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Order of the Boot for our wayward Datuks and Tan Sris

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IN 1945, soon after his disastrous defeat in the British general election, word came to Winston Churchill from Buckingham Palace that King George wanted to invest him with the highest of knightly honours - the Order of the Garter.

Churchill replied: "Why should I accept the Order of the Garter from my sovereign when I have already received from the people the 'Order of the Boot'?"

I mention this simply because the recent withdrawal by the Sultan of Selangor of the Datukship title from two businessmen for having abused their positions, has put some of his brother Rulers in the fast-forward mode to more vigorously "award" defaulters with the "Order of the Boot".

Actually the behavioural conduct expected of Datuks is stated in the certificate conferring the award.

"(He) must not at all times do injustice to his fellow humans, more so the intention to be disloyal to the Sultan or to have the intention of being spiteful or treacherous towards fellow human beings.

"The recipient is further reminded to take care to preserve this award and "never tarnish it."

Disciplining Datuks is not a new development.

It goes back to 1800 when the States adopted their different constitutions.

Johor was the first to have its own orders and decorations in 1895.

Stories abound about the manner in which Johor rulers (including the present Sultan) had disciplined their Datuks and other citizens over many years.

This is among the reasons why in 1992 Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad succeeded in getting Umno to approve a code of conduct for Rulers.

One of the early offenders to lose his title in Johor in 1982 was a lawyer.

His Datukship was removed a day after he was convicted for "contempt of court" in a land deal.

In the same year, seven State VIPs were ordered to hand back their decorations. One of them was the former Menteri Besar, Tan Sri Othman Saat.

The six others who lost their titles were three former State Exco members, former private secretary to Othman, former general manager of Kejora and the NEB southern region manager.

The following year, the Johor Sultan withdrew the Datukship and two other decorations (all carrying the title of Datuk) from a former MCA State Executive Councillor convicted on two charges of corruption.

The calibre of award recipients came into question in Sabah in 1986, when the former Chief Minister, Datuk Harris Salleh, returned his State Datukship (SPDK First Class) because, he said, he was dissatisfied with the calibre of 11 recipients of the Second Class award given by the then Yang di-Pertua Negri, Tun Mohamed Adnan Robert.

The Datuk issue surfaced again in 1987 when a contractor in Pahang was being sought by the police for being involved in several cheating cases.

The police said the Datuk in question had shaven off his moustache and changed his hairstyle.

Then back again to Johor where two former State Executive Councillors lost their titles. No reasons were given.

Shortly after, another Datuk - this time the Minister of Labour - lost two of his Selangor medals and the honorific of Datuk for "playing on racial issues."

A new twist was added to the Datuk saga when in 1992 the Selangor Umno Liaison Committee decided not to nominate any names to the Istana for datukships or other awards in conjunction with the Sultan's 66th birthday.

The then chairman of the Umno liaison committee, Tan Sri Muhammad Taib said the decision had been made because the committee had received information that "only certain names would be considered for Datukships".

Muhammad took this to mean that the names submitted by the State Government would not be accepted.

Only two weeks ago, taking the cue from the Selangor Sultan, the Perak Menteri Besar, Datuk Seri Tajol Rosli Ghazali, announced that the State Government would be "more stringent" in the selection of candidates for recognition by the palace.

Also, there have been suggestions that the other State Governments should emulate Selangor's tough stand on awards. One NST reader made this comment:

"Years ago, when someone was conferred a Datukship, it was in recognition of services to the State. Nowadays some people get Datukships from States they have never even visited."

One pertinent factor that emerges from this saga of the Datuks is that many of those who have been deprived of their honorific were top Government people or corporate leaders.

Several years ago, there was a suggestion that any Datuk, Tan Sri or Tun convicted in court would automatically lose his title.

Is that still on?

The good news from the latest saga of the Datuks is that the Sultan of Selangor and his brother rulers will be more stringent in their selection of honourable individuals and not hesitate to award the Order of the Boot to the wayward ones.

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