



Professor Laksiri Jayasuriya has never been one to sidestep sensitive issues. Today he talks candidly about the 'glass ceiling' that can deny highly-qualified Asian migrants access to top flight jobs, reducing them to the status of what the media has dubbed 'high tech coolies'. He is just as quick to jump into the social welfare debate about the recession cutting back on our nation's compassion. But as one of the first Asians to study at an Australian university during the bad old days of the White Australia Policy—and the first to walk away with a gold medal—he is also acutely aware of the radical and positive changes in attitude that have been at work in our society during the four decades that have elapsed since he first arrived in Australia.

At the end of last year, Professor Jayasuriya retired as Professor of Social Work and Social Administration, and Director of the Centre for Asian Studies, well aware that his own academic achievements, his high public profile and his impressive career would be an inspiration to Asians keen to participate to the full in public and professional life.

The professor first encountered The University of Western Australia campus in 1951. 'My boat had docked at Fremantle and I was on my way to do a double major in psychology and anthropology at Sydney University,' he recalls, strolling through the UWA campus and savouring the vivid green of manicured lawns and wide-spreading trees. 'When I was offered a teaching appointment at Sydney University I believe I was one of the first Asians to have received such an offer. The university had to get special permission for me to take up the appointment—and I still have my passport, specially endorsed by the then Minister for Immigration, Harold Holt.'

Later he received his PhD from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and also taught briefly at London University. He then returned to his home country—Sri Lanka—but he renewed his Australian connection when he became Associate Professor of Social Work at UWA in 1971 and later assumed the newly-established Chair of Social Work.

If Professor Jayasuriya has seen marked changes in social attitudes towards Asian immigration, he has also witnessed significant changes in the social welfare scene.

'I arrived at the height of the Whitlam era when not only were there new initiatives in relation to our role in the region and immigration, but there was a reawakening of interest in the whole of the welfare area and in welfare studies, and we at the University had to respond to a variety of new demands. It was an exciting time,' he says.

'Now the time has come for us, as a nation, to look at restructuring the welfare state and to reaffirm the principles of equity and justice in a liberal democracy. As a society we are in danger of losing a caring, compassionate concern for our fellow citizens.'

*'Multi-culturalism in Australia has been a great experiment—and one which the world has watched with interest. Of course it has not been without its problems, but it's one of the great achievements of this nation. We have become a laboratory for the world in terms of demonstrating our ability to integrate people from diverse countries and backgrounds. Now, the concept of multi-culturalism, like any social idea, needs rethinking and re-examination. We need to revitalise the concept of citizenship as a basis for multi-culturalism. Just as the White Australia Policy was written into one of the first acts of Federation in 1901, when we come to the year 2001—and look to the next 100 years—the most important change we need to make is to enshrine the rights of ethnic minority groups within a charter of rights.'*

## A CAREER FILLED WITH FIRSTS

A profile of Professor Laksiri Jayasuriya by Trea Wiltshire



Professor Jayasuriya feels it is also time to reassess the integration of professional social work and social policy studies that—based on the British model—has been the philosophical base for the department.

'I think it's time to re-examine the assumptions on which this model has been based, largely because social policy studies have now, all over the world, gained independent status as a distinct field of study. I believe the two should now be affiliated but as distinct and independent areas of study.'

'I also believe that there is a great demand for advanced research and that this University will have a prime responsibility in future to develop graduate study programs and research in professional social work.'

His position as Professor of Social Work has been a demanding one in that it required him to serve several constituencies.

'Primarily one's responsibility, in a university, is to serve one's academic peers,

but—unlike most other professors—I also had to serve my professional colleagues, and the welfare community, because of course our students work for the most part in welfare agencies.'

When he retired as Professor of Social Work—21 years after his arrival in Western Australia—Professor Jayasuriya was glad to have been able to invest so much of his intellectual energy and enthusiasm in the fields of social work and multi-culturalism. His standing in the academic and social community earned him the Medal of the Order of Australia in 1984. He is the first Sri Lankan to be so honoured in the Australian honours list.

'I am grateful I have been able to give something back to this country through my active involvement in these areas. Because of this I feel I have repaid a debt in the academic sense,' he explains. However his retirement does not mean that this distinguished academic will be lost to the University.

For the last three years Professor Jayasuriya has acted as Director of the Centre for Asian Studies and he will continue his association with the University as an Honorary Senior Research Associate.

'Because of my background it has been most satisfying for me to see an awakening of interest on campus in the area of Asian Studies,' said the professor. 'This University was the first to pioneer Japanese Studies, just as it was one of the first in the nation to establish a Centre for Asian Studies back in 1966.'

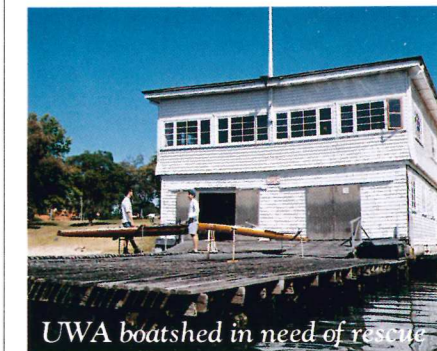
'The challenge now is to maintain the momentum established by those important initiatives—and I'm confident that the new Asian Studies program, which receives its first intake of students this year, will be an important catalyst in achieving this.'

One of Professor Jayasuriya's first tasks following his retirement will be to prepare a paper on Immigrant Absorption in Australia for an international conference in Israel in May. He is the only Australian academic to be invited to speak at the conference.

Professor Jayasuriya has held teaching posts at the University of Sydney, London, Sri Lanka and New South Wales. He was a Fulbright Scholar at the University of California and a Leverhulme Fellow at the University of New South Wales.

He has served on innumerable public bodies including the Migrant Task Force in WA and the Commonwealth Immigration Advisory Committee and was one of the founding members of the WA Multicultural and Ethnic Affairs Commission. He has also served on the Board of Governors of The Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) and was Vice President of the WA Council of Social Services. His most recent publication is *Ethnicity, Mental Illness and Immigration* which was launched by the then Premier Dr Carmen Lawrence at UWA last year.

## ROWERS CRY 'HELP'



Past and present members of the UWA Rowing Club can present a proud face to the public: in its long history—it dates from 1919—the club has had numerous successes and provided State, national and Olympic rowers. Last year it was WA's champion club, winning the Amateur Rowing Association of WA (ARAWA) Cup. It also carried off the Vice-Chancellors' Cup, competed for by all WA universities.

But it has a problem: the 65-year-old boatshed is not of the same high standard. Says captain Taher Omari: 'The building is slowly sinking, there's a dip in the middle of the floor, so the windows are sloping inwards, and the ramp is falling apart. It is quite safe but it badly needs new pylons and a new ramp. It's very difficult to get the boats in and out of the water.'

'We have professional advice that it would cost at least \$200,000 to repair and renovate it and about the same amount for a new building. It is aesthetically pleasing to have a boatshed built over the water and its position makes it very special. However, it is pummelled by the easterlies and the water movement destabilises the foundations, so it may be more practical to build a new boatshed on the Matilda Bay shore.'

'We are hoping past members and others interested will get in touch and help us with donations.'

'Last year the real estate company Browne Grove and Associates sponsored our rowing teams very generously and they are continuing this year. We are really grateful for their support. Both men's and women's teams were very successful—about 60 per cent of members are women.'

'We are now hoping to find more sponsors to help us host the Australian Universities' national championships at Collie in October.'

'Many people will remember great parties and dances in the boatshed. It can be booked on 386 4112—it's definitely quite safe.'

NOTE: Donations can be sent to the UWA Rowing Club, Guild of Undergraduates, UWA, Nedlands 6009. Taher Omari is on 380 1889.