

When objectivity can be questioned

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THE decision of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to stay away from the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation meeting in Seattle has provoked some Australian journalists into angrily finding a reason for his recalcitrance. And as usual instead of blaming the obvious i.e. the unfairness of Australian diatribes against Malaysia, they go for what they deem to be the inherent defects of his character, in particular his unwillingness to behave like other Asian victims of the Australian media.

Lindsay Murdoch, the writer of a recent article in *The Age*, an Australian newspaper, said many observers saw Dr Mahathir as a "blunt confrontationalist with a chip on his shoulder".

But in private, the article went on to say, Dr Mahathir was a "shy, reticent and secretive person who is his own counsel and his own best friend. Nobody influences him greatly. Even his own Cabinet Ministers think twice about speaking their minds, knowing that if the Prime Minister disagrees they are likely to be curtly put down".

The source of this analysis of Dr Mahathir's character is clearly someone who does not like the Prime Minister. There are not many of these people for apart from the abortive challenge by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah and Datuk Musa Hitam, very few Ministers from Dr Mahathir's Cabinet have lost their jobs. He does not reshuffle his Cabinet as often as Prime Ministers of other countries. Yet he leads a Government that has been remarkably successful in developing the nation. If he listens to no one then he should take all the credit for Malaysia's success. It will be a high compliment to him. But it is highly unlikely that the other Ministers are merely decorative.

Former Finance Minister Razaleigh, described in the article as Dr Mahathir's arch enemy, is quoted as saying: "The Prime Minister

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's penchant for bluntness and his steadfast adherence to principle in declining to be at the Apec meeting in Seattle have put him in the media spotlight again. An article in *The Age*, an Australian newspaper, on him and his style serves to raise certain concerns about the media. Are journalists a help or do they make things worse at times, asks P.C. SHIVADAS

could not care less what the rest of the world thinks. He cares about his survival. He criticises America, Europe or Australia purely to get support in Malaysia".

But he also criticises the Malays, his own people, whose support he depends on. On the other hand, he needs investments from America, Europe and even Australia in order to develop Malaysia.

Surely it is unwise for Dr Mahathir to criticise them. The Malays may approve of his criticism of these countries. But to stay in power he needs the support of the Chinese and Indians as well. They would not approve attacks which might undermine the nation's economic well-being.

Perhaps there are other reasons than merely to get the support of Malaysians. Certainly many believe that support for the Malaysian Government is due to the economic prosperity and political stability of Malaysia. It is doubtful that criticisms of America, Europe and Australia contribute much towards this support.

The country came out of a recession in the mid-Eighties to record an average growth rate of eight per cent. There is full employment and the economic cake is growing enough to ensure there is little or no sense of deprivation overall.

There is peace and stability. Inflation is low and per capita income of Malaysians has grown to be among the highest of the developing nations.

Dr Mahathir has the right responses for the times and far from being a loner he seems to have quite a number of people who share his vision and work hard towards its achievement. It is difficult to think of the Cabinet and the Umno supreme council meeting for four hours at a stretch with no one else other than the Prime Minister talking.

But *The Age* article is such that the message imparted is one of all not being well despite the success.

The Government's "racist" policies of helping the Malays get ahead in commerce and industry are said to have created tensions. Racial tensions are not conducive to economic prosperity. Yet the country is booming. The article contradicts itself by suggesting that Dr Mahathir neglects the Malays. If this is so and the prosperity is purely among the Chinese then there would have been racial disturbances. This has apparently not happened. The fact is that the Malays are getting their share. So they cannot have been neglected. And the Chinese have not been deprived either. Otherwise there would not be political stability.

Pointed reference in the article to Muslim Malays when there was no need to in dealing with economic questions seems to reveal a prejudice against Muslims on the part of the writer.

There is no concession to Malays making common cause with pagan and Christian indigenous people in

the country and the official favours granted them all. That Dr Mahathir is obviously against the Islamic party rule in Kelantan is also not mentioned. Only his antagonism towards Sabah's Kadazan Christian Government is mentioned.

Is it because the writer feels that equating Malays with Muslims would appeal to Australians?

Most recently, Dr Mahathir's decision not to attend the Apec meeting hosted by the American President in Seattle is interpreted as due to his fear of American domination. Western diplomats in Kuala Lumpur are quoted as saying this.

"Mahathir has dug himself into a hole. In the end he probably thought he should go to Seattle but his ego is too big to see him change his mind," a Western diplomat is reported to have said.

If he has dug himself into a hole what need is there for his big ego to stop him from changing his mind? He could not get out of the hole anyway.

The article goes on to say that senior Umno officials privately concede that Dr Mahathir's anti-Western stance on numerous issues wins him considerable prestige throughout the country.

"People see him as a strong little man standing up against the hypocrisy of the developed world," a Minister is quoted as saying. The Minister had declined to be named. Is the Minister supposed to be afraid of Dr Mahathir for giving a favourable impression of him?

Dr Mahathir, the article states, has staked his regional reputation on the Asia-only economic grouping, the East Asia Economic Caucus. "He claims a commitment to free trade, but his caucus is itself a barely disguised discriminatory bloc". Only people who see nothing odd in making a trade bloc of Apec can equate a caucus with a discriminatory bloc.

When he did not go to Seattle, the paper says, "he missed a perfect opportunity to press his concerns".

His anti-Australian feelings are attributed to the time he was a backbencher in the 60s and was invited to visit Australia under a special programme.

He did not take up the offer immediately but when he wanted to some months later, he was told that he could not go as the fiscal year had passed and there was no money allocated.

He is thus made out to be so petty that the nation's policies are influenced by that one incident.

That pettiness is again alluded to when Dr Mahathir was upset by the Australian television series *Embassy*. Is *Embassy* expected to endear Australians to Malaysians?

The close co-operation of former years, including the arrangement to defend Malaysia against attack meant little, claims the article.

But is it not true to say the defence agreement is based on fighting whatever war as far away from Australia as possible and thus serve Australian interest?

Dr Mahathir's relationship with regional leaders, particularly Indonesia's President Suharto, is put down as worrisome as the two men are supposed to despise each other so much they can barely sit down and talk.

The recent four-eyed meeting in Langkawi lasting more than two hours between the two leaders apparently bore out this "mutual despise" theory.

The article concluded that Dr Mahathir's rule is a one-man show and that his unwillingness to countenance any challenge to his authority had strained ties with some States, notably Catholic-dominated Sabah.

Again too much credit is being given to Dr Mahathir for Malaysia's success. He must be a real genius and he should really be free to do what he feels like doing since only good seems to be

the result.

Perhaps, what he told delegates at the Umno general assembly recently belies all these assumptions of his genius and single-handed development of his country.

"I am aware that no matter how popular a leader is one day he will be dropped. I will abide by whatever decision the party will make when my time comes. That's politics".

The man has ego but it is the sort that has helped make the difference for the nation and people he leads.

By that same token, journalists must measure their own contribution through what they write.

In this case, the question is whether *The Age* writer is helping to endear Australia to Malaysians. Or is it a case of ego getting in the way?

He begins his article describing the scene of a Press conference with Dr Mahathir. "He fixes on each of us and there is a hint of venom in his gaze. But when he speaks it is with a surprisingly gentle voice. Datuk Seri Mahathir Mohamad, Prime Minister of Malaysia, exudes the air of a statesman confident of his authority".

Who is this man, the writer asks, who next will snub an invitation to attend a meeting of regional leaders in America hosted by Clinton (the article appeared on Nov 12) and who says too much democracy can lead to homosexuality, moral decay, economic decline and single parent families?

Who is this man who can elicit an abject apology from Australia and is seen by Canberra as retarding its efforts to be accepted as a key player in Asia?

Isn't the writer himself vying for popularity with his readers by playing on their anger at a man who refuses to conform to their perception of an Asian leader?

How is he supposed to explain his "disguised discriminatory bloc"? Or is he so potent that he can explain even his discrimination?

It would appear also that Asians are expected to jump for joy whenever Australia talks of becoming Asian.

Would that be the case had Asia remained poor and Europe had not ignored Australia?

The slant of the article is such that only his detractors can describe Dr Mahathir's character correctly. *The Age* apparently believes opponents can be relied to speak the truth.