

NEELAN TIRUCHELVAM

Among Neelan Tiruchelvam's rare characteristics was his extraordinary generosity of mind and spirit. Where others would be indignant, Neelan would be sad. Where another would react with anger, Neelan's response would be pain. Deeply sensitive, and never one to hold forth about himself and his feelings, his pain was all the more acute for being borne in private.

Neelan always looked to the good in people and found it distasteful to dwell on the bad. Where we could not overlook unsavory things in a person's past, Neelan would seek out positive elements in their present role. This would at times exasperate those close to him. "Neelan, how could you forget", would be the refrain and the answer to our remonstrances would be just that quiet smile. His gentle personality, unfailingly kindly and considerate, gave a special dimension to his contribution to public life.

It would take a whole book to attempt to do justice to Neelan's contribution to the cause of human rights. This was exceptional as regards its quality, its quantity and its range. To mention just some examples, he was involved in constitution-making not merely in Sri Lanka but elsewhere (eg: in Kazakhstan). He had a special interest in election monitoring in which he participated in several countries of the world. He created and nurtured human rights institutions and had a great gift of involving others in their work, young people in particular. He moved a resolution in Parliament in support of Aung San Suu Kyi and the restoration of democracy in Myanmar, for which he secured backing from both sides of the House. He was deeply concerned with women's rights.

Neelan was an active member of the Civil Rights Movement. As early as 1982 he was one of five speakers at CRM's public meeting on Fair and Free Elections at the YMCA Forum which was full to overflowing. The others were Bishop Lakshman Wickremesinghe, S. Nadesan QC, Fr. Tissa Balasuriya and Senior Attorney H.L. de Silva. Neelan's last visit to CRM was for a meeting of persons committed to the unconditional abolition of capital punishment.

Just three days later, on 15 June 1999, he wound up a speech in Parliament with an earnest plea against the proposed reimposition of the death penalty. "Sir, I would like to express my strong moral opposition to this measure", he said, and then proceeded to briefly and lucidly enumerate arguments against it. Earlier in the same speech, Neelan gave voice to his anguish at what was his main preoccupation, the terrible consequences of war on ordinary people, and the need to bring an end to the human suffering, the displacement, the destruction and the senseless loss of lives both of combatants and of civilians. He went on to say:

We cannot glorify death, whether in the battlefield or otherwise. We, on the other hand, must celebrate life and are fiercely committed to protecting and securing the sanctity of life, which is the most fundamental value without which all other rights and freedoms become meaningless.

Throughout the years, Neelan's contribution to CRM, and to the Nadesan Centre for Human Rights Through Law of which he was a founder member, was vital and consistent. He would participate in our meetings and discussions, send us his suggestions, respond to queries for information or advice, and readily undertake to speak to others in furtherance of our concerns. He was always, despite a myriad other demands on him, ready to give of his time and attention to discuss a problem. Neelan would, moreover, go out of his way to express his appreciation of an initiative he felt was praiseworthy, thus providing important encouragement to those more directly responsible.

When I consider how sorely Neelan will be missed by CRM and the Nadesan Centre I am dismayed. And then when I think how comparatively small a part of Neelan's life were these two institutions, the enormity of the loss this shocking and contemptible assassination has caused to the whole human rights community, and to so very much else besides, is delineated in its stark magnitude. ■

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