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Fitting tribute to a true Malaysian patriot

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It has often been said that Merdeka was handed to Malaysia on a silver platter by the British. Nothing can be further from the truth. While it might have been true when Malaya won it in 1957, the birth of Malaysia in 1963 was fraught with peril.

The most brilliant of ideas can often be still-born and it would not be over-dramatising to say the Malaysia idea at its very inception stared such a prospect squarely in the face.

It is generally accepted that the Malaysia idea was first thought up by the British as a neat solution to hold in check an ambitious Singapore, especially in the person of its then still rather suspiciously leftish Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew.

But the fact remained that Lee found in his championing of Malaysia a somewhat odd opposition in Sarawak from an unlikely quarter - the Sarawak United People's Party and its founding leader, the late Tan Sri Ong Kee Hui, with the ensuing acrimony between them later brought into the first Malaysian Parliament where both ended up as strange bedfellows on the Opposition bench.

Few Sarawak political leaders, past or present, have so far organised their thoughts and actions in the form of written memoirs.

The outstanding exception so far has been Ong, trained agriculturalist, bank manager, mayor of Kuching and Federal Minister for 12 years.

Despite a good score years in happy retirement, Ong's two-volume memoirs, the voluminous Footprints in Sarawak covering the years 1914 to 1963 and Footsteps in Malaysia covering the years since 1963 still were sadly missing three last chapters upon his passing in 2000, aged 86.

Ong confessed at the outset of Footsteps in Malaysia feeling despondent as ceremonies marking the fruition of Malaysia ended in Kuching on Sept 16, 1963. Against such odds as opposition to Malaysia from a substantial segment of Sarawak's heterogenous population, varying degrees of support for such other ideas as outright independence or at least formal independence before joining Malaysia or a federation of the Borneo states and active disapproval from Presidents Sukarno in Indonesia and Macapagal in the Philippines, Malaysia had become, in Ong's own words, a "fait accompli".

In a postscript in Footprints in Sarawak, Ong wrote with like melancholy of that fateful September day of 1963: "Fifty years old and my dreams shattered."

"I had no premonition of what the future held for the party (SUPP) or me from our position in the wilderness of opposition in a Federation that we had bitterly opposed. That Tengku Abdul Rahman (Bapa Malaysia) would be magnanimous in victory certainly did not cross my mind. Nor that he would ultimately extend to the SUPP and I a helping hand in reconciliation and friendship. That gesture would prove to be the beginning of a new era in the story of the SUPP and another turning point in my own life."

Ong recounted how his party, then racked by self-doubt and serious internal acrimony, took its time to accept the offer of a Federal Cabinet post, forcing Tun Razak to swear in his Cabinet with one vacant post reserved for Ong to take up when his party was ready, which he did and was eventually sworn in as Federal Minister on Dec 9, 1970.

Scion of an illustrious string of pre-Independence era Kapitan China and married into the Wee family that today still controls Singapore's United

Overseas Bank, Ong's inclinations were clearly pro-establishment.

Perhaps it is Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who summed it up best in a thoughtful tribute to Ong printed in Footsteps in Malaysia: "It was his (Ong's) deep sense of duty and his understanding of the national need for true unity for the Malaysian nation which made him decide to lead his party, the SUPP to join the Barisan Nasional coalition. If he took time before doing this it must have been because he was a very careful man."

In almost like vein, Singapore's Lee recounted a meeting he had in Sarawak in 1962 to discuss Malaysia. According to Lee, Tun (then Datuk) Ong Yoke Lin took to quoting Shakespeare: "There is a tide in the affairs of men which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune; omitted, all the voyage of their lives is bound in shallows and in miseries."

Kee Hui replied with a Dayak proverb, translated into English thus: "It is dangerous to sail when the Rejang is in flood," what with logs, currents and other dangers.

Lee concluded in his own tribute: "In retrospect, Ong Kee Hui had it right."

Once the die was cast and the Malaysian voyage set forth with all its likely perils, responsible patriots had little choice but to dip their own oars in water and help guide all to safe harbour.

As we ponder on Merdeka eve where the nation is today, safely moored in harbour, Malaysia owes as much to such early sceptics as Ong who, with typical understated finesse, was able to subsume personal convictions to the greater national interest, and therefore showed himself to be a true Malaysian patriot all the same.