



Policy Statement

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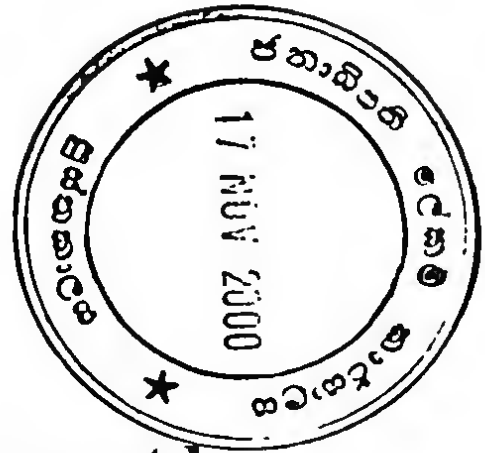
Her Excellency

Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga

President of the

Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka

2000



**Address to Parliament by
Her Excellency the President
Chandrika Bandaranaike
Kumaratunga
on the occasion of the opening
of the First Session of the
11th Parliament of Sri Lanka at
Parliament on
9th November, 2000**

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Mr. Speaker,

Hon. Members of Parliament,

The new session of the 11th Parliament of Sri Lanka begins as we look forward to meeting the challenges of a new century, at a time when our beloved motherland and our people face a very significant and decisive moment in history. I would first extend my warmest greetings to the Hon. Members of the Government and the Opposition who have been elected to this August Assembly.

Whatever political party one may belong to, the foremost duty of all of you who are seated in this August Assembly is to serve to your best the people of Sri Lanka who have elected you to this House. We understand that the greatest share of responsibility in this regard is borne by myself as the Head of State and my Government. Permit me, therefore, on this important occasion, to present to you the Government's policy and forward vision, as well as, our programme of action for the first decade of the 21st century. Mr. Speaker, it is a very significant development that the People's Alliance was re-elected to power at the general election held on October 10, last month.

If we are to look back at the history of Sri Lanka since independence you would find that this is the first occasion on which a government that completed its full term of office, and held a general election on schedule, has been re-elected to office by the free choice and vote of the masses of this country. What is most evident from this is the trust and confidence of the people in the forward looking policies placed before them and the work that was carried out by my Government in the past 6 years.

They have endorsed the correctness of our vision and policy, as well as, our programme of work. This is observed even better by the fact that it is not only at the recent general election but also by the fact that the people ensured the victory of our party in several elections held during our term of office. It is clear by these results that our people have very clearly rejected racism and extremism of whatever type or form. This I consider to be a welcome sign for the future. We are thankful to the people of this country for giving us a victory and mandate of this nature.

Our Policies and Programme of Action

When we contested the Parliamentary General Election in 1994, we presented a manifesto laying out our policies and programmes. In that we explained in detail our vision and our development plans which we intended implementing once elected to office. Subsequently, on the occasion of the opening of Parliament on January 6th, 1995 we presented these policies in greater detail.

In the implementation of those policies in the past six years we have achieved successful results. Those results belong to two categories, one of which comprises our achievements in the political and social sphere, and the other comprises our successes in the economic sphere. Our first promise on that occasion was to build a society where one could live without any fear. This is a reality today. Today our people do not live in constant fear of death. We

have seen to the dawn of an environment where the youth of our country can live freely without been haunted by fear. The People's Alliance government and I have great satisfaction in being able to successfully carry out our commitment to make our country one that is free from fear.

It is not only a new political culture that we established in the six years that have passed, we also took steps to establish a new economic order in keeping with this new political culture. In the sphere of economics what we have now bid good-bye to the past. You are no doubt aware that Sri Lanka is today linked to the most important centers and locations of the world economy. I expect to explain to you later a few details of the economic progress that we have achieved.

While our development programme was being carried out, on the 19th of August last year, we presented in detail our policies for the future which was titled "New Vision for the 21st Century" that included fundamentals for the country's economic development and activities until the year 2010. The policy statement of the present government is the same as what we presented at that time. That was the thinking on which our policy statement for the recent Parliamentary General Election too was based. Our future programme of action will also be the same.

As a result of the people having confidence and placing their trust in that forward vision, they have given power to the People's Alliance in all Provincial Councils and in 196 Local Government Authorities to enable us to proceed with that vision and programme of action. This is the best demonstration of the fact that there is political stability established in this country. The manner in which we have overcome the many obstacles and challenges that we faced within the country, as well as from abroad, and our ability to establish political stability in the past six years despite all these difficulties has won the commendation of the international community.

Mr. Speaker,

On the one hand, governance includes facing up to many a challenge. Personally, this is not something new to me. It is something that life itself has thrust upon me. On the other hand, we have gained strength as a Government by collectively facing up to many a serious challenge in the past 6 years. It is now an unshakable strength. The challenge of Government is not confined to the winning of elections. It is important to make a comparative study of the crises that prevailed during the period of the recent elections within our party and with or among other political parties and the gravity of the crises that exists within Sri Lankan society. It will then be understood that the time has come for all of us to set aside the various rivalries that prevailed among political parties in their efforts to face up to the challenge of the recent elections and instead look seriously at the real challenges faced by the country. What are the challenges that we face as a country and people today.

Mr. Speaker,

I shall make an effort to list these under 3 separate headings—

- (1) While strengthening and guaranteeing the basic human rights in all sections of our society to proceed uninterrupted towards greater democratisation of the Government and the society.
- (2) Ending the war and bringing about a political solution for the ethnic crisis.
- (3) Making our country one of the most developed and advanced countries in the 3rd world through a definite programme of economic development that would achieve the elimination of poverty.

Mr. Speaker, although I have presented economic development, the democratising of society and bringing an end to the war with the search for a solution to the ethnic crisis as three different topics, in fact they are all facets of a single problem. Where there is no economic development there is no social equality. Where there is no equality among communities there is no democracy. It is a noticeable feature in the modern world that the injustice that has caused in this manner is translated into guns and bombs. In our country, it is the lack of economic development and the ethnic crises that has led to the prevailing war. Therefore, we will give some facts with regard to economic developments.

Six Years of Sustainable Economic Progress

The aim of overall economic policies in the first years of the People's Alliance government were mainly directed to re-build the economy that had been disrupted. We are now realising the fruits of that effort. Even in the midst of a war that is drawing our resources, the rate of economic growth has been maintained at a steady 5 per cent during the past six years. The Gross Domestic Production which amounted to Rs.579 billion in 1994, rose to Rs.1111 billions in 1999. Un-employment which stood at 14.4 per cent in 1994 has reduced to 8 per cent while per capita income which was Rs.32,414 (US\$.515) has risen to Rs.58,323 (US\$.829) in 1999. Public servants salaries have been increased by 80 per cent. The rate of inflation has been brought down from 15 per cent to 8 per cent. This means that we have been able to moderate the price increases. During the past six years we have been able to increase our foreign reserves from 1400 million dollars to 2500 million dollars. Another major achievement we have realised is that the rate of savings has also increase substantially. The domestic savings, which stood at 17.8 per cent in 1994, have risen to 24 per cent in the current year. Export income has increased by 50 per cent. Consequently the unfavourable trade balance has been reduced. As a result of these developments we have been able to

reduce the burden of foreign debt. By 1999 our foreign debt had dropped to 57 per cent from what it was in 1994. This foundation that we have laid for a strong economy is evident in the progress that has been made in sectors such as industry, agriculture and infrastructure development.

In 1994 only 36 per cent of rural population had electricity. By 1999 we had increased it to 53 per cent. The availability of telephones was increased four fold from the number it was in 1994. The dependency on hydro-power, which was 80 per cent at that time has now been reduced to 67 per cent.

In the six years that has passed, there have been many changes in the pattern of consumption and lifestyle of our people. Consumption of rice, wheat flour, fish and meat products essential for the people has increased considerably. The use of three wheelers, the consumption of gas and the purchase of motor vehicles, television sets and radios have shown a marked increase. To give a few examples, the use of three wheelers increased from 15,000, in 1994 to 120,000 in 1999. Paddy production showed an increase of 45 per cent during this period. Tea industry grew by 80 per cent, production in the fisheries sector increased by 85 per cent, while industrial production has doubled. There has been a similar improvement of domestic savings.

The essential components of a sound economic development are overall economic and financial stability, moderating the cost of living increase through lower inflation, reduction in the budget deficit, a strong balance of payments and a fair distribution of income. Having taken forward economic management towards achieving these goals we will continue in our efforts to strengthen our economy further. Permit me on this occasion to explain a few aspects of our vision for the future.

Future Activities

Mr. Speaker, we have included our future programme of activity in our election manifesto. This came from the vision for the 21st century that we presented to the country in August 1999.

We have both medium and long term plans to achieve the targets set out in this programme. The medium term development strategy is intended to serve from the year 2000 to 2005. The basic objectives are to increase domestic savings, reduce the budget deficit, reduce domestic borrowings and release resources for investment by the private sector, the eradication of poverty, and further reduction in un-employment and the cost of living.

Accordingly, it is our aim to increase the rate of economic growth, which now stands at 5 per cent per annum to 8 per cent in the medium term. If that is achieved, un-employment could be brought down to 4 per cent. Consequently, the question of employment would be completely solved. However, if the programme for eradication of poverty is to be successful we should bring down the rate of inflation to a level of around 3 - 4 per cent. In order to achieve this it is necessary to reduce the budget deficit, which now stands at 8 per cent to 5 per cent by 2003. The domestic savings should also increase up to 35 per cent by the year 2010.

Similarly, I would like to show that there are other economic and social targets that we seek to achieve. There are 3 main targets in our economic development programme. The first is the diversity in economic development. The main emphasis will be the rapid development of infrastructure facilities. The second is the increase in production through productivity improvement and the use of the modern technology. Third is the eradication of poverty through the increase in personal income and the reduction of anomalies in distribution of individual incomes. Under the programme of infrastructure development it is our aim to make Sri Lanka the financial and service hub of South and South East Asia. It is for

this reason that we have paid special attention to the development of highways, power, telecommunication, information technology, water supply, banking and on efficient public service. In accordance with this programme we will complete a new expressway system which will link Colombo-Katunayake, Kandy-Galle and Matara by the year 2005. By 2010, the entire transport structure of the country would be modernised. The supply of drinking water, electricity and housing to the people is expected to be completed by 2010. Transport facilities throughout the island and communication facilities too would be fully modernised by this time. Giving due importance to the education sector, plans are already completed for every electorate to have at least 3 schools with all necessary facilities for proper education. Several steps are being taken to improve and facilitate the teaching of science, technology and foreign languages. With a view to making Sri Lanka the “cyber island” of the South Asia Region we have already established a separate ministry for this purpose. Other targets of our future programme includes the provision of vocational training to those who do not go for higher education, the provision of a main hospital with all facilities in every district and further improvement of the rural hospitals. Also included is the provision of houses for 75 per cent of those in the plantation sector, as well as, drinking water, electricity, schools and health facilities to this sector. In keeping with our national policy on the development of ports, steps are already been taken for the development of harbours and ancillary facilities. Our country too will have ports comparable in development to those in Singapore, Hong-Kong and Dubai. The expansion of the Colombo harbour, the improvement of the new Galle harbour and the development of harbours at Hambantota and Oluwil come within this programme of development. The main task of my Cabinet which has a large number of ministries is to carry out the necessary work to reach our targets expeditiously. We have also paid special attention to the problems of farmers which emerged very clearly at the General Election on October 10th.

A separate authority will be established for the marketing and distribution of agricultural produce. An effective and systematic programme will be initiated with regard to both the cultivation and marketing of paddy, potatoes, onions, vegetable and fruits. We have now reached self-sufficiency in rice production. In such a situation, the farmer is faced with a downward trend in prices due to seasonal excess production. The solution to this is to develop export markets for the excess rice and thereby bring about stability of prices in the local market. To remove the unfavourable impact on the indigenous farmer as a result of the import of some food items, steps will be taken to implement the safeguard mechanisms that were implemented in the past 6 years more systematically.

There are many instances when the consumer is faced with considerable difficulties due to certain enterprises having monopoly rights. Steps will be taken to remove such monopolies.

During in the past 6 years, the Government paid considerable attention to encourage new investment in the industrial and agricultural sectors and a great deal of work was done in this regard. However, entrepreneurs still find it difficult to obtain bank loans, land and similar facilities for their ventures. It is the intention of my Government to intervene and bring about necessary changes to solve such problems faced by domestic entrepreneurs.

It is our aim to reduce drugs, alcohol and smoking and other social abuses 50 per cent by the year 2010. Homes for senior citizens will be established. Facilities will be provided for health services to such persons to make the twilight of their life more productive and pleasant. There will be better facilities than now for war heroes and those who are incapacitated due to the war. As mentioned in my last Budget Speech we have already prepared the necessary grounds for special programmes providing for welfare of farmers, those who engaged in fishing, plantation workers, public servants, youth, journalists, artistes, those in self employment, women and children.

The Challenge of Globalization

Mr. Speaker, it is not my intention to limit the concept of globalization to the interpretation of been the economic concept by which the market economy is extended beyond the limit of state control. Globalization has had a tremendous impact of spheres of culture, society and communication through out the world. Globalization is a powerful and useful concept. However, there are, undesirable consequences as well. It is necessary that we pay special attention to help in the up lifting of the sections of society that are thrust aside as a result of social development aspects of globalisation farmers, small industries and un-employed youth are most in danger, of being affected by this process. Similarly, it is necessary to have a common programme for the eradication of urban and rural poverty. The results of the recent election have also compelled us to look into this deeply and come up with the necessary solutions. It has become all the more necessary that the Samurdhi Programme launched by us has further extended to face up to the threats to globalization. Mr. Speaker, it has become necessary for us to carry out our economic development policies based on market orientation and incentives for investment. However, as a poor country it is become necessary for us to give priority to social security and welfare programmes to assist the sections of society that are burdened with poverty. The late Prime Minister Mr. S.W.R.D Bandaranaike inaugurated our party to raise the economic social and cultural levels of the vast majority of our poor people, therefore our vision is based on combining of these three elements and searching any ways to achieve desired results. Our government follows a policy to seek to prevent the pushing of all sections of society to abject poverty and over concentration of property rights and the accumulation of wealth.

What is required by us today is the political and economic system based on powerful and realistic philosophy which takes into context the changed national and international political situation and is capable of facing up to the challenges of globalization in the 21st century.

This should be a programme with the properly blended and management capability and technology, the human aspects of socialist economy together with social justice and the modern democratic political concepts and principals that have been accepted in the modern world. It should also be a system that could safeguard our national honesty, culture and pride. In the final analysis while it safeguards the right of the Sinhalese Buddhist and the Sinhalese Christians should make up the vast majority of our population, it should also accept the equality in status tamils and muslims, burghers and all other similar communities and religious groups as well as respect and accept their individuality. Stated in different terms this means giving authority to humanity to transform our country into a land where people of dignity could live with honesty and where richness of humanity prevails throughout.

Mr. Speaker,

I will now explain to you the first challenge we face, which is that of strengthening human rights and values and the greater democratisation of Government and the society. In this context, it is necessary to take a pause to look at the history that has been left behind to fully understand the challenges that are before us.

The progress of mankind throughout history is one of progress through diverse eras and their own social systems. In the long history that has been the heritage of our land, we have passed through several such eras. The first of these was era of civilisation. Next was the colonial era. This was followed by the past-colonial era. Having passed through these various stages of history from 1956-1977 we entered the era of social revival. In other words, we stepped into the age of the common man. It is during this period that the people of our country were able to move about and carry out their livelihoods in freedom. This could also be described as an age of the re-designing and restructuring of society. From then on, the 17 long years from 1977-1994, was a period of

regression in our society. The end of that era and the dawn of the new era of peace and reconstruction dawned after 1994. It is during this period that we moved forward to re-establish the norms of democracy in our country.

Mr. Speaker,

Democracy is not only confined to the conduct of election to bring governments into power. It is not something that is confined to politics alone. In a truly democratic society, it is not only the verbiage of democracy that comes from the citizen that matters but also the practice of democracy in the lifestyle of the citizen. Looked at in that context, we as a society have faced many a setback. In seeking to democratise the family, religious organisations, political parties, the media, the state and all such sectors of society, it becomes necessary to draw lessons from the principles of democratic thinking of great intellectuals, philosophers and leaders from the past to this very day. Those valuable core-values of democracy can today be considered as what is now referred to as the "Rule of Law". This can be described as constitutional guarantees of the rights of man. It is necessary today for our society to have an acceptable code of ethics which will ensure that respect for human rights is a matter of day to day practice by all. By ridding our society of violence, ending the on-going war and not taking revenge against others, we as political leaders have to set the right example to the people by acting with a sense of brotherhood in keeping with the principle of "One for All and All for One".

Mr. Speaker, I am reminded at this time of the historic speech made by the founder and great leader of our party the late Prime Minister, the Honourable Mr. S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike when he left the United National Party and took his seat in the opposition benches on the 12th of July, 1951.

Drawing inspiration from and quoting Abraham Lincoln, he said that the political step he took that day, was with malice to none, but in the interest of the welfare of all. Mr. Speaker, I believe that when he wrote down that lofty thought "the greatest duty of man is to serve mankind" in your autograph album, he did so as a reminder of that principle of service to mankind.

Therefore, Mr. Speaker, the Honourable Mr. S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike who extended loving kindness even to enemies and through the many commitments in his life has given us a valuable lesson with regard to the direction we should go as a society and the leadership we should give to it. We have no reason whatever, Mr. Speaker, to deviate from that path. It is possible for us to go on this journey by extending from the uppermost to the lowest layers in our own society the right to life, the freedom of speech and expression, the freedom of thought and the freedom from torture and harassment and such other freedoms accepted as fundamental rights by other civilised societies of the world Mr. Speaker, there is a new debate today about strengthening the democratic rights we have obtained, and the necessity for a new political culture. There are many proposals made on ways and means of strengthening the democratic process.

The situation with regard to democracy is not one that only affects countries such as ours in the Third World. There are serious questions and issues about democracy even in countries of Western Europe, considered and believed to be having the highest standards of democracy. The new life and the new social democratic forces in Britain and other countries of Western Europe are looking at means of making their societies become more democratic. According to the Director of Political Science and Economics in the London School of Economic and Science, Anthony Giddons in his book titled "The Third Way" he states that the challenge faced by the countries of Western Europe today is one of the "democratising of democracy". What this indicates is that even in these countries democracy is facing a certain crisis. In a survey

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conducted in the United States of America and 11 European countries with regard to the democratic system of governance in those countries, the response of 90 per cent of those surveyed was that although there was a clearly accepted concept of democracy, it was necessary to look towards ways and means to further strengthen democracy in their countries.

Mr. Speaker, accordingly it is not a surprise that there are problems about democracy in our own country too. Although after 1994 under our Government it was possible to strengthen and stabilise democracy, there is today a noticeable debate about widening the scope of democracy within the entirety of our society. This is noticeable in all institutions of society and political parties, too. This is why our future programme of activity gives prominence to the essential requirement to expand democracy throughout our society.

In considering this matter I make a special appeal to the Hon. Members of this House to address their minds to the question as to whether our extending electoral system suits the needs of genuine democracy. There are charges made that the prevailing electoral system is one reason for the election related violence that is found today. Further it is my belief that this electoral system tends to give a distorted presentation of the democratic will of the people. The results of the General Election in 1994 and the more recent election on October 10th are very good examples of this distortion. Therefore, it has become necessary for us to devise an electoral system which will result in a truly reflect public will, while ensuring representation of the small parties and small communities in our society. It is my view that it should comprise the best aspects of the earlier first-past-the-post system we were used to, and the system of proportional representation. I earnestly request you to give serious attention to this in the period ahead. There is also today a debate about the need for independent commissions for Elections, the Police, the Public Service and the Judiciary for the proper democratization of society.

Mr. Speaker, I accept the necessity for such independent commissions for the proper governance of any modern civilized society. I am ready to establish such commissions and make the functional. That was why we included this in the draft Constitutional Bill presented during the term of the previous Parliament. I, therefore, wish to draw your attention to the fact that the speedy adoption of the new Constitution would lead to the establishment of these commissions too. Again Mr. Speaker, it is my view that in resolving the problems faced by democracy in a globalisation society to the proposals made by the new left and new Social Democratic intellectuals have a great relevance to the subject. Two main solutions offered by them are the decentralization of power and the sharing of power. Such sharing of power and the extension of democratic rights is not confined to the minority communities only. It is not confined to solving the problems of the minority communities. What the modern day thinkers on democracy show is that even solutions to the problems faced by majority communities could also be solved, through the de-centralization and sharing of power. It is possible for us to use this procedure of power sharing to improve and stabilize the political, social and economic rights of all peoples of this country including the Sinhalese. This could also be used to bring about a solution to the ethnic crisis and hope to end the on-going war. We have consistently shown this process as most important and relevant to end the war and solve the ethnic crisis.

Mr. Speaker, bringing about the end of the current war and helping solve the ethnic crisis is our next identified challenge. It is necessarily intertwined with the two challenges of democratising society eradication of poverty through economic development. The ethnic crisis is an issue concerning democracy in this country. We expect the fact that there is a strong and underlined political reason for the ethnic crisis that prevails today. This political reason is none other than the fact that there is no political understanding on the solution of this problem. The war is but a consequence of the ethnic crisis. There have been many hair

splitting arguments and counter arguments about what should be done to solve this problem. Some sections keep questioning as to how the new Constitution could be adopted without a two-thirds vote in Parliament. However, it is my honest belief that none of these arguments or legalistic and ideological positions that have been continued for the past fifty years have brought about any solution to this problem.

Mr. Speaker, it has been said that an ounce of practicality has more value than a ton of ideology. Permit me to explaining to you the reasons for our dedication to the practical solution to this crisis and the guiding principals behind this policy. The real cause of the ethnic crisis is that the minority communities have not had a fair or reasonable opportunity to share in the political social and economic power structure in this country. This is now the problem of the system of government now in place in our country. When we built up the post Colonial State structure we did not think of designing alternative structures which would suit a pluralistic society. We have failed to carry out successfully the responsibility that fifty years of history has thrust upon us, to establish a new strong and united Sri Lankan nation.

It is a consequence of this that communities that lived in friendship for centuries are now divided and face the unfortunate agony of war destruction and mistrust. The minority communities began feeling that in the existing State, they could not obtain justice and fairplay, and in fact such injustice had taken place, because we have been unable to get way from the framework of the essentially colonial power structure that does not suit in any way the prevailing conditions in our society. These clashes and conflicts turned into open war after 1983 and are now proceeding in the same direction of war due to the very dynamics of an armed conflict. Therefore, this question has to be looked at not from the point of view of what existed in the past but instead in terms of the present day requirements. Accordingly, in searching for practical solutions it has become necessary for us to look at alternative positions.

These are—

- (1) Constitutional Reforms
- (2) Rebuilding the country on the basis of national unity
- (3) Military action against terrorists

Mr. Speaker, although I have presented these alternatives in sequential order they should not be implemented one after the other but concurrently, together and in co-ordination with each other.

(1) **Constitutional Reforms**

We have seen that the 1978 Constitution that is in force today and the framework of government as it exists have failed to solve the ethnic crisis. Although Hon. Members who belong to different political parties in this House may have different views on this matter, I am aware that there is general agreement among them on this reality. If there are differences amongst us on this matter they have arisen due to certain steps we have taken with regard to constitutional reforms. However, in formulating a constitution aimed at solving the ethnic crises there are certain fundamental facts that you, I or any others cannot exclude. That is the acceptance of the basic reality of a pluralistic society and creating a constitutional framework under which the citizens are genuine and effective stakeholders in a pluralistic democracy.

The sharing of power is fundamental to the establishment of such a governmental system, we have prepared a draft Constitution in which the power of the centre is shared. Several independent commissions are to be given responsibilities both at government and administrative level, the Executive Presidency is to be abolished and a wide range of social and economic rights have been introduced and guaranteed. We were able to present it to the last Parliament, after extensive discussions at a Select Committee which

represented all parties in that Parliament. We did not include the various provisions that were in that draft on our own, but after taking into consideration the developments from the time of the Bandaranaike - Chelvanayalam Agreement of 1959 through the Mangala Munasingha Select Committee Report of 1992, incorporating the best proposals made up to that time, and also taking into consideration the experiences of other countries in the drafting of Constitutions suitable for a pluralistic democracy.

Having won the Presidential Election in December 1999 we had further discussions with all political parties and particularly lengthy discussions on this subject with the United National Party. We were able to obtain agreement and consensus on the vast majority of the clauses in that draft Constitution. Subsequently, I presented this draft in the form of a Bill before this Hon. House on August 3, this year. Once again, the politics antagonism that had been active throughout the history of this crisis again stood in the path of its progress.

However, Mr. Speaker, as a modern society, is there any other democratic alternative available to us other than the path we have taken? Therefore, it is with the greatest respect that I call upon all of you Hon. Representatives of the people in this House to consider this question again in the absence of any adversarial attitude, but with a gravity of thought about the crisis faced by the country and with fresh, innovative and pragmatic thinking on this issue.

There was a request made in the recent past that certain sections including the Maha Sangha needed an opportunity to express their views on this matter. In fact, from 1995 onwards we have had discussions of such a nature. However, if there is a problem with regard to the inadequacy of those discussions, I wish to declare that I am ready to give an opportunity for further open discussions on this subject.

(2) Rebuilding the country on the basis of national unity

In 1948, when our forefathers first set out along the path of freedom, they envisioned a truly free and united Lanka. The first Prime Minister of Independent Sri Lanka, D.S. Senanayake said after unfurling the national Flag in February 1948; "Our nation comprises many races, each with a culture and a history of its own. It is for us to blend all that is best in us - in establishing peace, security and justice for all people". He also stated (in the State Council on 8.11.1945) "For centuries, the Sinhalese and Tamils have lived together in peace and amity. We have been governed by their Kings and they by ours". "There is no greater ambition in my life than to get all these communities together" (State Council on 9.11.1945). One of Sri Lanka's greatest sons, Sir P. Arunachalam spoke in similar vein (in a speech made at the 1st conference on constitutional reform in 15.12.1917) "No scheme can be perfected or satisfy everybody... we must all give and take, we must sink our differences and present a united front to achieve our objectives. We all feel that racial representation is pernicious and has operated to widen cleavages... and to obstruct that unity and harmony".... I further quote the words of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike who stated in presenting the Tamil Language Bill in Parliament (on 17th July, 1958) "so that we can march forward together and achieve that progress... under this freedom which we have, freedom for the Sinhalese - yes, remember too that it is freedom for the Tamils, for the Muslims, for the Malays, for the Burghers..... and if it is not freedom in that way, for all, I too repeat the words of Shri Jawaharlal Nehru, who after being many years in jail and suffered many years to obtain freedom, pronounced that if freedom meant internal communal strife or injustice or suppression of minorities, "to hell with Swaraj."

“We have failed to realise the dreams of our freedom fighters to build a strong and united nation. The silent majority watched in horror, whilst a great nation with an ancient civilisation steeped in one of the finest cultural and architectural heritages of the world, nurtured in the traditions of the noble Buddhist philosophy of peace, tolerance and love veered off into a terrifying era of ethnic, political and social violence. The people have now awakened to the call for peace and amity.”

“The shrill screams of hatred and violence of the extremist few are being drowned by the sweet sounds of the multitude, calling for unity, harmony and brotherhood. We shall no more permit our people to be drawn down into the quagmire of jealousy, greed and bigotry.”

“History offers but a few opportunities to an individual or a nation to reach up to the stars. We have missed many chances. We cannot, we must not, miss this one last moment, rich with opportunity.”

We must have the statesmanship and the courage to succeed in our quest for lasting peace, which could be attained through the negotiated political solutions we have proposed.

And together, we must relentlessly strive to build a new nation, a united, strong nation, brimming with the vitality and joy of renewal, where all of us, whatever race, religion or caste we belong to, shall together build one nation, drawing strength from the richness of our diversity.

Then, and only then shall we have the peace and the resources required for strong and stable economic development which will offer a good and decent life for every Sri Lankan citizen.

I know that you and I and all Sri Lankan citizens together possess the courage, fortitude and vision to reach for the stars.

Mr. Speaker,

Some have raised the question as to who will be given the power under the constitution which regard the sharing of power. This question is about none other than the LTTE. We have by no means closed the door to LTTE to enter the democratic process in this country. We are ready to have discussions with that organisation.

However, there must be an agreement on what such discussions will be about. If it is the view of the LTTE that by discussions, they only mean the lifting of embargoes and the supply of food and similar things which are advantageous to them, then there will be no purpose served. This is because we have already taken such steps. One of the main tasks of our Government is to re-construct the areas of the North and East ravaged by the war. We have established a new Ministry for this purpose and have given that portfolio to the leader of a Tamil political party who has given up the politics of arms and entered the democratic process. Therefore, what the LTTE should discuss with us should be clear and definite political issues. The Tamil people who comprise the main minority of this country live in the North and East, as well as, in every other region of this country. Looking at it from the point of view of the Tamils themselves the establishment of a separate state in the North and East will not bring about liberation for the Tamil people. All our people will obtain liberation only when they begin to live in a united Sri Lanka. Therefore, the LTTE should give a positive response to the best democratic alternative that has been presented, of sharing power within a single united country. We shall consider it as our duty not to close any doors or place any obstacles in the way of such a positive response.

(1) Military action against terrorists

On this occasion we wish to mention about the efforts being made with the good offices of the Government of Norway to arrive at a political solution of this problem through the process of discussion. From the outset we have made efforts to prevent the destruction caused by war and solve this problem through peaceful means. Within few days of our election in 1994 we launched our peace initiatives. However, we did not receive a favourable response from the LTTE. Even while the war continued we did not reject the various efforts that were made towards discussing peace. The Government of Norway is now acting as facilitator in this matter. They have informed us that there are certain conditions that to be met before the beginning of discussions. However, there is no decision yet on what these conditions are. I expect that all Honourable Members of this House would agree with me that prior to taking any decisions about talks with the LTTE, we should take into consideration the previous practices and attitudes of the LTTE. We should give the most serious consideration as to whether they are trying to fool us too in the same way as they have fooled different governments through a period of fifteen years. However, once the Government of Norway through their facilitation informs us what these conditions are, we expect to come to the final decision having discussed the matter with all concerned parties. Until then we will in no way obtain our policy of replying to terrorism through military action.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to emphasize here that while our position with regard to peace talks with the LTTE is as I mentioned already, we have not changed by even an iota our policy with regard to providing genuine solutions to the problems facing the Tamil people. The policy that we presented to solve this problem has received the endorsement of the people in the several elections held through the past seven years. Mr. Speaker, we could not come to the wrong conclusion that democracy means obtaining

the consent or agreement of everyone. Democracy is the consent of the majority. It is not possible to expect hundred percent unanimity over any question. Such a system does not exist in any democratic country. Therefore, it is my view that to wait till the consensus or agreement that all sections is obtained is not the correct path to proceed on.

Mr. Speaker, in the political history in Sri Lanka it is our government of today that has formed the broadest national coalition of forces. We consider it a victory that many forces or movements that had for many years been fighting for a separate state have accepted our democratic alternative solutions, placed their trust in us and have joined with us. It is our expectation to make this national coalition force even broader. We have to remove the conditions that compelled certain sections to enter into armed conflict. The People's Alliance led by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party is a good example of this unity.

Mr. Speaker, in 1971 the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna launched an armed uprising or insurrection and confronted the United Front Government that was almost in its infancy. At that time the Head of Government, that un-paralled leader Honourable Sirmavo Bandaranaike, did not carry out the policy of complete annihilation of the insurgents. The loss of lives was limited to a minimum. She made it possible for the lives of leaders of the insurgency and the majority of those who participated in it to be protected and worked towards bringing them in the democratic process. She also launched a series of reform processes to provide solutions to the economic and political causes that led to the insurrection. It was another bold step taken by her that enabled the large number of persons who participated in that insurrection to later enter the democratic political process. Several of them are now with my government and shoulder a variety of responsibilities.

However, when the second insurrection of Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, took place the situation was totally different. What occurred was an attempt at total annihilation. The third generation of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna found the opportunity to enter the democratic political process under the government of the People's Alliance. That was the post 1994 period. I would like very much to impress upon this House that we were able to end the violence and fear in the South through democratic alternatives and wish to give the same example of those involved in the crisis in which the North is embroiled in today.

Mr. Speaker, the singular expectation of Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike was to obtain a solution to the ethnic crisis with the co-operation of all parties concerned. I wish remind this house an excerpt from the address she made on December 28th, last year to the Maha Sanga, the leaders of all other religions, all political leaders and the entire Sri Lankan nation. This is what she said.

“... At this decisive moment debating as to how the war started, and who should be held responsible would serve no useful purpose. What is necessary now is, that we leave aside all that, and make an intelligent and determined effort to solve this problem, disregarding all petty considerations of race, religion, caste and political opinion.

... this very same conflict is the greatest challenge confronting him, (Leader of the Opposition) and his party too. I would like to request him to iron out any differences through discussion and to join hands with the government in arriving at a solution to this problem by forwarding constructive ideas.”

Mr. Speaker,

This is not something that could be achieved by goodwill alone. It is necessary to introduce a great deal of essential reforms for this purpose. Therefore, I would request all of you the Hon. Members not to react with confrontational politics towards the good efforts we make but to extend to us the necessary co-operation to make such efforts succeed.

My Government has decided to take certain urgent measures towards arriving at a political solution. Accordingly, together with reform of the Constitution it is our intention to establish an interim administrative council for the North-East, including representing all communities in the region as an urgent measure and strategic move towards strengthening and revitalising the civil administration in the North-East.

It has become necessary for us to spend a huge amount of our national wealth on the war. However, we will not permit anyone to divide this country. We have the security forces that are carrying on bravely to ensure this. They are not fighting against any other people or community but to free a section of our population that has come under the control of rabid fascism. However, it is our expectation to finish this war very soon. We conduct this war in accordance with the expected norms of international law. We have not sent children into battle. We carry out widespread programmes to look after those who have been gravely injured in the course of battle and the families that have been affected by this continuing war. We have also launched a programme to rebuild the areas destroyed by the war and also rehabilitate the communities and lives of those affected by the war. Therefore, I wish to declare that whatever the threats may be, we shall carry on with courage and determination to free this country of armed terrorism.

Hon. Speaker, Hon. Members,

If we are to achieve what I have described so far it is essential that there is mutual understanding and agreement amongst us. I believe that what I said in addressing the nation after being sworn in as the President for the second time on December 22, 1999 remains relevant after the recent general election too. On that occasion I said;

“The people of this country have made clear their desire. They seek peace, and have elected a leader of peace; they seek national unity, and have elected a leader who has proven, able to unify our forces. But it is also certain that they also seek brotherhood, and they have therefore elected not only a strong President but clearly shown their support for a strong and vibrant opposition.”

“I believe that we must fully appreciate the meaning of the size of the victory that I have won. It is clear to me that the people of this nation do not intend the torch of peace to be carried by one half of our people while other half rests. I believe that our people intend these two parties to share the burden costed upon us by destiny. This nation has the strength to create two strong parties. I believe that these two strong parties together must use this strength to, once again create the nation.”

Hon. Leader of the Opposition,

I wish to remind you again of those sentiments I expressed on December 22, last year.

Mr. Speaker,

It is our responsibility to strengthen the launch of the new political culture which led to your being elected to the high and distinguished office of Speaker of this House with the unanimous consent of both sides of this House. Let us set a side all differences and unite to solve the grave problems that the country faces today.

Let us all be united in ridding our land of terrorism and the culture of death. I call upon all Hon. Members in this House, whatever party they may belong, to abandon narrow politics, petty differences, jealousies and all other rivalries and join in the urgent and necessary task of achieving peace in our land.

Hon. Speaker,

We have arrived right at a propitious moment when we can once again take towards prosperity and abundance this resplendent land, which has a rich soil seasonally watered by the rains, where people live who belong to all major religions, and where people value the finer traditions of civilised life. I call upon all Hon. Members to make use of the opportunity you have now received to give your best in the service of your motherland.

There is no doubt whatsoever that your co-operation, constructive criticism and pioneering initiatives are what the people of this country look forward to from you. History gives a person or people only few occasions to rise to the heights of glory. On many an occasion we have abandoned such opportunities. It is not possible once again to abandon this opportunity that has come to us now to realise our most cherished, hope and aspiration for our land and our people. It should not be so abandoned.

We need both courage and good statesmanship to achieve our aspiration of a permanent peace through discussion and a political settlement as proposed by us. Similarly, we should work unitedly with a consistent and dedicated effort to build a new and strong nation. We should build a united and strong country where within the single Nation those who belong to any religion, any community or any caste could live with joy and satisfaction. Let us draw upon the strength of our diversity to build a single nation.

I wish you all success!

Mr. Speaker and Hon. Members of this House, I express my thanks to you for given me a patient hearing on this occasion.



Printed at the Department of Government Printing, Sri Lanka.