



— by —
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If the 20s set the tone for the rest of the century, time is up for some great changes in these new round 20s. About this time in the 20th Century, a world war had recently been fought, but the world was scarcely prepared for another one in a 20s decade that was relatively uneventful before a great depression set in the US in the 30s that were to follow.

The 40s saw war engulf the planet on a hitherto unprecedented scale.

In this country, British rule was entrenched. The Ceylon University College, later to become Colombo University, was established in 1921.

But significantly, the economy of this country was subject to the vagaries of the commodities market in the 1920s confirming the truth of the adage that the more things change, the more they stay the same.

As tea and other commodity prices fluctuated wildly in the 1920s, the people of this country faced uncertain times, but not as anxious as the tidings they confronted a century later in 2022.

Before the 20th century was halfway through, however, war broke out and Sri Lanka got a foretaste of independence with a measure of self-rule granted in the 30s.

The plan was that though a tempest may rage outside our shores with world war and genocide, that there would be a relentless forward march towards freedom, self-rule and transformation of the old order. The 20s it can be said, laid the foundation for the transition from colonial to self-rule, and though there was no grand plan, everything pointed in the direction of radical transformation. If a hundred years are to be sized up, it's clear that the first two decades should be of crucial import in setting the tone for a century that would pass.

GENOCIDES

Such a process of reset happened properly in the 20th century, but would it happen as this country plans tentatively for a recovery from unprecedented economic upheaval in 2022? They say that South Korea developed due to a series of five-year plans. Sri Lanka could think of a comprehensive recovery if there is a plan for the next 78 years. If the tone is not set for the 21st century now in this country, when is a good time? Not post 2025, when we are well into the second quarter of the 21st.

If the world was thrown into a period of unprecedented chaos unexpectedly in the 1940s, several governments would have rued the day they passed up the chance to plan for just such an eventuality. Could there be war — or a world war even — in the fourth decade of the 21st century to match the carnage of the century that went before?

It's hardly likely, though there are several adventurers out there that wield nuclear weapons and flaunt them. If not a war, would there be some other calamity — and since we have already had a pandemic — something more severe? Prob-



The critical 20s

ably not, but the world has not become a less dangerous place after World War II that followed the transformative decades of the 20s and 30s in the island of Ceylon.

Students of history would not forget that the country was granted independence in the same decade that the world was convulsed in hostilities and experienced one of the most deplorable of genocides in the modern history — the holocaust — all of it ending with the detonation of an atom bomb.

Hardly a time it would have been thought, to wake up to the realities of a brave new world. But the plans from the early twenties and thirties had stood the new rulers of Ceylon in good stead. The university system has its roots in the second and third decade of the 20th century.

It means that a young country was ready with the intelligentsia that could handle the transition. There has been some criticism that the colonial ruler bequeathed a university system for the jewel in the crown, the behemoth we refer to as India, in the early years of rule, but had not thought of establishing a similar seat of learning in Ceylon.

However, the Colombo Medical College was amalgamated with what was then called the University College, and the University of Ceylon was established by the State Council in 1942.

It was fitting that the Ceylonese State Councillors, essentially, had thought of setting up the first University. The plan was theirs and there was no gift of a seat of learning on a platter. It meant that those early decades of the 20th century were ones in which there was furious planning by a subjugated people who knew though that the days of the Empire were numbered.

It would have taken much foresight and a clear-headed vision to plan for a future when a world war raging and there was still no sign that the coloniser was about to begin the process of dismantling the empire.

Would the same visionary spirit — prevailing despite odds — animate the first three or four decades of this century?

THE COLONISER COULD HAVE TAKEN IT ALL AWAY, AND IN FACT THE DEPARTING RULER DID AT LEAST ATTEMPT TO PLUNDER OUR COFFERS TO A GREAT EXTENT, WHICH IS WHY WE STILL BOAST RATHER POINTLESSLY THAT WE COULD "LEND TO BRITAIN AT THE TIME OF THE WORLD WAR"

It should happen, if we take history as precedent and mimic our political predecessors of the century that preceded this one. But are there any signs of it? At the moment the country is emerging from a period of unexpected and in many ways unprecedented upheaval and tumult. All eyes are focused on a recovery and a revival.

But that phase of uncertainty and doubt wouldn't be for long. A recovery now should not stop the nation from planning for the decades ahead. Some may say that the colonial subjugation of the same period in the last century was the least of our problems compared to the trap we are in now in as a result of debt, an economy that collapsed, and a nation that had no alternative but to be rescued by international lenders.

EXCHEQUER

Should we even say that by contrast we were able to lend to England during the world war which is of course a rather curious argument when considering that we cannot possibly 'lend' to our ruler; the ruler would have taken and utilised the money as the ruler thought fit.

But no matter, Some may still say that irrespective of how the money ended up in Britain, at least technically we had the capacity to lend because our coffers were full from the proceeds of local commodities, and we were not indebted to anyone, any institution or any country.

Some may perhaps even say that it was easy to plan for a future under such

fortuitous circumstances. But yet, the money earned in the period of colonial rule was in a sense not our wealth at all.

The coloniser could have taken it all away, and in fact the departing ruler did at least attempt to plunder our coffers to a great extent, which is why we still boast rather pointlessly that we could "lend to Britain at the time of the world war."

Head start

Despite such uncertainty when we weren't sure that the money in the exchequer was in fact ours, our 'founding fathers' were able to plan ahead in those early decades of the 20th century in which the foundations for our freedom was laid. They also say that Sri Lanka won independence without so much as having to raise a finger fighting for it. When the Empire folded up its project in India, it was clearly time up for colonial rule by the Brits.

But yet, it's easy to belittle early 20th century resolve, when hundred or so years down the road, we are looking down the barrel at economic ruin if not for foreign intervention and an IMF bailout. It's not where those forefathers — or founding fathers — wanted us to be. Their planning gave us a head start, but it could be said that though some gains were made, somewhere down the road, we lost our way.

It's all the more reason that at a corresponding time in the 21st Century, there should be some effort to finally take us where those grand old men would have wanted us to be today.