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## Recapturing age of innocence in politics

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SOMEONE reminded me that there is no such a thing as the age of innocence in politics. Politics is not for the faint- or noble-hearted. It is a ruthless world for the toughest, and survival is for the fittest. Weaklings get trampled. Idealism is a dirty word. And hope is only for victors.

Politicians are practical and pragmatic people. They will play to the gallery if they have to, they contradict themselves many times over and they have perfected the art of schmoozing. So, if you have any notion that politics is a discourse in civility or at least an exercise in moderation, forget it!

Everyone has an opinion on politics and politicians. We all have two professions - our own, and as critics of politics and politicians.

As a believer in politics, I have considerable respect for politicians. I may be an idealist but I believe politics has a role to play and politicians have responsibilities beyond kissing babies and handing out hampers to the poor.

Politics is never dirty, politicians never overt opportunists. Put ourselves in their shoes and we could end up worse than many. Yet, they are for the laymen and armchair critics objects of vilification.

The Malays have a peribahasa for it: betapa berat mata memandang, berat lagi bahu memikul (an onlooker may be sympathetic, but the person shouldering the burden feels the most pain).

Perhaps it has something to do with perception. Many politicians survive on a system of patronage and rewards. For the non-politicians, association with a political master is a surefire formula for getting noticed, contracts, whatever. In this country, a glimpse of someone seen with a political bigwig brings a certain amount of recognition, even status.

The corridors of power are full of hopefuls - from aspiring Young Turks, to businessmen, not to mention has-beens trying to buy an "insurance policy".

Politics excels at creating hope, but fails spectacularly in managing failures. It has its detractors and fervent embracers. Otto von Bismarck famously said: "Politics is the art of the possible." Fulke Greville said: "Politics is the food of sense exposed to the hunger of folly." And Charles de Gaulle must have had an axe to grind when he noted: "Politics are too serious a matter to be left to politicians."

I read Pico Iyer's *The Recovery of Innocence: Literary Glimpses of the American Dream* with awe for its truthfulness and eloquence. He is looking through the literary prism to understand the making of political America.

Iyer guides us through F. Scott Fitzgerald, D.H. Lawrence, Washington Irving even Norman Mailer to remind us of a vision now lost, an innocence that has faltered and an illusion that has turned to despair.

Iyer rightly argues, in chasing the future, one cannot afford to relinquish the past - the openness, freshness, idealism that are the birthright and its saving grace. He was referring to the American Dream, yet can't we have our very own Malaysian Dream to match that?

Leaving skepticism aside, Malaysia is founded on a vision of oneness, driven by tradition and sacrifices. Compromise was the rule of the game.

The minorities have equal share in nation-building. We have had our share of ups and downs, even catastrophic failures. Race relations are a contentious issue. Yet, we manage them relatively well.

We gain strength by the day. We are successful in more ways than one. We were once a country known for its rubber, tin and palm oil. Today, we are one of the most industrialised economies in the world.

Our politicians must have done something right. OK, give credit to the bureaucrats, the technocrats, whoever, but a one-man vision can also build and destroy a country.

Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the former Prime Minister, has changed not only the landscape - real or political - but also positioned Malaysia as an exemplary Third World country in terms of achievements.

Life has to go on, no matter what. The nation has to move on. The new man - Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi - has yet to prove his mettle. But the nation awaits with bated breath for a new hope.

We have to dream of greatness, glory and new excellence - if we care to dream. Pak Lah, as he is fondly referred to, has to be first and foremost a caring man to ensure the making of a caring nation.

Valcav Havel, the former President of the Czech Republic reminded us what people want is not just bureaucratic order and mechanical precision. Therefore, I urge Pak Pak Lah to go back to the people, back to basics and back to the age of innocence in politics, whatever that means to him and this nation.

Let's forget about differences. Politics may divide us. Someone said: "Politicians neither love nor hate, interest, not sentiment, governs them."

Why can't we look at the common interest and work together for the benefit of the people? Is that too much to ask from politicians from both sides of the divide?

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