

Nonsense About Norwegians: The Struggle Continues

Another week ...and yet again the need to counter a particularly fatuous 'review' of my Sri Lanka book that featured on the pages of [The Island](#) newspaper last week, claiming that in reality I ghost wrote the whole thing on Erik Solheim's commission and to his political specifications. Forgive any grammatical infelicities detected – this was written in something of a hurry. The main points, however, stand firm I hope!

Misery, Kamal Wickremasinghe Style

The Island, April 17, 2016



*Mark Salter addressing a gathering at ICES, Colombo at the launch of **To End a Civil War** recently. From (L-R). Jehan Perera, Dr. Dayan Jayatilleke, Dr. Pakiasothy Saravanamuttu and Salter.*

In what is starting to become something of a weekly ritual I find myself again responding to an article that takes my recent book, *To End A Civil War: Norway's Peace Engagement in Sri Lanka* as its point of departure. In this case, a splenetic diatribe by Kamal Wickremasinghe, dramatically titled 'To end Solheim's misery' (*The Island*, 12 April 2016) which, among its

various ambitions purports to be a 'review' of my book.

The 'review' gets off to a distinctly unpromising start: at the end of his first paragraph Wickramasinghe informs us that he is in fact talking about 'the latest offering by Erik Solheim' – and leaves matters at that. Following this extraordinary salvo we – and in particular I, as the actual author of the book – are then given a paragraph in which to compose ourselves before we are informed at the beginning of the following one that in fact Solheim commissioned the book, rather than actually wrote it, chiefly in order to 'settle a few scores' with people such as Lakshman Kadirgamar and Mihinda Rajapaksa''.

By this stage Wickremasinghe has already made no less than three major, and demonstrably false assertions: that my book in some way constitutes an Erik Solheim 'offering'; that Solheim commissioned it; and that his – and thus the book's – aim was to settle some old Sri Lankan scores. First, the book was written by me, and me alone, on the basis that it would seek to provide an objective and impartial account of the Norwegian engagement in Sri Lanka as official peace facilitators, a mission undertaken at the joint behest of the GoSL and the LTTE. In that context, I interviewed a very wide range of people involved in one way or the other in the peace process in Sri Lanka, India, the USA, EU, UN and of course Norway – as Wickremasinghe would have registered had he taken the trouble to consult the book's Appendices, where I list all of them.

While it is indeed true that Erik Solheim, along with Vidar Helgesen were key sources for the book, this was simply by virtue of their having been the two frontline figures in the Norwegian peace facilitation effort. Moreover, even a superficial reading of the book would have revealed to Wickremasinghe that in its pages, alongside more favourable mentions, Solheim comes in for plenty of criticism – both from Norwegian colleagues and a number of international figures.

Moreover, Solheim did not in any sense 'commission' the book – I submitted an initial proposal to the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which was eventually accepted. As to the score settling charge, I can state categorically that this assertion is complete and utter nonsense. Criticism of individuals such as Kadirgamar and Rajapaksa – which by the way is certainly not confined to Solheim – there most certainly is in the book. But this cannot and should not be confused or otherwise conflated with suggestions of the narrative being guided by predefined vendettas, supposedly entertained by one of its prime subjects.

But things go from bad to worse hereafter. Here in all its glory is Wickremasinghe's next paragraph of purple prose

No one should be under the illusion that the former NGO wallah Mark Salter is the real author of TECW: it is ghost-written to evade the impact of Solheim's unsavoury reputation on the credibility of the exercise. I think Salter's claim that he wrote the book as an objective observer is undiluted hogwash in the absence of an explanation as to why Solheim would fund a 'fishing expedition' by him on a set of events that have been buried for nearly a decade. Solheim's prominence at the launch of the book in Oslo, London and the US, and the lead role he played in panel discussions, with Salter playing a subsidiary role, portrayed Solheim as the real instigator.

Here we have it then: the 'real' story of how this, my latest book came to be written by a 'former NGO wallah' (I haven't worked for an NGO for over 20 years). Except hold on there! Now it seems I'm not really the book's author! Or to be more precise, that I 'ghost-wrote' it as part of a plot engineered by Erik Solheim to try and shield the book's reception from the negative impact of his own 'unsavoury reputation'.

But now, thankfully, the heinous plot has been unmasked by our intrepid columnist. And in this context, moreover, Wickremasinghe can also now 'reveal' my claim to have written

the book as an 'objective observer' for what it really is: 'undiluted hogwash' – unless, that is, an explanation can be provided as to why Solheim would have wanted to fund the whole exercise. (Spoiler alert: as explained earlier, he didn't fund the book). In support of his argument, Wickremasinghe points to Solheim's alleged prominence at the book launch events held in 'Oslo, London and the US' (for some reason he omits to mention those held in Canada, and most recently in Delhi, Chennai and Colombo), with me apparently playing no more than a 'subsidiary' role.

Obviously questions of prominence are to some degree a matter of perception. For anyone curious to verify the matter for themselves, however, films of the London and Colombo launches are easily viewable at www.marksalter.org. But I would challenge any fair-minded observer to watch the London launch film and tell me that I play second fiddle to Erik Solheim's lead role (others, including Vidar Helgesen, feature on the panel). When it comes to the Colombo launch, moreover, the matter becomes even more clear cut, as Solheim was not even present for that occasion – a strange way of demonstrating his 'prominent' role in 'his' book on its home territory launch!

Adding insult to injury, Wickremasinghe concludes his 'review' of the book with the following casual one-liner. "Any analysis of Solheim's selective account of his claimed 'services' to peace in Sri Lanka would be a waste of time."

So, that's the level of intellectual engagement a 500 page work, two years in the making and based on interviews with over 70 key figures in the Sri Lankan peace process, merits by way of attention! Much more useful, as Wickremasinghe appears to believe, to proceed to churn out a long, fairly random list of 'puzzling questions' regarding Norway's engagement in Sri Lanka. The list is so rambling, so filled with alternately partisan, ill-informed and fanciful 'questions (An example of the latter that actually had me laughing: 'Why did Norway facilitate the training of sea tigers in Thailand?') that it's

hard to know where to start.

In fact on second thoughts, I don't propose even to start. If Wickremasinghe seriously considers attempting to produce an informed analysis of my book to be 'a waste of time', then I am inclined to feel the same about the rest of his article – the list of 'puzzling questions' along with the crude, ill-informed and occasionally down-right slanderous attack on Erik Solheim that sullies the final section included.

Would it be too much to ask, then, for someone to produce a serious, objective and impartial review of my book in these pages? All in all, I'm beginning to think it just might be.

Mark Salter, Writer and researcher