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We won't stand for `kurang ajar' idiots

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VERY few Malaysians were at the Gala Dinner of the Apec Business Summit where Vice-President Al Gore carefully planned his remarks and his deliberate act of insult. I was.

I was there as one of the organisers. I sat through the entire proceedings and I must confess that I was stung by his final comments. When Mr Gore finished, I started to clap and it took me a full five seconds before I stopped. I suppose a lifetime of training and conditioning got in the way of what I should have done.

I was so upset that the first thing the next day, I called up the New Straits Times and asked them whether I could take a one-page advertisement to express my views. I asked them how much it would cost.

The paper came back two hours later to say that a page could indeed be found and that the lowest, absolutely lowest cost (special to me because I had once worked with the newspaper) would be RM14,500.

I took a deep breath. And proceeded to write the text. (In case you missed it, it is reproduced as part of this letter).

The morning it was published (Wednesday), I received many phone calls and faxes. Someone who was a fellow student in England, who has therefore known me for more than 30 years, said: "Wah ... I didn't know you have a temper!" Many of my friends and many who have heard me speak all over the world are very surprised because over the decades they have known me as a very diplomatic sort of fellow who would never, never call a spade "a bloody shovel".

I am, in fact, the sort of person who would invariably call a bloody shovel "a spade".

I have therefore tried to ask myself why it is that I was and still am very angry. Is it because of what Mr Gore said in his speech? Is it because I felt so sorry for our Prime Minister who sat through the whole thing from beginning to end, smiling, as well-bred Malaysians are taught to do on occasions such as these?

Mr Gore's speech was unadulterated kindergarten stuff. A mediocre first-year political science student would be able to match the sophistication.

I happen to believe that democracy is a moral good. And most often it is the most productive system that any society can have. I do agree with Churchill that despite its many flaws and weaknesses, it is the best system of government so far invented.

I happen to believe that even if democracy is not productive and optimal in economic terms - in certain societies, in certain circumstances, and at certain stages - this does not necessarily mean that democracy should be abandoned or denied.

Mr Gore says something that he can not possibly believe: that a nation cannot possibly have economic growth and prosperity unless it is a democracy, and a most American democracy at that. (He surely does not need reminding that the fastest economies in Apec, amongst those in the very room in which he spoke, are all not democracies).

I have been told that many in the US Government in Washington had tried to have the speech re-written, as did the American ambassador in Kuala Lumpur. It would seem that nothing less than a specific, calculated insult to Malaysia in terms of word and action would do if Mr Gore is to reap sufficient capital for the run for the US presidency on which he has already embarked.

I am afraid I cannot imagine that what he said is for the benefit of the Malaysian people. It is so cynically, so blatantly, for the benefit of presidential hopeful Al Gore.

Even this is not the complete reason for my anger. I think I was so enraged not so much because of what was said but because of what was done.

The Americans had specifically agreed, and given the undertaking, that after speaking, Mr Gore would sit and go through the first course before leaving for another appointment. Instead, he had his say and he rudely left. He was intent on insult.

The American aides had insisted that the air-conditioning in the hall be turned off on grounds that poison gas could be put through the air-ducts and therefore threaten Vice-President Gore. (The death of the one thousand other guests, including the heads of many governments including our Prime Minister, does not, of course, count). I am proud that the Malaysian engineers stood their ground and refused to obey instructions.

Even before the Gala Dinner itself, the announcer had been given detailed text about the announcements that had to be made. Obviously, Mr Gore's arrival had to be announced. Then, as protocol dictates, the arrival of the Prime Minister of Malaysia.

On the night itself, Mr Gore's staff ordered the announcer to first announce the arrival of the Prime Minister of Malaysia. Only then, she was instructed, could she announce the arrival of Mr Gore. Mr Gore would thus be the last to enter the hall. That would be the order of precedence.

Fortunately, one of the Malaysian organisers had the gall to inform the American staffer that we were not there to take orders from Americans. The announcer was told to announce the arrival of Mr Gore first, then the arrival of the Prime Minister of Malaysia.

When the emcee actually announced the arrival of Mr Gore, he refused to enter the hall. She then announced the arrival of Dr Mahathir. The PM, who was from a different holding room (because the Gore team had insisted that unlike all the other Presidents and Prime Ministers Mr Gore must have a separate waiting room, which only he would occupy) duly walked into the hall.

It was only after our Prime Minister entered the hall that Mr Gore deigned to enter.

And when he did so, he deliberately shook the hands of two others before shaking the hand of the Prime Minister, who was politely waiting to greet him.

More than a week before the event, I had been warmly entertained by a top US official and led to believe that the United States would not be raising the issue of human rights and democracy at the Apec meeting. (This proved to be technically correct because Mr Gore raised the issue at the Apec Business Summit, an NGO event, before the Apec meeting, not at the Apec meeting itself. I have been told that during the subsequent Apec Leaders' Meeting over the next two days, which were not reported or reportable, Mr Gore said absolutely nothing about democracy and human rights. Perhaps some clever lawyers will tell me that the Americans were true to their word.)

The American Government had kept up the elaborate pretense that Mr Clinton would be coming when they had no intention of having Mr Clinton at Apec and in Kuala Lumpur.

The subject of the dinner speech at the Apec Business Summit to which the Americans had agreed was: "My Vision of the Pacific Community". An outline of that speech had been conveyed to the Malaysian organisers. That outline addressed the agreed topic. There were no offensive points or remarks, which was why the organisers were relaxed and ready for a truly gala dinner when the Gore bombshell hit the fans.

I have no evidence to suggest that the Americans deliberately conveyed the outline to us in order to mislead the organisers, who otherwise would have cancelled the dinner speech. But then neither do I have any evidence to suggest that a clear attempt at deception was not mounted.

We in the organising committee should have smelt something when the Americans were so accommodating up front. I may be wrong. But with the benefit of hindsight, it would seem they were prepared to make any promise, accommodate any request, and do whatever was necessary, to ensure that Mr Gore had an opportunity to fling mud in our face - before the eyes of the world, and more importantly, before the eyes of the American electorate.

I must say that since I lost my `cool', and put in my expensive advertisement, things have happened which I could not imagine. An American friend of mine in an American company in Singapore phoned to apologise to me personally.

How did he know about the uproar? Because Malaysians working in the company in Singapore are up in arms and don't mind if the bosses know it. (Perhaps somebody should tell them that most American executives in the region are horrified by the Gore insult.)

Anyway, how did the Malaysians in this company know about what was happening in Malaysia? "I don't know, but they all know," he said. "Malaysia and Singapore are pretty close."

I am told that the telephone `hotline' that some have set up to take calls of angry Malaysians has been jammed solid. Perhaps they should have a battery of telephones instead of just one line.

I have been particularly touched by a letter from one `girl' who wrote some very strong words (which are quite un-printable). She ends by saying: "I am now relieved for taking this off my chest." Her signature I cannot decipher but she signs off as "an ordinary working girl in KL (but not so ordinary after all, after yesterday)".

Nationalism is a very powerful force. Those who talk of globalisation and the passing of the nation state might once in a while bear that in mind.

My mother and my father taught me to love my country. They taught me well. I hope that my wife and I have similarly taught our three boys.

Like other Malaysians, there are many things in Malaysia today which we don't like and which upset us.

I would like to apologise most humbly if I cause offense; but I cannot stand the corrupt practices, the cheating and the dishonesty that I see so often, in so many places.

We deserve many of the criticisms that have been made by Malaysians and by foreigners. Many, many things are wrong and have to be put right. (Although it is us Malaysians who must get the job done, not visitors on the way to somewhere else who spend two days on our soil.)

I have reached that point in my life when I will not stand for stupid, ignorant, kurang ajar idiots insulting my country in pursuit of their own agenda.

I will no longer stand for it.

And I am proud that I am not one. I stand in the company of millions of my fellow Malaysians.