

An old joke shared between Oxford and Cambridge Universities relates how an elderly Cambridge professor visited his professor friend at Oxford. It was a hot summer day and the two men decided to swim in the nude, in a secluded spot along the Isis River. Suddenly, a bevy of women undergraduates rode past on bicycles. The Cambridge professor hastily grabbed his towel and wore it round his waist. The Oxford professor, however, frantically wrapped his towel around his head, hiding his face. As the giggling girls retreated, the Cambridge professor asked the Oxford don why he only covered his face. The reply was: “Well, in Oxford, some of us are better recognised by our faces!”

Thus, throughout the English-speaking world, an ‘Oxford bath’ has come to mean a bath in the nude.

Consequently, the recent series of bizarre events culminating in the rude cancellation of the Oxford Union Society’s invitation to President Mahinda Rajapaksa to address it on 2 December can be interpreted, at one level, as an Oxford bath that has uncovered Sri Lankan diplomacy in all its nudity.

This, one should say, for no fault of the professional career diplomats – if you can find them among the scores of cousins and cronies in our missions abroad. Nor indeed is it a failing on the part of the highly educated and articulate External Affairs Minister.

The statements of the Oxford Union and of the Government of Sri Lanka; the demonstrations outside the UK High Commission in Colombo, led by that star of street theatre Minister Wimal Weerawansa, and within Parliament (despite the impartial and dignified intervention of the Speaker); and commentaries in the media and the world of blogs have still not answered a number of basic questions which concerned citizens of Sri Lanka have raised.

QUESTION NO. 1 Why on earth would the President of Sri Lanka want to address a foreign university debating society presided over by a 19-year-old



OXFORD: IN SEARCH OF ANSWERS

Jayantha Dhanapala describes what he likens to an ‘Oxford bath for Sri Lankan diplomacy’ and concludes by asking four burning questions.

and with an audience of wet-behind-the-ears undergraduates – supplemented of course, by a cheering squad of Sri Lankans led by Oxford graduate student Dilan Fernando?

One perceptive commentator saw it as ‘occidentalism’ – the obverse side of ‘orientalism’, critiqued famously by Edward Saïd as the prism through which Western scholars viewed the East.

The President says he wanted to talk about his vision for Sri Lanka. He added recently that he was to have disclosed the long awaited ‘political solution’ – presumably to the ‘ethnic problem’, whose existence is being denied.

Let’s get serious. If an impor-



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Is turning tables on the Opposition the red herring to distract attention from a monumental diplomatic faux pas?

tant policy decision impacting Sri Lanka is to be announced, surely that should be done in this country and not in a land that colonised us for one-and-a-half centuries. What is so wrong in going to my own alma mater, the University of Peradeniya – provided of course that disrespectful hooting could have been prevented?

In any event, if the President had to assert his right to free speech in the UK, surely the Royal Institute of International Affairs at Chatham House, the 350-year-old Royal Society and the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), all far more prestigious than the Oxford Union Society, would have been better forums.

The writer is an ex-ambassador of Sri Lanka and a former UN Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs.



MEDIA SERVICES PHOTOFILE (PRESIDENTIAL SECRETARIAT)

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expertise in Sri Lankabhimanya Dr. Christopher Weeramantry, Dr. Rohan Perera, Dr. Lakshman Marasinghe and others who can be relied upon to provide objective and independent views in the national interest.

QUESTION NO. 4 Are we underestimating the strength of Eelam supporters abroad? First, we need to compile an accurate database of the numbers of Sri Lankans residing overseas. India commissioned a consultancy firm to do this in the US, before devising an intelligent strategy to harness the resources of non-resident Indians – and it produced a rich harvest by assembling a powerful lobby to exploit the US system to pursue Indian national interests.

Almost every Western democracy has a Sri Lankan expatriate community, some of whom have emigrated with a sense of grievance. Their resentment may continue to rankle and be transformed into support for separatism.

They are gradually acquiring citizenship rights that include voting rights, and in many countries they form significant vote banks.

The modern history of the world has a number of parallels of determined groups of expatriates lobbying for their cause of statehood, the Zionist movement being the most noteworthy. Already, many expatriate Sri Lankan Tamils have been elected to local bodies in some European countries. The next step will be entry into national legislatures and the shaping of policies towards Sri Lanka.

We need to mount a counter-offensive urgently and intelligently, rather than waste time on demonstrations and votes of no confidence in our Opposition leaders.

QUESTION NO. 2 Who in the Sri Lanka bureaucracy was for the trip to Oxford, and who was against it? And is it, as the External Affairs Minister (an unnecessarily changed nomenclature – maybe to fall more in line with India?) said in Parliament, that the buck stopped with our President who wanted to cock a snook at the UK amidst all the rumours of a warrant of arrest for war crimes?

At least two Cabinet ministers have criticised the External Affairs Ministry and the country's professional diplomats for being asleep at the wheel. That is familiar scapegoating reminiscent of how a career ambassador on legitimate leave from his post in Tokyo was penalised for the former Prime Minister's error of judgement in accepting a personal invitation from a Sri Lankan Buddhist priest in Japan.

Unless we produce our own Julian Assange with a Sri Lanka-style WikiLeaks, we will

not know the answer – as to who gave what advice.

My own experience is that even with the best advice from experienced career diplomats, politicians opt to listen to the closest sycophants who always cover themselves with plausible denial.

When the Head of State has been exposed to a snub embarrassing the entire country, should there not be some accountability? Or is turning tables on the Opposition the red herring to distract attention from a monumental diplomatic faux pas?

QUESTION NO. 3 What is the truth about the risks our leaders and military officers run when they travel abroad? If our President was covered by the immunity of a sovereign head of state while in the UK, could a hostile group have sued for a warrant under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court's Article 58, underpinned by Article 15 and applied within the framework of Article 27,

since the UK is a signatory to the ICC although we are not? Would that risk remain whenever the President visits a country which is a signatory to the ICC curtailing our head of state's freedom to travel and his exercise of personal diplomacy?

As citizens of a country that has been freed from terrorism through the able leadership of the President and the brave professionalism of our military, we do not now need to live in suspense over the threats from supporters of separatism abroad.

The professionalism which won us the military victory is not being matched with professionalism in the conduct of our foreign policy. Instead, new manifestations of the terrorist threat are being met with foolhardiness, bravado and false notions of invulnerability.

A clear strategy to deal with international legal threats must be devised by consulting our rich talent of international legal