

# Dr CHRIS NONIS RATHER THAN JUST 'I'

With a plethora of experiences from diverse sectors ranging from medicine to international affairs to business, Dr Chris Nonis has worked and lived in both Sri Lanka and Britain. And as such is ideally placed to take up the position as the Sri Lankan High Commissioner to Britain. Currently the Chairman of Mackwoods Group, the lessons he has learned from his parents and grandparents have enabled him to acquire multifaceted skills and knowledge. Through constructive dialogue and discussion with diverse personalities he has learned to be non judgmental of people and believes that Sri Lankans have the responsibility to utilise this hard earned peace to respect pluralism and diversity where selflessness is more important where one should think more about others rather than just 'I'.

*By Udeshi Amarasinghe  
Photography Menaka Aravinda*



**Who is Chris Nonis? How would you describe yourself as a person?**

I am someone who has had the opportunity to derive an education in the broader sense of the word. Having lived and worked in two countries I have had the opportunity to work in the public sector in the UK, for the National Health Service, in academia, civil society and civil society organisations as well as the private sector in Sri Lanka. Therefore from my experience I understand the depth and breadth of human beings in general and very open to change. I see the value in change as an opportunity to gain from different experiences. I have been educated not just as a matter of getting degrees but a person who has worked, seen and been to so many different countries and have had discussions and dialogues with many different people. As a result of that what I have achieved is to be non judgmental of people.

I completed my primary education in Sri Lanka and then did my O'Levels and A'Levels in the UK and then studied medicine at Royal Free Hospital University of London. I did my electives at Harvard Medical School in Boston and completed my postgraduate studies at Addenbrooke's Cambridge, Brompton and Hammersmith. I also completed a BSc at Imperial College while doing my medical degree.

**You come from a family that has been a prominent member of the mercantile sector of this country for 170 years. What can you tell us about your childhood and how you became who you are today?**

It is predominantly because of the profound influence that my parents; my late mother and father, as well as my grandparents, have had on me that has made me who I am. They always wanted us to have a broad education as possible. They also taught us that whilst one should have ambition, that ambition should never be at the expense of another. In essence what they taught us is that whilst we should take opportunities to achieve success, we should always maintain as paramount our principles and values. That is what has kept us in good stead and that is probably what has made me who I am. At the same time we have

always retained our faith; despite whatever one achieves and should still achieve, we have maintained that degree of humility to understand that there is something greater than us.

**You are a physician by profession, but you are also the Chairman of the Mackwood Group and hold numerous posts in various organisations. How do you balance it all?**

Yes that is always a challenge. But another aspect that we have learned over the years is to be able to compartmentalise the focus on different areas. It requires absolute focus to do the best we can at that time. We have to com-

be able to stand on our own feet. Therefore my eldest sister became a teacher, my second sister became an accountant, I became a physician and my youngest sister became a lawyer. In such a way my parents always insisted that we should be able to stand on our own feet first and prove ourselves before we take on a role in the company. That is the reason why we have managed to maintain it and also maintain our name, partly because our parents and grandparents insisted that we obtain a formal and professional education first.

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partmentalise the different issues. That is how we try and achieve a balance.

**When one looks at Mackwoods, it is a diverse organisation. The sectors are very diverse. What can you tell us about this experience?**

Well that itself is an experience. The beauty of the Mackwoods Group is that, we have developed over the 170 years into a very diverse organisation. But actually if you take a long hard look at the strategy it has been one of selective diversification within each of our domain areas of expertise. Therefore what we focused on was leveraging on our existing domain areas of expertise.

Furthermore what has kept the Mackwoods Group going forward is that it has consistently been led by professionals, whilst being a family company. Within the family, we have always had to become professionals in our own right. That was one aspect that my grandparents insisted on even before we began to think of joining the company. They always wanted us to

sectors. We are in healthcare, business and plantations, import-export trading, power generation, IT education and software development, hotel and leisure. More recently we entered the financial services sector with our stockbroking company.

**When you look at these seven sectors, how has the progress been so far, especially if you look at the company's journey over the 170 years?**

If you look back at our roots, when William Mackwood set up the company in 1841, it was originally set up as a merchant and agent, as a trading company representing European interests in Sri Lanka. Mackwoods epitomises quite a unique business model in that it has not only survived for all these years but also managed to consistently expand despite the vicissitudes of the world wars, the global financial crisis and even during the entirety of the conflict in Sri Lanka. Part of that is because we were a diversified conglomerate. One sector could also provide a hedge against

another and that is what has seen us through.

We ourselves have been very flexible and open to change even though from a heritage perspective we are a fairly conservative company but actually we've been enormously resistant to change and one of our areas of growth has been innovation.

The beauty of how Mackwoods is structured is that we have very strong teams and good capacity within different people who lead the various sectors of the Group. My sister is the Co-Chair and Managing Director, Lalith Fonseka is the joint Managing Director. We have many directors who

issues. I had always promised her that I will come back. I did qualify to practice here as well but what I did here was I did not do any private practice but conducted occasional free clinics in the rural areas that gave me enormous satisfaction though it was a far cry from what I was doing in the UK in cardiology.

Nonetheless it was a great joy to go out to the periphery and even though the diseases were simpler and the challenges were far less, it still gave me equal if not better satisfaction. Unfortunately though at the moment with my other commitments I am able to do far less now. But I am happy to

they do the things they do, which are sometimes not obvious. It also makes you far more understanding because you also realise behind all the great successes of people, there have also been many challenges, many sorrows and that gives you a better understanding of who people are. Working in the public sector in the UK has also taught me how one should treat everyone equally irrespective of class, creed or religion and race. I feel that has been the most important lesson learned.

**What can you tell us about your experience as the Deputy Chairman of the Royal Commonwealth Society?**

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are leading individual sectors and our fairly matured, solid structure, will continue to run as it has in the future as well.

**Do you still practice as a physician?**

Much less now. I practiced extensively in the UK working within the National Health Service. Having developed my career in the UK I decided to come back to assist my mother as she was developing health

say that in my medical career in the UK or here I have never taken a cent from a patient. Medicine taught me a degree of compassion and empathy for people. It taught me to develop a greater understanding of human beings, what makes them 'tick', and also a sensitivity to people.

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I have always been very interested in international affairs and that again is predominantly the influence of my parents who always encouraged us to learn much more other than just the career we were following. They were always extremely widely read and encouraged us to do the same.

During the last 20 years during my time in the UK I was involved in many international societies and committees, which was as a result of



that interest. Over the years therefore I have had the opportunity to get involved with these societies and also participate in conferences and lectures, in the African sub-continent, Asia and Europe on international issues.

Fairly later on I became part of the Royal Commonwealth Society (RCS), which is the oldest Commonwealth organisation having been established in 1868. It has always been a forum for advocacy, for debate and what the Royal Commonwealth Society has done, especially its headquarters in

UK at our society. Since then of course we have provided the platform for a substantial number of heads of state to speak where we chair the sessions and the press and parliamentarians are invited as well. We have robust and challenging debates. A few of those who have addressed us are Lee Kwan Yew, Mahathir Mohammed, President of Nigeria, Prince Charles, the Royal family and many more. In addition to that in my work with the Commonwealth I have had to participate in fora internationally, particularly parallel to the heads of

achieved peace two years ago. But more than that we have achieved the political stability which would ensure that there will be a consistency in policy. However, it will be incumbent on all of us in all strata of society to build an inclusive and pluralistic society in order to make this hard earned peace a durable one. This is probably the greatest opportunity that Sri Lankans have to unite; all communities and all races, whether it be Tamil, Sinhala, Muslim, Burghers; all religions –Hindu, Buddhist, Christians, Islam – to build



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Governments meeting, such as in Uganda, Malta, Nigeria, Cyprus, Ghana, UK and Malaysia. Therefore meeting many heads of states, dignitaries and international leaders, and engaging with them has given me a very interesting perspective on international relations over the past 14-15 years.

I also sit on the Ramphal Centre for Commonwealth Policy Studies. Sonny Ramphal was one of the longest serving Secretary's General and was also a great campaigner for the release of Mandela and the end of apartheid. Therefore it has really given me a very interesting perspective of international relations and international diplomacy.

**So having so much experience in international relations and diplomacy what can Sri Lanka do differently?**

What Sri Lanka needs is time as I mentioned in my address at Rhodes House in Oxford a few months ago. We have had 28 years of bitter conflict and I must say under the leadership of His Excellency the President we

the pluralistic society so that we can make that peace sustainable. It is not so much about what can Sri Lanka do, its what Sri Lankans can do and should be doing. Each of us have a part to play. Everyone of us when we develop that degree of forgiveness, reconciliation and understanding of what has happened and what we would like to do as a cohesive nation state then we will truly flourish. This is not incumbent on just one person but on each and every one of us. I always believe that.

My mom was great fan of Mother Theresa. When Mother Theresa was asked a question by one of the journalists 'isn't what you are doing just a drop of water in the ocean?' Mother Theresa said 'yes my son but each of us will think that what we are doing is a just a drop in the ocean but the ocean will be less without that drop'. I firmly believe that each of us as Sri Lankans can contribute towards unity. To build a future not necessarily for us but for our children and children's children. We should also focus on how we can build the

London, is that it has provided a platform for heads of state, ministers, international business leaders to speak about compelling imperatives and I must say the RCS has always been a strong protagonist for change. For example, during my early days RCS very much led the campaign for Nelson Mandela's release and for the end of apartheid. In fact Nelson Mandela gave his freedom speech in the

future of Sri Lanka not necessarily focus on the present context alone. It is only then that we are driven by selflessness, by others and rather than just 'I'.

**How have the various roles that you have held strengthened you for your new appointment as the High Commissioner to Britain?**

My key strengths include the fact that I have been in several sectors already; public sector, civil society, international affairs, academia and the private sector and have lived and worked in both countries. The combination of the two in the context of my experience in international affairs will serve me in good stead to take on this enormously challenging role at this critical juncture.

There have been many hits on my profile on the company website because people are asking who is this person who has been appointed as the High Commissioner designate to Britain because it is a critical time for Sri Lanka. Everyone wants to know, what are his views and what is his stance. I have lived in both countries but I have not been a public servant or a private sector person entirely so people try to pigeonhole you into a box, which is not me. I have done nights on call every third night, had blood spattered on me and attended to hundreds of patients of all races and nationalities. All of which I have done humbly.

As a member of civil society I have met world leaders whether they be democrats or autocrats and that has given me a great amount of knowledge. Then, in the private sector in Sri Lanka it is a totally different ball game and has been very much private sector oriented. And now I will be taking over this new post. I am multifaceted and because of that multifaceted life experience I have a degree of humility and non judgmental. I hope that will enable people to understand me and Sri Lanka better. My values which will hopefully come across is that because of my experiences in all these areas I am open to everyone; to all races and religions and also the realisation on the limitations of what I can do. I am not going to be able to change the world or peoples attitudes but I might be able to make a one percent difference

of what they think. Therefore the thinking is to engage in constructive dialogue with everyone.

**What can be done to build Sri Lanka's image in Britain as well as the West as a whole?**

Our relationship with Britain has a very long history, and there is a commonality of values of heritage between the two countries. We have had an enormous reservoir of good will over the last 150 - 200 years and what we need to do is build on that, leverage our commonalities and also develop an understanding between the two

everyone however profound or simple, every single person has an enormous beauty within them, whether they are able or disabled, they all have a valid contribution to make in life. She urged us to provide ourselves time to see that in life; she always encouraged us to do that and I witnessed how she ran the charity fund that was set up by my grandfather.

In fact that was the first board that I was appointed to at the age of only 17, between school and university. My grandfather knew that I was going to England to study medicine. At that young age we think we can save the

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countries. Especially with Sri Lanka as it is now, and the direction in which it is going. We also need to highlight or articulate the real progress that is being made in the country. I need to reiterate that what Sri Lanka needs is the time and space to do this.

**If we move on to talk about your mother, Mrs Sriyani Nonis has been an exemplary figure to many women in Sri Lanka. What was it like growing up with such a strong lady? Would you say that who you are today is what you have learned from her?**

Yes, my mother was a very unique person, she always had a tender touch and compassion towards people; This is how she was able to run a large conglomerate as a female in this male dominated area. She ran it with great sensitivity and she used to constantly tell us that her employees have a family; she taught us faith, how to be caring and to remain simple; she taught me the beauty of simplicity, how powerful leading a simple life can be, and that

world and are rather idealistic. He wanted me to learn about poverty and as such he appointed me to the board of his charity fund. This fund has been in operation since 1983, and by working there it gave me an insight into the needs of people, particularly the underprivileged and marginalised. This became a great strength to me when I became a member on international committees but also international organisations which were engaged in developmental work in different countries.

My parents and grandparents taught us the importance of maintaining principles and values. This would be my greatest achievement, the fact that you respect everything you have done. When I made the decision to halt my medical career and return to Sri Lanka, I was able to have breakfast with my mother for two and a half years. This was the greatest gift I could give; if I had not done that, I would have regretted it. I am happy about the decision made to return to Sri

Lanka. This was during the height of the conflict where everyone else was going in the opposite direction; I was going to the land of coconut trees and bombs; people could not understand how I could leave the UK; such a secure environment and a career and return to a country full of conflict. However the decision was the right one. I was with my mother during that period of time and was also able to see the enormous difference in the country - pre and post conflict. This is why I am optimistic about the country. We have a great and wonderful opportunity, and we can make the transition from the status of developing to a developed

with a fairly robust legal and regulatory framework will give us many opportunities for economic development in the future, particularly in the private sector.

**Would you agree that the private sector has been somewhat slow in gaining pace after the end of the conflict?**

The private sector needs to develop their confidence and invest. That confidence is now developing; particularly in the last year, we have seen a robust and conducive macroeconomic environment. As we continue to have more successes particularly on investments and sovereign bonds,

devastating tsunami within a few years. This resilience is one of our greatest assets, the resilience of the Sri Lankan people of all races and religions. Due to this, with sufficient time and space we will develop this again in a few years with the commitment and the resolve of each and every one of us to build a truly pluralistic and inclusive society. I believe that we will do this and prove that we are capable.

**Final thoughts?**

Due to my experience in medicine and business, I will be taking on the role in international affairs as the High Commissioner to Britain. Despite this

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nation. However, it is up to each and every one of us to achieve this.

**When we look at the 2011 budget, many pro private sector revisions and tax reforms, how has that affected the group?**

Certainly the budget has been a pro private sector budget and it has been very beneficial to us particularly because we are in so many diverse sectors, and we look forward to leveraging on that. At the same time it came at quite an optimal time, as we are beginning to see more interest from the perspective of more foreign direct investment into the country and that certainly is leading to the development of a conducive macroeconomic environment and framework. If you look at the state of the economy today, we have single digit inflation, single digit interest rates, an appreciating rupee, fiscal consolidation and increased reserves. These together

there will also be a development in private equity investment and corporate securities and corporate bonds, which will be successful internationally. As a result of this, the private sector will also become very much a part of this development.

**It has only been two years since the war ended. Are Sri Lankans and the world in general expecting too much? What are your thoughts?**

My view is that over a period of 2500 years, we as Sri Lankans have developed as a fairly heterogeneous society. The 28 years have been a very unfortunate era during these 2500 years. Look at the nature of the Sri Lankan people, we are a fairly resilient group of people, in whatever capacity we are prepared. After a few years we have managed to get back together and live in harmony; a perfect example of this is the rapidity with which we recovered from the

being a challenging role, my hope is that we are able to make even a small contribution towards Sri Lanka and our people. Our ultimate aim is to rebuild the nation.

I am passionate about the ability of Sri Lankans to get together to rebuild the nation. What we all have to do is to give that degree of flexibility; the degree of an understanding between each other. We need to be able to give much more, so that each of us have the time and space to be able to get together. This comes with the respect and diversity of each and every one of us; we cannot expect each of us to be the same; we are diverse; what is imperative is dignity, to provide each one dignity and respect of diversity. If we have that in our minds continuously and if we developed a far greater understanding of each other we will be able to live in peace and harmony.