

Dr. N.M. Perera
Seventh
Memorial Lecture

18th August 1992

**Philosophy and Science of
N.M. Perera's Politics**

by

Carlo Fonseka

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This lecture, the seventh in a series organised by the N. M. Perera Memorial Trust, commemorates Dr. N. M. Perera the distinguished politician and scholar who exerted a profound influence on the history of his time.

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PHILOSOPHY AND SCIENCE OF N.M PERERA'S POLITICS

N.M. Perera, in whose honour we are assembled today, was a Doctor of Philosophy and a Doctor of Science. His philosophy inspired in him a vision of a healthy, compassionate, egalitarian, democratic, secular, sovereign, modern State in Lanka, harmoniously integrated into the international community. His science provided a basis for understanding the world and a method for changing it in the direction he envisioned.

In this lecture, I will first elaborate the aspects of his vision I identified a moment ago by a number of adjectives of quality. Next, I will define the method he assiduously practised, even more than he preached, for the pursuit of his idealized goal. Finally, I will argue that the exalting serenity of his grand vision remains inspiring to many, and that the method he deployed for improving the quality of life of the many, remains the most feasible and reliable instrument of social change in Lanka. It is the thesis of this lecture that 13 years after his death NMP's philosophy and science are more relevant than ever to those who seek to build a better world. For what is triumphant today globally and locally is the very antithesis of NMP's grand vision of a just and decent human society. In our country the proportion of people "in poverty rose from 23% in 1978 to 27% in 1987."¹ This trend has probably continued upto date. In the meantime parliamentary democracy has declined to the level of a tragical farce, as NMP perceptively predicted in his "Critical Analysis of the New Constitution of the Sri Lanka Government" published in 1979. The ruling moral principle which guides much public and private behaviour seems to be: Wealth and power by right means if you can; if not by any means wealth and power. The Cold War has ended, and capitalism appears visibly to have triumphed. Some have hastened to proclaim "The End of History."² If it be asked why in such a global and local context, anybody should seek to build a newer world in our time, the answer is this: Because many remain unconvinced --- as NMP and Albert Einstein and Bertrand Russell were --- that capitalism represents the ultimate expression of Man's economic wisdom.

The first aspect of NMP's vision I will focus on is related to health. I will do so not because I am a medical man but because the prospect of people in a state of physical, mental and social well-being in Lanka was very much a part of NMP's vision and that of his Party, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party. (The LSSP was first, last and always and above all, NMP's Party. Other stalwart founding-fathers of the Party felt impelled at different times, for diverse reasons, to abandon the LSSP temporarily or permanently, and found Parties of their own.) But NMP and the LSSP were like two in one flesh. No man or woman could put them asunder. Truly, the history of the LSSP is the political biography of NMP.)

But to return to his vision: as I say, a healthy nation in Lanka was very much a part of it. To substantiate this point I cannot do better than cite the first sentence of the first paragraph of the Manifesto that was adopted when the LSSP was founded on 18 December 1935. It goes like this: "After a hundred and forty years of British rule, the people of Ceylon are faced with poverty amidst all the material pre-requisites of prosperity, and with disease and recurring epidemics despite the

researches of modern medical science.³ There were compelling reasons for the LSSP to be concerned about the health of the people of Lanka in 1935. For that year which saw the birth of the LSSP, also witnessed the worst vital statistics of this country on record : Life Expectancy (estimated to be about) 27 years; Crude Death Rate 37; Infant Mortality Rate 263; Maternal Mortality Rate 27.⁴ What is worse, the Crude Birth Rate (34) was lower than the Crude Death Rate (37). Extinction is the fate that awaits a nation whose death rate persistently exceeds its birth rate. Something radical was called for, to arrest and reverse that lethal trend. In human societies, radical solutions to life-threatening situations are conceived by intelligent leaders, and if vigorously advocated they come to be implemented half - unwittingly by the many, who are driven by the biological impulse to survive. In the case of vital issues, rarely does the will of the people flow from the bottom up; it flows from the top down. In the aftermath of the devastating malaria epidemic of 1934 - 35, which afflicted some 3 million of the country's total population of 5.5 million, killing off some 80,000 of them, the will of the people to live found its most vigorous expression through the LSSP. Together with a band of highly educated and dedicated comrades, NMP worked tirelessly to relieve the terrible suffering caused by the ravages of malaria. As he later reminisced : "Some of the most poignant scenes were witnessed by us in this playground of the feudalists - the Three Korales. What we saw we could not believe - the horrible sights which we did not bargain to witness; dying babies sucking the breasts of dead mothers; whole families lying side by side dying or dead. We did succeed in bringing some relief to these stricken, dejected and abandoned mass of humanity."⁵

Bringing relief to victims of malaria was not the only good act that NMP performed for the benefit of the health of the people of Lanka. In 1943, when accused in Court of breaking jail he pleaded guilty instead to the "crimes" of having fought government to provide school-books to poor children; to provide them with a mid-day meal; to increase the number of dispensaries and hospitals in the country; to increase the number of midwives and to make their training program more scientific; to obtain maternity leave for women and gratuity payment for them.⁶

Many of the measures that the LSSP relentlessly campaigned for came to be implemented in the country by the rulers in due course. Expenditure by the State on social welfare increased from 16.4% of the budget in the 1920s to 56.1% in 1947. In the judgement of a contemporary historian, heavy expenditure on social welfare was continued upto 1977 "partly as a means of blunting the challenge of the Marxist left."⁷ (For "the Marxist left" read "NMP's LSSP.") Without necessarily confusing sequence with consequence, consider the following vital statistics of the country in 1979, the year NMP died at the age of 74 : Life Expectancy 69; Crude Death Rate 7; Infant Mortality Rate 38; Maternal Mortality Rate 1.⁸ Unsurprisingly these vital statistics happened to be, by a wide margin, the most impressive for any poor Third World country.

What, it may be wondered, galvanised NMP and his comrades into action in those days? The answer must be: largely compassion; that is to say, the pity they felt for the suffering of others. This brings me to another aspect of the kind of society NMP envisioned. For him, human society had to be humane or compassionate. It seemed to him in the natural order of things that the strong should help the weak; the healthy should help the sick; the rich should help the poor. He believed that a human society should put human beings before wealth; that it should not begin and end with money.

In practical terms, he believed that a compassionate society should place the responsibility for the unemployed, the sick and the old on the community. Why should a society be compassionate? The answer must surely be: Because we are human. The human genetic code makes us social beings, but not automatons like ants and bees. So there are two aspects to the life of each of us - private and social - and one is not less important than the other. Our private instincts motivate personal advancement; the social instincts make us to seek recognition and affection from others, to share their joys and sorrows, and to co-operate with them to improve the quality of the lives of all. As with any human characteristic, the co-operative instinct is stronger in some than in others. NMP manifested a strongly developed sense of concern for others. The goal of his politics was not the acquisition of power by hook or by crook; the goal was the creation of a decent human society and that meant above all, a compassionate society. He belonged, of course, to the privileged stratum of society, but in him privilege induced a sense of moral duty to provide for others something of the benefits that privilege had conferred upon him.

Although compassionate, NMP was by no means a sentimental moral crusader. Rational analysis of the genesis of the preventable human suffering he observed in the Three Korales during the malaria epidemic, led him to diagnose feudalism as the major underlying cause of the suffering. From this diagnosis flowed his long-term remedy for such suffering. As he put it: "We did more than bring relief to them. We kindled the fire that would set their hearts aglow and blaze the flames that would consume to dust feudalism with all its inequities."⁹ And this brings me to another characteristic of NMP's vision: egalitarianism.

Discrimination and oppression on the ground of caste was very much a feature of social life in Lanka at the time NMP's Party was launched. And his Party was called the Lanka Sama Samaja Party. The name literally means Lanka Equal Society Party. Explicit in the name is its ideology: equality or egalitarianism. According to NMP's famous guru, Professor Harold Laski of the London School of Economics, "no idea is more difficult in the whole realm of political science"¹⁰ than the idea of equality. Yet NMP's Party was styled the Lanka Equal Society Party. What exactly the term implied is not clear. At no time did NMP advocate an absolute equality of incomes or wealth. Such an idea he would have considered utopian and unattainable. He had, however, a strong bias in favour of equality and regarded it as the business of politics to reduce gross disparities in society in regard to the distribution of wealth and power. In particular he sought to mitigate inequalities which derived from accidents of race, caste, creed and sex. He had a clear vision of the idealized final goal, but he never lost sight of the biological reality that human beings are born with unequal and different talents and that human societies are hierarchically structured. He never advocated the abolition of all inequalities in one stroke. He thought that people who made larger contributions to society merited higher rewards. Where inequality served the common good, as in the hierarchical arrangement in the management of production, he sanctioned inequality. Because human beings are differently endowed, NMP's aim in translating the ideal of equality into practice was to attempt to provide equality of educational opportunity to all to become fulfilled according to their unequal and different talents. For he realised that in the modern world the power that counts is the power that comes from the possession of modern knowledge. While in prison in 1944 he wrote a book persuasively arguing the case for free education.¹¹ It was axiomatic to him that all humans are entitled to an equal

voice in determining the shape of the State and in the selection of rulers. Accordingly, he was a firm believer in universal suffrage : the concept of one person, one vote.

To believe in the principle of one person, one vote is to be democratic in outlook, and NMP's vision was indeed democratic. I have never heard him speak about the dictatorship of the proletariat or of anybody else. Flexible about various things, he was unrelenting in his commitment to parliamentary democracy. To him parliamentary democracy was the technique of ensuring that those who govern do so only with the consent of the governed. And he had no doubt that his vision of a healthy, compassionate, egalitarian society in Lanka was attainable sooner or later through parliamentary democracy. Unlike most self-styled revolutionaries NMP was remarkably successful at the polls. From 1936 to 1977 he represented the same electoral area without a break. He offered himself for election nine times and failed to be elected only on the last occasion when he was old and near his end, and even then only by a narrow margin.

Parliamentary democracy was indeed NMP's fixed point of reference, his bottom line. Addressing the 27th Annual Session of the Sri Lanka Association for the Advancement of Science in 1971 he remarked : "Democratic parliamentarism is the art of government by argument. Debate is a clash of minds which eventuate in a common measure of agreement.....We have a tradition of democracy coming down to us from the ages. Buddhism is the very antithesis of blind faith. It is the embodiment of independent thinking. We must build on that great tradition and dove-tail that heritage into our political institutions so as to lead our thinking to creative activity."¹²

Speaking of the formidable difficulties involved in implementing policies in the context of what he termed "unbridled democracy" he said: "Were we a regimented society with the full rigour of censorship of the press, of the spoken word and the written word, our task may be more smoothly accomplished. We have chosen a different path. We are pledged to all the liberties that democracy implies."¹³

So committed was NMP to parliamentary democracy that he was emphatically skeptical about the suitability of the Presidential system for Lanka. Here is the prophetic verdict he delivered on our experiment with the Presidential system: "The Presidential system offers unlimited scope for wielding absolute power albeit for a limited period. But the taste of unlimited power grows with the feeding and the lust cannot be easily satiated. It is a matter for regret that Sri Lanka that has amassed considerable experience in Parliamentary Government and has successfully overcome the teething troubles of the early period should now be thrown down the slope of constitutional confusion, in the end jeopardising democracy itself."¹⁴

Clearly, NMP was not just a cerebral democrat; he seems to have felt democratic with his whole being. But democracy implies different things to different people. To NMP it evidently implied at a minimum universal suffrage with periodic free and fair elections, parliamentary procedures, independent judiciaries and constitutionally limited executives. In societies such as ours which are inhabited by people with diverse cultural characteristics, speaking different languages and belonging to different religions, democracy based on universal suffrage could

translate itself in practice to a tyranny of the majority. Particularly would this be so, if the dominant group decides to accord a special status to its own language and religion. As it happened, NMP the democrat had to come to grips with this problem. In my view, the way he grappled with it was flawless in theory but it became flawed in practice. Concerning language he took the stance that the Tamils of this country are as much entitled to use their mother tongue in any part of the country as the Sinhalese are entitled to use theirs. Therefore he argued that both Sinhala and Tamil should be official languages. May I say in passing that the speech he made in parliament during the debate on the Official Language Act in June 1956 is the only one made in our legislature which I would urge my granddaughter to read and digest and absorb when she grows up? May I also say that had NMP not delivered that speech, I would probably not be delivering this lecture? By that speech NMP hooked me to the LSSP.

Concerning the official status of the religion of the largest ethnic group in the country, I fear NMP was compelled by the circumstances of coalition politics to compromise his idealized version of society. He himself hailed from a Buddhist family. He was educated in the foremost Buddhist institution of secondary education in the country - Ananda College - where we are assembled today. Nevertheless, NMP believed in the separation of State from Religion. That is, his idealized state was a secular one. Even so, the Republican Constitution adopted by the government of which he was an important member, not only does not separate State from Religion, but also confers the foremost place among religions to Buddhism. As NMP would have been the first to admit, in a multi-religious society, to accord a special status to the religion of the majority is to create a state in which those who belong to other religions suffer a lower status because they are minorities. So his practice was not as sublime as his theory. Those who are inclined to sneer at him for this compromise would do well to ask of themselves how well they have lived up to their own professed ideals.

NMP's initial vision saw Lanka as an independent, sovereign nation. For when he went to the London School of Economics in 1927, Ceylon was a colony of the British Empire. In London he joined the India League to campaign for Home Rule for India and Ceylon. Having returned to Ceylon in 1933 he set to work with like-minded young men and women to make their dream of a free, independent, sovereign Lanka come true. The attainment of national independence was one of the three long-term goals of his Party. On 22 May 1972, when Lanka became a Republic for the first time in its long recorded history NMP said in parliament : "Little did we as students in London meeting in dingy digs dream when we inaugurated a movement that later blossomed to be the Lanka Sama Samaja Party, that we would within our lifetime be the proud participants of this historic day. We affirmed as our first principle on that distant day in 1930 the achievement of full national independence. It is the fulfilment of this affirmation that gives us unending pride and pleasure" ...¹⁵

NMP was nothing but modern-minded in his outlook. He believed that the exercise of reason is at all times necessary for the purpose of bringing to pass the kind of idealized State he visualized. He thought of the good society as one that was rationally planned in accordance with modern knowledge. Rarely, if ever, did he hark back to the ancient glories of our blood and State. For him the idealized State

was one in which by means of modern knowledge men and women live lives filled with beauty and the joy of living.

We now have, I hope, some idea of the kind of State NMP imagined for Lanka. Let us now consider the means he consciously and systematically worked out for moving towards the vision of his idealized State. Briefly, it was parliamentary socialism. He was never in doubt about its feasibility, efficacy and even inevitability in the context of Lanka, the terrain of his praxis. He took up such a stance implicitly at a time when the conventional Marxist wisdom was that there is not and there cannot be such a thing as a parliamentary road to socialism. Let me try to state as clearly as I can what I consider to be the methodology he forged. He was convinced that the mass of people in Lanka (if not elsewhere) could and therefore should use universal suffrage as the decisive instrument (if not the only one) to acquire the legitimacy and the power necessary to change their world in a direction calculated to improve the quality of their lives. In the first 25 years of the LSSP's existence, NMP was probably the only front-rank leader who held such a view even implicitly. Being not given to polemics he didn't bother to write a treatise on "Lanka's Road to Socialism". NMP taught not so much by precept as by practice. To him theory was praxis.

Up to 1960 LSSP theoreticians urged the imperative need for and the imminent feasibility of a forcible overthrow of the capitalist State in this country. NMP was not one of them. In May 1960, during a special conference of the LSSP, NMP roundly declared that: (i) there is no possibility of extra-parliamentary action leading to the forcible overthrow of the existing state structure. (ii) there is no need for extra-parliamentary action to establish socialism in this country.¹⁶

This thesis was endorsed by a majority in the conference. It was noisily rejected by the theory-prone, Bolshevik-oriented faction in the Party. Under NMP's initiative, therefore, the LSSP not only explicitly adopted the parliamentary perspective but also made modifications in its ideological framework. To continue to believe in the revolutionary overthrow of the State in Lanka in the face of contrary evidence is to believe a fiction and NMP's philosophy and science of politics were not grounded in fiction. That no doubt is why he creatively revised orthodoxy. To sum up: NMP's understanding of political science led him to the conclusion that parliamentary socialism was the necessary and sufficient means for the purpose of building a decent human society in Lanka.

I come now to the final part of this lecture. I will begin this part by arguing that to many people who wish to make the world a better place for humankind to live in, the kind of society NMP envisioned remains a worthy model. The sudden and complete collapse of the systems of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe between 1989 and 1991 has convinced many people that socialism has failed. Let us admit that there is a meaningful sense in which it is true to say that the kind of socialism which came into the world with the Russian Revolution of 1917 has indeed failed and NMP for one expected socialism "deformed by the bureaucracy"¹⁷ to fail. But that does not necessarily mean that capitalism has triumphed. It means that Russia's first experiment in large-scale social engineering did not succeed. Let it be remembered that during the past four centuries, capitalism itself made false starts in hostile feudal environments. For example, in several Italian city states of the late

Middle Ages, capitalism failed to thrive despite making a number of promising starts. Socialism or "actually existing socialism" as it has come to be called has existed for less than three-quarters of a century. Reports of Socialism's demise therefore are -- as Mark Twain might have said -- "grossly exaggerated." Moreover, what has the golden age of capitalism demonstrated even during its hour of ephemeral triumph? That even the most advanced capitalist State --- the United States of America --- is plagued by such things as recurrent economic crises, unemployment, homelessness, inadequate health care for millions, millions of children who have not finished even high school, a miserable and sizeable underclass prone to crime and violence, and widespread drug abuse. Above all, who will deny the basic inhumanity of a society dedicated in practice to the proposition of making money by fair means if possible and by foul means if necessary? Because capitalism has failed to build a decent human society after centuries of experiment, it is necessary to ask : What's wrong with capitalism? Let Albert Einstein, perhaps the most brilliant brain of this century, answer the question.

"Production is carried on for profit, not for use. There is no provision that all those able and willing to work will always be in a position to find employment..... Since unemployed and poorly paid workers do not provide a profitable market, the production of consumers' goods is restricted, and great hardship is the consequence..... The profit motive, in conjunction with competition among capitalists, is responsible for an instability in the accumulation and utilization of capital which leads to increasingly severe depression. Unlimited competition leads to a huge waste of labour and to that crippling of the social consciousness of individuals which I mentioned before. This crippling of individuals I consider the worst evil of capitalism. Our whole educational system suffers from this evil. An exaggerated competitive attitude is inculcated into the student, who is trained to worship acquisitive success as a preparation for his future career."¹⁸ Having diagnosed what is wrong with capitalism, Albert Einstein went on to prescribe his remedy : "I am convinced there is only one way to eliminate these grave evils, namely through the establishment of a socialist economy, accompanied by an educational system which would be oriented toward social goals."¹⁹ I need not apologise for quoting Albert Einstein at length. The case for socialism, I think, has never been more cogently argued.

I will now tell you why I believe that the road to socialism that NMP took - the peaceful, parliamentary road - was, is and will be the only feasible one for people in Lanka to take.

To quote Karl Marx at this point is not to quote gospel, but to inform those who don't know it, that even Karl Marx envisaged the possibility of a peaceful transition to socialism in countries like England, Holland and America. He oriented the members of the First International towards both possibilities: "We must declare to governments : we know that you are the armed power which is directed against the proletariat; we shall proceed against you by peaceful means where possible, and by force of arms if necessary".²⁰

NMP believed in the power of universal suffrage. Karl Marx probably didn't. The fact is that he had no practical experience of universal suffrage at work. Indeed, urban working men first got the vote in England, and universal suffrage came to

Germany only in 1867, the very year in which Volume One of *Das Kapital* was published.²¹ So it is not surprising that he was at best doubtful about the efficacy of universal suffrage as an instrument of social justice. Proudhon, one of Marx's contemporaries, went so far as to declare: "Universal suffrage is counter-revolution."²² Marx thought Proudhon was stupid, but Proudhon turned out to be right. NMP was wise enough to imbibe the implications of Proudhon's penetrating insight. He gradually zeroed in on the parliamentary road based on universal suffrage as the right road to socialism in Lanka. Perhaps in his case, nothing reinforced his faith in universal suffrage, as his own success at the polls. Further reinforcement must have come from the judgement of his old teacher Professor Harold Laski that the Labour Government of Britain which was put in power by popular vote in 1945, was nearer the Marxist idea of a popular government than any government thrown up by Revolution – French, Russian or other.²³

Macaulay the historian had already figured out the consequences of universal suffrage: "Give votes to all and you must expect the instinct of self-interest—that same self-interest which Adam Smith counted on to work in the economic sphere of *laissez faire* --- to lead to state interference with the inequality of incomes and prosperity."²⁴

In his famous book on "Guerilla Warfare" Che Guevara, who had at least one successful revolution to his credit, wrote: "Where a government has come into power through some form of popular vote, fraudulent or not, and maintains at least an appearance of constitutional legality, the guerilla outbreak cannot be promoted since the possibilities of peaceful struggle have not yet been exhausted".²⁵

From the evidence I have adduced can there be any doubt that the orientation NMP gave to the special conference of the LSSP in May 1960 was rational, insightful and even "scientific" in a manner of speaking? The essence of that orientation is that there is no need for extra-parliamentary action to establish socialism in this country.

NMP was probably more sensible than the accredited theoreticians of the LSSP of the self-defeating nature of experiments in social change which try to go "fast" irrespective of people's felt needs. His initial strategy was to achieve the maximum redistribution of wealth and income within the existing framework. Policies going beyond redistribution he decided to leave to the democratically expressed will of the people. He had no doubt that such a procedure would lead gradually, if slowly, to socialism in Lanka. This may have been an unmarxist conclusion, but then it is relevant to remember that towards the end of his life Karl Marx himself declared that whatever else he might be he was certainly not a Marxist.²⁶

Let me conclude by re-affirming my faith that the underlying ideas of socialism provide the only rational and emotional basis for a decent human society in Lanka. NMP has shown the way Lanka should go.

NOTES

1. See : N.M. Perera Memorial Lecture 1991, by Lal Jayawardane (published by the World Institute for Development Economics Research, Helsinki).
2. Title of a much publicised article by Francis Fukuyama in "The National Interest" Summer 1989.
3. See : Manifesto of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party - Reprinted in Young Socialist, March 1980.
4. Source : Statistical Abstracts, Sri Lanka, 1989.
5. See NM : A Short Biography by E.P. de Silva, 1975.
6. N.M. Perera's address to Magistrate's Court, Kandy in 1943.
7. See : K.M de Silva : A History of Sri Lanka 1981.
8. See : note 4 above.
9. See : note 5 above.
10. See : "A Grammar of Politics" by H.I. Laski, 1925.
11. A Sinhala translation of the book originally written in English is in my possession. It was published in 1944.
12. See : Proceedings of the 27th Annual Sessions of the Ceylon Association for the Advancement of Science, 1971.
13. See : note 12 above.
14. See : N.M. Perera : "Critical Analysis of the New Constitution of the Sri Lanka Government" 1979.
15. See : note 5 above.
16. See : "Lanka Sama Samaja Party of Ceylon" by Ranjith Amarasinghe. Ph.D. Thesis,(Undated).
17. According to Trotskyists, in Soviet Society the power of workers was "deformed by the bureaucracy".
18. See : the article entitled "Why Socialism?" by Albert Einstein first published in Monthly Review, Vol.1, no.1 in May 1949.
19. See : note 18 above.
20. See : "Marx in His Own Words" by Ernest Fischer, Pelican Book, 1973.
21. See : "Roads to Freedom" by Bertrand Russell, Unwin Books, 1918.
22. See : "Introduction" by A.J.P Taylor to the Communist Manifesto, pelican Book, 1967.
23. See : note 22 above.
24. Quoted in Paul A. Samuelson: Economics 10th Edition, 1976.
25. See : Che Guevara: "Guerilla Warfare" published in the 1960s.
26. See : Karl Marx by Isaiah Berlin.

