

---

# The Tamil Tigers have reaped what they've sown: Jonathan Kay on the legacy of Neelan Tiruchelvam

Wednesday, 06 May 2009

Last Updated Wednesday, 06 May 2009

National post By Jonathan Kay The conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil Tigers has deep, tangled roots. But to a rough order of magnitude, the moral stakes can be reduced to a single act of terrorist savagery that took place on July 29, 1999 - the day Neelan Tiruchelvam was blown out the side of his Nissan sedan by a female suicide bomber riding a moped.

Tiruchelvam was a Sri Lankan Tamil, but not the kind that makes excuses for terrorism, or for the nihilistic death cult led by Tigers chief Velupillai Pirapaharan. Instead, he sought to bring justice and self-determination for Sri Lanka's Tamil minority through negotiation and constitutional reform. In Sri Lanka, he was an elected parliamentarian and the founder of two major think tanks. In the United States, he taught at Harvard University, enlightening Western students about human-rights abuses committed in Sri Lanka - by the nation's military and the Tigers alike. He was a moderate, in other words - the Tamils' answer to Yitzhak Rabin or Nelson Mandela. And that's why he was assassinated: The Tigers despise any Tamil who does not share their commitment to war and terrorism. Tiger propaganda - including the terrorist group's own "poet laureate" - spent years vilifying Tiruchelvam as a traitor prior to his assassination. Muzhakkam, a Tiger-controlled newspaper here in Canada joined in the campaign. The act serves as a grim metaphor for the war itself. Much as many Tamil-Canadians claim that the Sri Lankan government is engineering a "genocide", the greatest threat to the country's Tamils has been their professed protectors. The Tigers are the ones who have assassinated moderate Tamils, erected a murderous mini-dictatorship in the northern part of the island, abducted Tamil children to serve as terrorists and soldiers, and stolen tsunami-relief money to fund military operations. Now that the Tigers are cornered in north-eastern Sri Lanka, the Tigers are holding tens of thousands of Tamil civilians as human shields - shooting them in the back as they seek to flee. Tiruchelvam's sacrifice is remembered in the highest places - including right here in Canada. In fact, it helps explain why Michael Ignatieff has decisively reversed the Liberal party's traditionally soft stand on Tiger terror. In the late 1980s, Tiruchelvam and Ignatieff were Harvard colleagues, preaching human rights from the same hymn book. When Tiruchelvam was blown up, Ignatieff traveled to Sri Lanka to deliver a lecture in the man's honor. A year later, he described the experience in a speech at the Canadian Journalists for Free Expression awards dinner in Toronto. Neelan Tiruchelvam, Ignatieff declared, was "a man whose memory I revere." But that wasn't the prevailing view among many of the noisiest members of the Canadian Tamil community: "When the word got out that I was going to give a lecture in Colombo in his honor, I began to get very extraordinary bits of Tamil literature, mailed to me with a Canadian postmark. And the sum and substance of these newsletters was basically to say that Neelan, my good friend, got what he deserved. This was a man who'd spent his entire life seeking peace and reconciliation on that bloody and tragic island. And it shocked me deeply to discover that the people who wished and rejoiced in his death were fellow citizens of [Canada] ... Don't think it doesn't put a chill down your spine when you get mysterious little missives like that." A decade later, with Ignatieff leading the Liberal Party, those hatemongers are now reaping what they've sown. And so are the Tamil Tigers themselves, whose last-ditch positions are now set to be overrun by Sri Lanka's military. Ten years after the group killed Neelan Tiruchelvam, an opportunity to implement his vision of peaceful reconciliation may finally be at hand.

jkay@nationalpost.com

Courtesy:Nationalpost.com