

Sir Oliver Goonetilleke: the first Ceylonese Governor-General

—By—
Rear Admiral Dr. Shemal Fernando, PhD

His Excellency Sir Oliver Goonetilleke, GCMG, KCVO, KBE, KStJ was the first Ceylonese to become the Governor-General of Ceylon. His tenure from July 17, 1954 to March 2, 1962 as the Governor-General encompassed the reigns of five Prime Ministers – Sir John Kotelawala, S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, Wijeyananda Dahanayake, Dudley Senanayake and Sirimavo Bandaranaike. “Sir Oliver” as he was affectionately known, was by profession an Accountant, a breed rarely transformed into super heroes. Yet, Sir Oliver broke the mould. One of his many flairs was a good head for figures. He was also a consummate negotiator and political strategist. Above all, he was always a gentleman and had a demeanour all his own.

Birth and Education

Oliver Ernest Goonetilleke was born October 20, 1892 in Trincomalee in Ceylon. He was the fifth child of eight and only son of Alfred Goonetilleke and Emily Jayasekera. His father who served in the Ceylon Postal Service was the Postmaster of Trincomalee at the time of his birth.

He was educated at Wesley College in Colombo where he won many prizes and scholarships including the Hill Medal and the Gogery Scholarship. After completing his secondary education, Goonetilleke joined the teaching staff of Wesley College as an Assistant Teacher. He later earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of London.

After gaining his degree, he left his teaching post and joined the Bank of Colombo as a Sub-Accountant, then became the Manager of the Ceylon Daily News. He was also an honorary Lieutenant in the Ceylon Cadet Corps.

He married Esther Jayawardena and had three children, Joyce, Shiela and Ernie. Esther died of an illness when the three children were very young. In 1921, Goonetilleke joined the government service having been appointed the Assistant Auditor for Railway in the Audit Office and was thereafter promoted as the Assistant Colonial Auditor.

Professional Career

He was the first Ceylonese to be appointed as Colonial Auditor of Ceylon on June 25, 1931. With the implementation of the Donoughmore Constitution, the title of the head was changed to Auditor General of Ceylon and he became the first to hold the new appointment on July 7, 1931 and served in this capacity till February 16, 1946.

As the Colonial Auditor, he was an ex-officio member of the Executive Council of Ceylon in 1931. He took on additional duties as Chairman of the Salaries and Cadres Commission, Civil Defence Commissioner and Food Commissioner. He was appointed a Companion of the Order of St. Michael and St. George (CMG) in the 1941 New Year Honours.

With the onset of World War II in

the Far East and the likelihood that Ceylon would face a military threat from Japan, Oliver Goonetilleke was given the additional duty as Civil Defence Commissioner in the War Cabinet of Ceylon, heading the newly formed Civil Defence Department.

Some civil defence preparations such as knocking down buildings to create fire breaks in Colombo proved unpopular, but proved to be justified when the Imperial Japanese Navy carried out air raids on Colombo and other cities on April 5, 1942.

Ivor Jennings, Principal of the Ceylon University College, served as Goonetilleke's deputy, and the two worked closely with D. S. Senanayake, the Minister of Agriculture and Lands. This group was known as “The Breakdown Gang” as they began to talk about much besides civil defence, including the steps that might be taken to move Ceylon to complete independence after the war.

In 1943, a declaration was made for grant of government for all the matters of civil administration in Ceylon. The trio, D. S. Senanayake, Oliver Goonetilleke and Ivor Jennings drafted a constitution, known as the “Ministers’ Draft,” and submitted it to British Government in February 1944. At this time Goonetilleke who was the Commissioner of Food had to visit Britain to discuss an urgent food supply.

There he met Lord Soulbury who had been appointed to lead a Commission to Ceylon, pressing his case for self-rule. Oliver Goonetilleke upon his return advised Senanayake on approaching the members of the Soulbury Commission when they arrived in Ceylon in December 1944. He became an “Unofficial Secretary” to the commission and significantly influenced it.

He was knighted with a KBE for his services in the 1944 New Year Honours. However, on December 18, 1946, questions were raised in the House of Commons by Douglas Dodds-Parker on irregularities in the Auditor-General's Report on Civil Defence Expenditure for 1943-1944 and 1944-1945.

With the war drawing to a close and the closure of the Civil Defence Department, Sir Oliver left his post of Colonial Auditor and took up a new appointment as the Financial Secretary of Ceylon on February 16, 1946, assuming responsibility as the head of the Treasury for all financial policy of the colony.

As the Financial Secretary, Sir Oliver sat in the Board of Ministers. He was the first Ceylonese to hold the post of Financial Secretary and served in the position until his resignation on February 3, 1947.

Minister and Diplomat

With Ceylon gaining dominion status within the British Commonwealth, in 1947 the first Cabinet of Ministers was formed with Senanayake as Prime Minister after the 1947 General Elections. Sir Oliver was appointed as the Minister of Home Affairs and Rural Development on September 26, 1947.

He was bestowed KCMG in the 1948 New Year Honours for his services. His partnership with D. S. Senanayake was a key element in the smooth transition to independence.

Sir Oliver had been appointed



Sir Oliver Goonetilleke

to the newly formed Upper House of Parliament, the Senate of Ceylon and became the Leader of the Senate when both houses were ceremonially opened by the Duke of Gloucester, marking the independence of Ceylon on February 4, 1948. His term as a minister did not last long as he resigned as Minister and Senator on July 22 1948.

Sir Oliver was thereafter appointed the first Ceylonese High Commissioner to the United Kingdom. He returned to Ceylon in early 1951, to resume his cabinet position as Minister of Home Affairs and Rural Development and Leader of the Senate in March 1951 and served till April 1952.

Following Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake's resignation in 1953, Sir John Kotelawala succeeded him. Sir Oliver was appointed as the Minister of Finance and Treasury on October 14, 1953, while holding the post of Leader of the Senate.

Once again, his ministerial tenure was brief, lasting only till June 30, 1954.

Sir John served as the “Minister in Attendance” to the Queen Elizabeth II during her Royal visit to Ceylon. This was the first visit to the country by a reigning monarch and it was just five months after her coronation. She was accompanied by her husband, Prince Philip, The Duke of Edinburgh.

The Queen arrived in Ceylon on April 10, 1954 and left the country after a 11-day stay on April 21. It was a remarkable visit as April 21 marked her 28th birthday.

Prime Minister Sir John Kotelawala made a request to the Queen to consider appointing a Ceylonese to the post of Governor-General, as successor to Lord Soulbury who served as the Chairman of the Soul-

bury Commission 1944-1945 and as the Governor-General of Ceylon 1949-1954.

Governor-General of Ceylon

Shortly after Queen Elizabeth II's visit to Ceylon, the decision was taken to appoint a Ceylonese to the post of Governor-General. Sir John Kotelawala was Prime Minister when Sir Oliver succeeded to the position and took up residence in Queen's House on July 17, 1954.

Sir Oliver remained in office after the election of the left-wing S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike as Prime Minister defeating Sir John Kotelawala in the 1956 General Elections. Bandaranaike was pressured to remove Sir Oliver. On May 24, 1958, when communal riots erupted, Prime Minister S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike did not make a formal response.

With violence spreading throughout the island, Sir Oliver declared a state of emergency on May 27, and deployed the armed forces to quell the rioting. He issued orders to the armed forces to suppress the rioting and succeeded in restoring order in a few days.

Sir Oliver once again was forced to take decisive action, on September 25, 1959 when Prime Minister Bandaranaike was shot at his home in Colombo while meeting the public. Sir Oliver was at Queen's House accepting letters of credence of the Italian Ambassador.

Sir Oliver upon learning about the assassination attempt, stopped the ceremony and rushed to Rosmead Place. He informed parliament to continue and at 11.00 a. m. declared a state of emergency, bringing the military to full readiness and

mobilizing reservists. Bandaranaike, who was rushed to hospital and into emergency surgery, died twenty-two hours after he was shot.

Bandaranaike had been scheduled to go to New York to attend the UN General Assembly in late September 1959. The Leader of the House, C. P. de Silva was in London undergoing treatment and Bandaranaike had sent a letter to the Governor-General recommending Wijeyananda Dahanayake, Minister of Education as acting Prime Minister during his absence. With this letter, Goonetilleke appointed Dahanayake as Prime Minister on September 26, 1959.

Following the assassination of Bandaranaike, the country faced a period of political instability. The Premiership of Dahanayake lasted only one year, and during that time many changes to his cabinet took place. Fresh elections were called, but the General Elections in March 1960 were indecisive in their outcome, as Dudley Senanayake formed a government for a brief period.

Sir Oliver had a difficult decision when faced with the classic difficulty for a Governor-General, whether to dissolve Parliament, causing a new election, or call on a different faction to form a government when Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake lost Parliament's confidence. He dissolved the parliament and called for fresh elections.

Sir Oliver briefly held the portfolio of Minister of Finance from March 21 to April 23, 1960.

Bandaranaike's widow Sirimavo Bandaranaike was selected by his party, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party as its leader and won General Elections in July 1960. Sir Oliver called her to form a government.

The legendary Olympian Professor Nagalingam Ethirweerasingham once shared an episode that had taken place in 1961. “Ethir” had returned from the University of California, Los Angeles and had been unemployed for a long time. Sir Oliver had invited him to the Queen's House and offered him a job in a Tea plantation having discussed over Tea.

In January 1962, the information surfaced of an attempted military coup against the government of Sirimavo Bandaranaike. Felix Dias Bandaranaike, Parliamentary Secretary for Defence and External Affairs stated in Parliament on February 18, 1962 that Sir Oliver had been cited in the investigations as having been involved in the conspiracy.

Sir Oliver while denying that he had played any such role, indicated that he had no objection to being questioned by the Police. But this was not enough for Bandaranaike, who was determined to force him out of office. She requested the Queen to appoint a new Governor-General.

On February 26, 1962, it was announced that the Queen had accepted to appoint William Gopallawa as the new Governor-General, from March 20, 1962.

Gopallawa was Mrs. Bandaranaike's uncle, and she hoped that he would be more subservient to her. Meanwhile, Sir Oliver quietly vacated Queen's House on March 2, 1962 and afterwards left the country.

Retired Life

Sir Oliver settled into a retired life in London, in a self-imposed ex-

ile. He preferred the frenetic pace of the city, choosing to live near Hyde Park, at the heart of London. It is one of the city's most select addresses, just over a mile from “Buckingham Palace” and with “Apsley House,” the home of the Duke of Wellington, as a close neighbour.

Despite his sadness at leaving Ceylon, Sir Oliver did not succumb to grief. Instead, he created a new life. He accepted various posts with companies related to Ceylon's tea and rubber companies and achieved another ‘first’ when he became the first Asian underwriter at Lloyds.

In the investigation into the attempted military coup, some of the crown witnesses tried to link Sir Oliver and former Prime Ministers, Dudley Senanayake and Sir John Kotelawala, with the conspiracy; this was never proven.

Sir Oliver was also an avid horse racing enthusiast and horse owner with his horses racing at Epsom and Ascot. He named his two horses “Castle Street” (where he resided in Ceylon) and “Evaldine”, the name of his residence.

He discovered domestic happiness after having spent many years as a widower since the death of his wife in 1931. He first met his second wife Phyllis Miller when she visited Ceylon as secretary to the Soulbury Commission. After that, they stayed in close contact and married quietly in 1968. In 1972, aged 82, Sir Oliver was tried in absentia and sentenced to four years rigorous imprisonment and a fine of 950,000 rupees (£61,000) by the Criminal Justice Commission (CJC).

Following the defeat of Sirimavo Bandaranaike in the 1977 General Elections, Prime Minister J. R. Jayawardene, repealed the CJC and released all who were jailed under the provisions of the Act with an amnesty declared, allowing Sir Oliver to return to Sri Lanka where he died a few months later aged 84 on December 17, 1978 in Colombo.

Legacy

A biography under the title “OEG” had been written and statues of him erected in his honour. The government issued a commemorative stamp in 1982.

The “Sir Oliver Goonetilleke Memorial Shield” is presented to the winners of the Wesley College and S. Thomas College, Mt. Lavinia rugby encounter.

A lover of sports, whenever he attended as the Chief Guest at the National Championships or Public-School meets in 1950s, he used to walk to the high jump arena along with the President of Ceylon Amateur Athletic Association, Carl Van Geysel, Ceylon's first Olympian at the 1924 Olympic Games.

His truly warm handshake with a half-smile, signified his love to people, no matter from which walk of life they came, they were all dear to him. Like a computer wizard he acted with brilliance and speed to handle crisis after crisis.

His contribution to Ceylon's Independence is a lasting monument to his unique skills. In the words of his biographer, Charles Joseph Jeffries: “If Ceylon makes it, this will largely be due to Oliver Goonetilleke. If she fails, it will not have been his fault.”



Sir Henry Monck-Mason Moore, Governor of Ceylon and D. S. Senanayake signing the Declaration of Independence Agreement in 1948. Standing (L to R) C. H. Mulhall, Sir Oliver Goonetilleke and Sir Arthur Ranasinghe.



Sir Oliver Goonetilleke, the Civil Defence Commissioner, visiting university students serving as volunteer firemen.