

Multi Nation Program



Dr. Harsha de Silva | Colombo, SRI LANKA
Member of Parliament, The Parliament of Sri Lanka

As the key opposition spokesperson for economic affairs in Sri Lanka's parliament, Dr. Harsha de Silva is a vocal critic of excessive government intervention in the economy and a strong advocate for economic liberalization. An internationally recognized development economist, he was appointed Member of Parliament after the 2010 parliamentary elections by the opposition United National Party. While working on a range of issues at the policy and operational level relating to emerging Asia, he also hosted a popular weekly TV talk show on political economics from 2006 until 2010.

Dr. de Silva's purpose while on fellowship was to understand the interaction of politicians, think tanks, academics, lobbyists, and the media in the policy-making process. He wanted to gain insight into the practical functioning of the process among the various parties, and to observe the dynamics of these different groups in converging and diverging on issues to elicit public support for the positions they were pursuing. He approached the topic from the perspective of a new MP who had observed for the past year with dismay that legislation in Sri Lanka was often enacted without substantial discussion and debate.

It was against this backdrop that Dr. de Silva spent the first week and a half of his fellowship in Washington, D.C. He was there during the 'government shutdown debate' that ended when President Obama and the Republican-controlled House of Representatives compromised just hours before the deadline to approve the 2011 U.S. federal budget. Dr. de Silva was impressed with the quality of the debate (although along party lines), and how both sides utilized voluminous data and analysis from the Congressional Research Service, Congressional Budget Office, and various think tanks to bolster their arguments.

During his visit to Washington, D.C., Dr. de Silva met with politicians and policymakers, their advisors, senior staff at the U.S. Department of Treasury, congressional staff, the Government Accountability Office, think tanks, academics, lobbyists, pollsters, public opinion specialists, and media personnel. He says, "I learnt so much. I learnt what real democracy meant. The fundamental premise in this country is that everyone has a voice, be it the individual who wants to express his or her opinion, or groups or organizations pushing their positions via the hundreds of lobbyists. In fact, it was so heartening to see people lining up to sit in on congressional hearings to make their views heard by the politicians."

Dr. de Silva continued his fellowship travels to St. Louis, MO, San Francisco, CA, and other cities across the nation, where he learned more about these issues at the city and state levels, and interacted with many stakeholders in the process. He noted that "The fellowship experience contributed to my development by showing me many examples of leaders in politics, academia, media, and government. I saw how they have led, and continue to lead, the policy processes from their own perspective, based on what they believe is the best way forward towards making America great."

Upon his return to Sri Lanka, Dr. de Silva will work to bring together young politicians from both the ruling and opposition parties to initiate a dialog on the need for greater discussion and debate in formulating laws in Sri Lanka. He will also continue conversations with think tanks he visited during his fellowship.

Leaders bettering the world around them.