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INAUGURAL ADDRESS OF THE VICE-CHANCELLOR ON 14TH JULY, 1942

Sir W. Ivor Jennings

ABSTRACT

The following speech by Sir Ivor Jennings, first Vice Chancellor of the University of Ceylon, delivered at the inauguration of the University of Peradeniya as the new main campus of the University of Ceylon in July 1942, has been reproduced here in celebration of the Diamond Jubilee of the institution. In this speech, Sir Jennings reminisces the negotiations and tensions underlying the decision to shift the University of Ceylon premises to Kandy, the administrative and logistical challenges encountered in the process, and the vision for this seat of higher education as envisaged then. He also emphasizes the importance of offering well-rounded education that constructively contributes to societal growth, and also the crucial role played by academic independence in ensuring meaningful intellectual growth of an institution of higher learning.

Keywords: University of Peradeniya, Education, Research, Academic Independence, Responsibility

The formal establishment of the University is but the first milestone, and we have still far to go. It is our privilege - and I include the undergraduates - to set the University on its road in the hope that, long after we have departed to other functions, those who come after us will at least be able to say that we chose the right route and the right vehicle.

The University of Ceylon was established fourteen days ago when the Proclamation under the Ceylon University Ordinance brought the Ordinance into operation. In a few weeks it will be ready to hold its first Convocation and to confer its first degrees. Convocation is a public assembly and degrees are badges which distinguish us from the non-academic world. The internal life of a university being much more important than its external manifestations, it seemed appropriate that our first formal ceremony as a university should be a domestic event in which only the staff and the undergraduates took part, and that it should be held on the first day on which undergraduates of all four Faculties were in residence.

* This speech was originally published in Ceylon Daily News in July, 1942

The statue of Sir Ivor Jennings, the first and founding Vice-Chancellor of the University of Peradeniya (then University of Ceylon) was unveiled on the 6th of December, 2017, in celebration of the Diamond Jubilee of the University of Peradeniya.

HALF PROMISE OF 50 YEARS AGO

I have heard it said in Jaffna that the undertaking by the Government of Ceylon to found a university was made in 1826. In due course, no doubt, the historian of the University will look into this claim. If it were true we could at least assert that the University was not brought into being without due deliberation. I doubt, though, that it is true. Mr. Chelliah, the historian of Jaffna College, tells us only that there is in existence a document of 1826 which states that the foundation of a "College" had been proposed by the government and was under consideration by the authorities in England. A College as we know from our own experience, is not a university and, though the American Missionary Society might have thought of a degree-granting institution, it does not follow that the government did the same.

However, there was a promise, or at least a half-promise, over 50 years ago. In 1890 the Governor, Arthur Havelock, visited Jaffna College, and the need for a University was pressed upon him. The Colonial Secretary later replied to the request: "With regard to the hope expressed by you that a Ceylon University may be created, His Excellency desires

me to state that he trusts that the standard of excellence is being raised in three institutions of higher education in Ceylon in such a manner as will soon justify the government taking such an important step.

START WITH MEDICAL COLLEGE

Actually, part of the future University of Ceylon was already in existence though in Colombo and not in Jaffna. The Ceylon Medical College was founded in 1870. Even there the impetus had come from the North. Its establishment was recommended by Dr. Loos in a report

on the depopulation of the Wanni, and being a report by a medical officer, it necessarily stressed medical needs. Since more medical facilities were required, there must be medical education in Ceylon. The Principal, Civil Officer Dr. Charsley, took up the idea, and the Ceylon Medical College was founded. No one will deny the great services that it rendered Ceylon during the 72 years of its existence. For exactly half that time it was producing doctors competent to practice everywhere within the British Empire. The proud boast that Ceylon is one if the healthiest countries between the two tropics is surely due in part at least to the initiative of Dr. Loos and Dr. Charsley. Yet the Wanni still lacks population. Such a problem as the depopulation of the Wanni is not one that can be solved by the use of a single technique. It is not merely a problem of malaria and hookworm; it is also social, economic, and agricultural, it is the kind of problem which requires to be studied in an institution which takes the whole of knowledge for its province. I am not asserting that now that the University of Ceylon has been founded the population will go streaming back to the Wanni. I am drawing the moral that Ceylon needs a university in order that problems of this kind be studied.

WORK OF SIR P. ARUNACHALAM

The impetus for the creation of the Medical College came from the North. So did the impetus for the foundation of the Ceylon University College. The paternity of the University of Ceylon was ascribed to Sir Ponnambalam Arunachalam before the child was born. Nor is the claim unjustified. But others had raised the question before him. There was a recommendation to the government at least as early as 1884. Things began to move, however, when he took up advocacy. He apparently did so in 1896, and ten years later with the assistance of Sir Marcus Fernando, Sir James Peiris, and others, he founded the Ceylon University Association. That body induced Sir Henry McCullum in 1911 to set up a committee “to enquire into the question of secondary and higher education in the colony”. There was a parallel inquiry into elementary education by a committee among whom there appears another to whom we owe much, Sir D.B. Jayatilaka. The committee recommended the establishment of the University College, though ten years elapsed before the recommendation was carried out. The delay was partly due to the consultations that took place in England, and it is worth noting that in 1913 the Secretary of State himself raised the question whether the University College should be in Colombo or in Kandy. Much preliminary planning was done in 1914 and1915, chiefly owing to the energy of Sir Robert (afterwards Lord) Chalmers. The development of the war of 1914-18, however, prevented immediate action, and when the University College was opened in College House in January 1921, it was the product rather of an impulsive act by Sir Edward Denham than of deliberate planning.

STEADY DEVELOPMENT

It is unnecessary for me to tell the tale of the past 21 years. On the academic side it would be a tale of steady development. On the side of equipment and buildings there has been almost equally steady development. The College owed to Mr. R. Marrs, the first Principal, the position to which it had been brought by 30th June, 1942. His period of service covered eighteen of the twenty one years, and he built it up from a few odd classes in the College House to the three faculties that we have in these buildings today. Nor did he forget that he was planning a university. Almost from the day of his arrival he and the College Council were working out the details of the constitution, the buildings, the staff, and the courses required for the University of Ceylon. Turning over a pile of papers the other day, I came across a draft of the Art Ordinance. It was undated, but it had evidently

been circulated in 1924. In general outline and even in some of its language it was not fundamentally different from the Ordinance which the State Council passed three months ago. The architect of this University was Mr. Marrs.

SITE CONTROVERSY

Lord Chalmers in 1915 said that the status of a University College was in an interim stage. Sir Ponnambalam Arunachalam said that the arrangement of 1921 was a makeshift arrangement. It has taken 21 years to get the University established because of the controversy over the site. The problem was mentioned by the Secretary of State in 1913. When in 1921 the University College was established there were some who considered from the beginning that it should be located in Kandy. Sir Ponnambalam Arunachalam himself was among them, though he had changed his mind by 1926.

I do not propose to rake the embers of this controversy. It was a controversy in which the partisans were all anxious for the establishment of the best University that Ceylon could afford. Nor indeed was it only a question as between Colombo and Kandy. Some of those who supported the Colombo proposal did so because they foresaw that a decision to move to Kandy would destroy the best part of five years' work and so cause delay in a project which had, they thought, already been sufficiently delayed.

Not until 1938 was the dispute settled with the acquisition of what I like to call the University Park at Peradeniya. After that decision it became possible to push ahead. Those who had opposed the Kandy scheme were now anxious only to get the Kandy scheme started. Those who had supported the Kandy scheme saw no objection to the preliminary creation of the University in Colombo. The establishment of the University this month is, in fact, the direct consequence of the decision of 1938. Now that it has been decided to establish the University in Peradeniya, we must proceed with the building as fast as we can.

PROBLEMS CAUSED BY WAR

The University could hardly have been founded at a more difficult time. When the University Bill was before the State Council on March 30th, we had to take shelter during an "alert". Less than three days after, I heard the Council read the Bill a third time. I was at my post as Deputy Civil Defence Commissioner listening to the progress of an air raid on Colombo. If air raids are to develop on a substantial scale we should have difficulty in keeping going at all. One can move a school, but one cannot move a University except to a University and there is no other University to which to move. But the war gives us other problems. We have to work in academic isolation, unable to communicate freely with our sister Universities, unable to obtain much of the equipment that we need, and unable to order books that we ought to have. The building programme in the University Park, instead of being pushed ahead with increasing speed, must be held up until the war is over. We have to create a University in the front of the line of battle.

Any other moment in the twenty-one years of the University College would have been more propitious. Yet the creation of the University at this stage of the war is essential. We could work as an appendage to London only so long as our lines of communication are short and secure. It is due to the Royal Navy that during the three years of war every one of our scripts has got through. It may well be asked whether brave men should risk their lives to carry even the pearls that drop from the fountain pens of the Ceylon student. Man cannot wage war on tea and rubber alone; but examination scripts are quite low down in the order of essential imports into Great Britain. However, the danger was not that shipping space could not be found, but that the one ship that might be

sunk will be the ship that carried the scripts. Even so, this danger was not the real reason for the creation of the University of Ceylon. The real reason was that every year the corrosive influence of London examinations delved deeper into the educational system of the Island.

EXAMINATION FETISH

You will not wish me to retell an old, old story; but the worship of examination results has become almost a national custom and is undoubtedly the major problem that confronts not only the University of Ceylon but the whole educational system of the Island. It is the greatest of the handicaps with which we begin our work. To fail to take account of it, even in this preliminary and congratulatory address, would be to ignore our most fundamental difficulty. If we ask ourselves whether employers, including the Government itself, want men and women with first classes in Mathematics or Classics or Geography, the answer is evident; they do not. The theory on which the Civil Service examination is based, for instance, is not that the candidate who gets most marks is ipso facto the best administrator. It is that the candidate who has had a University training and can show evidence of high academic ability is likely to make a good administrator. He is expected to have a broad and flexible intelligence, an active and adaptable mind, a generous understanding, as well as great academic ability. The written examination can test only one part of his character. The initial qualification, without which he cannot even enter the examination, is also the most important; it is that he has had a university training.

I have taken this example because the Civil Service is very rightly the peak of the first row of mountains that most undergraduates seek to cross; but the argument applies equally to other professions. The examination qualification is excellent, provided and provided only that it crowns a university career. What the University does when it confers a degree is to certify that the graduate has completed university training by achieving a certain standard in an examination. It is not very important what the standard is – in Oxford and Cambridge it is very low - because the university training is more important. I know that in Ceylon this statement is received with polite skepticism. I fear that I must go on making it, and I hope that my successors will go on making it, so that in a generation or two generations we may begin to make an impression on public opinion.

EXTRA-MURAL ACTIVITIES

No university denies the value of private study. Indeed, nearly all universities do their best to encourage it through extra-mural activities. Nor do universities deny the value of an examination as a means of enabling a student to undertake a disciplined and systematic course of reading. What universities say is that the training which they give is far wider and that their degrees are marks not of examination successes but of university training followed by a test in academic work.

The University of London alone confuses the issue by having two sets of degrees, the internal degrees which are evidence of university training and which most of us are or would be proud to possess, and the external degree which may mean anything from training in a University College to a fraud on the public.

Ceylon itself makes the distinction. Any parent who can afford it sends his son to a British University because he knows very well that the educational and commercial value of an internal degree is far higher. At the University College, however, we have had to prepare for external degrees which can be obtained by coaching cramming, question- spotting and other devices known to those who run commercial establishments. This would be

a matter of no great importance were it not that in consequence the impression prevails that it is the examination that matters and not the training. The impression has necessarily prevailed at the University College as elsewhere. It has been impossible for us to forget that the main demand for our services was due to a desire not for education but for examination successes.

Further development along that line was impossible. We could continue to expand our courses but we could not improve our educational system so long as we were tied to London. The University of Ceylon, like most universities, has no power to confer external degrees. Consequently, a Ceylon degree will indicate what a university degree is supposed to indicate, that the holder has had university training for at least three years and has shown at least moderate competence in his examinations.

CEYLON DEGREE

Our task now is to make the Ceylon degree as good as any in the world: So far as

examination standards are concerned I have no doubt that we shall succeed. Our entrance standards are high; our experience of marking on behalf of the University of London has shown that we expect our students to reach a high level of attainment; and in due course the Senate will consider means to associate teachers of other universities with us as external examiners.

But this is again to emphasize the examination side and (it would not be worthwhile, for this alone, to break with London). Our primary task is to create a university atmosphere, to establish a university tradition, to make certain that our students have access to university training.

The separation from London will produce immediate results. We can begin to think in terms of education rather than examinations. We can mould our syllabi so as to make

them suitable for Ceylon students instead of following syllabi which are suitable for the internal students of the University of London.

The lecturers can develop their courses so as to make students think, instead of merely enabling them to pass examinations. Our teachers can cease to be superior coaches and become experts in the art of provoking ideas. I do not think that anybody who has not taught in a university can realize the importance, to teacher and student alike, of having control of one's syllabus. To teach on some other teacher's syllabus is soul-destroying and we have had to do it for twenty-one years.

IMPORTANCE OF RESEARCH

This chance in itself will infuse a new spirit into our teaching; but there will be other consequences no less important. As the present generation of undergraduates passes out, a new generation waiting to be taught on our own curricula will pass in. Those curricula will relate the problems of the world to the conditions of Ceylon. They will be drafted by members of this University for members of this University.

Teachers who are studying the application and the development of their subjects are necessarily far better than those who are merely giving instructions in alien subjects. A university teacher who is doing no research is not a university teacher. The research in itself is as important as the teaching. To continue it is an obligation which we owe to the community. It is also an obligation which we owe to our students.

The live lecture is that in which the teacher is expressing his own ideas, or at least ideas which he has thought over and personally accepted. In universities we are always on the border of knowledge looking into the

unknown or at best the partially known. We are not teaching set facts which simply have to be accepted dogmatically. The data of one generation may be rejected by the next. For the purposes of education, nothing can be more beneficial. The effect of teaching for Ceylon examinations should be to encourage our teachers to develop new ideas or to work out new applications of the old.

NOT A GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENT

Another factor will help us to develop the University spirit. For twenty-one years at the University College and for seventy-two years at the Medical College, we have been Government servants employed in Government Departments. In this status there was an inherent contradiction. A Government Department cannot be a university and cannot develop a university tradition: Government servants cannot be university teachers. To be

a Government servant in a Government Department is to be bound by rigid formalism which is no doubt excellent for administration but destructive of creative ability. As we become accustomed to our new status, an easier atmosphere will prevail. Our system of government will in many respects be the reverse of that employed in the Secretariat. We must be no less efficient but more like a team. I have no illusion about the length or the time of the transition, because, I know, having suddenly jumped from the one to the other, how great is the change.

All this deals with the academic side of the university work; but it has another side, the side in which staff and students educate each other in matters which are not to be found in the university calendar. Life is infinite in its variety, and the problems of the world are not all covered by, let us say, the London syllabus in Pure Mathematics. Nor does education consist only in the training of the student's capacity for assimilating academic knowledge.

We are all aware that the best part of the education that we carried away from our own universities was not acquired in the lecture rooms and laboratories. Common rooms and playing fields are equally important, and private conservation is the most effective medium of instruction. For these we have made some provision, both in the university and in the hostels. The influence of "atmosphere" depends, however, on the atmosphere, and the most optimistic among us will hardly assert that as yet we have a true university atmosphere. The fact that we now have a University according to law will no doubt help. The influence of "atmosphere" arises primarily out of a spirit of loyalty, and it is difficult to develop a spirit of loyalty to a Government Department that is academically an appendage of another University.

LAYING DOWN A TRADITION

We can now begin to lay down a tradition of our own in the hope that we shall be internally as well as externally more like a university when we move to Peradeniya. This is primarily a task for the students. The members of the staff are glad to help where they are asked to help, and I have no doubt that they will be asked. One suggestion I throw out to undergraduates: They have not realized, I think, the importance of symbolism. The device of the "old school tie" is derided by those who are not able to wear it, but it is based on excellent social psychology. I believe there is a University College tie, though I have never seen it. I believe there are University College blazers, though I have never seen them. The Committee on Academic Dress has spent time lately on another side of University symbolism. One result of our effort you see flying on these buildings today. Another you will see at our first Convocation. Some of you perhaps scoff at these things; at one time I did so myself. Since then I have become a student of

political symbolism, and I believe that gowns, flags, ties, and blazers have important effects in maintaining a spirit of loyalty. I suggest that the Union Society consider what support it can give to the development of a Ceylon University symbolism.

THE RIGHT SPIRIT

Nevertheless, these are the outward manifestations of the University spirit, the propaganda material of the University tradition. What we need is the spirit itself. We are not entirely lacking in it even now. I hope it has not been forgotten that throughout the panic of March, at least one educational establishment remained open. We prided ourselves upon it. We, at least, stood firm. I think we would even have stood firm in April if we had not been engaged in our normal vacation.

Such occasions, unfortunate though they are, provide us with a test. A panic evacuation is evidence of a faulty community spirit. The fact that we stood firm suggested that we had a sound community spirit. I should like to place on record that the University College closed on March 28th and the University of Ceylon opened on 14th July. Those were the dates fixed by a now defunct official, the Principal of the University College, in June 1941. There is, however, more to be done before we leave for Peradeniya; and you, the undergraduates, must do it. You have a difficult task because your contacts with other universities will necessarily be rare. You must learn more by experience than by example. Most members of the staff fortunately know something of other universities. I am sure that they will always be glad to help you. In particular, I hope that you will not mind an occasional suggestion from me.

These are among the tasks which must be undertaken before the University moves to Peradeniya. I hope that very soon we shall be able to start buildings in the University Park. When the war is ended, a large number of persons of all classes will find themselves without employment. I have no doubt that the Government is already considering plans for the transition, so that the process of transfer to ordinary life may be eased. I would suggest that the buildings of the University should be one of the first tasks. Most of the land has been purchased and part of the money is available. It is a task which is urgently needed, and its completion would be of permanent social value. No doubt the cost of material will be high, though much of the stone is available locally. It seems to me that the project should be subsidized, as a work of national rehabilitation, both by the Government of Ceylon and by the Imperial Government.

If this is done, the removal of one or two Faculties may not be far distant. Within another year, the rest of the three Faculties housed in these buildings should be transferred. Meanwhile, I hope that we shall have Faculties of Law and Agriculture established. After that, there will remain only the Convocation Hall and the administrative block. These problems as well as those arising out of the creation of the University on the academic side, will give the Vice-Chancellor plenty of work to do. I trust that you will bear with him if sometimes he seems to be a remote figure. The days of paternal dictatorship are in any case past. In large measure the University must govern itself. Nor have I mentioned all the problems. For instance, we anticipate - if the Dean will permit the phrase - that the Faculty of Oriental Studies will put on flesh.

STILL FAR TO GO

I have merely given you a bare outline of the problems to be solved and the tasks to be undertaken. There is one more duty to perform, the duty of thanking those who have helped us so far. Many, I fear, will not be able to attend our first Convocation. I have mentioned already Sir Ponnambalam Arunachalam, Sir Marcus Fernando, and Sir

James Peiris. I would like to add the names of three others who have not lived to see their efforts rewarded - Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan, Dr. S.C. Paul, and Mr. W.A. Silva. Others who have been members of the University College Council I must mention collectively, though I would refer especially to the three gentlemen who have helped the University College from the beginning - Sir D.B. Jayatilaka, Mr. P.de S.Kularatneand, and the Very Rev. Father M.J. Le Goe.

A fourth member has shared the burden with them, but I mention him separately because he has also been a member of the staff. I refer to Professor S.A. Pakeman, who is leaving us, I regret to say, to take up military duty. Professor Pakeman stood at Mr. Marrs' right-hand for eighteen years; he carried a somewhat troublesome baby in the interval between the two Principals, and gave me great assistance during my short term of office as Principal. We are all sorry that he will be unable to help us to establish the University on a firm foundation.

Finally, I must refer to the Hon. Minister of Education and His Executive Committee. They have been in general control of the University College since 1934, and they have given much time to the consideration of University problems. The proposal for the immediate establishment of the University was brought up because the Minister specifically asked me to report on the question, though perhaps I may confess that I had written a memorandum on the subject in England, and had discussed it with University administrators. The Executive Committee allowed their agenda to be disrupted in order that the Bill might be considered with all possible speed. They have always been anxious to help the College, and they were particularly anxious to help me through my first very trying year. J have no doubt that the Director of Medical and Sanitary Services would wish me to pay a similar tribute to the Minister for Health and his Executive Committee. We disapprove in principle of Government Control of University institutions, but the two Executive committees made the control as light as the circumstances permitted.

A GREAT RESPONSIBILITY

Ladies and Gentlemen, the future of the University of Ceylon is in our hands. It may be a great success or a great failure. It can be a great success if we strive to make it so by common effort. If any of us thinks in terms of personal benefit or personal prestige it may be a failure. If we get into internal conflicts, whether among the staff or between the staff and the students, it may be a failure. I see no reason why it should be so. I can speak of the University College only, and of that only for a short time; but my experience of internal relations as Principal of the University College was altogether happy. If we can carry the spirit of collaboration from the University College to the University, it will be a success. In the interests of Ceylon we must do so. The Island cannot afford more than one University and if that is a failure the welfare of the whole will be in jeopardy. The responsibility thus imposed on us is great, but I am sure that we shall be able to bear it.