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Cantabrigian tales

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WHAT could possibly be more English than Oxford and Cambridge? Nothing, that's what. As Malaysia searches her soul with regard to education in English, the country's Oxford and Cambridge Society draws attention to education in England.

"There's nothing comparable at university level," says Cantabrigian Chacko Vadaketh. "Cambridge is historic. It's beautiful.

"And it's in a Brideshead Revisited setting!"

Attracted to English and History, Chacko in fact read Law at Cambridge. Why didn't he pursue his first love? "The Asian mentality, I suppose," he muses; "the belief that you need a sensible degree, professional qualifications.

"The English don't see things that way. They look at a first degree as part of an education in a broader sense. It's not to prepare you for anything in particular ... except for life."

And life is what had brought Chacko and 46 Oxbridge alumni and their guests to Perak on Saturday. The Oxford and Cambridge Society of Malaysia was to address students of the Malay College, Kuala Kangsar, on the subject of their careers.

Established in 1905 by then sultans of Perak, Pahang and Selangor, as well as the Yamtuan Besar of Negri Sembilan, MCKK is the oldest fully-residential school in the country. Illustrious alumni include four former Yang di-Pertuan Agong; Malaysia's second Prime Minister; the previous Sultan of Brunei.

The day's three speakers were given a rousing and riotous welcome. As society vice-president and Sunway College principal Elizabeth Lee (Cambridge, 1985); investment management consultant Terence Mahony (Oxford, 1965); and MSC Venture executive director and CEO Sarina Karim (Cambridge, 1993) entered MCKK's Hargreaves Hall, a sea of white-clad schoolboys, from Fifth Form down to First, erupted into emphatic clapping. On the walls, the college motto boldly emblazoned: Fiat Sapientia Virtus - Let Wisdom Be Virtue. Further down, pertinent quotes from Jane Hamilton and G.K. Chesterton: Books are key to the wide world. If you can't do anything else, read all you can (the former); Good books teach us to love friends and enemies - perhaps because they are one and the same (the latter).

A Persian proverb, too, anonymously urges the boys on to greater achievement: Thinking well is wise; planning well is wiser; but doing well is wisest and best of all.

Descending from the dizzy heights of Hamilton, speakers give practical, pithy advice.

"Asia has a propensity to save," observes Mahony, "and one may always invest in stocks. Nowadays, though, success on the stock market doesn't mean making money - it simply means not losing it!"

The private sector, observes Mahony, is where the real money is - a fact appreciated by his audience. "If you'd invested RM10,000 in Dell a decade ago, you could be looking at RM10 million today!"

Instinct, he continues, can't be underestimated. And connections may open doors - but they can't guarantee subsequent success. In a pronouncement perhaps particularly pertinent to the Malaysian situation, in which patronage plays an undeniable part, he says: "Don't rely on connections; don't rely on the Government.

"Ultimately, it's not WHO you know - it's WHAT you know."

Second speaker Sarina, stressing the importance of good communication, highlights the emerging convergence of communications, computing and content. Technology, she points out, is a tool. The information age values intellectual capital. And vital to the understanding of this capital - as well as of business and the Internet - is English.

"It's simple," says Lee impishly; "Get straight As!

"Study hard," she continues, sounding like the teacher she has been, "and get good grades in English.

"It's never too early to start thinking about your careers."

Her audience responds with gratifying vigour. To the news that Oxford and Cambridge actively promote themselves in Malaysia, sending representatives here every year to conduct interviews, Five Science Three's Azmil Mohd Ikram asks, "After Sept 11, are Muslims like us at risk in the UK?" Society president Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad (Cambridge, 1984) - an MCKK alumnus himself - answers in the negative, saying reassuringly: "It depends where you go. My sons studied in England, and they've experienced no problems of that nature."

Four Science Six's Hafiz Tajuddin showcased considerable skill at oratory, demanding dramatically: "In this world of fluctuating stocks and hostile takeovers, how would a puny degree - a mere education - protect a naive post-graduate in the capital market jungle?" "Capital markets," responds Mahony, "are common sensical. Once the going's good enough - stop. In finance, humility'll help you steer clear of sharks."

And to Ahmad Khairi Zazali of Five Science One, who worried that any course choice would be carved in stone, Abdullah responded - to hearty applause - with a reminder about our most celebrated career-switcher ... Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Muhammad Nur Hazman of Two Unggul sums up the Oxbridge experience thus: "I was here today to be educated ... and I have been. I was especially interested in the bit about how best to make money - that's always good to know!"

Mercenary? Not really. Just a young man planning his career.

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