



The four decades from 1930 to about 1970 saw colourful personalities strut the political stage in Sri Lanka, almost all of them from the Old Left. Phillip Gunawardena was perhaps the most spectacular of them all. In view of his 35th death anniversary, which fell last March, shall we take some space to rev up our memory about this extraordinary man? Phillip's career concluded in anticlimax but that does not take away the attractive gloss and punch of his core years in the political arena. He continues to live in the public memory as a legend and still, to many, as a hero.

Don Phillip Rupesinghe Gunawardena was born on January 11<sup>th</sup> and he died on March 1972. He had a proud ancestry being as he was the scion of the Boralugoda Jacolis Ralahamy of the Hewagama Korale. The Ralahamy was legendary for his fearlessness and also for his generosity and Phillip inherited both these characteristics in ample measure.

Phillip had his senior school education at Ananda College, Colombo. While at college, he lodged at the residence of TB Jaya, freedom fighter, who was also a teacher at Ananda. There, Phillip came into contact with critics of colonial rule like Anagarika Dharmapala, Walisinghe Harischandra, and John De Silva.

Phillip entered University College Colombo in order to do Economics but Jacolis Ralahamy had other plans for the son and he sent the latter to study in the US. Phillip studied at the universities at Illinois, and Wisconsin. He graduated and postgraduated in Agricultural Economics- a sound academic base for any aspiring Lankan political leader.

However, Phillip had his focus worldwide- toward struggles for freedom from oppression and repression anywhere and everywhere. Exposed to Marxian Socialism in the US, he engaged in mass agitation there by joining the Anti Imperialist League in New York in 1929. He went to the UK and participated in mass agitations and anti imperialist movements over there. Phillip crossed the Channel from London and hopped into Europe- to Germany and to France. He undertook a dangerous journey by foot across the Pyrenees carrying with him some secret documents to be delivered to the Spanish rebels there. Phillip assisted in the struggles for freedom by Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya and Ram Goolan of Mauritius

An early convert from Stalinism to Trotskyism, Phillip Gunawardena returned to Sri Lanka and founded the LSSP in 1935- the oldest political party in Sri Lanka- along with NM Perera, Colvin R De Silva, Leslie

Gunawardena, and Edmund Samarakkody . Along with these leaders, Phillip founded the Surya Mal campaign set up to help the poor during the Malaria epidemic in the 1930s.

During WorldwarII Phillip Gunawardena organised trade union agitation and anti imperialist campaigns and was arrested and jailed. Along with his even fiercer brother, Robert, and jailor Solomon, Phillip escaped

and such attempts were frowned upon by many other MEP leaders. Powerful vested interests worked on Bandaranaike and against Phillip. SWRD caved in and the resultant acrimony led Phillip to break off with the MEP government.



## REMEMBERING THE LION OF BORALUGODA

from jail and fled to India and lived under a disguised name "Guruswamy". In India, too he engaged in the anti imperialist struggle along with Indian leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru. Phillip was jailed again but released in 1945 after which he was sent back to Sri Lanka.

Phillip was elected to the State council in 1946 where he worked tirelessly in poverty alleviation projects. In the General Election held in 1947 Phillip Gunawardena was elected to the first Parliament as MP for Avissawella with a huge majority. Ideological differences with his LSSP colleagues led him to break away from that party and form the VLSSP in 1951. In 1956, the VLSSP became a constituent party of the MEP that campaigned under the leadership of SWRD Bandaranaike. After the victory that followed, Phillip Gunawardena got the portfolio of Agriculture and Cooperatives. In this role he introduced revolutionary changes to peasant agriculture by bringing in the Paddy Lands Act and by setting up Cooperatives and the Multipurpose Cooperative. He also set up the Cooperative Bank that later became the Peoples Bank. Within the MEP Phillip became a strong left-tilting force that threatened the establishment. He kept pushing Bandaranaike to bring in reforms

.....one can shower a lot of praise on Phillip for many good reasons. He was scrupulously honest in his dealings. As a leader he stood by his convictions instead of yielding to vested interests as SWRD so often did. From the beginning he kept an intellectual focus on social justice and freedom from oppression for humanity anywhere. As Minister of government he strove for economic justice and the amelioration of poverty among the peasantry.

He took with him other stalwarts like William Silva.

When leaving, Phillip made one prediction before the House of Parliament, namely that one day the same forces that were aligned to Bandaranaike will strangle him (SWRD) and puff the life out of him. He also criticised the unholy influence of certain Buddhist monks who really acted as spokesmen for "racketeers"

True enough Bandaranaike was assassinated by a Buddhist monk suspected of being an agent of vested interests. In the election that followed, Phillip campaigned vigorously for power. Slogvanized as "Maha Kalu Sinhalaya" Phillip's popularity throughout the island gained by the day. I was one of his numerous fans and I remember attending a huge meeting of his at the Bogambara in Kandy during my Peradeniya days. Phillip spoke with great eloquence and with a strident voice. The swing became stronger and stronger until some SLFPers persuaded Bandaranaike's widow, Sirima, to take over the mantle of leadership. Lo and behold! The very same masses that had been gathering around Phillip turned over to Sirima and

Phillip's deserved opportunity blew out. I think the Lion never forgot that ever.

The adversity of his fortunes caused utter disgust in Phillip. In the meantime, he had also been suffering from a family financial crisis. Here was a man who had lost all his vast inherited property and wealth for politics-now faced with a showdown. The decision to make his famous U-turn by joining the UNP in a "National Government" under Dudley Senanayake during 1965- 1970 took place against this background. That represented the ironical and sad anticlimax of the life of the great Lion of Boralugoda. He had capitulated to the very conservative forces against whom he had worked all his life.

That said, one can shower a lot of praise on Phillip for many good reasons. He was scrupulously honest in his dealings. As a leader he stood by his convictions instead of yielding to vested interests as SWRD so often did. From the beginning he kept an intellectual focus on social justice and freedom from oppression for humanity anywhere. As Minister of government he strove for economic justice and the amelioration of poverty among the peasantry. Although the MEP was a product of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism Phillip never played with communal or religious feelings. The progressive changes he made in the rural economy and the banking sector lives to this day.

The political disabling of Don Phillip Rupesinghe Gunawardena epitomises the failure of our country and of our people.



Shyamon Jayasinghe

**KJL** ශ්‍රී ලාංකීය මාධ්‍ය සිසුලු අවශ්‍යතා සඳහා  
**SPICE CORNER**

Monday - Thursday 10.30am to 8.00pm  
 Friday - 10.30am to 9.00pm  
 Saturday - 10.30am to 9.00pm  
 Sunday - 10.30am to 8.00pm

ශ්‍රී ලංකා උණු උණු ආහාර  
 බිරියානි  
 බත්  
 පැන් රෝල්ස්  
 ටටේ

ශ්‍රී ලාංකීය සිවිල් සිටි  
 ඉන්දියානු ශ්‍රී ලංකා සාරි සහ බලච්ඡ  
 මැණික් හා ස්වර්ණාභරණ  
 ගෝන් කාඩ්ස්  
 වෙසන් සුබපැතුම් පත්

16 Bellerive Avenue Mount Waverley  
 Tel : 9544 7189 Mob 0418 531 620 Fax : 9562 5503

weekly video hire 75c

ශ්‍රී ලාංකීය මාධ්‍ය කවුච්ච.  
 ගොඩවන්න අදම

www.thisara.com

**චීසරා** FM 97.4