

*Charles Abeysekera, founder co-editor of Pravada, was also an active member of Sri Lankas Civil Rights Movement for many years. The following are the sentiments about him expressed by some leading members of the CRM when they met on July 9, 1998.*

### CRM Tribute to CHARLES ABEYSEKERA

#### EXTRACT FROM THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE WORKING COMMITTEE OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT HELD ON 23 JUNE 1998

Rev. Soma Perera took the chair at the commencement of the meeting.

Members expressed their shock and grief at the untimely death of Charles Abeysekera whose gentle presence at our meeting had contributed so crucially to the work of CRM.

**Rev. Soma Perera said:**

I would like to pay a tribute to the life and work of Charles Abeysekera as from the Civil Rights Movement and restrict myself to the CRM though I am aware of his many other involvements in several other NGOs. So what I will say will be fairly restricted and limited. Others will also speak and pay their tributes.

I came to know Charles through the CRM and mainly at our CRM meetings. The CRM provided for me a small window through which I saw something of the man. But I have been seen only small segment of his total life and work.

I read an article in the *Sunday Times* last Sunday where Fr. Tissa Balasuriya has written at length of his many-faceted services to the country and his involvement in several NGOs and the influence of his thinking on the life of our country through the newspaper he started *Yukthiya* through which he communicated his vision, his ideas and how the many economic, social and political problems of our country could be resolved.

I wish to give my own experience of Charles through the CRM. What did I see of the man, the kind of man he was, through what he said at our meetings.

Jesus said of Nathaniel - "Behold an Israelite in whom is no guile". We could say Charles "Behold a person in whom there was no guile" - no treachery, no deceit, no double dealing. A man of one word. A man who could be trusted. A man who had depth and strength and integrity of character. That is the level we all saw.

At another level, and a very important one, was the contribution he made at our meetings. We all valued his contribution. He would go to the heart of the matter because of the clarity of his thinking. What he said was clear, to the point, balanced, level-headed and on certain matters uncompromising. We all listened to what he had to say and he was able to guide us in important decisions we had to make. We greatly respected the man and his views.

A great man has passed away. His premature death is a big loss to us and to the country and to the several organizations he served, especially to the cause human rights, justice, ethnic harmony and equality. We condole with the members of his family.

**R.K.W Goonesekere said:**

One feels more than one can ever tell about Charlie. CRM has to come to terms with his sudden death. CRM had its quota of lawyers - Charlie stood in the forefront of the others, often their spokesman, and brought to discussions a philosophy and analysis of his own. He studied an issue and considered the views of others before he took a stand. In his own charming and persuasive manner he would convince others. Many a time when I was wavering Charlie would provide a perception that I had not seen. It was his conviction that made him work tirelessly for the good of the society he lived in. No one can play the same role and his loss will be felt far and wide. Here in CRM, Suriya more than anyone else will mourn, for Charlie would be there to help in a policy decision or work out a statement.

It was mostly at CRM meetings that I had occasion to talk to Charlie but we also met at seminars etc. He was in great demand at intellectual gatherings because his integrity and courage had earned him great respect. A short time ago, Bernadeen phoned me and said

that she and Charlie would like to see me. I thought, sure, Charlie is in trouble or about to give trouble to someone like the Mayoress of Nuwara Eliya and promptly gave an appointment. It was a total surprise to me when Charlie with that winsome smile explained that a search committee had selected me to be Chairman of CRM. All this could have been done over the telephone, but that was Charlie's way of doing things.

The sadness over Charlie's unexpected death will linger. We feel angry that a little carelessness, a little over-confidence should have removed from our midst a valued friend. These are times when we cannot afford that. I salute the memory of a man whose influence in seeking solutions to social problems was profound.

**Suriya Wickremasinghe** said:

The Civil Rights Movement, founded 27 years ago, has been fortunate to count among its members a number of extremely talented and dedicated people. Sadly, however, it has also been suddenly deprived of the services of several whose contributions were of such a nature that they seemed irreplaceable when they died. We recall, at this time, Bishop Laksman Wickremesinghe, S. Nadesan QC, Bishop Leo Nanayakkara, Nimal Senanayake, K. Kanthasamy, Rev. Celestine Fernando. We must also recall the crucial contribution of our founder Chairman, Dr. ER Sarachandra, who readily accepted that office in November 1971 at a time when many might have felt uncomfortable to do so, and who remained a member and in touch with CRM till the end of his life. All these persons were unique in themselves, gave freely of their varied talents to CRM, contributed to the building of our movement.

The recent and sudden death of yet another key member of CRM leaves us with a sense of loss as acute as any we have felt before.

Some of Charlie's outstanding characteristics were his wide knowledge, his versatility, and his wise judgment. This made him indispensable at every level of an organization, whether it was a matter of general human rights policy, of how to react to a burning issue of the moment, or a mundane question of the day to day running of an office. Only the other members of CRM's Administration and Finance Committee know the extent of Charlie's contribution in sorting out the sometimes trivial, sometimes more serious problems that it has had to handle from time to time.

Charles was, in particular, a defender of the right of the nonconformist in society; this is, no doubt, why CRM's *Value of Dissent* project,

of which Charlie was one of the initiators, appealed to him so much. He was, as we know, passionately committed to freedom of thought and expression, and to the value of tolerance. Often we genuinely believe in certain values but in our conduct fall short when we come to putting them into practice. It is not uncommon for the most eloquent exponents of freedom of speech and conscience to become impatient and even scornful of those who think differently to them on some subject or other.

But in Charlie's case, his beliefs were always reflected in his very manner and approach to his fellow human beings. He would participate in the most difficult of discussions, on the most controversial of issues, and always remain not merely calm and collected, but also with respect for the inherent right to hold other viewpoints in the forefront of his mind. This meant that when he did intervene in a discussion, his interventions had a particular effectiveness and value. They would be based on his wide experience and exceptionally deep and varied knowledge, they would reflect the special wisdom with he was amply blessed, and in addition they would always be imbued with a genuine respect of the right of others to differ.

This is why Charlie's presence at our discussions, his participation in so many organizations, was invaluable, and irreplaceable. In one dreadful blow we have lost a person who gave us freely of not just one talent, but a unique combination of talents, the like of which one rarely finds combined in a single human being.

**Radhika Coomaraswamy** said:

Charles Abeysekera was a man ahead of his time. If anyone was an icon which symbolized the nascent human rights and peace movements of this country, it was Charles Abeysekera. He was not only a watchdog, a monitor and an activist, but a civilisational force who reminded us of the roots of humanism in global as well as South Asian traditions. He was totally free of prejudice and there was an innocence and kindness in his dealings with even the most complex of people. His love of music, art, theatre - and of course cricket - only pointed to the fact that he valued human creativity in all its forms. We mourn him not only as a colleague and a friend but also as a symbol of what is beautiful in this country. Sri Lanka and the international human rights movement cannot afford to lose someone like him. His loss is irreplaceable. The void will never be filled.

**AN INSIDE LOOK AT THE WORLD OUTSIDE**

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