

Watchdog of the economy

By FEIZAL SAMATH

I Certificates of deposit – a cheap source of funds’ screamed the headline in the business page of the inaugural issue of the Sunday Times.

The story referred to the introduction of certificates of deposit and their attraction as an investment option. It was just a half page of business news.

Twenty-five years later, such a story would probably be relegated to an inside page, a small box perhaps – such as the business and economy story taken a giant leap forward from those, then finding-their-way stories on the economy.

The Sunday Times may not have been the first to devote a full page to business but it is certainly a trail-blazer in starting a separate section on business which others in the industry then followed.

The focus on business was as a result of founding editor Vijitha Yapa’s passion for business stories, a trait he brought from the Island newspapers.

“I remember the Island being the first to start a daily business page,” Yapa, also founding editor of the Island, said. “The business pages began at a time when there was little to talk about the private sector that was growing slowly owing to the country’s conflict.” Business and economic news in any mainstream newspaper was not a priority in the mid to late 1970s since there was little or no established private sector.

Setting the bar high

By DR NIMAL SANDERATNE

Twenty-five years ago economic journalism was sparse and scanty. The media was not a watchdog of the economy. This has changed much due to the initial enterprise of the Sunday Times Business—a one-page economic and business supplement. Its news and comment on the economy was well received and widely read.

The Sunday Times was fortunate to have Lakshman Kannangara, a former Deputy Governor of the Central Bank of Sri Lanka as the first editor of the Sunday Times Business. Mr. Kannangara’s counsel, his business contacts, his meticulous concern for accurate information and precision of language ensured high quality journalism in the early years of the Business Times. His advice was invaluable in guiding journalists towards writing stories that interested the business and finance community. Many of the staff of this era are now editors of business sections of other newspapers.

The Sunday Times Business expanded its coverage to reincarnate itself to its current Sunday Times Business on Sunday. Other newspapers began to publish business pages. The full-blown Daily FT has been the outcome of this expansion. Much of the credit for business and economic issues being well covered in the English newspapers must go to the initial efforts of the Sunday Times that has made a significant contribution towards dissemination and discussion of economic and business issues and contributed to the public’s understanding of economic developments.

(The writer is an eminent economist and among the first contributors to the Sunday Times business section, which he continues to this day)



From our archives:
The first Business Times section

During Sirima Bandaranaike’s closed-doors economy in 1970-77, it was the unorganized sector, small and medium scale industries that provided goods and services with most coming from government-run factories and institutions.

Advertising in the media was mainly state-driven. That changed overnight in 1977 when J.R. Jayawardene’s opposition United National Party (UNP) crushed the SLFP-led coalition, opening the floodgates to free enterprise and unlimited imports.

Not only did local industry struggle to meet the challenge of far superior imported products but newspapers (apart from the only radio station, Ceylon Broadcasting Corporation, there was no television or social media) were also crawling their way through a new paradigm of development.

After a lot of soul searching, newspapers began paying more attention to the growth of the private sector, the advent of the free trade zones, inflow of foreign investments and great advances in banking and finance.

The Sunday Times moved with the times and on August 23, 1992, its first, fully-fledged business section was launched followed in September 1, 2002 with the Business Times, later to be renamed Financial Times.

Ruvini Jayasinghe, a former Business Editor of the Sunday Times, recalls that during her tenure from 1995 to 2000, the Business section grew from youth to maturity. “We literally grew from less than 10 pages to 16 to 20! The section was packed with news

features, columns and comments and the week’s markets including the stock market, money market and debt markets transactions were all recorded in one section, which was like a window to the week’s financial markets and industry updates,” she said.

She said it was an era where many reforms matured markets, regulatory reforms liberalised business and trade and new industries were set up; a busy and progressive period for the Sunday Times Business.

“The section changed in its style of reporting, commenting and design and layout reflecting the vibrancy of the financial growth and reforms of the era and the leaders who headed the financial institutions at that time,” she recalled.

The paper reverted back to the ‘Business Times’ in November 2009 with the advent of the Daily FT.

In recent times the paper has expanded its coverage to development issues and supporting professional associations and their goals.

The poverty discourse has also got a lot of play in the paper apart from its usual coverage of business news, analysis and happenings in the stock market.

The Business Times has unwaveringly promoted transparency and good governance – buzz words in today’s competitive business world – and has had to take to task corporate leaders found wanting in these areas.

Often CSR projects pronounced in great detail in annual reports are not what is practised in the field.

Today’s consumers are very conscious of the environment, of governance and accountability and obligations to the community. Ethical products are an integral part of today’s marketing dynamics with one good example being the garment sector where top buyers demand a decent wage for workers with good working conditions while the same applies to tea companies where fair trade certification provides for part of the profits being used for the upkeep of workers.

These are development issues that have been the focus of the Business Times in addition to the ‘biggies’ – the state of the economy, private sector development and the much vaunted stock market.

Stories that shook the world? Oh yes – the ill-fated hedging deals between the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation (CPC) and local and foreign banks which were exclusively exposed by the Sunday Times.

It was only then that opposition parliamentarians got involved, taking the case to the Supreme Court leading to a conflict with the executive. CPC Chairman Asantha de Mel was forced to resign and multi-million deals in which the CPC lost heavily in one-sided contracts, were cancelled. The cases are now before arbitrations.

The business desk has also led from the front in some of the best investigative pieces like the Pramuka Bank collapse, the dubious Golden Key credit card company and subsequent collapse of most of the Ceylinco Group, the Supreme Court judgments reversing the privatization of LMS, Insurance and Waters Edge and recently the National Savings Bank fiasco over a stock market deal.