

Summary of the Plenary Speech

What is the best Innovative Strategy for Sustainable Development? Just one Word. Change.

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Words can be tiring - no, tiredness-inducing. Phrases like ‘Sustainable Development’, words like ‘Innovation’ and so on have been heard so much by Sri Lankans that they have lost their currency, and have become noise, irritating noise. What development, for example, have we seen in this country, in these nearly 75 years of independence, sustainable or otherwise? These are phrases that come in every manifesto put forward by every government that have failed to bring any kind of prosperity to this land – they are still being trumpeted off rooftops by every moron wise enough to know that Sri Lankans will get caught, yet again, to the same wordy net of lies they spin, cast out and reel in again with the spoils at election. Words have become empty skeins which cover walls that have been crumbling since around the 1950s in this country – they mask the rot, the corruption and the hopelessness of a nation that have been lead by the incompetent, whose incompetency has been excused by the masses who repeatedly vote them in, for which we – the academia – have also to take much of the blame for.

So, if I am to rant about the condition of the country and its rulers, there is no way I can hold myself, nor any of those listening to me, away from the criticism due to those responsible for this state of affairs - belonging as we do to the most important institutions that exist in the country responsible for the intellectual health of the nation. If there are academics listening to me, they cannot be unaware of the existing conditions in our arts faculties, where despite the fact that we keep bumping onto words like ‘innovation’ in every corporate sounding plan we are meant to waste time over, we have the sad reality of the majority of teachers not being able to read the most modern of knowledges coming into existence because of the problem of language; tertiary education being reduced to note taking and repetition of whatever the teacher was taught when they were undergraduates; recruitment and promotions given that make a joke of what it is to be addressed by particular titles sometimes. All we need to look at it is what we produce. What can the young men and women we are putting out to society capable of doing? Not

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agitating against, not pontificating on, not simply thinking and worrying about – but simply - doing?

I do not have to tell you the answer. You already know. The situation in the country makes it obvious anyway, should you want to make a guess, if you are not aware.

So how do we actually try and make things better? And not simply get lost in the meaningless of words like ‘system change’ and ‘sustainable development’? We – we all – need to change. We need to teach students how to calculate the worth of graduation not in the glossiness of the photos at graduation day and the smiles and the makeup (though that happiness is important too, I agree): we need to create a generation of people who believe in things beyond image, in this day and age that it seems to have become the be all and end all of all things. Downsizing the importance of image is not easy in a country where the worth of a teacher is measured by the dress she wears, and not much on how much she knows and can teach. Then we have inauthenticity: we have young academics who get through the grueling process of getting a permanent position in the university system almost as a first step to get a visa into a developed country. All this is always covered with excuses – “we have nothing to do if we come back”, “we did it for our children” – as if their job was not given to them in the first place to serve all the children of the nation; as if they are right in demanding and are entitled to be provided opportunities to put their skill to use – when they have been blessed with enough brains to see how work can be created within a system that the politicians have sucked dry. That’s our job – to see how things can be made better in a very terrible place – if it is through protest and constant pressurizing the powers to solve issues, so be it; if it is through finding new ways to solve old problems, so be it. There is always something to be done. That is why we have been given a salary and been paid to study – so that we can make things better in this country.

So, what I will do today with the time I am given will be to show you two things that we did in the university of Sri Jayewardenepura to create new ways of helping people learn English as a second language which is my subject area: the “Basha Buddy” Project and the “English for Fun” Project. The discussion will not be based on the success or failure of these projects (because we have anyway given too much importance to these two concepts at present: not only might worrying about both these things make us prefer not to do anything different at all, but no one hardly ever questions the fact that we have bought wholesale the idea of success given by a profit-driven capitalist economic system that is fundamentally warped) – but on the possibility of change; of thinking outside the box; of trying to beat the system through over-riding it, if

it is not possible to change it. Because one of the major problems I see that we have as a people is that we don't try new things enough, we do not try and change things enough. We don't try fresh young people in positions almost left alone for old people – especially old people – to fill; we don't try breaking frontiers in academic subjects in arts faculties often enough; we do not try leaving aside old and heavy cultural baggage that have kept women miles back in some aspects – and if it is fear of failure that is making us not do any of this – then fear of failure is the first thing that needs to be thrown out of the window, if we are even thinking of going where the word innovation is leading us.

To bring it back to where it applies to all of us again - the university system itself is too much of a white elephant to change its character much – but within that system, academics do have much freedom – and we are being paid to think and innovate. So, let's use this chance, this slight opening, to see what we can do. And above all else, let's teach our students how to use their brains to see how change can be brought into a country that is crying out for it. That is what we need to do if we are going to use words like sustainable development and innovation with the seriousness they deserve. We need to do just one thing: Change.