

# Opinion polls: We were right; they were angry

# When 'brother' became 'brothel'

Ever since elections were held in Sri Lanka — be it to the State Council, the House of Representatives, the National State Assembly or Parliament, as the Legislature has been known from time to time — it had been the numerous star-gazing, palm-reading astrologers who ruled the roost in predicting the outcome.

Some of them would come right, and they would boast of their forecasts, while others who got it wrong would slither into hiding for some time to re-emerge later when all was forgotten.

In the 1994 General Elections, the Sunday Times introduced the first scientific polling mechanism to predict the outcome of a parliamentary poll.

Welcomed by many as a new innovation found in most modern democracies, the main political parties themselves went into a tail spin as this newspaper announced on July 17, 1994

that the country's first opinion poll would be taking place for the August General Election.

Mitofsky International was a United States-based organisation that had worked for many leading US news channels,

including CNN, NBC, the Washington Post and New York Times. It had 150 trained persons, many of them graduates of the University of Colombo to undertake the questioning in all the provinces, outside the North and East where the LTTE still had some control.

After the first announcement of the poll results, all hell broke loose within the political parties. The UNP President's Office invited the publisher of the newspaper for a meeting and aides discussed the opinion poll. There had been views in favour, and against the opinion poll, while the UNP PM sent a message saying that "the people only read the headlines" and therefore to be careful with the headlines.

On the other side, the opposition People's Alliance (PA) believed the newspaper was preparing to say in the last week that the UNP would win the elections. It threatened to issue a statement saying so; it got a pro-PA tabloid to question the credibility of the poll; Sirimavo Bandaranaike told the party's final rally to be watchful for misleading information in the poll;

and the party lodged a formal complaint with the international polls observers in the country that the opinion poll was aimed at misleading public opinion.

Undeterred, but happy with the excitement it had created, the Sunday Times went ahead with announcing the unedited results as they filtered in from Mitofsky International. A second poll was also launched with Survey Research Lanka (Pvt.) Ltd., a local research organisation.

The last week before the elections, the newspaper ran the final results indicating that the ruling UNP had a slight lead, but that on projections for the third week of August (when the election was to be held), the floating vote was to tip the scales in favour of an opposition PA victory albeit with a slim majority. The front page headline didn't lessen the curiosity factor; "UNP leads; but PA can win".

At the August 16, 1994 elections, the PA won with 91 seats and 48.94 % of the votes (3.8 million votes), while the UNP received 81 seats with 44.04 % of the votes (3.4 million votes). It was that close. With 14 National List seats, the PA obtained only 105 seats and eventually formed a government with less than the majority number of seats, which is 113. The UNP could not muster enough support to form a government.

With the country, and the political parties having been baptised in a scientific opinion poll, they were less afraid of this method of predicting the outcome of an election with the elections to come.

Opinion polls always have a margin of error, and in some countries they have gone horribly wrong. In one of the British elections, all the opinion polls were proved wrong.

At the 2001 General Elections, the Sunday Times opinion poll was a 'bull's eye'. It could not have come any closer to what the results eventually were.

This time, it was done in conjunction with Org-Marg Smart, an independent private market, social and economic research agency. We also commissioned Survey Research Lanka (Pvt.) Ltd., once again.

Here too the North and the East were not areas to which pollsters could go.

The Sunday before the election, the newspaper predicted the following results;

- UNP - 43.5 %
- PA - 38.8 %
- JVP - 10.2 %
- The end result was;
- UNP - 45.6 % (4.0 million votes – 109 seats)
- PA - 37.8 % (3.3 million votes – 77 seats)
- JVP - 09.1 % (815,000 votes – 16 seats).

With that, scientific opinion polling had been introduced to Sri Lanka only to fade away soon after.

By AMEEN IZZADEEN

Half-baked knowledge is dangerous. So is half-baked technology even though it is a stepping stone to full-baked technology. The Sunday Times' techno-journey carries with it several costly blunders. However, timely detection and measures have saved us embarrassment and costly legal battles.

One such story stands out. It happened in the paste-up-technology or semi-computerised era sometime in the early 1990s when the Sunday Times Plus section carried a story in a series titled "Like Father Like Son". The bromides which were like

today's prints-outs were waxed, cut and pasted on the cardboard sheets; a photocopy or page-proof was taken to be read by our proof readers and sub-editors. If there was a typo, say for instance the word 'wife' had been printed as 'life', we would remove the letter 'L' – we used a carpet knife – and take out the letter 'w' from an old waxed bromide and paste it on where the letter 'L' had been. The paste-up section in the editorial was thus full of tiny letters that often got stuck to our clothes, hair and body.

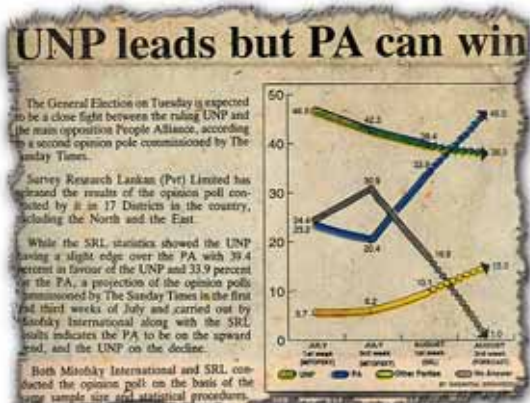
The 'Like Father Like Son' story began with a quote from a prominent minister of that era. "I was named after my father's favourite brother..." and the story followed. It was proof read twice and the final artwork was sent to the press. The printing took place on Thursday night. When we came to work on Friday morning, we would find on our desk the machine proofs of the paper. A few minutes later, a highly disturbed publisher called the subs desk to pinpoint the blunder in the page one story of the Plus section. Instead of "I was named after my father's favourite brother," the words read "I was named after my father's favourite brothel".

Some 50,000 copies carried the horrible blunder. While an immediate probe was launched to find out what happened and who was responsible, advice was sought as to how to overcome the problem. Some said the entire 50,000 copies which carried quite a few advertisements to the tune of tens of thousands of rupees – should be destroyed. Someone said we should smudge the word 'brothel' with printing ink using sticks and twigs. To do that, we needed an army of labourers. Dispatch Department supervisors brought in some neighbourhood youths who joined the regular staff and daubed the 'brothel' with black ink. The Dispatch Department looked like a Postal Department.

The internal investigation showed that the blunder happened because a letter 'L' – all sorts of letters were all over in the Subs Desk in those paste-up days – had fallen on the letter 'R'; thus completely changing the meaning. The case was dismissed.



The old despatch department where Wijeya Newspapers' employees and hurriedly hired youths from the neighbourhood used twigs and sticks to place an ink blob on the word 'brothel'.



The first opinion poll in the Sunday Times: Not far from the final results