

UPALI OBEYESEKERE – PRESIDENT, CANADA-SRI LANKA BUSINESS COUNCIL

Upali Augustus Obeyesekere arrived in Canada on November 3, 1974, as a landed immigrant and picked Toronto as his future home. Exactly thirty-days after arrival, he was fortunate to secure full-time employment. He joined the computer giant – IBM Canada Ltd., in a marketing administration position on December 3, 1974. Upali sponsored his fiancée from Sri Lanka and Tamara arrived in Canada on April 8, 1975. The couple were married in a simple ceremony at The Annunciation of Our Lady Parish in Don Mills on April 26, 1975. They have three children and six grand-children.

While working at IBM Canada Ltd., Upali pioneered the import of food products from Sri Lanka to Canada in 1983 under the name and style of Ad-Bri Enterprises Inc. He became the Canadian agent for Consolidated Exports of Sri Lanka, a government agency. From a small shipment in 1983, Ad-Bri Enterprises graduated to bringing 20-foot containers. He introduced a total of 134 different varieties of food items, spices, fruit drinks, etc., from Sri Lanka to Canada and sold the products through a network of around 48 distributors in Ontario, Quebec, Alberta, British Columbia, Nova Scotia, and Manitoba. His company also pioneered the import of tea bags from Sri Lanka to Canada under his private label, “**TANAB TEAS**”.



In February 1990, Upali quit IBM Canada Ltd., after 16-years of service during which time he managed several high-profile assignments in the Large Account sector of the company’s marketing structure. For his commitment to excellence, Upali was awarded the Triple ‘A’ Award twice in 1982 and 1988. He was a valued employee of IBM Canada Ltd. His decision to leave a lucrative job with IBM was justified as by this time, Ad-Bri Enterprises Inc. had become a household word in Canada. The change in career was mainly to focus his attention 100% on imports from Sri Lanka. To this end, he was very successful in promoting bilateral trade between Canada & Sri Lanka.

Joining a coterie of members of the Canadian business community led by Sir Christopher Ondaatje, Upali helped form the “Canada-Sri Lanka Business Council” in October 1990. As a Charter Member, he was elected Director, Publicity & Promotion at the preliminary meeting held at the World Trade Centre in Toronto. From 1997 – 2008, he served as General Secretary of the Council. In 2012, Upali was elected president of the council by unanimous assent and continues to function in this post to date.

In 1999, Upali was appointed Canadian Investment Representative for the Board of Investment of Sri Lanka – a post he held with distinction for 3-years. His duties entailed promoting Canadian investment in Sri Lanka on major infra-structure projects. His contribution towards the increase of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Sri Lanka has been acknowledged in many ways by the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL). Upali has participated in every Canadian delegation to Sri Lanka since 1999, and led the last two delegations that went for the Sri Lanka Footwear & Leather Expo + Sri Lanka Expo.

Upali has been an integral part of the Sri Lankan expatriate community since his arrival in Canada. His contribution towards the socio-cultural evolution of the community has been tremendous. He was Sports Secretary, Canada-Sri Lanka Association (CSLA) from 1976-1978; Director, Sri Lanka Club Peel from 1982 – 1988; and Founding President, Josephian-Peterite Alumni Association of Canada, in 1984. Upali captained the first unofficial Sri Lanka Cricket XI from 1984-1988, under the auspices of Sri Lanka Club – Peel. He was also the General Secretary, Association of Canadian Cricket Journalists (ACCJ); Steering Committee Member, South Asian Business Councils’ Alliance (SABCA); and President, Canada-Sri Lanka Business Council.

One of Upali’s passion was to launch an ethnic newspaper in Canada. He made this happen in 1990 when along with veteran journalist Kirthie Abeyesekera – he launched *The Times of Sri Lanka* that was well received in Canada and the USA. Today, he still manages *The Times of Sri Lanka* website www.timeslanka.com and moderates a blog titled “Canada-Sri Lanka News Network” both of which have become hugely popular amongst readers around the world. He promotes tourism to Sri Lanka through his popular blog “CeylonHolidays Canada”.

As a good corporate citizen, Upali’s contribution to Canada and more specifically to the Sri Lankan expatriate community is legendary. He is well-known at all three levels of government in Canada – Federal, Provincial and Municipal. He works closely with the Government of Sri Lanka and its allied departments and agencies. All the roles he has played in the last 42-years had made him invaluable to the diplomatic community from both jurisdictions. Upali is a proud recipient of Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Award at the Ontario Legislature in 2012.