



2026

SRI LANKA STUDY TOUR

AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS, VICTORIA



**Australian Institute
of International Affairs**
Victoria

7-18 June 2026

TOUR LEADERS' NOTE

As tour leaders, we can report that AIIA Victoria's 2026 Study Tour to Sri Lanka was an outstanding success. Aided by co-leader Prakash Mirchandani's extensive in-country contacts, we were privileged to meet senior and influential figures across Sri Lanka's political, intellectual, economic and industrial fields. We found much that surprised us and returned to Australia much better informed and hopeful for the country's future.

We also found time to experience Sri Lanka's deep history and were particularly impressed by the richness of its pre-colonial culture. Many of us also took the opportunity to explore Sri Lanka's unique culinary tradition, which is quite unlike that of its larger Indian neighbour.

Our tour group were exemplary ambassadors for our country and engaged deeply with our hosts throughout the visit. They made our job as tour leaders an absolute pleasure throughout. We thank them deeply for their engagement and friendship.

Prakash Mirchandani and Richard Iron CMG OBE
Study Tour Co-leaders

SRI LANKA STUDY TOUR PARTICIPANTS

The AIIA Victoria Sri Lanka Study Tour consisted of co-leaders Prakash Mirchandani and Richard Iron CMG OBE, Study Tour Intern Tess Landry, and participants John West, The Hon. Murray Kellam AO KC, Dr. Michael Moignard, Katherine Moignard, Angie Carter, Colin Carter AM, Chris Lambert, Katrina Lambert, William Comley, Steve Cusworth and Mark Gaillard.



INSIGHTS FROM AN AUSTRALIAN PERSPECTIVE

A key outcome of the study tour was challenging many of our preconceived perceptions of Sri Lanka. Rather than viewing the country through Australian or Western narratives, engaging directly with government, industry and academics provided a broad understanding of Sri Lanka's political, economic and cultural landscape.

One of the most surprising insights was Sri Lanka's approach to China. Australian and Indian narratives often frame China as a security threat and in competition for influence in the region. In contrast, many of our engagements in Sri Lanka viewed China primarily as an economic partner rather than a threat. Discussions also suggested that Sri Lanka's own media and perspectives are often overshadowed by the scale of Indian media, positioning external narratives to dominate international perceptions of Sri Lanka's foreign policy. Similarly, there appeared to be little interest in U.S. politics compared with the prominence these issues receive in Australia.

Our meetings also explored what a supposed Marxist government looks like in reality. We found that the National Peoples Party, while historically rooted in Marxist ideology, has a pragmatic approach to government, with policies shaped by economic recovery, IMF reforms and strengthening fiscal discipline over strict ideological principles.

The study tour also broadened our understanding of Sri Lankan identity. Rather than a single national identity, discussions highlighted the complexity of balancing Sinhalese, Tamil, Burgher among other identities, with diverse religious and cultural influences.

Finally, we gained a greater understanding about Sri Lanka's migration and diaspora, with approximately 78,000 people of Sri Lankan ancestry being based in Melbourne. We learnt that diaspora experiences differ between countries, with Australia's majority of education and employment based migration contrasting with the higher levels of conflict driven migration to countries such as Canada and the United Kingdom, influencing the countries to navigate different internal pressures and relationships to Sri Lanka.

Overall, the trip succeeded in highlighting the importance of engaging with local perspectives and understanding a country's landscape through their own social, political and economic lens.

DAY ONE

MONDAY 8 JUNE



After a welcome breakfast briefing, the group was introduced to Sri Lanka's history, politics and culture through a guided tour of Colombo. The tour included visits to Independence Square, the Parliament building, war memorials, historic area and religious sites.



Our first appointment was with the Advocata Institute, where we were briefed on the current economic landscapes shaping Sri Lanka. This meeting gave participants key insights into economic trends such as Sri Lanka's heavy reliance on remittances and tourism, impacts of the demographic decline and high emigration and targeting reforms that move beyond economic stability towards growth.



Trade liberalisation is central to Advocata's economic development vision, where nationalism, bureaucracy, and stagnant government productivity were pinpointed as structural barriers to growth.



We finished the night with a traditional Sri Lankan buffet, followed by an informative talk by Uditha Devapriya on Sri Lanka's history and culture. The conversation challenged inherited global perceptions of the country, its complex society shaped by diverse influences, as well as ongoing debates around national identity.

DAY TWO

TUESDAY 9 JUNE



Day two began with an engagement at the Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute (LKI), focusing on Sri Lanka's maritime position and security. Key discussions centred on Sri Lanka's strategically important maritime location, the shared maritime and economic interests between Sri Lanka and Australia and the ongoing challenge of balancing economic and security priorities in regional relations.



Next we headed to Virtusa Corporation, where we were joined by Denver De Zylva, Akhil Tandulwadikar, and Patrick Fernando to discuss changing perspectives on industry and how sustainability is increasingly viewed as a strategic asset rather than a reporting obligation. The conversation further challenged perspectives of Sri Lanka, emphasising the need for different approach to Sri Lanka's tech industry compared to India due to a smaller skilled workforce.



We were joined at dinner by M.A. Sumanthiran, PC, a constitutional and human rights lawyer and former MP for Jaffna. We explored the ongoing challenges facing Sri Lanka's Tamil minority, including cultural identity, post-war reconciliation and the lasting social and political impacts of the civil conflict. The discussion questioned the extent of or reluctance to post-conflict reconciliation and highlighted the need for accountability, transitional justice and truth to support intersocietal reconciliation.



DAY THREE

WEDNESDAY 10 JUNE



Our first stop on day three was Edith Cowan University, a private Australian Campus offering Australian degrees to Sri Lankan students. Pro Vice-Chancellor David Matthews gave us a tour of the campus, which mirrors Australian classrooms and discussed how the campus adapts to local cultural context while responding to workforce and university placement demand.



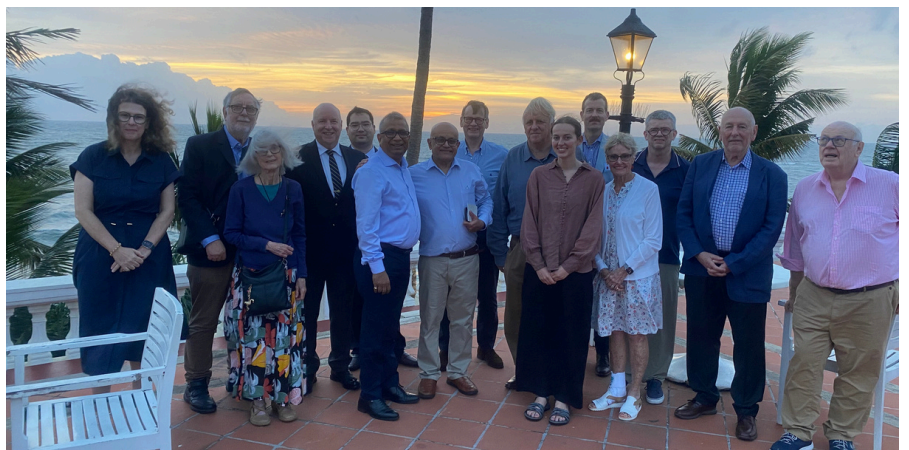
Austrade Sri Lanka Director - Education Sandi Seneviratne highlighted education as a key bilateral bridge between Sri Lanka and Australia, with strong student migration flows and navigating ongoing 'brain drain' concerns.



In the afternoon, we attended a Q&A with The Hon. Sajith Premadasa, Leader of the Opposition, covering Sri Lanka's political landscape, ideological directions and the balance between pragmatism and reform. Discussion also focused on structural reforms in education, investment, justice and diaspora return.



Our evening concluded with dinner at the Mount Lavinia Hotel. One of Sri Lanka's oldest heritage hotels, originally built in 1806 as a beachside mansion for British Governor Sir Thomas Maitland.



DAY FOUR - FIVE

THURSDAY 11 - FRIDAY 12 JUNE



We travelled to Galle and enjoyed a relaxing seaside stay at the Jetwing Lighthouse Hotel, designed by the famous late architect Geoffrey Bawa.

In the afternoon, we had a guided tour of Galle Fort, visiting the ramparts, watchtowers, boutique shops, colonial architecture and historic churches. The Fort is a UNESCO World Heritage Site which reflects a largely Dutch influence, as well as Portuguese and British.



On day five, we explored further south along Sri Lanka's coast. We began in Matara, visiting the Dutch Star Fort. We then stopped at a lighthouse, located at the southernmost tip in Sri Lanka. We enjoyed lunch at Kurumba Bay in Weligama, a popular surfing destination.



Returning to Colombo in the evening, some of the group stopped by the iconic Galle Face Hotel.



DAY SIX - EIGHT

SATURDAY 13 - MONDAY 15 JUNE



Day 6: We travelled to central Sri Lanka, entering the Cultural Triangle. Today's stop was Dambulla Cave Temple, a Buddhist cave set into a mountain rock face. We admired the impressive carvings and frescoes dating back over 2,000 years old.

Day 7: Half the group opted for a 5am climb of the Sigiriya Rock Fortress, passing ancient water systems, staircases, paw carvings and frescoes as the sun rose. At the summit, we explored the remains of the royal palace complex.



Plans were briefly delayed for the Socceroos World Cup match, before continuing the day with a scenic drive around Sigiriya rock, learning about the reign of King Kashyapa I. We then had lunch at a lakeside restaurant in Minneriya, eating traditional lake fish and spotting a wild elephant on the journey back.



Day 8: On our final day in the Cultural Triangle, we visited Polonnaruwa, the ancient second capital city of Sri Lanka. We first stopped in the museum to learn about its archaeological and historical significance and then walked through the remains and artefacts that date back 800 to 1000 years.



Our time in the Cultural Triangle also highlighted human - elephant conflict, particularly the risks faced (both to elephants and humans) by urbanisation of major roads cutting through national park areas.

DAY NINE

TUESDAY 16 JUNE



Our morning started with an engagement with Dr Harsha de Silva (Opposition MP), Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on Public Finance, where we discussed Sri Lanka's post-crisis economic stability and the need for reform to achieve sustainable long term growth. It was noted how regional geopolitics, particularly India's influence, shapes Sri Lanka's economic choices.



We then had a briefing and Q&A with The Hon. Chathuranga Abeyasinghe (MP), Deputy Minister of Industry and Entrepreneurial Development. Conversations focused on navigating the new government's challenges with balancing public demand for concrete outcomes, with IMF discipline.



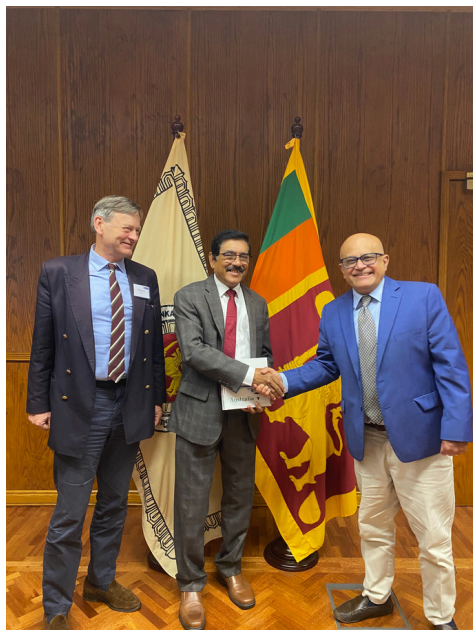
Next, we had a briefing with Her Worship Vraîe Cally Balthazaar, Mayor of Colombo, where we learnt about the complexities of governing Colombo's diverse council and community.



Finally, we attended a briefing at the Australian High Commission with High Commissioner Matthew Duckworth and First Secretary - Maritime Security Sharini McEwen, where we discussed Australia's Indo-Pacific strategy and its relationship with Sri Lanka. Our cooperation mainly focuses on maritime security, capacity building and regional stability, with strong connections through diaspora, education and climate resilience.

DAY TEN

WEDNESDAY 17 JUNE



We began our last day with a meeting with The Hon. Dr Nandalal Weerasinghe, Governor of the Central Bank of Sri Lanka, where we discussed Sri Lanka's economic recovery following the crisis, IMF reforms and improved fiscal discipline. We also explored the future outlook, navigating post-IMF, financial literacy initiatives and loans from China.

We then visited Linea Intimo, a unit of MAS Holdings, a Sri Lankan founded and owned global apparel and textile manufacturer operating in 14 countries. Touring their automated design lab, dyeing, stitching and production lines gave insight into the scale and ethical labour practices behind their athletic and sportswear development and manufacturing processes.

In the afternoon, we headed to Akbar Brothers, largest tea exporter in Sri Lanka (and fourth largest globally) and one of only three tea bag manufacturers worldwide. We had a tea tasting, experiencing Sri Lanka's regional tea leaf diversity and toured the Wattala packing facility, which also houses Asia's first carbon insetting-certified warehouse.

The AIIA Victoria Sri Lanka Study Tour concluded over a farewell dinner at The Gallery Cafe, located in the former offices of the celebrated architect, the late Geoffrey Bawa.



RECOMMENDATIONS

The study tour provided a great foundation for strengthening engagement and partnerships between Australia and Sri Lanka.

AIIA Victoria plans to maintain key relationships established throughout the visit. AIIA Victoria will explore the opportunities for further engagement with stakeholders such as the Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute to increase global institutional collaboration and future exchanges.

Looking ahead, travelling through Sri Lanka highlighted just how much the 'small' country has to offer. A possible follow up study tour exploring the North and East would provide a very different perspective of Sri Lanka, while still examining the country's economic and political reforms beyond the IMF program and building upon the people-to-people connections established during this visit.





THANK YOU:

- Advocata Institute
- Uditha Devapriya
- Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute
- Virtusa Corporation
- M.A Sumanthiran MP, PC
- Edith Cowan University, Sri Lanka: Pro Vice-Chancellor David Matthews and Austrade Sri Lanka Director - Education Sandi Seneviratne
- The Hon. Sajith Premadasa MP
- Dr. Harsha de Silva
- The Hon. Chaturanga Abeysinghe MP
- Australian High Commissioner Matthew Duckworth and First Secretary Maritime Security Sharini McEwen
- Her Worship Vraîe Cally Balthazaar, Mayor of Colombo
- The Hon. Dr Nandalal Weerasinghe, Governor of the Central Bank of Sri Lanka
- MAS Holdings - Linea Intimo Unit
- Akbar Brothers - Quick Tea

Trip Leaders: Prakash Mirchandani & Richard Iron CMG OBE

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