding of my sister as its attesting witness. Then I was a young priest serving in the Negombo area.

Since then I have seen how in a meteoric political career he rose to be a well accepted and a much loved political leader in this country, holding responsible positions in Government including the position of Prime Minister of Sri Lanka already three times.

Hon. Wickremesinghe has proven himself to be an intelligent, astute, versatile and absolutely selfless leader in our country. He has no personal agendas or ambitions to fulfill and has always been completely dedicated to the well being of the motherland and its people. He has a cosmopolitan and open mindset without being slavish to any restrictive ideologies.

He has also risked his political career in order to dedicate himself sincerely to peace, harmony and progress for our country and its people. It is this spirit of courage to think beyond the narrow prejudices of racial or religious ideologies that has marked him out as a true statesman, able to take this country forward.

Sri Lanka, which has a glorious and lengthy history of civilization coloured by the teachings of Buddhism and enriched further by Hinduism, Islam and Christianity down the centuries can truly be a nation of peace and prosperity and an example of harmonious living to the whole world, if it remains faithful to the noble teachings of these religions. Honourable Wickremesinghe in many a way crystallizes within himself this rich cultural heritage with an exemplary sense of openness to the most noble aspirations of the human heart.

I consider it a singular fortune to have met and come to know Mr. Wickremesinghe and I can say that he is truly a noble human being and a great son of Mother Lanka. I wish him God's blessings and Ad Multos Annos!

Launch of the Book

Ranil Wickremesinghe - A Political Biography



Ranil Wickremesinghe - A Political Biography





Ranil Wickremesinghe - A Political Biography

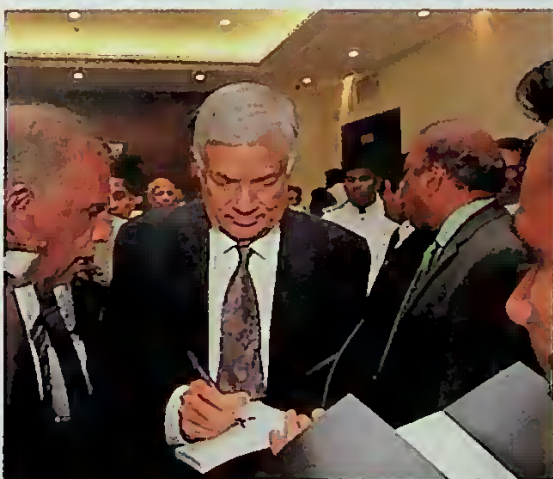


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