

# British Tamils Forum United Kingdom

Thursday, 18 January 2018

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

## **Tamil Thai Pongal celebrations at the House of Parliament, London 2018**

For the first time in the history of the British parliament, Tamil Thai Pongal day was celebrated at the Jubilee Room, House of Parliament, Westminster, London, SW1A 0AA on the 17th of January 2018. This celebration was jointly hosted by the All Party Parliamentary Group for Tamils (APPG T) and the British Tamils Forum (BTF).

Thai Pongal is one of the most important festivals celebrated by Tamil people in Sri Lanka, in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, as well as by Tamils worldwide, including those in Malaysia, Mauritius, South Africa, United States, Singapore, Canada and UK. Thai Pongal is mainly celebrated to convey appreciation to the Sun for a successful harvest. Part of the celebration is the boiling of the first rice of the season consecrated to the Sun.

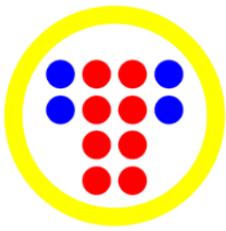
The origins of the Thai Pongal festival may date to more than 1000 years ago. Tamil people refer to Pongal as "Tamizhar Thirunaal," the festival of Tamils. Pongal is an occasion for giving thanks to nature, for celebrating the life and welcoming new beginnings and has a very strong environmental message.

In a packed hall overflowing with people who had come to grace this historic occasion, Tamil Schools, temples, Priests, many Tamil activists and a number of cross party MPs participated in this event. The hall was decorated reflecting a Pongal arena and Tamil cultural programmes were performed to reflect the rich cultural traditions of the Tamils.

As Prime Minister Theresa May noted in her Pongal message, the British Tamils make a real difference to countless lives right across this country. As we celebrate our achievements and welcome a new year, let us also renew our commitment to achieve justice for the Tamil people in the North East of Sri Lanka and recognise their political aspirations.

Paul Scully MP commended Tamil people for their contribution to the UK. On the day Tamils world over celebrate and thank the God for the Sunlight he vowed to bring sunlight into the Sri Lankan state for an enlightened approach to national reconciliation. "Sri Lankan government to make sure that we are having a reconciliation process for you as the diaspora".

The Rt Hon Teresa Villiers MP paid tribute to the contribution Tamils make to the diverse culture and vowed to support the Tamil people in their quest for justice and lasting peace. She said 'This festival is a wonderful opportunity to pay tribute to the Tamil community in Britain and to thank them for their huge contribution to our culture, to our economy, to our public services. Also, to stand together as your friends in parliament to continue to support your campaign for justice in Sri Lanka and a lasting and just political settlement in Sri Lanka which brings to an end, the terrible injustices we have seen that have been suffered by the Tamils in Sri Lanka over so many years. You have many, many strong friends in parliament and it's a real honour to be able to work with my Tamil constituency and beyond London. It's hugely important to bring lasting peace and stability in Sri Lanka.'



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The Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP pointed out that ‘there are 114 Tamil owned businesses in East Ham high street and the number goes up every year, just reflecting the scale of the contribution that this community is making to our economy and to our community.’ He also read the message from the Opposition Leader and the Leader of the Labour Party Rt. Hon. Jeremy Corbin.

The Rt Hon Jeremy Corbyn, leader of the opposition, says ‘Today, Tamils here in the UK and around the world are celebrating Thai Pongal, Tamil harvest festival. Thai Pongal is a time to give thanks, spend time with loved ones and look forward to the future together.

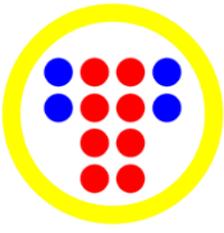
Britain’s Tamils make an important contribution to our society, in communities across the country. The Tamil community is a key part of the diverse, tolerant and vibrant fabric of Britain.

The Tamil people have made huge sacrifices in their struggle for human rights in Sri Lanka – and still face persecution today. As we approach the 70th anniversary of Sri Lanka’s independence, our government must take a lead in ensuring the Sri Lankan government takes active steps to support justice for Tamils in Sri Lanka and commit to serious post-conflict reconciliation.

Siobhain McDonagh MP said the resilience of Tamil people in fighting for justice has made the world recognise their plight and she is committed to stand together with the Tamils world over in their struggle for justice, peace and freedom.

The Rt Hon Sir Ed Davey MP said ‘It’s very important to make clear that we want to work with the Tamils in Britain, across the world and Tamils in Sri Lanka to fight for justice and human rights in Sri Lanka as well as an independent International investigation for war crimes. As the vice chair of APPG T, working with British Tamils forum, we need to step up the pressure on the government in Colombo, which is failing to abide the promises it made to the international community at the United Nations. It keeps dragging its feet, it keeps failing to do that. We have to hold it accountable for those promises and until it delivers, we need to increase the pressure. My concern in recent times, is that that pressure has come off and they have been rewarded. For example, by giving trade concession by GSP plus even though they have failed to abide by their international pledges. So, I do think this is the case where UK, European Union and the colleagues of the world to send a very clear message to not let off that pressure and I would personally like to see the GSP plus concessions are taken back from Sri Lanka’.

Mike Gapes MP said ‘The Tamil community in my constituency in Ilford, Redbridge, London and in the UK, has made and is making an incredible contribution to our diverse culture and your young people are in schools working hard, studying, doing well because your community is committed to education. I hope the young people do their very best. We must never forget the terrible things that happened in Sri Lanka. We must also have a memory of those who lost their lives in Sri Lanka in 2009 and earlier. I just want to say all of us in this parliament have a responsibility to ensure that our Tamil community is protected and feels that we are doing what we can internationally for justice for the people of Sri Lanka that suffered and to bring about a genuine reconciliation and a genuine peace in Sri Lanka.’



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Bob Blackman MP says ‘First is to see justice for the Tamil community worldwide, to ensure those that committed war crimes are brought to justice but secondly for Tamil people in the home land getting the opportunity to farm the land, to fish and make sure that they are the ones that get the benefit of the end of the civil war. Secondly, we are hosting the commonwealth heads of government meeting here in the UK in April. That gives an opportunity for all of us and the Tamil community to advance to the commonwealth heads of governments exactly the cause everyone is fighting for.’

The event was supported by British Tamil Conservatives (BTC), Tamils for Labour (TfL) and Tamil Liberal Democrats (TfLibDem).

Thai Pongal which marks the dawn of Thai is believed by the Tamil people to bring new opportunities. Thai piranthal vazhi pirakkum. (தை பிறந்தால் வழி பிறக்கும்) Let us hope this is realised soon to bring peace and freedom to our people.

-Ends-

**Contact: S Sangeeth** Tel: +44 (0) 7412 435 697  
Email: [news@britishtamilsforum.org](mailto:news@britishtamilsforum.org)

**Notes to Editors:**

**British Tamils Forum** exists to harness the skills and the knowledge of the members of the forum, well-wishers and significant others including mainstream decision makers in the UK with the aim of alleviating the sufferings of the Tamils community in the Island of Sri Lanka and to further their right to self-determination within a democratic frame work under pinned by international law, its covenants and conventions. For more information [info@britishtamilsforum.org](mailto:info@britishtamilsforum.org) and/or visit: [www.britishtamilsforum.org](http://www.britishtamilsforum.org)