

PRIME MINISTER REVEALS HIS HOPES AND FEARS

NSunT - 6 JUL 1986

Q What do you think of the power you hold over people?

A I think I have been given maximum power. If I cannot achieve much more than I have, partly because of the distractions and detractors I have to face and their attempts to undermine my credibility, I accept this as part of life.

Q But there is a dimension to your power which is not to do with politics; it is not the

power of your office, it is your own aura of authority. Do you remember when you spoke out against environmentalist lobbies for being anti-development, and there was a busload of people who went in pursuit of a certain well-known environmentalist and picketed his home? What do you make of such a thing?

A I didn't expect it to happen, I'm surprised that it did; but there are some people who do feel strongly, although their methods of expressing their opinions are rather primitive. That's simply because they can't argue their case. I think it's natural for the uneducated to express their feelings that way. Me, I have to argue my case.

Q But you were the source, and they used your ideas in what turned out to be a very negative, disruptive way. How does that make you feel?

A I feel sad that they had to resort to that. On the other hand, I understand their need to express themselves. As much as we have to understand and tolerate the need of some people, the intelligent ones, to use forums — and misuse them. They say things which have no basis. That is also a negative approach. Let's talk about the Bakun project. The real damage to the environment is not the Bakun project. If you fly over Sarawak, you will see bald patches all over the country caused by the slash-and-burn method of cultiva-

tion on traditional land. Literally thousands of acres are destroyed in this way. But it is not the popular thing to blame poor people, although the fact that they are poor does not detract from the fact that they are destroying the environment. But which person dares to say this? Even I hesitate to talk to you about this. The solution is to resettle these people in an area which they can cultivate without destruction, but who dares to say this?

Q You do.

A To you. But even I have not come out in public to say this. I'm scared. This could become a political issue. "Are you suggesting these people should not be allowed to live their natural way of life?" When there were a few, no harm was done. But over the years, people have multiplied into hundreds of thousands. There are many places in Sabah and Sarawak where there is only secondary jungle; not because we extract timber, but because of this primitive method of cultivation. How many "investigative reporters" are prepared to go and study how much land has been destroyed this way?

Q You're not too fond of the Press are you, Datuk?

A It's not that. I think the Press has a role to play, but the Press must also be responsible. The first thing I did when I became Prime Minister was to call the Press and tell them you have to inform us where we go wrong. I need this feedback. But I find that some people — not all — have to invent incidents in

order to publish.

Q Sensationalism?

A Yes.

Q I would suggest that a lot of us have a tremendous feeling of impotence; and I think that sensationalism might be a reaction to this conviction that we have no say in the way the country is run.

A I don't think so. It depends on the perception. The Press can help the process of development, or it can obstruct. It has to dish out praise where praise is due, it has to be critical where criticism is justified. To say that over the last five or six years there has been no improvement at all in the Government's service to the people would not be quite correct. And yet, how often have we read about this?

Q I would think a solution is communication between your office and us out there. We don't seem to have enough of it.

A I sometimes feel frightened. Naturally, the journalists who get near me are the more aggressive ones, and they have a tendency to be sensational. They catch me on the way to the toilet and ask me a question. I give a very simple answer, and it is taken out of context. I get into a lot of jams, and the next day I find what's reported is not what I said. The words may be the same, but the context is wrong. After that I become very frightened about saying anything, and I have no comments to make.

Q There are two situations when the media and yourself can get together. One is the formal Press Conference,

QUOTE:

I go to the kampung and do a lot of work there. A lot of reporters follow me. Not one word about what I did in the kampung. All the questions are on what's happening in KL. Why follow me to the kampung? And then I am accused of showing no interest in rural development, paying attention only to heavy industries.

which tend to be glorified dictation sessions. The other is this chasing you around, firing questions at you. It seems that neither of these actually helps you get your ideas across.

A It's not my fault. You don't ask me the right questions! Practically nobody's asked me questions on the environment, for example. They will ask me "Is the MCA problem solved?" "Is the Gerakan leaving the Barisan Nasional?" I go to the kampung and do a lot of work there. A lot of reporters follow me. Not one word about what I did in the kampung. All the questions are on what's happening in KL. Why follow me to the kampung? And then I am accused of showing no interest in rural development, paying attention only to heavy industries.

When I go to the kampung and start these rural industries, all kinds of things, most of which are — I don't like to say this, but — are my own ideas, nothing is reported. And I am asked why I don't do something for the rural areas? It's not that I don't; it's just that it's of no interest to those who interview me.

Q Is this what you mean by irresponsible journalism?

A What I'm looking for is balanced reporting. There has been very little reporting on rural industries, on what we have been doing in the kampungs, how we have raised the level of health and education... this is not very sensational, but there is a lot of human interest in the development of a kampung. The revolution that is taking place in the minds of the kampung people, in their way of life, is something that is worthy of reporting.

Q I do agree that we are not concentrating as much as we perhaps should on the 75 per cent of this nation which is rural, but that's only because we seem to be heading towards a very urban frame-of-mind. No matter what happens, the teenager in the countryside is bound to be drawn towards the major centres. Hence we have urban drift, squatters...

A I regard that as a positive development. I really do not want people to spend the rest of their lives in the rural areas working a small plot of land. The land area cannot be increased. As the family grows in size, they

must leave the land, and the land must be consolidated into bigger farms, run on a co-operative basis along modern lines; with people working there as paid employees as well as owners.

The younger generation should flow into the urban areas where we have industries and trades. I think it is unnatural to tell people "Look, you stay in the kampung while I enjoy myself in the town". If we have 5,000-acre padi estates, I think there would be managers who would be highly-qualified and able to run them.

Q In other words, farmers too can be prosperous.

A Yes. This is what we're calling the *bendang kelompok* concept. Amalgamate your land. You will own a share in accordance with the area you contributed, you will get your profit based on that share, at the same time a few of you will work on that land as paid employees. The rest could start cottage industries, or go to the towns and get a job.

Q But what if they come and there are no jobs? Is it fair to suggest to the rural folk that the urban way-of-life is something they should aspire towards?

A It is not a question of aspiring towards. It is something that you cannot avoid anymore. Look at all the developed countries. When the United States was started 200 years ago, 95 per cent of the population lived in the rural areas, producing food for the five per cent who lived in towns. Today, five per cent live in the rural areas producing food for the 95 per cent who live in towns.

This is the switch that happens when development comes.

Development is bad only when you don't know how to manage it. There is no necessity to have slums, but there is a price to be paid. You can't say "Don't touch the people in the slums because they are poor," while at the same time saying they must live in better conditions. How do they live in better conditions if you can't pull down their houses and build better houses for them?

Q All-in-all it adds up to a major "revolusional mental" for the Malays. You've made them think very deeply about their nature, about who they are and where they're going, and then you worry that they're losing their identity. Maybe we are developing a new and more modern identity for the future. Maybe that's good. Maybe we should lose the old identity. If it is associated with backwardness, it isn't a good thing at all.

A It's all a question of management. Nothing is bad if you know how to manage it. Being poor is bad, but being rich is also bad if you don't know how to manage your wealth. It is poor management that affects us. We have to become better managers.

It is only recently that the Malays have been introduced to a monetised society. I have talked about the Malays' idea of money as a mere convenience; something lighter that you can put in your pocket instead of carrying a sack of rice to the town. Money in order to make money is a new concept.

Q Things are changing?

A Slowly.

Q We seem to be now in a time of great questioning. Islam is being questioned, your administration, you yourself are being questioned. It seems a worrisome time.

A I'm not scared, really. I see things very clearly. I see the dangers of course, but I also see the solutions. I think, given greater appreciation of the problems by responsible people, including the Press, we can overcome all these problems together, and go on to achieve the kind of society that is rightfully Malaysia's. We are a rich country, we have people with the potential. We have a lot of negative things, of course, but we have the means to overcome them.

Q Or at least, if we can't overcome all our problems, ensure that our problems don't overcome us.

A At the very least.

Q Do you think there will ever come a time when every young Malaysian can feel that his position, his prospects and opportunities in this country, have nothing to do with his race?

A That is certainly a possibility. You see, you only cling to your race when you feel a sense of fear. If the Malays learn that there really is nothing to fear, that they have the ability to compete and succeed, I think the emphasis on seeking protection in their own community will disappear.