

Dear Mr. Fraser,

I belong to a generation of South Asians who grew up with the Great Depression and became adults during the Second World War. As happened with most of the liberal-minded urban youth of that era, we were inspired by the Indian freedom movement led by Mahatma Gandhi and became innately anti-colonial in out-

my daughter and son-in-law who have migrated a couple of years earlier, I found the country to be delightfully multi-cultural and far more tolerant than any other society on earth. It is not an exaggeration to state that this almost total turn around of a society within a couple of decades was brought in as a cumulative result of the Whitlam government's reversal of policies, the steadfast continuation of those social policies by your government and the continuous adherence to those directives by

its heyday of mid-1970s when the Commonwealth successfully applied pressure to racist regimes in southern Africa to change their ways and be embraced by the global community. This time around the Commonwealth is striving to stay relevant in a fast changing world and you are concerned that the forum is not fulfilling its role and, as expected, you have strived to bring the recommendations of the Eminent

war you are referring to was not, by any stretch of imagination, a war between two regions or two communities. It was an armed conflict between a besieged government and, arguably, the most ruthlessly efficient terrorist outfit the world has ever seen.

Doubtless, when a conventional armed force encounters a guerrilla group fighting behind human shields, there would

An Open Letter to Malcolm Fraser



look. We were also, as most of the urban populace in the present day sub continent, avid followers of the game of cricket. Although we were politically anti-colonial, i.e., anti-British, when we followed ashes series throughout the Bradman era to the times of Hutton and Miller, we supported and hoped for an England victory against yet another colony, i.e., Australia. There was an irony in this warped partiality but, for us, our unwanted colonial masters were far more preferable to a country with an official white's only citizenship policy.

That was eons ago. Much water has passed through the Indian Ocean between the small island nation of Sri Lanka and the island continent of Australia since those un-enlightened times. In the early 1970s we followed with fascination what seemed to us an almost overnight transformation in the Australian society and polity. But, with the collapse of the Whitlam Labor government in 1975, we became apprehensive that under a conservative regime, all those attempts at social engineering would be rescinded and Australia may take a huge backward step. Little did we know that for the next eight years the Australian government would be led by a genuine liberal statesman who would ensure that the advances in Australia leading up to the Seventies would not only be enshrined but also enhanced?

When I came to Australia in 1992 to join

the subsequent government. During the last two decades, however, there were instances when one group or the other representing vested interests tried to give voice to prejudices seeking to subvert this social cohesion. But these crusades have seen their ups and downs and usually end

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up as voices in wilderness. Whenever there was a loud prejudicial voice or an aggressive divisive movement emerged during the time I lived in Australia it could be rest assured that there were a handful of eminent Australians who would stand up to give voice to humanism and reason and foremost among them almost always was one Hon Malcolm Fraser.

Now, when it comes to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Australian soil, you would, naturally, make your feelings known to the Australian public. After all, you have been closely involved with the CHOOGM during

Persons Group into focus.

Regarding Sri Lanka, you have pointed out that reports that came out from not only UN Human Right Commission but also from the International Crisis Group suggest that there have been many atrocities by both sides during the final weeks of the armed conflict between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan government in mid-2009. You have also pointed out that Sri Lankan government must properly investigate the charges and hoped that Sri Lanka should not be allowed to host the CHOOGM if it does not address the war crimes allegations and institute human rights reforms before the next scheduled summit in 2013.

Being aware of your unwavering adherence to the values of democracy, the rule of law, human rights and the basic common human decency, the expatriate South Asian community and the Australian populace at large, no doubt, will appreciate the sincere intent behind these publically stated views. However, the discerning among the Sri Lankan expatriates and others who have witnessed or had a close knowledge of sufferings undergone by all Sri Lankans during the past twenty-five years are deeply distressed at the way the remnants of extremist elements of the Sri Lankan Tamil community distort your comments to give legitimacy to their misinformation campaign against the Sri Lankan government and the country itself.

I would like to point out that the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict began like any other movement of minority community to address their legitimate grievances against the majority community. But, within few years of early to mid 1980s, the LTTE ruthlessly eliminated all democratically elected minority Tamil representatives and all other militant factions and held the whole of Tamil dominated northern and eastern parts of the island to ransom and, for the next twenty years, conducted a relentless campaign of terrorism in rest of the island. In this process, the LTTE went on a rampage of destruction of government and commercial edifices and vital infrastructure, desecrated shrines all faiths and cold-bloodedly murdered not only thousands of Sri Lankans of all ethnicities, religious dignitaries and scholars but also assassinated numerous politicians, members of parliament, members of the cabinet of ministers, presidential contenders, a serving president and even a former Indian prime minister. The

be civilian casualties. There certainly was collateral damage during the final stages of the conflict. Some rogue elements within the Sri Lankan forces probably would have executed some LTTE militants and the Sri Lankan forces might even have been guilty of some "war crimes" but the Sri Lankan state was never guilty of crimes against humanity as the LTTE was throughout their 30 years long campaign.

In comprehensively defeating the terrorist movement, the government has established peace throughout the island and provided an environment where people can go about their day to day business without any fear but the majority Sinhalese leadership has certainly been remiss of not being able to come up with a political solution acceptable to the minority Tamil community even two and a half years after the end of the conflict. It is not so much a matter of procrastination but the inability of the authorities get different sections to agree on political reforms of devolution of power that defies a solution to this vexed issue. Perhaps, two and a half years is too short a time to resolve an issue far too obdured by two and a half decades of violent confrontation.

This state of affairs, however, should not be allowed to go on for much longer. If Sri Lanka has not established a viable, democratic administrative framework for all its regions and had not instituted necessary human rights reforms by the time next CHOOGM comes around, the country not only does not deserve the honor of hosting the summit but also must rightfully be condemned for its failings. In the meantime, it would be prudent to not make comments which could be misconstrued by those who are hell bent on destabilising a resurgent nation which is struggling to emerge from a devastating conflict.

Sincerely,
S.Piyasena



Senior Journalist
S Piyasena

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