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What's in a title?

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I ONCE covered a Press conference where a visiting foreign businessman, obviously befuddled by our system of honorifics, took to the podium to lavish praise on "Mr Datuk", the local dignitary present to officiate matters that day.

The rest of us tried to stifle our mirth but the businessman sensed he had committed some kind of social faux pas. Unable to detect what it was, however, he bravely soldiered on while the dignitary continued trying to look ... dignified.

It was a forgivable mistake, but it did throw up the interesting question of why we need our complex network of titles in the first place.

Every few months the papers will carry stories listing the fortunate few whom royalty have favoured with accolades, and there are many: Datuk, Datuk Seri, Datuk Paduka, Tan Sri, Tun, and so on and so forth.

But there is a growing weary cynicism, especially in urban areas, about the existence of such titles, and the inevitable deference that they command.

Etiquette demands that the minute a person is conferred a distinction, we stop using their names and start referring to them by their new title. Malaysians are much too polite a people to do otherwise.

But shouldn't we be able to judge people solely by their abilities and their accomplishments, and not have to be clobbered over the head by their decorations?

While it's true that these titles are supposed to be earned by an individual's abilities and accomplishments, shouldn't a person be distinguished by the strength of these alone?

We needn't be reminded of them constantly, and these achievers needn't be tagged as such.

We can recognise who the best of our peers are, by their words, their deeds, their beliefs, honesty, sincerity, and a host of other guidelines that common sense have laid in place for us.

From P. Ramlee to Fred Astaire, from Einstein to Gandhi, people who have earned a special place in history remain known to millions around the world solely by their names.

Even the Prime Minister is known to both his critics and his advocates abroad as "Dr Mahathir", and not "Datuk Seri." He is instantly recognisable to many for what he has done, for his outspokenness, and for all that he stands for - his title doesn't figure into the picture at all.

It is only here that we take such excruciating care over such titles, and while the intent to honour the commendable few is good, the resulting mentality that it induces in the rest of us can't be healthy.

We are supposed to be impressed by a person's title and rightly so, since they're supposed to have been earned, but sometimes you run into so many titled people in a week it's difficult to maintain the air of exclusivity that they're supposed to command.

Much has been made of this country's aggressiveness modernisation, but a great, cerebral leap forward could be made if we were to release ourselves from this system of ranks.

Just a suggestion.

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