

19/05/2004

The brains we gain fall mainly down the drain

By Rehman Rashid

NOW just wait one cherry-pickin' minute. What's all this beseeching brilliant Malaysians overseas to come home and run government-linked companies, eh? What about the brilliant Malaysians already here, beseeching decent work?

Some of my contemporaries are grumbling quietly in my ear these days, muttering animated oaths against the Fates that have forgotten them.

They are today's 40- and 50-somethings who didn't cut and run to cushy little billets in California, Sydney, Vancouver, London or Las Vegas when the going was good, there to develop foreign accents in pursuit of world-classness while taking the occasional smug long-distance pot-shot at the bumpkins back home.

Instead, they chose to stay right here through the tooth-and-nail, hell-for-leather, corporatising, privatising, liberalising and re-engineering 1980s and 90s, building and losing fortunes and enduring untold travails in the name of national aspirations. They spent their youth and genius being first used, then abused, and thereafter ignored.

The corporate executives who came online 20 years ago (at least, those who have survived) wish it to be noted that they have critical experience and knowledge of the way today's national economy was assembled. They also know how things fell apart.

They know how the peculiar economic challenges of nation-building in the 80s and 90s led to a credo of swift completion at all costs. Absolute efficiency in project delivery was the order of those days, and whoever delivered best, first and most could be assured of even more opportunities to do so.

Which turned out to be a treasure best left at the bottom of the sea, as it spawned huge conglomerates sprawled over unwieldy hosts of industries. In the 80s and 90s, Malaysia's corporate managers had to perform like circus jugglers, keeping a dozen things in the air at once.

In retrospect, that they were able to manage anything at all is a wonder in itself. That they had no way of weathering unexpected squalls, such as the regional financial crisis of 1997-8, became manifestly obvious.

"Everyone took care of their own turf and assumed someone else was watching the big picture," recalls one. "So when everything collapsed across the board, no one knew enough about anything."

It didn't matter if a tree was healthy when the forest was on fire.

But while the eyes of the nation stayed glued on the fates of a woe-begone handful of ex-billionaire CEOs, the legions of the country's best brains who had assembled their corporations and businesses were left to scratch like rats through the wreckage for what meagre pickings they could glean.

It wasn't their fault. They'd been trained as accountants, engineers, lawyers, academics, economists and managers. They were businessmen, technocrats and executives.

They were the first generation of the New Economic Policy, schooled from childhood to be the new professionals the country needed so many more of, not the politicians of whom there seemed quite enough already.

They had no choice. It was their destiny, decreed by national policy. They got with the programme or were left behind; it was as simple as that. Enough of them took the stated mission objectives seriously.

But in the end, the better they performed, the more they had to deliver.

If someone said something couldn't be done, someone else would say it could be - and, what was worse, attempt to do it, hang the cost.

In the end, people were trying to do frankly impossible things - like serve the nation and simultaneously have a life - and the many-roomed mansion of cigar smoke and gilt-edged mirrors came tumbling down.

Let it not be forgotten, therefore, that the brilliant Malaysians behind the tripling of the country's gross national product from less than RM4,000 per capita in 1980 to more than RM11,000 in 1996 remain at the nation's service, still have 20 to 30 productive years ahead of them, and might yet have a thing or two to tell the new crop of brilliant Malaysians vaulting so adroitly into the corner suites of Malaysia, Incorporated.

Having paid so singularly high a price for their 20-year apprenticeship, it would be a shame if the country now dispenses with the hard-won maturity of the Mahathir Generation in favour of a whole new batch of apprentices.

Immolation in the furnace of national ambition is a terrible thing to do to the flower of the nation's youth. At least let's salvage what tempered steel is to be found amid the ashes and slag.

Without sharing the load with those responsible for it - their immediate predecessors - today's bright young geniuses are just as likely to crumple under the many burdens of inordinately great expectations.

(END)