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Factors Shaping Political Identity in Host Countries: The Case of the Tamil Diaspora in the UK

Editorial Note

*The policy papers were produced in the context of the project *Diaspora Dialogues for Development and Peace*. We commissioned brief policy and background papers (mainly) from activists to get their views on how they perceive their political activism, as opposed to how outsiders view them. To generate as many policy papers as possible, reflecting diverse viewpoints, the project invited activists and academics via a “Call for Papers”. Since the majority of the papers were written by activists or by those who are both activists and academics, the papers cannot be viewed as a neutral account of the present history. Nonetheless, we believe that these are unique perspectives that are hardly recognized in the scholarly writing and should be given space for reflection.*

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Abstract

To identify the factors that shaped the Tamil diaspora's political identity this paper argues that an individual's community or a nation's identity is not a predetermined or fixed phenomenon, that aspects of political and religious identity are subject to change based upon personal experience or events and that the motivation for political activism is defined by the timeline of events. The paper also considers the influence of technological advances in aiding communities to forge communal bonds and allegiances. In order to address the question's key issue, the author provides an understanding of Sri Lanka's pre-conflict history.

The themes within the paper address the evolution of diasporas as a concept, victim diasporas, the UK's Tamil Diaspora and Social Movement theory. It also examines the influence of environmental factors on a diaspora's formation; its relationship with the host society, its remoteness from the homeland and technological factors enabling diasporas to retain identity and influence homeland politics. To understand the formation and organisation of the diaspora as an effective representational and lobbying entity, the paper utilises sociologist Charles Tilly's WUNC formula in understanding how the UK Tamil diaspora could be categorised as a social movement.

1. Introduction

“During the three decades of civil war in Sri Lanka, a well-organized Tamil diaspora has played an important role, maintaining Tamil nationalism, engaging in political work and funding the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which struggles for Tamil self-determination in the northeast of the island against the Sinhalese-dominated government” (Orjuela 2008, 437).

The events of summer of 2009 in Sri Lanka may prove a turning point in Sinhalese–Tamil relations. This article focuses on the Tamil diaspora’s role in these relations, the diaspora’s organisation, structures, hierarchies and its desire to maintain a distinct Tamil national and political identity, coupled with its political involvement within host countries the various sections there will be a discussion on the thematic issues of diasporas, including victim diaspora, as well as an examination of Tamil Nationalism and the UK Tamil diaspora as a Social Movement.

Scholars such as Camilla Orjuela note evidence of long-term projections of diaspora interaction which impact upon the host-land and homeland politics. Diaspora communities achieve this through numerous means: the main one being the direct provision of support for warring parties, including financing opposition parties, rebels and other actors. Sources of funding vary in their scope and origins, from direct individual contributions to global business or criminal networks (Orjuela 2008, 437).

The canvassing of international support is recognised as crucial to generating political awareness and action in favour of a particular cause. The manifestation of such support varies from access to weapons and military training to international aid as well as international public support for secession. Garnering necessary support is usually achieved through three main methods:

- Advocacy;
- ‘Propaganda’ (the use of factual information to illustrate and progress an argument in an accessible and appealing manner) and
- Protests involving requesting recognition of the cause’s legitimacy.

Returning to Orjuela (2008, 437), she, amongst other scholars, has observed that diasporas turn to producing films, music, cultural events and news outlets; the aim of which is to shape knowledge, discourses and directly effectively influence the conflict and its resolution within the homeland. In turn, this process of internal discussion and consideration of the issues and options feeds into the actors’ decision-making processes. Additionally, these efforts are viewed as supporting immediate as well as long-term post-conflict reconstruction and development.

Within the terms of post-conflict reconstruction and development, diasporas are known to play an “important economic role for their homeland through the remittances they send to relatives, but also as consumers of homeland products, as investors in business in the homeland and as contributors to a variety of charity organizations” (Orjuela 2008, 438f.). The Tamil

experience is evidenced through a variety of manifestations, including the provision of remittances from offspring to parents or relatives. Other economic roles include diaspora tourism, where members of both communities make numerous visits to Sri Lanka, and the high degree of commercial enterprises in the form of Sri Lankan restaurants, grocers and supermarkets selling home-sourced products for the community within host countries.

Disaspora donations to Non Governmental Organisations (NGO's) are another form of direct economic support and can become vital constituents for development of the infrastructure (Orjuela 2008, 439). In the main Tamils have focused their assistance through NGO's such as Medical Institute of Tamils (MIOT), Vannimission.org, White Pigeon or the various Temple or Church affiliations, home village associations and alumni organisations; home-grown charities.

For many scholars religion forms a key component of an individual and national social and political identity. In the case of the Tamil diaspora, a brief look at the role of religion within Tamil civil and political life is sufficient. Whilst it is acknowledged that the Tamil society is by nature quite religiously conservative, its political identity has remained secular in its conception and traditions. Thus, while Tamils globally maintain their links by regular observance at places of worship or by retaining rooms devoted to prayer in their homes; especially amongst the older generation, who have for the most part remained caste dominated, this has not impacted hugely on political life, especially amongst the older generation, who have, for the most part, remained caste centric in their outlook.

Tamil politics developed a secular tradition to accommodate Tamil society's embracing of several of the world's major religions (Hinduism, Islam and Christianity). Reflecting this diversity, Tamils have drawn their leaders from across the societal and religious spectrum. In turn, these leaders have successfully combined their religious and political beliefs in furthering rights-based politics, most notably S.J.V. Chelvenayakam, a Christian who led the Federal Party (Jeyaratnam Wilson 2000, 3).

This paper is divided into three parts; beginning with a discussion of diasporas in general, including an examination of the notion of victim diasporas; it then looks at social movement theory in its application to diasporas before turning to the interaction between the UK and the Tamil diaspora, it hosts and concludes by observing that the changing nature of Tamil political identity provides a challenge to those seeking to lead the Tamil diaspora as a unit.

2. Understandings of Diaspora

The formation of diasporas is not a new phenomenon. They have been present throughout history, with early examples including civilisations in Mesopotamia and the Greek city-states around the Mediterranean. Later formations include the forced migrations of the Jewish and African peoples (forced mass migration to the Americas) that created diasporas (Adamson 2006, 171; Cohen 1997, 2, 36), the Irish and Italians, who migrated to North America throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and, more recently, the Palestinian diaspora, which is spread

predominantly throughout the Arab World (Adamson 2006, 171; Cohen 1997, 171). Before engaging with the issue of the Tamil diaspora in the United Kingdom in-depth, I examine the historical and cultural understanding of the term diaspora. In addition, this paper focuses on other competing visions of diasporas associated with economic migration or colonisation.

Looking for a working definition of what constitutes a diaspora, I turn to Cohen's understanding of the Ancient Greek definition, which states "[t]he word 'diaspora' is derived from the Greek verb *speiro* (to sow) and the preposition *dia* (over)...the ancient Greeks thought of diaspora as migration and colonization" (Cohen 1997, ix). Cohen notes that, while our cultural understanding of diasporas varies depending on pre-conceived notions and the experiences of hosts, diasporas and home-landers, it is nonetheless crucial that all three communities recognise a characteristic common amongst all diaspora communities:

"(...) all diasporic communities settled outside their natal (or imagined natal) territories, acknowledge that "the old country" – a notion often buried deep in language, religion, custom, or folklore – always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions...a member's adherence to a diasporic community is demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable link with their past migration history and a sense of co-ethnicity with others of a similar background" (Cohen 1997, ix).

As part of the word's etymological development, the term has become a generic label for the categorisations of people, whether they are "expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants and ethnic and racial minorities *tout court*" (Safran 1991, 83). In the case of Australia, many original settlers were convicts shipped to a far-flung penal colony by the British authorities. Their descendants refer to new émigrés as 'pomms', a colloquial term for British or other people from the home country. While relations between the two States equate to a friendly rivalry, this phenomenon is not unique to Australian-British relations. Furthermore, they can have both negative and positive impacts on shaping the political identity of diaspora communities. Taken from the ancient Greek conception of diasporas, as outlined above, the multi-generational British-originated populous of Australia may be categorised as a diaspora.

The linguistic expansion of the term diaspora has led some sociologists to consider contemporary uses of the term as risking its relevance:

"(...) [T]he Dixie diaspora, the yankee diaspora, the white diaspora, the liberal diaspora, the conservative diaspora, the gay diaspora, the deaf diaspora, the queer diaspora, the redneck diaspora, the digital diaspora, the fundamentalist diaspora and the terrorist diaspora...The problem with this latitudinarian, 'let-a-thousand-diasporas-bloom' approach is that the category becomes stretched to the point of uselessness" (Brubaker 2005, 3).

While the number of diasporas communities around the world has risen exponentially, they all retain several shared features:

"They, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from an original "centre" to two or more foreign regions; they retain a collective memory, vision or myth about their original homeland including its location, history and achievements; they believe they are not – and perhaps can never be – fully accepted in their host societies and so remain partly separate; their ancestral homeland is idealized and it is thought that, when conditions are favourable,

either they, or their descendants should return; they believe all members of the diaspora should be committed to the maintenance or restoration of the original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and they continue in various ways to relate to that homeland and their ethno-communal consciousness and solidarity are in an important way defined by their existence of such a relationship” (Safran 1991, 83-4).

The twentieth century saw an exponential rise in intra-state conflicts in locales of strategic international importance, from the United Kingdom (Northern Ireland) to the Middle East and Vietnam. Consequently, the position and role of diasporas in international relations cannot go unnoticed. As Vertovec notes, “several are emerging as (or have historically long been) significant players in the construction of national narratives, regional alliances or global political economies” (Vertovec 1999, 1). This article is intended to analyse the origins and development of a cohesive political Tamil (diaspora) identity through the prism of victim diasporas, with particular relevance to the United Kingdom (discussed below). Within this scope of investigation, it remains critical to narrow the definition and description of a diaspora to one best suited to the circumstances.

As a diaspora, Sri Lankan or Eelam Tamils, depending upon your choice of preferred prefix (and hence viewpoint), are not unusual, constituting an ethno-national diaspora. Such constituencies are often defined as:

“(…) a social-political formation, created as a result of either voluntary or forced migration, whose members regard themselves as the same ethno-national origin and who permanently reside as minorities in one or several host countries. Members of such entities maintain regular or occasional contacts with what they regard as their homelands and with individuals and groups of the same background in other host countries. Based on aggregate decisions to settle permanently in host countries, but to maintain a common identity, diasporans identify as such, showing solidarity with their group and their entire nation, and they organize and are active in the cultural, social, economic, and political spheres. Among their various activities, members of such diasporas establish trans-state networks that reflect complex relationships among the diasporas, their host countries, their homelands, and international actors” (Sheffer 2003, 9-10).

Diaspora involvement in homeland politics is neither new nor unique to Tamils. In many respects, the Tamil diaspora’s experience replicates those that have gone before. Prime examples include the Irish diaspora in the US; the Kurdish diaspora in Germany (which is discussed within this paper). The Irish diaspora’s involvement included funding the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and engaging support for the peace process (Cochrane 2007b; Orjuela 2008, 438). All communities cited constitute diasporas connected through varying constructs of transnational nationalisms based on their ethnic or national (territorial and cultural) origins.

Many of the twentieth century’s diasporas owe much of their formal and informal community structures to previous nineteenth century diasporas (Waldinger/Fitzgerald 2003, 23). However, distinctions between the experiences of diasporas formed in each century are the result of technological and societal changes within the host state:

- The effects of technological change – reducing the costs and time entailed in communication and travel;
- The shift from ‘the melting pot’ to multiculturalism – legitimating the expression of and organisation around home country loyalties;
- The nationalisation of home country societies – increasing the salience of the national identities with which immigrants arrived; the advent of a new international human rights regime (labelled “post-nationalism”) – diminishing the difference between “nationals” and “foreigners” by circumscribing the power of receiving states (Waldinger/Fitzgerald 2003, 23).

Beyond the strict descriptive meaning of diaspora, one could include the term ‘expat’, a shortened form of expatriate. This term is often utilised to describe communities of nations who move to other countries either permanently or on a part-time basis in search of better lifestyle, employment, and for further educational purposes or through choice. As a global phenomenon, this group comprises all age ranges from most nations. From a European perspective, expatriate communities are formed from retired Europeans, mainly the British and Germans who move from cold northern European climes to Southern European , such as Greece, Italy or Spain, for their warmer conditions, or young eastern Europeans seeking employment or university degrees from western European universities.

Expatriates differ from victim diasporas in that many return to their home countries after a number of years (due to financial difficulties, health problems or improving economic conditions and job opportunities). While many of these groups replicate diaspora characteristics and practices, they differ in at least three respects. Firstly, they tend to have chosen to move out, not been forced to move through compulsion. Second, they tend to be ‘welcomed/invited’ economic migrants, as was the case in the UK during the late 1940s-1970s and is the case with employment quota systems historically utilised by the Australian Government and the UK Government in an attempt to control immigration (BBC News 2010). Third, members of expatriate communities are either able to renew contracts, find new employment opportunities, retire in the host country or freely return to their homeland, whereas diaspora communities having been forced or ejected from their homeland and cannot return freely without fear or hindrance until an amicable solution is found to the political causes of their displacement.

2.1 Victim Diasporas

Given the nature of the Tamil Diaspora’s formation and development in the UK, I begin with a brief study of the term ‘victim diaspora’. Contemporary visions of diasporas recognise that increasing numbers of communities develop as a consequence of discrimination and/or violence. This has often included forced migration giving rise to what are commonly termed ‘victim diasporas’ (Cohen 1997, 31). Victim diasporas are the result of “...mass displacements that are occasioned by events wholly outside the individual’s controls – wars “ethnic cleansing”, natural disasters, pogroms” (Cohen 1997, 180).

Whether one views this terminology as a positive or negative trait, the term ‘victim diaspora’ represents the culmination of a series of deleterious episodes that have resulted in forced external relocation. These events imbue a populace with a sense of collective trauma, as Terrence Lyons notes, the remembrance of grievances and their inheritance by the next generation:

“The trauma of violent displacement is vivid in the first generations’ minds and is often kept alive in subsequent generations through commemorations and symbols. In fact, one function of conflict-generated diaspora networks is to ensure that displacement’s original cause is remembered and the grievance passed onto the next generation” (Lyons 2006, 4).

Classic examples of victim diasporas have been drawn from the experiences of the African diaspora, the Jewish diaspora and the Palestinian diaspora formed at the time of the creation of the state of Israel and again after the 1967 Israeli–Arab War. Most victim diasporas form as a result of inter or intra-communal greed- or grievance-based conflicts. Within the realm of conflict, conflict prevention and post-conflict peacebuilding, these diasporas have the potential to provide significant contributions. From recent studies investigating the correlation between a diaspora’s dispersal and conflict contribution, “the greater the span of an ethnic or religious diaspora across international boundaries, the higher the potential for external support for insurgencies and the higher the risk that a country will experience a civil war” (Gleditsch 2007, 298).

So far, I have argued the formative themes for shaping a diaspora’s political identity are those issues and events that force people to leave their homeland. Whilst not seeking to detract from this reality, others have drawn attention to the nature and position of the host-country in conditioning a diaspora, in turn shaping its political future. For instance, states with a significant geographic distance from the homeland are able to prevent the homeland from spreading its tentacles into the host-state, furnishing diasporas with new avenues (Waldinger/Fitzgerald 2003, 28).

2.2 Diasporas as Social Movements

As part of this study, it is necessary to evaluate and understand the literature available on social movements. The development and utilisation of mass mobilisation to affect social and political change have, throughout history, caused rapid political, social and economic changes. The most obvious include the suffragette movement, the International Communist League, the civil rights movement in the United States and the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

Charles Tilly, a leading theorist in this field, defines social movements as comprising of three complementary qualities:

1. A sustained, organized public effort making collective claims on target authorities (let us call it a *campaign*);
2. employment of combinations from among the following forms of political action: creation of special-purpose associations and coalitions, public meetings, solemn processions, vigils, rallies, demonstrations, petition drives, statements to and in public media and pamphleteering (call the variable ensemble of performances of the *social movement repertoire*); and

3. participants' concerted public representations of WUNC: [an acronym for]: worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment on the part of themselves and/or their constituencies. (referred to as *WUNC displays*) (Tilly 2004, 3-4).

From a thematic perspective, utilising this definition provides a broad conceptual outline informing our understanding and analysis of available opportunities for diasporas to affect changes in host-country policies towards homeland government policies.

For example the 2009 protests in Parliament Square in London (BBC News 2009a; BBC News 2009e) epitomise the relevance of this theoretical field in understanding how and why the UK-based Tamil diaspora represents both a social movement and an off-shoot of a global social movement.

Clarity can be found in the term *WUNC*, an abbreviation for:

- Worthiness: sober demeanour, neat clothing, presence of clergy, dignitaries, and mothers with children;
- Unity: matching badges, headbands, banners or costumes; marching in ranks; singing and chanting;
- Numbers: headcounts, signatures on petitions, messages from constituents and filling the streets;
- Commitment: braving bad weather, visible participation by the old and handicapped, resistance to oppression, ostentatious sacrifice, subscription and/or benefaction (Tilly 2004, 4).

This definition facilitates a better understanding of the diaspora's motivations, including environmental factors, that continuously influence and shape member's and the group's identity. These factors ultimately impact upon diaspora community relations with both the host land and homelands.

To understand and explain the factors shaping the Tamil diaspora's political identity, scholars, policy-makers/analysts and community leaders must be cognisant that peoples' identities are not stagnant. While certain inherited aspects of one's identity, such as gender, familial role, amongst others, are relatively immutable, other, non-inherited identities including political identity remain in a state of flux throughout people's lives – not all too uncommon occurrences. Political commentators often discuss a particular politician's political journey, from obscurity to leadership, and from one philosophical wing of a party to the other. Practical examples include the political journey taken by Vinayagamoorthy Muralitharan (a.k.a. Col Karuna or Karuna Amman), a once influential member of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and an ardent supporter of an independent Tamil state, now a member of the Sri Lankan Parliament and minister in the Sri Lankan Government (Chopra 2008). Another in the UK is House of Commons Speaker John Bercow, a man who, throughout his political career, has purportedly moved from the right of the Conservative Party towards the left (BBC News 2009c).

Returning to the formation of political identity within the UK and the global Tamil diaspora, one can see a political identity being increasingly shaped by imagery, music and

broader nuanced symbols of defiance and determination. Historically, symbols have been widely evoked and utilised to advance a particular cause or issue. Returning to the WUNC ‘formula’, which provides a framework for determining a social movement, we can determine the Tamil diaspora to be in some part a social movement. By considering each component of the ‘formula’ and factoring in the correlation between with the physical and public manifestation of the attributes, I hope to illustrate the possibility by highlighting examples of their usage.

- **Worthiness:** e.g. the 73 day public protests by Tamils of all generations in Parliament Square, including mothers with young children, was covered by the mainstream media and rose the issue in Parliament (BBC News 2009d).
- **Unity:** during the 2009 protests, Tamils united on a nationally and global scale, chanting slogans and holding banners, while projecting a singular message of “stop the genocide”. Younger protestors often wore dog tags and head banners with red paint to symbolise the dead and injured. In addition, many Tamil protestors openly displayed flags with emblems of the LTTE, a proscribed organisation in the UK (BBC News 2009a).
- **Numbers:** while protests numbers may have seemed small and punctuated with a few large rallies and marches, they remained consistent, maintaining interest and coverage from public service broadcasters and the news media. It should be noted that organisers, apparently, and often at short notice, have been able to martial marches of over 100,000 at regular and consistent intervals, though this figure is regularly contested by numerous parties (TamilNet 2009).
- **Commitment:** members of the Tamil diaspora critical of the Sri Lankan Government and/or those who support or are sympathetic towards the LTTE have displayed commitment. When displaying their views or lobbying for due consideration concerning their people’s plight, diaspora members pointed to the oppression they suffered at the hands of state organs or an indifferent state structure, such as the Language Act, quota system, pogroms since Independence and through independently verified reports of atrocities. Historically, Tamils have adopted Gandhian *Satyagraha (non-violent) approaches*; however, during 2009, a few have felt compelled to turn to more public displays of self-mutilation to display their anger, frustration and disappointment at a lack of international action (Jones 2009).

Developments within the social movement domain include the development of global social movements. On close analysis, these movements have gained the most impact with the spread of telecommunications media, including the Internet. Such technological advancements have amplified the ability of like-minded people to communicate and organise over a period of time that was previously unthinkable. Pettifor, an organiser of the Jubilee 2000 campaign for the eradication of third-world debt, describes global social movements as having autonomous national campaigns,

“(...) but [sharing] overall goals, symbols, and information – and a tremendous sense of solidarity...The ability to cooperate and coordinate...campaigning was greatly enhanced by use of the Internet (Pettifor 2001, 62 cited in Tilly 2004, 2)”.

This is reflected in the organisation of the 2009 Tamil diaspora protests in the UK, Australia and Canada that were designed to generate international concern over the situation in Sri Lanka. These transient protests, like the *Satyagraha* campaign of the 1950s, 60s and 70s before, have been accompanied by long-term ‘institutional developments’ such as the establishment of the Global Tamil Forum and Provisional Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam (Rudrakumaran 2009) and lately the Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam (TamilNet 2010).

While technological advancements have facilitated a plethora of global social movements including Amnesty International, Greenpeace and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), such organisations represent historical relevance as examples of ways to affect domestic or international change. Examples of such changes include the movement for the abolition of the slave trade, the International Workers League, more commonly known as the Fourth International, an international organisation whose goal is the advancement of Trotskyism, and the publishers of the World Socialist Website.

3. The Tamil Diaspora in the UK

For many within the Tamil diaspora, the concept of Tamil nationalism provides an important indicator of what it means to be a ‘political Tamil’. Importantly, workshop participants commented that being politically Tamil does not require one to be ethnically Tamil, with, the Australian born, Adele Balasingham (Balasingham 2001) cited as an example of someone who is considered politically Tamil by the community. The core aim of Tamil nationalism as laid out in the Vaddukkoddai Resolution of 1976 was to mobilise the nation and the youth “in particular to come forward to throw themselves fully in the sacred fight for freedom and to flinch not till the goal of a sovereign socialist state of Tamil Eelam is reached” (Jeyaratnam Wilson 1994, 128-129).

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) provides a definition of nationalism as “advocacy of or support for national independence or self-determination” (OED Online 2008). As an adjunct to this definition, the OED notes, “whereas patriotism usually refers to a general sentiment, nationalism now usually refers to a specific ideology, esp. one expressed through political activism. In earlier use, however, the two appear to have been more or less interchangeable” (ibid).

In many ways the evolution of Tamil nationalism could be viewed as a reactionary political tool – a tool designed to give a generation of disgruntled, disunited and disenfranchised Tamils focus to channel their energy in the face of increasing Sinhala majoritarianism that is opposed to Tamil federalism (Jeyaratnam Wilson 1994, 128).

The UK’s (Sri Lankan/Eelam) Tamil population is one of the largest outside of South Asia. Throughout her work on the Sri Lankan conflict and the role of the diasporas, Orjuela argues that “the active involvement of Diaspora groups has enabled an extension of nationalist mobilization, hostilities and polarization to an international arena. Diaspora actors engaged in propaganda work of great relevance for the international legitimacy and support for the main conflict parties”

(Orjuela 2008, 437). Furthermore, the Sri Lankan/Eelam Tamil population in the UK now forms part of a stateless global Sri Lankan/Eelam Tamil diaspora “dispersed segments of nations that have been unable to establish their own independent states” (Sheffer 2003, 73). These stateless diasporas represent an antithesis to state-linked diasporas which are “those groups that are in host countries but are connected to societies of their own ethnic origin that constitute a majority in established states” (Sheffer 2003, 73).

While acknowledging that, within the Tamil diaspora, there are actors who describe themselves as either apolitical – a rather uncomfortable position for many Tamils given the politicised nature of the polity – or represent the interests of the Sri Lankan state, this discussion relates solely to Tamils who, on the whole, oppose the actions and politics of the Sri Lankan Government. The formation, maintenance and politicisation of the UK Tamil diaspora occurred in three episodes or phases over the last four decades each phase linked to key events in Sri Lanka’s post-independence history. Phase I occurred within the post-independence era of 1950–1980; phase II took place following the 1983 pogroms; and Phase III transpired following the commencement of President Kumaratunga’s Peace Through War campaign from 1995 until the present (Orjuela 2008, 440).

While these phases are often seen as distinct, a number of overlapping factors cross each phase. As is the nature of history, there are no clean divisions from era to era; aspects of the previous era may remain through several generations. For example, discrimination over access to further education is often cited as a central theme to the diaspora’s formation in phases I and II, but this may not feature for those joining the diaspora in phase III. Prior to reflecting on the impact of these phases on the diaspora, I briefly highlight the impact of the decolonisation process on inter-communal relations. Whilst this paper focuses on the development of the UK Tamil diaspora’s political identity, it is important to recognise the impact of the decolonisation process and post-colonial settlement on inter-communal relations.

4. Colonial Legacy

British Colonialism had two main legacies for Sri Lanka: the territorial unity of the island and the institutionalisation of the first-past-the-post electoral process or ‘Westminster system’ (Wijesinha 2005, 75). Many political scientists have noted that territorial unity and the Westminster system are not suited to all political environs (Wijesinha 2005, 48ff.). Of specific interest are those environs with religious or ethnic cleavages, as it “endows majorities with massive powers. For the most part Britain’s political conventions, the result of centuries of conflict and compromise, have limited, if not nullified, the possible abuse of the resultant powers” (Wijesinha 2005, 75). While the Sinhalese and Tamil political elites, pre- and post-independence, were schooled in the prevailing British political and legal

traditions, the political culture of Sri Lanka’s majority did not follow these conventions, making the Westminster system unsuitable for the Sri Lankan environs (Wijesinha 2005, 48ff.).

Phase I: 1950-1980

From a Tamil perspective, the first three decades of independence constitute the formative years of institutional alienation from a state that they, for the most part, identified with. From anecdotal experience, members of this generation still occasionally refer to Sri Lanka as Ceylon. This, and other forms of, discrimination against the Tamils occurred despite well documented evidence that section 29(2) of the first constitution of an independent Ceylon prohibited legislation that discriminated against any community or religion (de Silva 1997, 248f., 260). There will now follow a brief discussion regarding the mechanisms of discrimination and their impact upon inter-communal relations before detailing their impact on informing and forming the diaspora's identity.

The 1956 Official Language Act imbued Sinhalese with official-language status for the purpose of government, education and business. Consequently, a sound proficiency of both Tamil and English (the inter-communal link language and the language of governance under the British) was rendered redundant. Furthermore, the Act prevented civil servants, many of whom were from the State's minorities who previously had no requirement to be able to read or write Sinhalese, from undertaking, or continuing, their employment (de Silva 1997, 264). As a result, the more educated sections of Tamil society struggled to gain or retain employment due to the lack of fluency in Sinhalese, forcing them to leave the island for the UK, India or Malaysia in search of work (de Silva 1997, 263).

This migration made it possible for later generations to imagine a better life outside the island. This notion came to fruition with the introduction by the government, of the standardisation policy for the university higher education system: a policy that saw the government at the time attempt to rectify the perceived preferences for Tamils over Sinhalese entering university, another aspect of the colonial legacy (de Silva 1997, 266f.). The introduction and management of the policy created substantial levels of disaffection amongst the Tamil youth. While the policy aim of increasing tertiary educational participation amongst Sinhalese youth may have been well intentioned, the consequences of this policy implementation instead fuelled the alienation of a generation of Tamil youth. The Tamil youth were now doubly discriminated against: through the abandonment of English as an official language in both education and public services and through the restriction of access to universities instead of universally expanding the number of university places. The policy restricted Tamil admission to universities, allocating places in a ratio that benefited the Sinhalese far greater than others. The impact of the Language Act and the standardisation policy increased individual and community isolation from the state. Practical figures show that in 1994 Tamils constituted 5.2% of the civil service compared to 12.5% in 1981 (Weerakoon 1999, 1-8). The standardisation policy and Language Act furthered the idea that the Tamil diaspora was a victim diaspora. The fact that these policies appeared to have targeted the youth, who are often the main source for any viable diaspora, meant that:

- A diaspora was likely to form as people sought an education wherever they could and,
- Those who left would forever recall the reason why they left their homeland and, if successful in their work, could bring family and relatives who wanted an education/employment or to escape discrimination and violence. Given that

'youth' tend to lack inhibitions towards experiencing new environments and adapt to changing environments, meant that much of this generation left the country, creating a "brain drain".

Phase II: 1983-1995

The second phase formation coincided with the emergence of Tamil militant groups. Essentially these actors consisted of youth angered by the perceived failure of their political leadership to gain more rights for Tamils and deliver on the election manifesto of the 1977 Vaddukodai Resolution (Jeyaratnam Wilson 2000, 110). The increasing volume of displacements was further borne out of prevailing increasing tensions and inter-communal violence, such as the burning of the Jaffna Library in 1981 (Jeyaratnam Wilson 2000, 160f.) and the pogrom riots of 1983 (Rupesinghe 2006, 10).

This phase of migration comprised of mainly younger men and women, many of whom were students or activists for the main Tamil political parties. Within this group, particularly amongst the activists, many had suffered ill-treatment and torture at the hands of the Sri Lankan police; some émigrés at this time included survivors of the Welikada Prison Massacre of 1983 (Jeyaratnam Wilson 2000: 127). Their experience in canvassing support during elections in Sri Lanka and reports of their experiences had a three-pronged result within the Diaspora. Initially, first phase émigrés felt justified that they were the victims of ethnically motivated discrimination through the quota system and Language Act and that their own experience and decision to leave home had been vindicated. Secondly, they confirmed that Tamils were being disenfranchised and oppressed. Thirdly, many second-phase émigrés were accustomed to political activism and confident of conversing in English could help galvanise community cohesion. Such a development was crucial to the sustainability and political evolution of the community: the presence of an established community eases the transition for future arrivals and the larger the community the more diverse the endeavours it can embark upon. For instance, the Tamil diaspora is able to simultaneously provide substantial assistance to families and local communities through remittances and raising the profile of the discrimination that their brethren face in Sri Lanka whilst promoting their goal of an independent state.

Within the increasingly febrile ethno-sectarian nature of Sri Lankan politics that had by now pushed aside the politics of communitarian cohesion, a space was created in which Tamil militancy could take hold: Tamil militancy was fuelled by increasing uncertainty within the Tamil polity. By the late 1970s a generational gap had emerged – a generation of youth had become disillusioned with a leadership, whose *satyagraha* (non-violent) approach, which had lasted for thirty years, had seemingly failed to attain tangible improvements for Tamils.

For all their contributions in advancing Tamil rights, the pre-1980's Tamil political leadership, especially SJV Chelvenayakam, concluded that independence was the only alternative:

"We have abandoned the demand for a federal constitution. Our movement will be all non-violent...We know that the Sinhalese people will one day grant our demand and that we will be able to establish a state separate from the rest of the island... for a time, in the formation

of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) an amalgam of the Federal Party and the All Ceylon Tamil Congress (Jeyaratnam Wilson 1994, 129)".

Thus the adoption of the Vaddukoddai Resolution in 1976, a logical political evolution, paved the way for the basis of the Tamil Independence movement and the foundation of a diaspora political identity (ibid.).

For this new generation of intellectuals, academics, fisherman and farmers, organisations like the LTTE presented an effective and disciplined organisation (Singh 2006, 22). Furthermore, the LTTE's commitment to disband the caste system, prioritising individual abilities over their social status was attractive to lower caste and secular Tamils (Jeyaratnam Wilson 1994, 140). The presence, once again, of a unified, purposeful entity with a clear goal quickly replaced the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) and other earlier organisations. Between the 1980s and 2009, the LTTE played an important role in shaping a Tamil political identity, both within the Northeast and within the diaspora. They achieved this in two ways. By the organisation clearly articulated their position as the natural outcome of the violent opposition to Tamil attempts towards "a peaceful struggle of the Tamil people for their political rights" (Pirapaharan 2008); and by linking their emergence as a consequence of the failure to implement the Vaddukoddai Resolution, the TULFs mandate for the 1976 Parliament. Unlike previous political parties the LTTE quickly embarked on a statebuilding project, demonstrating to Tamils that an independent homeland with institutions associated with a modern state could be indigenously achieved, sustained and become successful:

"Travelling from government-controlled to LTTE-controlled areas resembles a border crossing between two nation-states, with well guarded control posts where travelers (sic) are required to show identity cards, goods are inspected and customs fees collected. Within the areas they control, LTTE runs a *de facto* state administration, which includes revenue collection, police and judiciary as well as public services and economic development initiatives. The emerging LTTE state builds on institutional experiments in the period from 1990 to 1995, when LTTE controlled Jaffna and parts of Vanni and established local administrative bodies" (Stokke 2006, 1022).

Phase III: 1995- 2010.

The previous phases of Tamil dislocation, between the 1950's and the 1980's, can be overwhelmingly characterised as the product of discriminatory educational and employment policies within the state sector. The latter part of phase II and the majority of phase III witnessed increasing militarisation and conflict intensity between the parties, which correlated with increases in the number of people dislocated internally and externally from Sri Lanka.

The increasing militarisation of both sides affected the experiences of members of the diaspora. During this period, a large proportion of those dislocated clearly did not have their political identity shaped by the same factors as those displaced during phase I, especially those who lived through the wars and international interventions of this period. Civilian experiences of the Third Eelam War differed vastly from those during of previous bouts of conflict, particularly

before the Indian Peacekeeping Force's intervention in 1987 (de Silva 2005, 705f.). The third phase of the development of a Tamil diaspora identity occurred largely in times of active military conflict and during the most brutal period for Tamil civilians, culminating in what is widely accepted as the military defeat of the LTTE.

When considering this third phase of the formation of diaspora's identity, 'members' ages typically ranged from their early 40s to today's teenagers (the children of those displaced in earlier phases of the conflict). The experiences of this generation, including that of their kin growing up in the West, differ vastly from those of previous generations.¹ For example, those displaced during the first phase and early on in phase II were primarily affected by the state-imposed structural inequalities of language and education discrimination. However, those displaced during the second half of phases II and III, periods of active conflict, may not have received a secondary or tertiary education in Sri Lanka, rather gaining those opportunities in the host states. Concomitantly, Tamils growing up in host states will not have experienced the lack of opportunities in education, though they may have 'memories' of employment or general discrimination experienced by their parents within host states and in the homeland.

A series of events, incidents and international engagements continued to shape Tamil political identity within the UK: the most significant amongst them being President Kumaratunga's War for Peace (Balasingham 2004, 200), the declaration of the 'War on Terror' in 2001 (Chandler 2001, 8) and the 2002 Ceasefire-Agreement and its subsequent failure. Other issues include the continued proscription of the LTTE within the European Union (TamilNet 2006; Bell 2006) towards the latter end of the peace process, the lack of international backing and the Sri Lankan establishment's vetoing of both the Interim-Self Governing Authority (ISGA) (Balasingham 2004, 462) and the Post-Tsunami Operational Management Structure (P-TOMS) (Silva 2005). A feature of the Tamil political identity, prior to the recent conflict phase, which resulted in large-scale civilian deaths and internment, has been an eagerness to have faith and trust in the intentions and actions of the international community. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence suggests that the awakening of a Tamil political identity among diaspora Tamils born in the hostland stems from both a lack of belonging and varying degrees of harassment in schools and communities and identification with Tamils being persecuted in the homeland, due to the psychological benefits gained from a sense of belonging. Theoretical interpretations of motivations for diaspora activism point to a sense of not belonging or not being welcome in the hostland (though some argue that Tamil diaspora motivations, in particular, buck this trend as Tamils, especially the youth, draw on a confidence found in the knowledge of having a secure and prosperous future, in this case, in the UK).

At this point in the essay it is important to discuss the relationship between host-country populace and those in the diaspora in shaping political identity. Host-country attitudes and approaches towards diaspora communities affect the way in which the political identities of a diaspora form. A few members of the diaspora, with the patronage of an established political party, have been able to represent their community by being elected to council wards where Tamils form large constituencies. Movement onto the national scale in order to affect policy on

¹ A fact brought to light during the conference in London in the summer of 2009.

inter-state affairs, particularly British–Sri Lankan relations, is limited by the electoral system of the host-country. The UK's First- Past-The-Post (FPTP) electoral system favours parties who gain one more vote than their rival in any constituency, rendering all other votes 'wasted' (Johnston et al. 2002). This effectively limits parliamentary representation to a few established parties, namely Labour, Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, with a few seats left for Plaid Cymru, the Scottish National Party and the two main parties from Northern Ireland (Dryzek/Dunleavy 2009, 164).

Amongst its other flaws, the FPTP system leads to an under-representation of small parties or parties with widely distributed support. The resultant duopolistic dominance affords the electorate little choice, whilst narrowing the space and opportunity for minority voices to break through, unless they conform and join one of the main parties. It is said to "discourage the selection of a socially broad spread of candidates in favour of those who are attractive to a large body of voters" (Heywood 2002, 233). These realities contribute to shaping not just a Tamil diaspora identity, but also to other communities who are thus unable to take a fair and active part in their 'homeland' as well as hostland politics.

There are, however, rare examples of breakthroughs; the election of single-issue independents or newly formed parties able to galvanise support from disenchanted or disenfranchised voters wishing to give the incumbent government a 'kicking'. More recent examples include the election of George Galloway in Bethnel Green and Bow in 2005 (BBC News 2005) and the election of fringe political parties in European Parliamentary elections (BBC News 2009b). The election of independents and smaller parties within domestic politics are considered rare events in a system otherwise dominated by two- or three-way party politics.

Herein lays a paradox in relation to the diaspora's politicisation and the issues that shaped the community's identity: within the diaspora it is widely accepted that the Sri Lankan democratic process contributed to the creation of the Tamil diaspora, including Sinhala nationalism. Whereas, the democratic tradition in the UK has evolved towards a vision of one-nation multi-cultural secular liberalism that has facilitated the ability of the diaspora to 'freely' mobilise under the banner they wish: given the anti-terror legislation, even this vision has appeared shaky in recent times.

Diasporas are not only moved to act to respond to events in the homeland, but also by events in the host-country. In recent years the political identity of Tamils supportive of or sympathetic to the organisations seeking Tamil independence have been shaped by the domestic and international political environment surrounding the 'War on Terror' – the proscription of the LTTE and the Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation (TRO) (TamilNet 2007), including, but not exclusively limited to, the United States. The impact of such measures and legislation is subject to an individual's experiences and attitudes. As a collective body, these issues have had the effect of reducing the avenues through which the diaspora could support their kith and kin displaced during the conflict or the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami. Thus, as a result, community leaders formed the British Tamils Forum to focus the community's engagement more directly with UK politicians and policy-makers "to ensure that they recognize the legitimate socio-political aspirations of Tamils in Sri Lanka and to help them find peace with justice and dignity" (British Tamils Forum

2009). The point here is that the impact of such measures and legislation is subject to an individual's experiences and attitudes.

I previously discussed the role of the host state as passively or actively facilitating the political development of conflict-based diasporas. In certain instances, the politicisation of ethno-nationalist or transnational 'state-seeking' diasporas has either been tolerated or encouraged by host states to further their own foreign policy objectives within the home state (Waldinger/Fitzgerald 2003, 28). Østergaard-Nielsen notes that the actors, "the state and the diaspora, while finding mutual benefit in the immediacy, often develop strained relations due their diametrically opposed views of the issues and desired outcomes in a given situation" (2001, cited from Waldinger/Fitzgerald 2003, 28). Lyon and Ucarer (2001 referenced in Waldinger/Fitzgerald 2003, 28), point to the experience of the European Kurdish community, an experience replicated in Tamil-European and Tamil-North American relations. In this instance, both Germany and France were willing to engage the Kurdish diaspora where it appeared they sought greater rights within the context of being a minority within Turkey. However, once the communities displayed the politics of Kurdish nationalism, the authorities quickly and "severely curtailed homeland-orientated, political activities...demonstrating the continuing potential for restrictive host responses, as well as the relational nature of the matrix in which trans-state migrant and ethnic social action takes place" (Lyon/Ucarer 2001 cited in Waldinger/Fitzgerald 2003, 28). In addition the community experienced "widespread ostracism by German mainstream parties, finding little support amongst even the far left" (Eccarius-Kelly 2002, 108 in Waldinger/Fitzgerald 2003, 28).

The Tamil experience has similarly been regulated by the community's relations with the British government. During the last two decades of the 20th Century there developed, in part, a mutually dependent relationship between the two actors. For the diaspora, engagement represented a chance to convince the former colonial master, Britain, that their model Asian democracy (de Silva 2005, 522) had become deficient in the model's ability to maintain minority rights and representation, and that the Tamil people no longer entrusted the Sri Lankan state with protecting them or their rights. In essence, the social contract (as understood from a European perspective) non-consensually entered into at independence had been broken and the Tamils wanted to separate.

For Britain, the presence of a substantial Tamil community afforded opportunities to develop further formal and informal contacts with various Tamil actors, to gauge the feelings of the community and wider Tamil populace in the Northeast and to validate any interventions the UK might make. Critics however, would argue that this is a co-option of the diaspora's interests within the international sphere (Kanthavanam 2007, 6f.). This situation is what Huntington and Smith would view as an impairment of the formulation of a coherent foreign policy by skilled ethnic lobbying. Whilst transnational corporations have been able to influence municipal law and state policy in relation to investment, trade and financial regulations diasporas have also been seen to influence inter-state relations including trade, aid and sanctions (Misra 2008, 145)

However, it arguably overstates the influence diasporas have on a state's foreign policy (Smith 2001, 184). While the diaspora as a political entity has modified its actions in accordance

with the changing prevailing legal environment, the outcomes of the events of 2009 have seen the emergence of a pattern of civil disobedience based on potentially dangerous embers. The inherent dangers are equal for both the UK and the Tamil diaspora. The new level of defiance, born out of frustration, anger and a sense of betrayal with the international community's failure to prevent civilian killings, particularly after the collapse of the 2002-2008 Ceasefire Agreement, means that the UK potentially has less influence with the diaspora whilst the diaspora risks damaging its image through unfettered reactions.

5. Conclusion

The original purpose of this paper was to identify the factors that shape the political identity of diasporas in host countries, paying particular attention to the United Kingdom. As I identified earlier, diasporas generally originate from the negative consequences of state policy, economic decline or conflict. A diaspora Tamil identity, not just in the United Kingdom but in France, Canada, India, Australia, New Zealand and Germany, is primarily structured around the events of the three phases, a position Orjuela also subscribes to: "Large-scale anti-Tamil violence in 1983, Indian intervention and subsequent war with the LTTE in the late 1980s, and the exodus from the northern peninsula of Jaffna after the government takeover in 1995 are collective traumas around which Tamil identity is structured" (Orjuela 2008, 440).

Dividing the history of the diaspora's formation and ongoing development by chronological phases, I was able to succinctly identify factors, both old and new that shaped the Tamil diaspora's political identity. Concomitantly, it was noted that there previously existed several cross-phase displacement factors for those emigrating between the 1950s and 1960s had previously existed, including colonisation programmes in the Northeast, standardisation in education and greater access to government services through linguistic equality, and remained unresolved by the 1980s.

Those displaced from the 1990s onwards are unlikely to have fled for the same reasons, which probably include the indirect and direct effects of war. As has been noted, diasporas form for several reasons, ranging from economic reasons to state persecution, leading to what we identify as the creation of a 'victim diaspora'. Economic factors can motivate emigration for personal gain or betterment whether or not there is a stable political and economic environment at home or, as a result of poor economic opportunities or discrimination.

Victim diasporas tend to have greater motivation to seek change in their homeland than the mainly economically-motivated diasporas. The most prominent of such groupings include the historic case of the Jewish diaspora. A transnational nation that successfully lobbied for a portion of mandated Palestine to be partitioned into the State of Israel (Bose 2007, 215-217; 226-227). Another successful community includes the Kosovan diaspora, which successfully lobbied for international intervention to stop Serbian crimes and establish an independent State (Ramsbotham et al. 2005, 150). In this regard, as a victim diaspora, the Sri Lankan/Eelam Tamil

diaspora is no different. Like most forms of identity, whether linguistic, familial, cultural, etc., one's political identity is not static. The first workshop of the series of four that this paper accompanies showed definite generational changes with regards to the events and/or issues that informed the shaping of the UK Tamil political identity. A large proportion of participants present saw events or incidents occurring in more recent history, particularly from 2000 to the present, drawing on events such as the Sencholai School bombing in 2006 (BBC News 2006). Apart from resulting in the loss of life, these events worked as a catalyst to politicise a new generation of Tamils. For Tamil youth they provided an immediate connection to the issue, as many of those who died were of their own generation. Furthermore, these events informed and shaped their view and identity with regards to the relationship between the Tamil national question and Sri Lanka. Their understanding of, and identification with, particular politics was strengthened when placed within the historical context of post-independence Sri Lanka and the experiences of close relatives. The youth identified a strong narrative of discrimination and victimisation of Tamils at the hands of the state.

Currently, the political identity of the Tamil diaspora, on the whole, remains resolved on the issue of Tamil independence. However, it naturally remains in flux on certain issues, namely the policies that inform their political identity, their world view, which organisations or individuals should lead the Tamil cause and the Tamil attitude towards the international community. It is important for relevant actors, such as those seeking to provide leadership and direction to the diaspora, including those seeking to engage with the diaspora, to recognise that the Tamil diaspora youth's political identity has been formed and shaped by the events from 2002 to the present day. Their focus has mainly been on the Sri Lankan government's actions over this period and what they perceive as the international community's apparent lack of action and mishandling of the displacement and killing of civilians from 2006 onwards. As the generation before them formed the armed groups, the younger generation will, combined with their inquisitorial culture imparted by the UK educational system, seek and demand more from the community leaders and the British government. This younger generation will draw on the perceived double-standards of the international community over its response to the conflicts in Kosovo and Darfur.

As witnessed by the 2009 Iranian anti-government protests, this generation has the ability of drawing on real-time instantaneous international communications on a small, 5-10 people, and large scale, 30 or more, to organise protests at short notice. This is achieved using a plethora of social networking sites, from MSN Hotmail to MySpace, Facebook and Twitter (CBC 2009). Since 2000, Facebook and Twitter have become the medium of choice for web savvy youth. In terms of mass communication, it has provided another avenue, however, culturally and socially, it can be said to be detrimental. For example, it has digitised the cultural form of the diary, evolving into more than private thoughts, developing into a need to publicly express opinions, views and ideas on everything from your daily routine, the latest fashion, celebrity style, the death of global celebrities and politicians to crises of international concern. In addition to population movements, advances in telecommunications have facilitated the expansion of political/national identity beyond the traditional boundaries of the state (Cochrane et al. 2009, 682).

This has happened more easily and quickly than traditional forms of media could have ever achieved; people are able to spontaneously organise and conduct public campaigns over the internet, thus garnering far wider attention in a shorter period of time. Whereas previous campaigns or marches were prepared months in advance, occurring on days of cultural or national importance such as Black July or Heroes Day, events today can be organised in a matter of minutes and be seen taking place within hours in cities across the world from Sydney, London, Oslo and Toronto.

For this generation, the events, laws and practices that informed the views and political identity of previous generations, such as the Language Act, the university quota system, state-sponsored colonisation, and the pogroms of the 1950's, 1970's and 1980's, do not inform their sense of identity or galvanise them to action. Rather, for the upcoming generation, it is primarily the events of the last few years. This distinction portrays an epoch of inter-generational division, partly in terms of what it means to be politically Tamil (both for Tamils and non-Tamils) and secondly, how to identify oneself and what the Tamil body politic stands for, what it represents and how it goes forward as a united entity.

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- White Pigeon – <http://www.whitepigeonuk.org/>
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- British Tamils Forum – <http://www.tamilsforum.com/>
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