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Puthucheary's moral legacy

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PROFESSOR Wang Gangwu read the eulogy at the memorial service of the late James Puthucheary. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad also attended the memorial service as a friend.

Dr Ronald McCoy chaired the memorial service. In his eulogy, Wang said of Puthucheary, "with his passion for reason and intellect, he felt that truth would prevail, that people could always be persuaded of the right things and that people who thought like him would act accordingly".

This must be the season for doing the right things in the right way. In memory of the late Puthucheary (who I did not know personally), allow me to reflect on "his cause" as interpreted by Wang.

The New Sunday Times (May 7) carried the following advice, which could imply that Puthucheary's cause may have become more real after his passing.

First, there was Finance Minister Tun Daim Zainuddin advising Malay businessman against playing politics in business. His advice was to focus on one or the other.

Then, there was Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's statement that Umno is the moral force behind Barisan Nasional's "tried and tested multi-racial coalition".

Works Minister Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu, meanwhile, promised to step down "if he fails to resolve the issue of monthly wages for plantation workers".

The Angkatan Melayu Global has its own way of "reviving traditional Malay culture" using a business model with a global vision.

Another Malaysian, Tambun Member of Parliament Datuk Husni Hanadzlah was elected Chairman of the Economic, Political and Security Committee of the Inter-Parliamentary Union with "a call for world leaders to find ways to protect those who are marginalised due to globalisation".

Finally, Selangor Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Abu Hassan Omar on Saturday promised to "turn Petaling Jaya into a garden city".

Are these "advocates for change" also guided by the same moral imperative for positive change, as was Puthucheary?

Wang said "Puthucheary was always more prepared than the rest of us for change. His priorities were political action because the times demanded such action. He felt that not to use his talents would be a waste and an irresponsibility".

What then is the real difference between political rhetoric and action? Why did Datuk A. Kadir Jasin caution about "courting disaster with lip-service" in his Other Thots column?

The nation is at a philosophical crossroads. The last election brought many issues to the forefront, albeit veiled in the controversy of the former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's dismissal.

Now that the euphoria and clamour for the fruits of Malaysian development success has subsided, it is time to take stock as well as re-evaluate the moral imperative to do the right things in the right way.

The information age will raise expectations on the moral integrity of all actors. As Kadir put it, mere lip-service or political rhetoric would not suffice anymore.

Responsibility and accountability of all actors will now come under the scrutiny of the public eye.

Therefore, as Umno selected its leaders for the dawn of the 21st

century, we could only pray that wise and morally upright leaders were elected to lead both Umno and the nation.

Both the Prime Minister and his deputy are right; Umno must continue to provide the moral integrity for the Barisan Nasional-type multiracialism to progress.

As Wang put it, Puthucheary's life and political action were "a period of growing up and transformation".

If we learn from his life, he would have left a worthwhile legacy for our way forward. History is always a good teacher. The 21st century will demand an even higher standard of integrity and morality within the framework of a truly globalised environment.