

Keynote Address

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Your Excellency, Distinguished Guests who have graciously honoured us with their presence, elected Officers of the Burgher Association, and Honourable Members, young and old from far and near, welcome, thrice welcome!

To begin, let me set the record straight. Those who are in this beautiful hall this afternoon are not, and let me repeat, not an ethnic minority. The Burghers are an ethno-socio-cultural group of people of European descent, of dual parentage, European and Asian, even perhaps some African, virile hybrids as all hybrids are and exotic and of rootstock definitely from the continent of Europe since 1500.

Our ancestors were humble, God-fearing peasants and towns-folk. They were not royalty nor were they noblemen but plain, ordinary people, the ‘nobodies’ of their time. But, like all ordinary people they possessed extraordinary courage to venture out on perilous seas and to come thousands of kilometres to an unknown land. Indeed, I can say that they had guts of iron to brave a journey of some 11 months in small, overcrowded, damp, vermin infested, highly uncomfortable vessels that bobbed up and down like a corks.

My own ancestors came from the beautiful valley of the Mosel in the Rhineland, Western Germany. They came here along with several other families: The Christoffelsz, Kochs, Eberts, Zimmermanns, Försters, and Langenbergs. They fled religious intolerance and persecution to seek refuge in Groningen and Hoorn in the Netherlands from where they then joined the Duke of Württemberg’s Regiment of Germans that was formed to protect the mercantile interests of the United East India Company in South Africa, Java, Sri Lanka and South India.

They came all the way from Europe to the tip of Africa, then across the vast expanse of the Indian Ocean to the end of Western Australia, then up that long and arid coast to Batavia in Java. From there, they went through the Straits of Malacca and then across the stormy Bay of Bengal to the alluringly beautiful Island of Sri Lanka.

Long before my ancestors came here, other intrepid Europeans from the Iberian Peninsula came here with Dom Lourenço de Almeida and his successors, from 1505 to 1656.

Yes! They came and when they did, they saw, across the simmering, translucent, warm sapphire sea, a golden shore and stately palms, leaning out, beckoning, and welcoming them. Here skies were always blue and the sun shone brightly. They landed. They were welcomed with unfeigned hospitality by the indigenous people, a quality that endures amongst them to this day and age.

The damsels they beheld were exotic, dusky and ebony-eyed and altogether delectable. Indeed, they were scented with the aromas of cinnamon and sandalwood, jasmine and attar of roses. And, what happened? Well, they stayed. And, what's the evidence? We! Indeed, we are the living proof of what I have just described!

We are best described as an exotic ethnic and cultural cocktail and a very potent one at that because the Burgher influence from that pivotal date began an irreversible process of change on this Island home of ours.

Lest we be misunderstood, the Burgher Association is not a racist organization. It has been formed to promote and protect the wider interests of the entire community of persons of European origin, of mixed ancestry, and of dual parentage born, nurtured and domiciled on this Island. It does not subscribe to, condone, or promote any sort or manner of racial superiority or elitism. Most emphatically not!

Thus, the Burgher Association will seek to establish links with similar ethno-socio-cultural organisms representing the interests of those of European descent, of mixed parentage, worldwide. There are communities in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, in Mozambique, South Africa, Namibia and Angola. In Malaysia and Singapore, in Indonesia and East Timor, in Hongkong and Macau. In Haiti, Guadeloupe, Jamaica and Peru, and so on.

These various communities have been colourfully described as “Lost White Tribes,” in a book with that title by CNN Italia’s senior editor, Riccardo Orizio. This book has also been subtitled ‘Journeys Among the Forgotten.’ But, we are not forgotten or ‘Lost,’ nor are we ‘White,’ nor are we a ‘Tribe’ in the primitive sense of that word.

All these people he so vividly describes are living communities with ancestry, culture, religion, and social values, all of which define them. One and all have fundamental human rights whether those rights have been acknowledged or granted or not and the fact that we all originated in Europe from the sixteenth century onwards unite us with a common bond of fellowship.

For example, I am sure most Burghers would like to know what their origins were whether they came here through Portugal, the Netherlands or Britain.

The Rozários, Da Silvas, Menezes, Pieres, Ferreiras, and Moreiras were Portuguese families;

The Fernandos, Ferrers, Rodrigues, Correiras were definitely Spanish. Many of the Pereiras, Diaz, Gomes, and Garira, Ferdinand, Carvalho, and Paiva families were Iberian Jews who were forcibly converted as ‘New Christians,’ and shipped out. Many Iberian Jewish names are to be found amongst the Sinhalese and Tamils in a corrupted form where Nunez became Nonis, Mendez became Mendis, D’Alves became De Alwis, Souza became Soysa and De Mello became De Mel.

We have the descendants of German Protestants with such names as Koch, Ebert, Christoffel, and Förster.

French Huguenots named Brohier, La Franais, Raux, and De Neise.

Those who came from Neuchatel in Switzerland with the De Meuron Regiment with such names as Toussaint, Mortier, Bolling, Raymond, Rôdet, and Thomét.

Milanese such as Sansoni, Raffa, Ludovici, Conradi and Pappilli.

Flemings named Auwardt, Vanderputt, and De Vos. Walloons named De L'Isle, Melot, and Anjou.

Dutch named Leembruggen, Simmons, Verwyk, Krikenbeek, and Juuriansz.

Luxembourgians named Rabôt. Swedes like Foenander, Danes like Overlunde and Anderson.

Scots like Brodie, Campbell, McLeod, and Balfour. English like Austin, Beven, Cooke, Darling, Eaton, Gray, Marshall and Wright.

Welsh such as Jones, Morgan, and Evans. Irish such as Kennedy and Meloney.

Prussians named Altendorff and Neydorff, Poles such as Cadenski.

There were also Saarlanders, Genovese, Venetians, Frisians, Hungarians, Corsicans, Czechs, Sardinians, and Slavs who fled their homes seeking refuge where they could and who inadvertently ended up on these shores.

Because of the Roman Empire that stretched from Hadrian's Wall in Britain to the deserts of Arabia and from the Nile to the Rhine and its successor, the Holy Roman Empire, the basically Celtic people of Europe also had Greek and Roman, Arab and Jew, Carthaginian and Phoenician, Goth and Visigoth, Hun and Nordic genes added to the pool before our erstwhile ancestors even left the continent of Europe. Here was a genetic cocktail, a veritable pot pourri, of ethnicities that went to produce the quote/unquote pure European.

The land mass we call 'Europe' is arbitrarily divided by the Ural Mountains. On one side is Europe and on the other is Asia. The Caucasus range acts as the southern boundary between Armenia and Iran but the landmass is one enormous continent known as Eurasia to geographers. If anyone is looking for genuine Eurasians all he has to do is to look at the Burghers because they are an amalgam of so many races!

Therefore, it would be desirable for us to understand and accept the fact that we are the distilled product of many and varied bloodlines and a remote ancestry that gives us a unique versatility. It also puts paid to any notions of so-called quote/unquote purity of genealogy that some people fondly like to believe in.

Scientifically, the concept of quote/unquote race is baseless and meaningless because human beings have been mixing since the dawn of creation. What defines us is our unique culture which is a melding and mixing of West and East.

Indeed, the modernization of Sri Lanka as a Nation can be ascribed to the Burghers. They produced modern Sri Lanka's first physicians and surgeons, attorneys, magistrates and judges. Its first journalists and editorialists to which tribe I proudly claim affiliation. The country's first political leaders came from this community. This City of Colombo even had a Burgher Mayor.

Yes, friends, they played a significant part in fashioning modern Sri Lanka and they still do so, quietly, behind the scenes. The Burghers have done great things that they could be proud of for their Motherland—Sri Lanka. Just yesterday around this time the Institution I work for commemorated the 96th. Birth anniversary of a great Burgher: Professor E.O.E. Pereira, the Father of modern engineering education in Sri Lanka. He created this country's first faculty of engineering and for over 20 years produced this country's homegrown engineers.

He obtained two Bachelor's degrees with first class honours from London and Cambridge universities, where, incidentally, he also won the Mechanical Sciences Tripos with first class honours. He was a brilliant, versatile, eminent and distinguished Burgher of the highest caliber. He followed Sir Ivor Jennings to become the fifth vice chancellor of the University of Ceylon in 1969. He was chairman of the National Science Council and of a dozen more government boards and commissions. He was honoured with the title Vidya Jyothi in 1986 and passed away in 1988.

He joins a galaxy of Burghers who served Sri Lanka with integrity and loyalty. Let me just reel off a few names in order to encourage you:

There were honourable justices of the Supreme Court--- Jacobus Petrus de Wet. Names like M.C. Sansoni, Percy Colin Thomé, and Sir Francis Soertsz, justices Swan, Gratiaen, Keuneman and De Kretser.

Leading lawyers like Sir Richard Morgan and Charles Ambrose Lorenz.

Artists like J.L.C. Van Dort, Aubrey Collette, and George Keyt.

A photographer like Lionel Wendt and a host of writers: Christine Wilson, Dr. R.L. Spittle, Dr. R.L. Brohier and his daughter, Dame Deloraine Brohier; Dr. Bernard Swan, Christopher and Michael Ondaatje, Maureen Seneviratne née Milhuisen, Jean Arasanayagam née Solomons and Carl Müller.

Education had A.E. Buultjens who was the first Sri Lankan principal of Ananda College; the university had professors Lyn Ludowyke, E.F. Bartholomeusz and H.A. Passé. Ludowyke specialized in English; Bartholomeusz was the first professor of Engineering Mathematics and Passé, of European Classics.

Agriculture has been advanced by Dr. A.W.R. Joachim and there's Wester Modder still at it at the Tea Research Institute up at St. Coombs.

Dr. Alice de Boer was this country's first woman doctor. My own family had a number of leading physicians and surgeons, the Drs. Müller; the cinema and stage had Arthur Van Langenberg.

The Police had an army---Van Sanden, Leembruggen, Altendorff, Van Twest, Muller, Van Cuylenberg, Wambeek and others unnamed of the same caliber.

Need I mention any more to encourage you, to make you feel proud that you are Burgher? No! I don't think so.

When Burghers like the people I just mentioned staffed the Civil Service and worked in almost every government department—the Police, Customs, Excise, Prisons, the Railway, the Harbour, the Survey Department, the PWD, Health, Education, and so on, tell me, did any one of you of the older generation present here today ever hear the words “Bribery and Corruption?” No! Never!

The Public Services were as clean as a whistle! Justice and equity prevailed. Promotion was strictly on the basis of merit, not on the basis of race or caste or religious affiliation! When the older generation of Sri Lankans regardless of race or class or creed says: “Those were the days” that meant that everything that was done was done legitimately, was free of the taint of corruption or of bribery.

We had a superb public administration staffed by able, even eminent public servants that took both duty and responsibility very seriously. We had the best judicial system in Asia. We had a model Police Service and the Treasury was full. We had people coming here from Malaysia,

Singapore and even African countries to study the set up and replicate it in their countries. We were a model country, the former ‘Jewel in the Crown’ of the worldwide British Empire that had not lost its lusture.

It would do us good to also examine what happened to bring this once proud community to a position of insignificance and marginalization, of poverty, helplessness and hopelessness.

When the British Government granted internal self-government and universal suffrage or ‘one man, one vote’ in 1931, the leaders of the Burgher Community should have sat up and taken notice that great changes were on the way. During World War II, actually in 1944, when the Soulbury Commission was appointed to study the constitutional change precedent to the granting of Dominion Status, the Burgher leaders should have taken notice. When independence was granted in 1948, the leaders of our Community sat back complacently in their comfortable Middle Class cocoons and did not proactively represent the vital interests of the Community. When 1956 happened, they were thunderstruck by the events that followed even though they had prior warning ever since 1931!

Yes! A lack of vision, an inability to accept ground realities, a refusal to acknowledge inevitable change eroded the leading position of the Burghers. The option they sought was to emigrate, to run away to Australia, Britain, Canada, New Zealand, and even Brazil. Really, that was no solution. We had to adapt—that is the Law of Nature—adapt or perish! Those who left were compelled to adapt to newer and harsher environments, not only climatically, but also socially and culturally as any Burgher who has returned from abroad will tell you.

Darwin once said: ***“It is not the strongest species that survives, not the most intelligent but the one most responsive to change.”*** How true! And that gives us a cue. The Burghers must not only respond to change, the Burghers must become dynamically proactive in leading change and building up an irreversible momentum of change that will transform Sri Lanka once again into a land of peace and tranquility, a land flowing with milk and honey.

Indeed, the Burghers, those people of European descent who were on this Island at the capitulation of the Dutch to the British in 1796 transformed themselves from ‘nobodies’ to ‘somebodies’ between 1800 and 1900 and risen to greater heights from 1900 to 1950. During this time, the Burghers came to represent QUALITY and CLASS in the life of this country. Did you know that this was Britain’s premier Crown Colony, that is, the first, the best Crown Colony? Not Australia, not New Zealand, not Singapore, not Hong Kong, not Canada, not India—Ceylon, Sri Lanka! Why? Because it had a peculiar people—the Burghers—to give it an unsurpassed quality and class out of all the then British Empire! Then, they were the best sons and daughters, the finest sons and daughters of Mother Lanka.

They have lived peacefully and in harmony on this Island home of theirs for nearly 500 years now as the most law-abiding, loyal citizens of the land. By virtue of their multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and multi-religious origins both in the European Fatherland and their domicile in the Sri Lankan Motherland, they are related by ties of blood and shared parentage with every other ethnicity found on this beautiful Island.

The Burghers by another definition, a British definition, I might add, are a 'political community' of the descendants of the Europeans who came here and found that the warmth and hospitality of the indigenous people were just what they were looking for and decided to stay. Indeed, our forefathers made a wise choice in settling here amongst the friendliest people on the globe bar none. Their unique way-of-life moulded the character of the Europeans who settled in their midst, tempering their restless dynamism and peripatetic energy into a more tranquil and equable way. Those genetic hybrids of the merging and mixing of the peoples of the East and the West is the people in this Hall – the Burghers of Sri Lanka.

It redounds to the eternal credit of the indigenous people that they accepted these aliens with equanimity, and took them to their bosoms in enduring friendship, so much so that the Burghers are now part of the Sri Lankan family, not metaphorically, but very, very literally. As a Community we should never forget this. We should thank our God that we are not mistreated and spat upon as outcasts as happens in some other countries where there are communities of people like us.

Their European heritage bequeathed upon them and the indigenous people the enlightenment of the Renaissance, that great flowering of the human intellect and the spirit of free inquiry. It also imparted the knowledge and the understanding of science and technology and the skills that flowed therefrom in abundant measure. In the indigenous people, they discovered keen and intelligent minds able to grasp these new concepts and ideas and further develop them with brilliance. Certainly, the inheritance from Europe that began at the beginning almost of the 16th. Century changed Sri Lanka forever as it climbed out of its own Dark Ages. The dynamic momentum generated by European modernism changed the face of the country and the benefits have been innumerable.

Unfortunately, in this day and age, it is the negative aspects that receive media attention and coverage. But, by and large, the great mass of law abiding citizens who uphold the Rule of Law and live by the codes and norms of civilized society owe that to the European heritage—the living heritage of the Burghers one and all.

That European heritage also gave us the timeless inheritance of Judeo-Christian values that have shaped the law under which we all live. It has given us morality and a code of ethics that permeates every aspect of life and those do in no way contradict the priceless heritage

bequeathed on this Island by Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, for all restate, in different terminology, universal truths common to the human family.

Indeed, here on this Island in the middle of the Indian Ocean, all these threads, these strands, have come together. In the weft and the warp we have woven a beautiful, if endless tapestry that is being woven every day as people from different cultural backgrounds meet, fall in love, marry, and raise families.

The diversity and variety to be found on this Island is our greatest strength because it endows us with superior intellects and the dynamism to achieve rare brilliance in any field of human endeavour. If we have failed it is because of a lack of vision and leadership, nothing else.

Today, a revitalized Burgher Community bids once again to play a significant role in shaping the future of this country in the 21st. Century, in the Third Millennium and this not with any ambition to dominate but to make this a ‘Land like no other’ on the face of the Planet, our homeland, or rather, our common homeland from sea to shining sea. Indeed, I strongly believe that **‘the heritage of the past is the seed that brings forth the harvest of the future,’** and, therefore, we must know where we came from and why if we are to find out where we want to go.

We call upon our most distinguished guest, the representative of the Netherlands from which our forefathers set sail on perilous seas, to hearken to our cry. **We need support for education and higher education, for technical, scientific and business education. We need to train trainers to teach teachers to go forth and teach English to the large mass of children marginalized by the ignorance of that global language. The Burgher Association needs to establish a Language Laboratory and Training Institute in Information & Communications Technology where Burgher children could be taught and trained in the skills of a rapidly globalizing and modernizing world. It could then provide the trained personnel demanded by Sri Lanka’s developing and expanding mercantile, banking and industrial sectors.**

That also means and implies the whittling down of welfare hand-outs or charity to those who could be gainfully employed. Help us, your Excellencies because, to use a figure of speech, ***“if you can help teach the Burghers to catch fish, they needn’t have to come to you for cans of donated fish!”***

The greatest single technological input of the decade of the Nineties absorbed by Sri Lanka has been information and communications technology. Everything else pales into insignificance in the face of the digital electronic revolution sweeping the country, and I might add, the world. And, you know what? This entire revolution is on a platform of English.

The Gospel according to John in the King James Version begins with the profoundly majestic phrase: “In the beginning was the Word...” As much as those words and that book shaped our values and gave us sustenance through good times and bad, today, the world is being shaped by another Word: Microsoft Word---and its applications—in the English language.

A knowledge of and mastery of that language which we wisely adopted in 1796, that is after the capitulation on 19th. February 1796, as our Mother Tongue, opens doors to advancement, to a career that has a sustainable future and which ensures economic sustainability fore each and every one of us. As natural English speakers, the Burghers have a head start in the great race that has begun. You must take advantage of your intrinsic strengths to move forwards, upwards and outwards from your current circumstances. English is the key!

Let me quote what Richard Lederer wrote in ‘The Toastmaster:’ ***“English is the most widely used language in the history of our planet, understood in some way by at least one out of every seven human beings around the globe. Half of the world’s books are written in English, and the majority of international telephone calls are made in English. Sixty per cent of the world’s radio programmes are beamed in English, and more than 70 per cent of international mail is written and addressed in English. Eighty per cent of all computer texts, including all web sites, are stored in English. English has acquired the largest vocabulary of all the world’s languages, perhaps as many as two million words, and has generated one of the noblest bodies of literature in the annals of the human race.”*** There, I rest my case for, indeed, English is the key.

You all here in this Hall and out there are a wonderfully gifted, a well endowed community of people and you, one and all, can be great again. You could win back your dignity and self respect.

You can become the best managers and the best leaders. Let me quote from a very illustrative definition: ***“Managers do things right. Leaders do the right thing.”*** In other words, a leader will know what is best to do while a manager knows how best to do it. Indeed, some of you men and women will make excellent managers whilst others will make superlative leaders. A former governor-general of Australia, Field Marshal Lord Slim said, and I quote: ***“There is a difference between leadership and management. Leadership is of the spirit compounded of personality and vision, its practice is an art. Management is of the mind, a matter of accurate calculation, its practice is a science.”***

You can play an important rôle, a significant rôle in shaping the future of Sri Lanka and its people. How? Ladies and gentlemen, you are the only, I repeat, the only NATURAL ENGLISH SPEAKERS on this blessed isle. From amongst you, the Burgher Association is to call for volunteer trainers to be taught in the art of training teachers to teach English. This programme has been named “The English Language Initiative” and is being supported by the leading organizations of the Private Sector. They are lobbying the Government to accept our trainers in the National Schools System as Trainers of Teachers.

The Private Sector, too, wants English Language Instructors to train their staff. The demand is overwhelming and all it needs is your willingness to come forward. The Information Technology & Communications industry is also desperate for those who can teach English. By joining in this you, that is, Burghers, can once again play a most significant role in the shaping of Sri Lanka in the 21st. Century.

Just as our ancestors transformed this country in the 16th. Century, this generation, 500 years on, can do the same if the leaders of the Burgher Community seize the initiative to be full co-equal citizens of this, our Motherland. Believe you me, every father and mother will bless you because you will give their sons and daughters the opportunity to live and prosper in the modern world through the English Language.

Yes, it is more blessed to give than to receive and you all now have the opportunity to give Sri Lanka the gift of your special ability as natural English speakers to train teachers, to teach children, and open the door to prosperity, progress, and peace.

As a purely voluntary organization, the Burgher Association will be looking towards your wholehearted support, your honest-hearted commitment and your unconstrained participation in proposed and planned activities.

When the Peace Process succeeds, the opportunities would be tremendous, even overwhelming. The Burgher Association wants you to be ready to take advantage of those opportunities, to seize them and run towards the goal of your prosperity, your progress, because your success will be the success of all! You have a leading rôle to play wherever you are, what ever you are doing.

The Burgher Association has an ambitious programme. In order to implement that, it needs your money, it needs your manpower, it needs your dedication, and it needs your commitment to transform these ideas, these hopes and these dreams into living, breathing, tangible reality. These past two years, the Officers of the BA have worked with tremendous commitment, with devotion to duty, with loyalty and their team effort has made this and the various other events a success. All of this has been done for you and is meant to build up your morale.

As we look forward hopefully to another year, our values should revolve around that still small voice called 'conscience,' the highest ethical standards, and accountability in the work undertaken by the Burgher association for the social, economic, cultural, and, eventually, political development of the entire Burgher Community.

I call upon you, one and all, to demonstrate your commitment to responsibilities entrusted you by the Burgher Association in all matters related to the building up of the Burgher Community. It is very important for the Community that government recognize the potentials and capabilities of the Burghers in Nation-building, in changing lives and lifestyles and in creating a superior quality-of-life for ALL citizens.

Let me say that it has been a great privilege to come before this distinguished assembly—yes—you are distinguished because you care, because you are concerned and because you are here—where we have had this important annual convention. The end purpose of all this is to ensure that the Burghers will one and all, begin to enjoy a better quality-of-life, have their dignity and self-respect restored and that we will all once again seriously begin to play a significant rôle in the affairs of our Motherland. Be proud to be a Burgher!

I thank you all for your great courtesy and undivided attention.

May the good Lord bless and keep you from all harm, danger and evil!

A Thank you very much!!