

CONFERMENT OF HONORARY DEGREE (D. LITT) BY SABARAGAMUWA
UNIVERSITY

OF SRI LANKA AT ITS 6TH CONVOCATON HELD ON 5TH NOVEMBER, 2003

Prof. Mahinda Palihawadana

Introduction and Presentation by Prof. Rajiva Wijesinha

Chancellor,

I am honoured today to present Mahinda Palihawadana, Professor Emeritus of the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, to be conferred the Degree of Doctor of letters, Honoris Causa at this 6th Convocation of Sabaragamuwa University.

Prof Palihawadana's involvement with this university however dates back a dozen years. In fact he could be described as the founding father of the programme that has produced the largest number of honours graduates in our brief history. If in the last few years this university has gained some renown, if at a recent gathering of Vice Chancellors we were the only university to which our paymasters, the Treasury, paid tribute, it is in no small measure due to the vision and commitment Prof Palihawadana displayed at that period.

I say this because this university is distinguished not only for the large number of graduates in English it has produced, but also because almost all our Faculties function entirely in English. This has contributed to a high proportion of our graduates finding employment very quickly, and I am happy to say that they seem to be working satisfactorily in various fields, in particular the teaching profession.

It should be noted that many of our students come from schools and areas where English was comparatively neglected. It was Prof Palihawadana however who, when the concept of Affiliated University Colleges was mooted, took the lead in developing an English Diploma Programme for students who had not done Advanced Level English. This had been one of the dreams of Prof Arjuna Aluwihare, the dynamic Chairman of the University Grants Commission at the time. Unfortunately he found that established English Departments at various universities were not happy with the idea. They felt that this would be lowering standards in a field in which they were proud of producing graduates who they could claim to be the equivalent of graduates in English anywhere in the Western world.

This was indeed an achievement to be proud of, however few the number of graduates they produced each year. But unfortunately the able products of such courses were not likely to go into the teaching profession, in particular in the rural areas most in need of English teachers.

Such departments had received tremendous resources when such needs became apparent, but they had not been able to satisfy them.

This was the situation Prof Aluwihare faced when he wanted to develop tertiary level academic programmes that would give students who had, through no fault of their own, been deprived of English at school, the capacity to function as teachers of English, and indeed to take on other jobs that required a basic command of the language. And it was Prof Palihawadana who, as Dean of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, took up the challenge.

It was ironic then that it was a University that did not in those days have a Department of English that took on the Affiliated University College English Diploma programme. But Prof Palihawadana had faith in the type of student he had nurtured over the years, and he felt they were owed wider opportunities than they had been given in the past. In a context in which English was a path to professional advancement, he felt it necessary to ensure it was provided to as many talented young people as possible.

He worked indefatigably therefore to develop a programme, and within a year it had become the most popular programme at the various Affiliated University Colleges set up all over the country. It was not only at the three Colleges initially entrusted to Sri Jayewardenepura, Belihuloya, Ranhangala and Anuradhapura that the programme was conducted. It was instituted later not only at Buttala, but at Trincomalee and Addalachenai which were under the Eastern University, and at Vavuniya which was under Jaffna.

The University of Sri Jayewardenepura continued to supervise these programmes and also coordinated the general English programme at all but one of the Affiliated Colleges. None of this would have occurred if not for Prof Palihawadana's commitment and his confidence in the quality of students from all areas over the country, a confidence that has been amply justified by their achievements over the years.

And he did all this while continuing to excel in his own chosen field of academic study. Having graduated from the University of Ceylon at Colombo in 1947, and taken his MA with distinction five years later, he became Principal at Ananda Sastralaya Kotte, when he was not yet thirty years old, in 1960 he returned to university life, as a lecturer in Sanskrit at Vidyodaya University, becoming Professor in 1971.

It was twenty years after that, when he was Dean of the Faculty of Arts, that he undertook such innovative work with the Affiliated University Colleges. Before that he had been a Visiting Scholar at Harvard University, and a Visiting Professor at Northwestern University in Illinois. In the mid eighties he was Distinguished Visiting Professor in World Religions at Colgate University in New York, and after his retirement he went back twice to Colgate as Visiting Professor.

His publications have been diverse and prolific. He has translated the Dhammapada from Pail to English, and some of Krishnamurti's work into Sinhala. His studies of the cult of the God Indra were especially innovative excursions into Vedic mythology. He has written on Sanskrit Culture in Sri Lanka, on Globalisation and the Buddhist World View and on Conflict and Conflict Resolution in terms of Perspectives from the Theravada Cannon. In the last couple of years, having completed three quarters of a century, he has lectured on the Buddhist Attitude to Religious Pluralism in Taiwan and at a Symposium on Foundations for Buddhist – Christian Understanding in Scotland.

We are proud therefore to honour today an academic who, while exemplifying excellence in his own field, has so often and so productively manifested the wider perspectives that are a mark of true learning. And apart from this, he has displayed a moral integrity, in his professional as well as his private life, that has made him a shining example to the university community. Standing up even in isolation for the basic rights of students and colleagues is on a par with his commitment to the cause of vegetarianism, born of an all encompassing humanity. Perhaps most characteristic of this distinguished scholar, of all his writings, is an article on 'The Impossibility of Intolerance: A Buddhist Perspective', published in Dialogue in 2001. And it is no wonder that he was described by another distinguished humanist and scholar, Prof J B Dissanayake, as 'The greatest gentleman I know'.

It is a privilege then for this university to confer on Prof Mahinda Palihawadana, for his services to learning in the field of Sanskrit and Oriental Studies, his services to education in the broader sense through his encouragement and fostering of English and other programmes at Affiliated University Colleges, his administrative devotion as Dean and Acting Vice Chancellor, and his outstanding humanitarianism, an honorary degree.

Chancellor,

It is with pride and pleasure that I present Prof Mahinda Palihawadana for the conferment of the degree of Doctor of Letters, Honoris Causa.