

# No let-up in fulfilling

Nst - 8 JUL 2001

**B**ARELY two weeks after the MCA's extraordinary general meeting, president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik shares his feelings and views on the recent controversy surrounding him and the party. He spoke to SHAMSUL AKMAR and CHOW KUM HOR in an exclusive interview recently. Pictures by SHAHIMAN SHARIP

**Q:** In the aftermath of the extraordinary general meeting, how would you describe the state of affairs in the MCA now?

**A:** We went through the political process — the presidential council, the central committee and then the EGM. We also went through the shareholders' meeting. I chose to have a wider democratic forum. The shareholders and the trustees are important but we must not lose sight that they were appointed by the presidential council and central committee.

Therefore, I chose a wider political forum to endorse the deal. Myself and the other three trustees are also members of the presidential council.

And then it was extended to 40 central committee members with equal voting rights. And when they called for the EGM, we acceded to it immediately. There were over 2,000 delegates.

We treated the EGM very seriously. We made it the most democratic EGM that you could find. We gave both sides an equal number of speakers and time, and I myself proposed a secret ballot so that nobody would say they were being pressured.

Now that the totally democratic process has been completed, I am very, very hopeful that there will be no detractors. Nobody can say, "I was forced to do this and forced to do that." Everybody should ac-

cept that decision. EGMs and meetings are a democratic process of making a decision. Once a decision is made, it is representative of all who participated in the decision-making process. If it has gone either way, we all must accept it.

I would expect things to come back to normal. I would expect the vast majority of delegates and

leaders on the ground to quickly bring things back to normal.

During the EGM, besides the decision whether or not to take over Nanyang, the underlying voice of the EGM was very, very clear. Whenever the speakers touched on unity, everybody clapped heartily. There was overwhelming support. That, to me, is very important.

Some may agree and some may not agree to the takeover. Irrespective of that, once the decision is made, we must all stand together because our agenda is so long.

We have so many other things to do. Of course, some may have been a bit emotional over this. But once things cool, I think everything will get back to normal. I hope all

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# agenda

leaders will play their role. Knowing the underlying voice of the EGM was on unity, I think all of them should be playing their role.

**Q: As MCA president, how do you plan to consolidate party unity?**

**A:** My doors are open. If there are any suggestions, please come forward. We had a shareholders' meeting recently. That was cordial. I don't want to repeat anything that may hurt feelings.

I am glad the shareholders endorsed and gave the board of di-

**Q: But some people have turned it into a leadership issue.**

**A:** In any issue, you have the core "yes" and "no" and the fringe "yes" and "no". There will always be a core which is a large block.

These (Nanyang and party leadership) are different issues. That is not something to be decided now but something to be decided next year (during the party election).

**Q: Surely, you cannot deny the fact that if there is a leadership tussle that will take place in the near**

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rectors the comfort they needed, as was explained to all the shareholders on Tuesday (during the board of directors and trustees meeting.) It is common practice for the board of directors to make the decision to go-ahead because speed sometimes is of the essence.

Later, we come back to the shareholders for comfort. "We have done this. Do you back us?" Not that the deal is not done but that the deal is done. Because if you wait for 21 days' notice (to convene the board of trustees meeting), you may lose a lot of opportunities.

**Q: Do you see the narrow win in the EGM as a threat to your leadership?**

**A:** I think these are separate issues. There may be some inter-connections but they are separate issues. This is the takeover of Nanyang.

**future, surely there will be excess baggage that will be carried from now on. Do you see that this issue may be detrimental to your position in the future?**

**A:** We will only make our decision next year. Irrespective of that, there will be no let-up in fulfilling the kind of agenda that we have set for ourselves. We have never let up in the last 10 to 15 years.

TAR College has been expanded; when I took over the party, it was almost bankrupt. Today, its assets are sizeable. A very poor little orphan is today a beautiful entity that we can all be proud of. We have an agenda like the setting up of the Tunku Abdul Rahman University. Together with my colleagues, we have been very quietly working on it.

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# Ling: I harbour

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And we will continue this struggle.

Getting permission to set up is only one thing. To set up is another massive challenge. Can you imagine, so many bright kids want to do medicine but yet there are not enough places (in university). If TAR University is given permission to set up a medical faculty, then the challenge only starts then.

Getting the licence is one thing, to fulfil it is ... *wooh*, can you imagine?

Hospitals, paediatric wards, orthopaedic wards, operating theatres, O&G wards, ICUs, all the laboratories and the training of staff, the professors, the senior lecturers, the lecturers, the doctors, the nurses, the matrons. Can you imagine the challenge?

That kind of agenda is mind-boggling. But because so many want to do it, can we let them down? Can we say the challenge is too big?

I remember when we started the TAR College, we borrowed classrooms from all over the place. That was the beginning of what is TAR College today: over 30,000 students and hundreds of thousands of graduates.

These are all the challenges. The unfinished agenda is very, very important. I presume when members see this scenario, they will know the objective of attaining it is much, much more important than the people involved.

Leaders come and go but the objectives and struggles stay on.

Even in the changing of guards, the members will be very mature and it will be in a very smooth way. Don't disrupt ourselves and don't dilute our strength. We need this kind of strength to achieve those objectives.

**Q: Based on the verdict during the EGM, there appeared to be a gap in the sentiments of the party leadership and those of the grassroots, as manifested by the narrow majority. This lends credence to the argument that the central committee and presidential council are mere "rubber stamps".**

**A:** I think that is not fair. The central committee members are elected by the delegates. Of course, in

Everytime, three days before the annual general meeting, there comes a court case. The court process normally is quite tedious and long but that is the provision of the process.

Some of the points have already been decided upon and should come to a conclusion soon. Those are last year's cases.

I hope we can conclude it as speedily as possible. As I said, my conscience is very clear and I leave it to time and process of law to clarify. We leave it to the courts. All I can say is that my conscience is absolutely clear and we leave it to due process.

**Q: (Deputy president) Datuk Lim Ah Lek has described you as "arrogantly the takeover of Nanyang, how relevant is the MCA to the Chinese electorate now?"**

**A:** I think issues like Suqiu is something we have discussed even in Cabinet. A lot of their views are short-term, medium-term and even long-term. Some can be said to be sensitive, like abolishing Bumiputera rights. This is a vision of the future. All the ethnic group should discuss.

I don't think the Malays want it (the special privileges) forever. Whenever they have achieved the right status I am sure they would be willing to discuss the matter. Nobody wants it in perpetuity.

The Malays are an intelligent race and have the capability to catch up, and they have shown that with the proper training and education, it is possible. If you look back 30 years ago, where were the Malays in engineering and medicine? But today, they are in universities all over the place.

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any event it is always the smaller group who can have further access to information.

Sometimes, when you expose it (information) to a larger group, there is the possibility of disinformation, emotion and all that. I am not blaming the delegates ... I don't think there was enough effort focused to bring the real message down, but in the party's interest and within the provision of the constitution, that was what the time frame provided for.

And in hindsight, it was good that people requested for the EGM. We responded, and in the shortest possible time we brought it to a logical conclusion.

So, I think there is a difference. I give a lot of credit to the maturity of the central committee and presidential council members, including the people (who opposed the deal) who sit with me in the presidential council week after week.

So, how can you say that the two bodies are rubber stamps? They have been very contributive.

**Q: There are some who believe that Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's winding-up speech during the party's general assembly (one day before the MCA's EGM) had some influence on the way some delegates voted. Dr Mahathir made some strong remarks about *Nanyang Siang Pau* and *China Press*.**

A: I have had no time to assess the impact of the speech. I myself did not have a chance to listen to what was said by the Prime Minister. At this point of time, it is not wise of me to comment. If, as some quarters say it helped, then I must say that I am grateful.

**Q: Is the "smear campaign" against you part of the agenda to topple you in the run-up to the party polls next year?**

A: It all started one or two years ago with flying letters. But from my point of view, they are lies.

And then the use of the courts in this whole propaganda machine to topple me. The timing is uncanny. These are things that allegedly happened years ago. Why is it coming a few days before the AGM?

**gant" and said you have caused most of the problems in the MCA today. How do you respond to that?**

A: I don't want to say a single bad word against anybody. He has been working with me very closely for over 10 years.

**Q: How effective is the MCA as the custodian of the Chinese community's interests within Barisan Nasional?**

A: It depends on many factors. The deciding factor in any issue is handled by the Government, whether at the local, State or national level. The PM's Government is a very hands-on Government.

We can bring up any issues from drains to planes to ports to roads to rubbish collection. All these issues are brought up weekly at the Cabinet meeting.

The Cabinet is a very important institution for conflict management or problem-solving.

Working in close range with the PM for the last 15 years, he is a very good manager. He has a very sensitive nose to spot potentially sensitive issues and nip them in the bud, and this is one of the qualities all of us have learned from him; how to resolve issues and strike compromises to get a win-win situation.

In that sense, the Cabinet has been one of the most important bodies. Whether we are custodians of Chinese interests within the Barisan National depends on so many things.

One of them is the close relations within the BN and secondly, the close relationship between leaders of BN component parties. I think what is very strong in Malaysia is that this leadership has been together for more than 10 years.

We know each other in and out. We have compromised, we have argued and we have never lost our friendship. We know this is the environment in which we have to work. I must say that there has been no issue that has not been resolved.

**Q: In light of problems like Suqiu, the relocation of SJK (C) Damansara, Vision Schools, and more re-**

That is why we told Suqiu to go to the National Economic Action Council and discuss all these long-term things. These things have got to be managed. We will have to explain a lot of these things in greater detail. Just like Suqiu. Before the (1999) general election, I had dialogues with Suqiu. We allowed them to go to the NEAC.

As for issues like Vision Schools and SJK (C) Damansara, we will have to find the time to have a deeper explanation and dialogue. There may be other solutions.

Take Vision Schools, for example. We appreciate what the Government is trying to do but, on the other hand, we are also exploring the certain fears of certain groups.

One way to get our children to integrate deeper from a very young age is in Vision Schools.

But then, we discovered that it is quite sensitive. It may run very well for 10 to 20 years. Then suddenly in one deep recession, some smart aleck may say that in order to cut costs, why are we having three headmasters in one school? Why can't we just have one? That is when sensitivities come about. These are possible fears.

The other alternative is *Rancangan Integrasi Murid-murid*, where you have three different schools within close commuting distance of each other. There can be integrative programmes like Mothers' Day here this weekend and Sports Day there. We can get the children interacting and yet there is no danger

of saying: "Can we have one headmaster for these three schools?" Under this programme, you achieve the same objective but wipe out the sensitivities.

One of the areas in the future is probably we accept this programme. It is when you structure your new schools, have them quite close to each other, and that brings about interaction and integration.

These are some of the things we must take time to explain, not only to the people but also to the Government. This *Rancangan Integrasi*

# ' no ill-feelings

have not been happy with me in the past but as the circle goes, I always say if circumstances are right, then there is a chance for more amicable ties. If some people in State ExcOs have to be changed, then we change. He will be very angry with you. Everytime you make a decision, you make an enemy. But to say not to make decision that may alienate people, that is not possible.

To me, that (reconciliation with Lim) is very possible. Whatever I can do to effect that, I am very willing to do. I believe in the saying "*ja her wan shi shing*" which means when the family is united, all problems are solved. I think everything should be done to effect this family reconciliation.

**Q: Would you be having a second round of dialogue with Ah Lek or his men to discuss party succession? This problem is one of the main causes of friction between you and him.**

A: I think talk is not wrong. We must always anticipate situations and try to at least mentally prepare for a solution, but eventually the general body must decide. We cannot decide for them. I am very open to the possibility of a talk, but ultimately the general body must decide.

**Q: Rightly or wrongly, the perception is that you are very insistent that vice-president Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting take over the party leadership from you...**

A: Oh... oh... oh... oh... (breaks into laughter). This cannot be right, can it? In the last talk, I campaigned for (vice-president Datuk Chan) Kong Choy to be the deputy president. You ask the central committee

A: That is for the next generation to decide. Hopefully, it is an amicable decision because, very importantly I always say, party interests should take precedence. You must know why unity, oneness of mind, vision and action is very important to gain the confidence of the Chinese community.

**Q: Vice-president Datuk Chua Jui Meng has apparently joined Ah Lek's camp. Do you see that as a threat?**

A: I don't view these things as permanent because maybe on (the matter of) Nanyang there are different views but maybe on the next issue, we may have similar views. There is no permanent structure in politics.

There were a lot who were against me previously but who are now with me. There were a lot supporting (former MCA acting president Datuk Neo) Yee Pan while I supported (former president Tan) Koon Swan. A lot of Yee Pan supporters are with me today. People like Jimmy Low, Datuk Yik Pooi Hong and so many others. On this issue we are divided, on that (another) issue, we are united. I don't see any permanent structures.

**Q: There are some who feel that your Achilles heel is the financial problems your son Hee Leong faces. Has the issue in any way affected your standing as a senior politician?**

A: Now, I am not fully aware of all these things. Obviously, as I said all these court cases are politically-motivated and the timing is uncanny. A lot of these things are in court and that is the proper forum to resolve it. To discuss whatever is

*Murid-murid* is strongly backed in Cabinet, especially by Pak Lah (Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi) and me. It was drawn up when Pak Lah was the Education Minister while I was his deputy.

This is the width of possibility in a multi-ethnic society. We must be good conflict managers. You must be sensitive enough. If this method is good in principle, but there are grey areas, then we must be able to change course. All in the best interests of the country.

**Q: Despite the challenges the MCA faces, do you still believe that the Chinese electorate will vote for the MCA in the next general election?**

A: In the last two general elections, the Chinese were with the MCA and Dr Mahathir because we were very genuine in what we were doing. From 1990 to 1995, I did not have much rest running around the whole country and expanding TAR College.

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In the 1995 general election, the Chinese supported us very strongly. In the 1999 general election, we continued doing all the positive things and we added women power to it. We recruited thousands of women and promoted them at local levels. You can see capable women becoming capable village heads and local councillors.

And the PM did very well when he went against all odds and rejected the IMF's (International Monetary Fund) aid. Time has proven him correct. Even his greatest detractors in 1997 and 1998 today say his formula is very good. The Chinese gave him full support for this kind of vision and determination and courage. We were fortunate we could be there behind him. The Chinese will not forget Dr Mahathir. He has given the country peace, harmony and stability for a long time.

This is what the Chinese want so that they can do their business, educate their children and look forward to a better quality of life. And this is what we in the MCA and BN should be providing, and therefore the vision of a TAR University to fill all the gaps that may still exist. The MCA is also helping to build more and more Chinese schools.

**Q: Ah Lek described his ties with you as "uncordial" and "bad". Are the feelings mutual?**

**A: No. I have nothing in my heart against him. I have always refused**

**“ I don't think the Malays want it (the special privileges) forever. Whenever they have achieved the right status, I am sure they would be willing to discuss the matter. ”**

to harbour ill-feelings against anybody. There is a Chinese proverb which says that when you are angry with somebody, you suffer because you are carrying the burden. When you take it out, you are the one who is relieved, not him. I think that is fantastic wisdom. I don't harbour ill-feelings against anybody, especially Ah Lek.

**Q: In other words, there is a possibility of a reconciliation between you and him?**

**A: There are lots of people who**

members. This is the most comfortable formula if Ah Lek really wants to go. It was not Ka Ting. Only a small group of people can be the top party leaders, not all 900,000 members.

I always say that at every division or branch, there are only five to 10 activists. If all of them work very well, there is no problem. You don't have to fight for these kind of things. You know who the activists are.

As long as these activists have good relations, there is no problem. It is only when they have bad relations that there are problems. At every level, there is a handful of activists that keep the relations warm and therefore you get good unity.

**Q: In other words, the perception that Ka Ting is your "protege" is wrong?**

**A: Together with Kong Choy, they are good leaders who have been in the party for a long time. Who takes over who later I suggest we should sit down and discuss. There is no end to formulas on how you can share power. There are so many ways.**

**Q: Hypothetically, if you have absolute power in deciding who will take over the party presidency after this, then whom do you have in mind?**

**A: I don't have that power and I don't have to make that decision. I don't want to speculate.**

**Q: You have announced that you will be defending your post next year...**

**A: No, what I said was if I feel that the people still want me, then I will offer myself.**

**Q: How do you gauge if the people still want you?**

**A: There are many ways to know this. I am one of those very hands-on people. As you move from State to State and division to division, you will know whether they support you in what you are doing. For example, in fund-raising events for TAR College in Perak, you will know. The people are there. The hawkers are there, the shopkeepers are there and the coffeeshop owners are selling free for you. You know the people want you to continue doing this.**

If nobody wants to sell for you and your fund-raising is only RM10 at the end of one year, there is something wrong, either I am doing something wrong or the way I am doing it is wrong or is not in consonance with the wishes of the people. Then you stop.

**Q: Assuming the sentiments are in your favour and you decide to defend your post. Do you have any potential running mates in mind?**

in court is sub judice. I don't want to do anything to jeopardise the cases. As I said, my conscience is very clear. I will let the courts and time decide on it.

**Q: In other words, your standing in the MCA is not affected by this problem?**

**A: No, I expect members and delegates to separate the issues. Whatever is in court, let the courts decide. What is in the political arena, let the politicians decide. Don't mix up the two because my enemies will try to mix up the two.**

**Q: You have been party president for a long time now. In fact, you are the longest-serving president. When do you plan to call it quits in politics?**

**A: In politics, you don't set deadlines. You don't say: "I am quitting." You only set it in your own mind. When you have achieved what you set out to do, when you have set in motion all that you want to set in motion, you just wake up one morning and tell all your colleagues, "Thank you very much. Breakfast is on me." That's how it is.**

Some things you haven't achieved, you have to put others in place to run it. People can come and go but the vision and the objectives have to carry on.

**Q: What is the unfinished agenda holding you back?**

**A: A lot, both in Government and in politics...**

**Q: You will want to complete it before you leave politics?**

**A: Hopefully, but that is not possible because my ports have got a momentum of their own today. Transshipment boxes now overtake import and export. This is another milestone.**

The Prime Minister asked me to do to the airlines and airports what I did for the ports. I have been quietly travelling, meeting with all the CEOs of airlines and airports. The PM gave me a lot of leeway.

When you can put a face to an airport or ports and when you can help fulfil their (the users') wishes, they will come. The railways are going full steam. The double-tracking electrification... let's see these things through.

In the party, our agenda is still very wide. We can translate the experience of running a college into running a university. We have sufficient capabilities and expertise. Like the upgrading of Mara Institute (ITM) to Universiti Teknologi Mara.

I will do everything possible to bring the party back because that is the wish of the EGM. The underlying voice of the EGM.