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Remembering those moments in history

By Syed Nadzri

Forty years after his tour of duty in Malaysia, Australian diplomat Thomas Critchley returns to Kuala Lumpur and reminisces about the old days, writes SYED NADZRI.

LONG after he retired from the foreign service, Australia's first High Commissioner to Malaysia Thomas Critchley still wears that old diplomatic charm when he talks about relations, whether of people or nations.

He remembers very fondly his stint in Kuala Lumpur from 1955 to 1965, his "brandy soda" mates among Malaysian ministers, his golf kakis and his enduring love for the durian.

Now 89, Critchley still likes the joke from the old days about Tun Tan Siew Sin, known for his ultra-straight and prudent ways as Finance Minister in Tunku Abdul Rahman's Cabinet: "In athletics, Siew Sin would make a superb 100-yard sprinter but not in the 220-yard event." Why? "Because he can't turn."

On his love for the durian, he says: "For a person trying it for the first time, the first taste holds the key. If it is from a rotten fruit, he'll hate it forever."

Critchley is in Kuala Lumpur on a 10-day visit in conjunction with the launch last Monday of Australia and the Formation of Malaysia 1961-1966, a volume of over 350 historical documents published by Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Though only a few of his old friends are left, he is being "held hostage, whisked here and there by the ones still around".

Kuala Lumpur holds special significance for Critchley as it was here that he married his wife Susan and here, too, that their first daughter was born. In fact, he named her Karen Laurie so that her initial would be KL, just like the Malaysian capital.

Critchley can still recall the wedding reception at No. 33 Jalan Langgak Golf, till today the Australian High Commissioner's residence in Kuala Lumpur, on Aug 3, 1962. The newly-weds had to leave their guests midway through the party (about midnight) to head for their honeymoon in Dungun and Pulau Perhentian.

"At first we wanted a quiet wedding but the Head of Protocol at the Malaysian Foreign Ministry would have none of that and said he would fix it all up. We had a magnificent gathering," he says.

Among those who attended were the Yang di-Pertuan Agong then (the Raja of Perlis Tuanku Syed Putra), Tun Abdul Razak and Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman. Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman was away in London at the time.

The bungalow, with a huge compound along what was already then a diplomatic enclave, was bought by the Australian Government for £30,000.

What Critchley liked about it was that it was just next to the Royal Selangor golf course and had no fences. Sometimes, he says, the Tunku would, during a round of golf, pop in for a quick drink.

"But Kuala Lumpur has literally developed out of sight now. To get to the golf club from the house means you have to make one big turn," he says. "But it's impossible not to be impressed with the city now, though I have a lingering sentiment of the old KL I enjoyed so much."

Critchley also cannot forget the crucial years leading to Malaya's Independence and the formation of Malaysia.

The British Government, he says, was keen to let Malaya gain independence because its political and economic interests had moved from

the Far East to Europe.

"The British High Commissioner, Malcolm McDonald, had a strong opinion about independence and cautioned that the communities should be united or the federation would be fragile. Tunku came up with a good arrangement to get three political parties, each representing one of the three major races, to work together as a coalition.

"And a few years later when there was indication that the formation of Malaysia was on the horizon, the word was out that extreme care should be taken because of the risks involved, particularly on a communal basis."

The British view, he adds, was that it should incorporate Malaya, North Borneo (now Sabah), Sarawak and Singapore into a federation, while Indonesia wanted the entities to exist as independent nations.

"This, in fact, was the view of Hatta (former Indonesian vice-president), and Sukarno (former Indonesian president) who said the federation could result in Indonesia having a second China as neighbour because of the large number of Chinese immigrants in these regions.

"I had a very good relationship with Sukarno and went to see him about the formation of Malaysia, telling him that it was in accordance the wishes of the people in the States involved," he adds.

Sukarno, Critchley says, was concerned about Singapore which was also a major entrepot for Indonesia. And this objection from the Indonesian president subsequently led to konfrontasi, a declaration that the republic would adopt a confrontational stance towards the newly-formed Malaysia.

What struck Critchley most then was the fact that when confrontation began, Malays in Malaysia were quick to dump Sukarno as someone they looked up to. "Before that, I could see a lot of common ground between Indonesian nationalism and Malay nationalism, because when I first came to Malaya I could see in the kampung that most Malay houses had portraits of Sukarno and Hatta on their walls. When confrontation started, these pictures were taken down and burnt."

Critchley deals with questions about some of the most volatile periods in Malaysia-Australia relations like a true diplomat, particularly about Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad when he was Prime Minister.

"At that time, Dr Mahathir also had the buy-British-last policy and he was looking East to Japan rather than traditional trading partners like Britain. Australia used to be quite close. Since the Second World War, we were anxious to be on good terms with our neighbours, so the hiccups were not something we welcomed. We regretted that, but the basic thing was not to get too excited over individual statements and attitude."

He is not easily worked up even at the mention of probable mishandling in specific episodes such as Australia's description of Malaysia's laws as barbaric following the death sentence on its citizens Kevin Barlow and Brian Chambers 20 years ago, former Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating calling Dr Mahathir recalcitrant for not attending the inaugural Apec summit in 1993, Malaysia hitting out at Australia for being "deputy sheriff" to the United States and the criticism of Malaysia's logging activities on some Pacific islands.

"I think there was mishandling but I don't know by whom. But the most important thing is, neighbours should work for mutual interest. And I hope relations will brighten."

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