

# A man of matter

TARUN DAS pays tribute to Walter Paris, a former secretary of the Bengal Chamber

**I**N the history of economic and industrial development of India, there are some individuals who played a silent but significant role in helping evolve policy in the first two decades after Independence. Walter Paris, who was secretary of the Bengal Chamber in Calcutta and served Assocham, was one such person.

Flashback: November 1963, Calcutta – as it was then. I had sent my Curriculum Vitae to the Bengal Chamber of Commerce and Industry. The call came for an appointment with Walter Paris, deputy secretary of the Chamber. He was the equivalent of a COO in a company today.

Walter Paris was a big man, slightly stooped. He had his hair slicked back and was always smartly dressed in dark suits and polished dark shoes. He ran the Chamber with a soft, iron hand and a very broad Scottish accent. He never raised his voice. His command over the English language was amazing. Every word would be carefully chosen and every major speech

or policy paper would be crafted by him. The archives of the Chamber will have Walter Paris' imprint in every major record of those years – till 1970.

In 1963, there were 18 expatriates in the Chamber when I joined as a management trainee on 25 November – just after President Kennedy's assassination. Walter Paris went on to become secretary, Bengal Chamber, and the second last British-head of BCCI – Alec Robertson, his close friend and his deputy – was the last to leave in 1972, two years after Walter.

In 1967, the chamber appointed me as secretary of Indian Engineering Association, CII's predecessor body. The committee of the Association was unhappy – they did not want a 28-year-old as secretary of IEA. Walter Paris would have none of it. He said, I would be there till I

made a mess of the job. And I am still there!

He also said that this Association, of all the others (jute, tea, mining, etc.), had the greatest potential for growth and that I should give my best. Prophetic words, indeed!

Walter Paris was a man of enormous quality. He was committed to the institution he served, setting a very high standard for all his colleagues. He said little but when he spoke, it was specific and precise. Also, his pen was mightier than the sword. The environment in Calcutta changed.

Walter Paris bowed out in 1970, after which he proceeded to head the India Pakistan Burma Association in London. We kept in touch and he was unfailing in his appreciation of CII's growth and

spread. He would to say that he never thought an association of industry could do so much. He was a traditionalist – of the idea that employer organisations were limited to only policy work vis-a-vis the government.

It is a privilege to have learnt under the aegis of a man of as enormous ability and high values as Walter Paris. Since 1970, Paris regularly attended CII's annual India Reception in London in July except in the last couple of years when he was not keeping good health.

On 1 January, his wife, Pat, called from London to say that Paris had passed away that morning. A legendary figure in the building of institutions in India is no more. But, his contribution will be forever imprinted on all those whose lives he touched and on the framing of government policy through the 1950s and 1960s, a crucial time for independent India.

*(The author is Director-General, CII, New Delhi.)*