

Venerable Chancellor,
Venerable Mahasanga and the Clergy of Other Religions,
Vice Chancellor, Deans of Faculties,
Members of the University Council and Senate,
Members of the Academic, Administrative and Non-academic Staff,
Invitees, Parents, Well-wishers and Graduates.

I consider it a privilege for me to have been invited to share some thoughts with you, on this critical occasion in your lives, wherein you are assembled, after several years of strenuous studies, to receive your degree.

My own mind goes back a three quarter century – way back in 1946 - when I was part of an assembly such as yours awaiting the award of my own first degree. I remember that the foremost thought in my mind was what avenue of work that I should engage myself in so that I could contribute my best to the society in which I lived.

My final choice was Public Management – an area of work which has been my focus, both nationally and internationally, for the past six decades. As a result of this choice, I was able to gain many experiences – sometimes satisfying and at other times disappointing. From each of these experiences, I tried to draw lessons and to apply the lessons drawn to my subsequent work. Being the Chair of the Presidential Committee on Administrative Reforms, during the period 1986 to 1988, enabled me to gain further insights in to the situation as concerning public management in our country.

It would be my effort during the rest of my time to share with you some of my experiences in public management during this period. It is my hope that they would be a frame of reference to you in your future work. Let me start off with the reason why I regard public management as the most critical concern for us in Sri Lanka. We are today nine decades into our development effort; during the large segments of which the leadership and the conduct of the development effort was assumed by the public sector. My assessment of the net outcome of this exercise has, unfortunately, been disappointing. We—despite the natural and human resources that have been available have failed to achieve the optimum development which we could have achieved therefrom.

The challenge for you who seek to engage in Public Management is how the you could change this disappointing situation in our country and what you can do to place the country on a strong development trajectory. I do not claim to have all the

answers. But, based on my past experience in our country and my understanding of the experience of other countries, I would like to share some thoughts with you on the contribution which you could make as individuals and as groups to make it possible to envisage a positive development trajectory for Sri Lanka.

One of the first lessons that I learned was how important it was to understand the environment within which one had to function as a public manager. It is very important that a public manager keeps abreast of the continuing changes in the work environment in which he or she functions – whether it be the local environment, the national environment or the international environment. All these keep changing – at times perceptibly and at other times imperceptibly. So, it is essential for all public managers to be continuously aware of these continuing changes and to adjust the programmes of work of the public organisations in which they are serving and are currently responsible to respond to such changes. It entails your having to devote considerable segments of your daily time to accessing information sources.

If you are to do all this continuous study, it will be obvious that your ‘work time’ does not begin at 9.00 a.m. and end at 4.30 p.m.!

Equally relevant is for you to keep abreast of the management practices which are being used by other organisations – private and public - particularly seeking to understand the changes that are continuously being introduced by them. I would suggest that you try to assess how such changes have affected the performance of the organisations concerned and examine the possibilities of introducing similar changes to the work practices of your own organisation.

However, I must introduce a note of caution here. I have – over the years – seen how the introduction of changes has been either resisted or the changes, themselves, have been implemented half-heartedly in many instances in public sector organisations. Very often, I have found that in almost all such instances the resistance has been the result of one’s colleagues resenting their being not consulted in the designing and application of the concerned changes and, for this reason, not co-operating in their implementation.

This brings me to the next point that I would like to stress. It is the importance of regular discussions and consultations with your colleagues – senior and junior – in the designing and implementation of changes. Obviously, any changes that are planned should be discussed with your colleagues. I have found that regular, weekly discussions with colleagues are a positive asset to effective management. If the organisation which you head is large, it may be more effective to

break up the discussion group into two – say senior and junior - but keeping each group aware of the thrust and content of the discussions with the other. Such discussions are more useful if they cover a range of issues. What comes to my mind are issues such as the performance of the organisation, effectiveness of the recent changes that have been implemented, cost-effectiveness of the operations of the organisation, and the public perceptions of the work and effectiveness of the organisation - to name a few. There should always be a record of the proceedings of each discussion group which is shared amongst all participants.

I would also like to share with you some thoughts on what I see as being the major challenges that you would have to cope with as public managers. These arise from several of the emerging inadequacies in regard to public management as have become evident in recent discussions.

I have been struck by the negative findings of the Public Accounts Committee as revealed in its most recent Report as well as in the reports of the immediate past. These negative findings all point to repeated lapses in effective public management. To my mind, there appears to be a tardiness in implementing the efforts that require to be made to correct the gaps. I do hope that this situation would get rectified sooner than later. What made me refer to this issue is to alert those of you who seek to join the ranks of public managers of the importance of studying the defects highlighted in these reports as a guide to how you should function as public managers in the years that lie ahead. I do hope that those of you who see your future in different positions and areas of work in public management would take the time to study these reports and seek to understand how the inadequacies highlighted in them should be avoided in your own future work areas. I consider them to be an important component in the manuals that should guide all public managers in the discharge of their duties.

The many elements of public management are such that they have a direct impact on almost all aspects of the community. For example, they affect all forms of economic activities; they affect law and order in our society; they affect our access to the health services that we need; they also affect the quality of education and skill development of our future generations. Given the multiple aspirations of different individuals and groups in our Sri Lankan society, it is to be expected that there would be high competition in regard to all these areas and that different members of our community would – if possible – seek to use whatever influence they have or have access to in order to gain optimal benefits, for the groups they are linked to, from these areas of activity. Such pressures will be many and would also vary in intensity. The challenge that you would have as public managers would be to resist such

pressures and to be guided only by the relevant laws and regulations in the making of decisions. I know that such conduct could result in negative personal consequences. Punishment transfers, denial of benefits such as scholarships etc. But my plea to you is not to be over-awed by them.

Do what is correct, do what is legal – so that when you come to the end of your work life you could look back with self-satisfaction and self-respect.

Disappointments will be many. They were so in my own work life!

If and when we enter the portal of public management, we have only one basic thing to remember. As public managers you have only one master and loyalty only to one group. This is the general public of Sri Lanka – whom you have chosen to serve in taking your oath as public servants. Your loyalty, as public managers, would not be to individuals or groups who wield influence as political cadres or claim to possess the capacity to ensure your career wellbeing and advancement. Your commitment should be to the the public whom you serve.

What the country needs are ‘public servants’ and not ‘government servants’ – persons who keep their concentration on the good of the citizens rather than on the preferences of those groups who, temporarily, occupy political office.

One can deal with this issue ad infinitum. However, neither the time available nor the occasion that we have met together to celebrate would permit this. But I felt that the context within which we meet together today required me to ask you to ponder on this and the other issues which I have raised as you make your contribution to the development of our country and the wellbeing of your fellow citizens.

May this contribution be strong and beneficial to our fellow citizens.

I wish you all strength.

Dr. H. S. Wanasinghe
Chairman
Centre for Police Alternatives