

SUSTAINABLE WISDOM FROM AN

By Raymond Schonfeld

On 24 June, the third lecture in the series named after Amartya Sen (1953) was delivered by Anand Panyarachun, also a Trinity man (1952), on the subject of *Sustainable Democracy*. After a distinguished career, including two terms as Prime Minister of Thailand, Anand Panyarachun is one of Asia's most respected democrats. A brief biography follows the summary of his lecture.

See Issue 3 of *The Fountain* for background on the Amartya Sen Lectures on Sustainable Development.

Why does democracy seem so fragile in the developing world, and how can a country reach the threshold necessary to sustain it? Those were the central questions addressed by Anand Panyarachun in his *Amartya Sen Lecture*, before a packed hall in Brussels. Drawing on his experience as prime minister of a large developing country—Thailand's population of 65 million equals Britain's—he detailed seven essential *pillars of the architecture of democracy*.

Anand began by acknowledging the influence of Mahatma Gandhi and Amartya Sen. Gandhi, for his view that *democracy cannot be imposed from without [but] has to come from within*; and Sen, for placing human freedom at the centre of his idea of development. Yet despite such influences and the implicit premise that democracy is superior to other forms of rule, it has

had difficulty taking root around the world, even after the end of the Cold War.

As the *primary cause* of the difficulty Anand pointed to the struggle between those who rule and those who are ruled: no government is so strong that it is invulnerable to individual greed and ambition. He went on to name and describe the seven pillars essential to democracy's architecture if it is to be sustained in face of those pressures: 1) elections, 2) political tolerance, 3) the rule of law, 4) freedom of expression, 5) accountability and transparency, 6) decentralisation, and 7) civil society.

By "architecture", Anand did not mean the slavish application of a blueprint or a standard engineering design. Each country has to choose its own balance of priorities, responding to variations in stages of development and culture. The sustainability of democracy depends ultimately on a people's shared values and aspirations.

But the need for architectural pillars of some sort is universal, just as democracy itself is a universal value. Anand rejected claims that other values or principles—such as so-called *Asian values*—might replace these pillars. Only the speed and pattern of progress



Ray Schonfeld, 2nd from Right, taking notes

may vary. Even in Western Europe the evolution of democracy had been slow and non-linear. Today, in the developing world, each society must work out its own contradictions, its own competing priorities.

After the lecture, Anand fielded a stream of questions. A Chinese student asked if the institutions of civil society—such as activist groups, charities, trade unions and think tanks—are a prerequisite of democracy or a consequence of it. *Answer*: don't impose a rigid order of progress, each society ultimately needs to choose its own. A British guest, noting that Thailand and Britain both have constitutional monarchies, asked if monarchies are inherently opposed to democracy. *Answer*: monarchy and democracy are not mutually exclusive, monarchies can provide continuity, moral authority, and checks and balances if they have popular support. Another asked if



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democracy can be successfully installed where educational standards are low.

Answer: while education is important, democracy must be able to work even for the less well educated. Anand ducked only one question: whether Barack Obama would be good for global democracy. Amid approving laughter, he declined to intervene in US domestic politics.

The longest discussion—and the most thought-provoking—was on whether sustainable democracy must

rest on some underlying commitment to broader moral principles. This brought discussion back to Sen's emphasis on freedom, through the comment that, indeed, a narrow definition of democracy may not guarantee all the elements of freedom essential to sustainable development, and that western democracies are often hypocritical in seeking to impose narrow processes on the developing world when they themselves fail to respect all the elements fundamental

to wider freedoms. Let each society choose its own route and build democracy in its own way.

The full text of the lecture is available on www.sen-lecture.eu

Raymond Schonfeld (1962) is a member of the organising committee for the Amartya Sen Lectures on Sustainable Development.

ANAND PANYARACHUN—A TRINITY MAN IN ASIA

Forget the hard-to-pronounce last name and the honorary KBE: in Thailand, he is plain Mr Anand. After reading economics and law at Trinity, Anand entered the Thai Foreign Service, going through a series of top ambassadorships before becoming head of the Service in his early 40s. Removed as a suspected communist by a military government after a coup d'état, he was triumphantly vindicated, went on to serve two terms as Prime Minister, and then led the drafting of a democratic constitution that gave Thailand the longest period of uninterrupted constitutional government in its history.

He has been called *the best and cleanest prime minister the country has*

ever had, and was noted for a style of public communication that was the exact opposite of many of his contemporaries. Far from using the media to *dumb down* messages, his philosophy was that a public is able to digest advanced discussion of difficult issues, if it is openly and fairly given clear and relevant facts. He used this approach to drive through reforms in taxation, telecommunications structure, and media regulation, and to curb corruption.

As well as his public service, he has headed two of Thailand's largest companies and played an active role in a Cambridge scholarship programme in Thailand. Internationally, he has led a United Nations Panel on Global

Security. Revered in Asia and deeply respected outside for his integrity and insight, he shuns the limelight: asked for biographical background

for this article, he submitted a press report calling him an "accidental" Prime Minister. Few would be willing to believe that his success or his reputation came by chance.

For a fuller biography visit www.un.org/News/dh/hlpanel/panyarachun-bio.htm



Anand Panyarachun (1952)