

# DEVELOPMENTS ON THE ECONOMIC SCENE

"Countries with energy, food and technology will dominate", says Dudley Seers

*Professor Dudley Seers was back in Sri Lanka early this year with a team of economists, at the invitation of the Government, to advise on development strategies for particular sectors of the economy in the context of present employment needs. Professor Seers who is a Fellow of the Institute of Development Studies of the University of Sussex is well-known in Sri Lanka for the Programme of Action he prepared for this country in 1971.*

*During his visit to Sri Lanka this year Susantha Goonatilake, Head of the People's Bank, Research Department carried out this interview with Dudley Seers for the Economic Review. We publish here excerpts from the interview.*

**SG:** Professor Seers, we would like to raise a few broad questions from a long-range perspective about developments on the economic scene. How would you classify the general structure of the World System today, bearing in mind the changes circa 1500 to the 21st century?

**SEERS:** I would not like to think in terms of divisions of North-South, Developed - Underdeveloped and similar categories but rather of which countries are in possession of three basic resources. The three basic factors are energy, food and technology. I can think of only three countries which can be more or less self-sufficient in these three respects: the USA, USSR, and China. But each has one major weakness. The US exports technology and food, but is increasingly dependent on imports of energy. Russia, on the other hand, has energy and technology, but is dependent on food imports. China has broadly enough food and energy in relation to its levels of living, but has had a late start in technology. However, technology is an area in which deficiencies can be made up in a few decades, which is not true of energy or food. Therefore, in the 21st century China may well overtake the other two. All three have, of course, large land masses and the population base for military and technological leadership.

**SG:** How about those countries like Brazil and India which

also have large land masses? Do they have the potential for self-sufficiency?

**SEERS:** In the case of Brazil there are strong dualistic socio-economic structures, and India also in some way resembles this. These will prevent them realising their potential.

**SG:** Your categorisation appears simplistic and even facile. How about the economic relationship, specifically the inter-relationship of various social classes and groups nationally and internationally?

**SEERS:** Any description of the global system must simplify and pick out only a few essential determinants. To me, the three factors I mentioned appear basic.

**SG:** In an address before the Association for the Advancement of Science, you discussed the example of Cuba as being a small country with strong dependent ties to the metropolis. Your analysis left us with the feeling that the manoeuvrability for small former dependent countries was very small and that the outcome might even be a return to a new dependency. This has important repercussions for countries like Sri Lanka. Isn't your view perhaps over pessimistic?

**SEERS:** Maybe, but that is the picture as I see it. One asset of Sri Lanka, however, is hydro-electric capacity, and it is within sight of self-sufficiency in rice.

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**SG:** In 1962, you published an article called 'Why Visiting Economists Fail'. This, to my mind, is the most significant article that you have written. Have you changed your views since then? In short, do visiting economists now succeed, whereas in 1962 they failed?

**SEERS:** No. In fact I am of the same view still. Visiting economists can add very little to the work of local economists. They may act as catalysts or may even sometimes as legitimisers to certain views which a local economist would find sometimes not politic to express. But their role is at best marginal.

**SG:** Britain has a lot of pressing socio-economic problems. Its absolute unemployment figure is nearly double that of Sri Lanka. I feel that there are many Sri Lankans with the know-how, capacity and self-confidence to assess what is wrong with the British economy and suggest means of putting it right. When are you going to invite me to advise your country?

**SEERS:** If it lay in my hands, you would be one of the first to be invited. But, as you know, these invitations are decided by political and other forces.

**SG:** In short, what you mean under the term 'political forces' is that there is still a colonial division of the world — even in academic matters.

**SEERS:** I was referring to political forces inside Britain. Academically, there is perhaps an increasing acceptance of equality. As you well know, our Institute at Sussex is the centre of lively international discussion and host to social scientists from all over the world and the permanent staff is increasingly international. However, it is true that in the social sciences, as in the natural sciences, especially for research; and the models and theories developed in the industrial countries still exercise a heavy influence on the minds of social scientists elsewhere — far too heavy an influence.