

## The Island

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## Parasites

**S**ri Lankan political leaders have an enormous predilection for foreign models, as is common knowledge. They have introduced a Constitution, which is a political chimera, as it were, containing features of the French and British systems of government. The Provincial Council system is based on the Indian devolution model. But they have chosen to ignore the Swedish model anent the salaries, perks, privileges, etc. of members of parliament.

The CID, which switched its allegiance to the present regime, following last year's change of government, is reported to have commenced a probe into a colossal amount of public funds (Rs. 2.8 billion) spent on purchasing luxury vehicles for the bigwigs of the *yahapalana* administration.

The ongoing CID probe reminds us of an article on the Swedish MPs, who have to lead simple lives because they are debarred from living high on the hog, at the expense of the taxpaying public. They, including ministers, have to take public transport and live in small apartments as tax money is not utilised to provide them with vehicles and palatial houses.

In January 2015, after being sworn in, President Maithripala Sirisena had the public believe that his was a simple lifestyle. He went so far as to use a locally produced ballpoint pen to sign some documents and refused to live in the President's House purportedly to save public funds. But, later, he had three sprawling ministerial residences merged into one big presidential palace and made it part of his retirement package! The latest editions of SUVs and other luxury vehicles bought for him and others, under the *yahapalana* government, cost the public a fortune. A supplementary estimate was presented to Parliament seeking to buy ministers more luxury vehicles while the country was still reeling from the explosion of the army's Central Armoury, at Salawa, in 2016.

Spending public funds amounting to billions of rupees on luxury vehicles for politicians who already have fleets of them is a crime, in a debt-ridden country like Sri Lanka, where malnutrition and growth stunting are rampant among children. According to the Demographic Health Survey 2016, the prevalence

the Demographic Health Survey 2015, the prevalence of stunting, wasting and underweight among Sri Lankan children under five years of age remains static at 17.3%, 15.1% and 20.5%, respectively (a level of 15.1% is categorised as 'very high'). The prevalence of wasting places Sri Lanka among the 10 worst low-and middle-income countries in the world, as we reported the other day. Besides, hospitals are experiencing drug shortages. Schools and universities are crying out for more funds. The country is struggling to service its debt. As many as 1,500 children with congenital heart diseases die annually unable to undergo lifesaving operations. Members of the public and various organisations have come forward to build a Cardiac and Critical Care Complex at Lady Ridgeway Children's Hospital, under *Little Hearts* project, which is trying to raise Rs. 2 billion. The government contribution to this worthy cause has been only Rs. 300 mn! The *yahapalana* administration spent as much as Rs. 600 million on two vehicles for its Prime Minister, according to the JVP.

The SLPP grandees who are making a hue and cry about waste had no qualms about living in clover at the expense of the taxpayer, before being ousted in 2015. Today, they have taken the moral high ground and are raking the UNP over the coals for the purchase of super luxury vehicles for the MPs and ministers in the previous government. What will these holier-than-thou politicians do with these vehicles if they succeed in forming the next government? We suggest that all of them be auctioned and the proceeds sent to the Treasury.

A prerequisite for a developing a nation is to keep its politicians in their place and stop using public funds to humour them. Sweden has done so and achieved its development goals.