

24/10/2004

It's time we change our perception of Datuks

By Brendan Pereira

THIS is open season on the datukship. It seems that everyone past puberty has an opinion on whether the States should give out fewer titles to prevent the dilution of an award that once meant something.

The roiling debate has also brought to the surface a fact about Malaysians: We often seek refuge in parlour humour when confronted with an issue causing unease, unhappiness or just pure disdain.

Heard a good joke about the datukship? How about this offering?: "Before if you threw a stone you hit one Datuk. Now, you throw a stone you hit two Datuks."

The copyright for this gem belongs to former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Here is another making the rounds: "Congrats, You have been conferred the Darjah Gemilang, Cemerlang, Terbilang which carries the Datuk Seri award. The award will be forwarded to you by Pos Laju."

Once the peals of laughter have died down, maybe Malaysians should examine what really irks us about the award of the datukship.

IS it that so many are given out?

Dr Mahathir said recently: "If you want to give value to anything, it must be limited." He is spot on.

But the less-is-more concept has not always found support among those who award the titles.

Of the States, Johor and Kedah have been the most sparing in giving out datukships.

It might be easier to strike a lottery than get a datukship from the Sultan of Johor, who awarded only five this year.

Perlis has also been quite stingy, giving out 210 datukships since 1965. Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim said: "Datukships from Perlis are only given on merit and to those who contribute to society."

For many of the other States, the number of awards has been climbing steadily.

This year, Malacca stole the headlines by awarding 84 datukships. But really, no one should be too surprised at the number of recipients.

Just two years ago, 78 datukships were awarded by the State, continuing an upward trend started in 1994, when 22 datukships were given out.

The last time fewer than 10 individuals were conferred the award was in 1992, the same year Malaysia won its first Olympic medal through badminton at the Barcelona Games. Seems like a lifetime ago.

Pahang also has sprinkled its datukships quite liberally. In 2001, 103 individuals were conferred the title Datuk Seri or Datuk. The number jumped to 154 in 2002, and settled to a more manageable 117 last year.

In 1993, 44 datukships were given out by the State. Maybe it is time for all States to agree to limit the number of datukships to 30 a year.

IS it that we have been programmed for so long to think of Datuks as a special class of people?

Let's face it, Datuks get a better deal than others. And that is because in many ways, we still remain a feudal society, respecting those with titles regardless of whether they are worthy of respect.

The policeman is unlikely to summon a traffic offender if he spots the "Persatuan Datuk" crest on the vehicle.

The flight attendant is likely to flash a wider grin to the Datuk than to the young woman who is struggling to keep her two brats in check.

The journalist is likely to lob soft-touch questions to a Datuk and put on his Woodward-Bernstein act only for lesser mortals.

Malaysians are likely to swallow even the most unlikely story if it escapes the lips of someone with the title Datuk. Remember Nor Azami Ahmad Ghazali, the man behind the impressive-sounding Federal Special Forces?

Many believed he was the leader of a shadowy paramilitary outfit and that he was destined to be the sixth prime minister of Malaysia after Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi. He conferred the title of Datuk on himself, and encouraged several thousand people to pay RM150 to join his elite force.

A number of members were willing to part with up to RM40,000 to buy military ranks. Many were sceptical about this scheme but did not dare question him. Why? Because he was a Datuk.

It is a good thing that so much ink has been expended in the debate over the value of the datukship.

Sometimes, there is a need to allow an issue which has been percolating for so long to boil over. Will the number of datukships be limited? Maybe. Some States may feel the need for a ceiling, or at least to scrutinise candidates for the award more closely.

Whatever it is, this matter is out of the hands of the average Malaysian.

Even the Federal Government cannot dictate how many awards a State can dish out every year.

But what Malaysians can and should do is change the way we perceive someone with a Datuk before his name. He is no better or worse than the rest of us. That way, we will not be disappointed when he does not measure up.

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