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Should old acquaintance be forgot... Happy New Year!

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GOOD morning and Happy New Year. Today, as you may have noticed, is the first of 2003. This column feels almost as much significance in that as in

being a year old this week (i.e., not a lot).

For, if I may, this is also the 20th anniversary of my debut as a weekly

columnist with this newspaper - notwithstanding the 13-year break I took in that time to do as Robert Burns counselled in Auld Lang Syne, and run about the braes, paddle in the burns, and cross the broad roaring seas.

Having returned, I feel like Wip Van Rinkle - or Rip Van Winkle in reverse. Washington Irving had his feckless Dutchman fall asleep for 20 years, wake up and find himself the same while everything else had changed. This Malaysian did the same and found himself middle-aged and grey, while nothing else had changed.

It is quite immiserating, not to say tiresome, to be faced with the same issues after 20 years. Racial polarisation, we were dealing with in 1983 (obviously with as much effectiveness then as now). Arresting the decline

of the English language in education, same-same. Schisms in the MCA, oh boy. Corporate opacity - well, that was almost new and trendy back then, although we see through it more clearly now.

On the world stage, Israel and Palestine's principal players were then, as now, Ariel Sharon and Yasser Arafat. Back then, Sharon owed his fame to his performance against Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in southern Lebanon; now he's playing the West Bank. Arafat's role, costume and script have not changed.

Then, 302 American and French soldiers were blown up by just one suicide bomber in Beirut. Since then, enthusiasm for the technique has risen in inverse proportion to its efficiency.

Twenty years ago, Benigno Aquino was shot dead on arrival at Manila's international airport. Now, someone's blown up Ferdinand Marcos's mountainous concrete likeness in the Philippines' Benguet province.

Twenty years ago, North Korean agents blew up the South Korean Cabinet on a diplomatic visit to Yangon, killing four ministers and barely missing then-President Chun Doo Hwan. Today, they're trying again with their own nuclear facilities, and Chun Doo Hwan is still barely missed.

Then, the Soviet Union shot down a Korean jetliner over Sakhalin Island.

Now there is no Soviet Union, but civilian aircraft are still wilfully blown out of the sky, and the United States continues to find Evil Axes to grind.

Here, too, it's not easy to ring out the Old and ring in the New, because the Old seems to enjoy sneaking back around the front to gag the baby and steal its diapers. Twenty years ago there was Dayabumi; now, the Petronas Towers. Then, it was Kenyir; now, Bakun. Then BMF; now Perwaja.

Back then, Federal Territory Minister Shahrir Samad announced plans for an "aerobus" system for Kuala Lumpur - and drew gasps by suggesting the project might be offered to the private sector. Today, Shahrir has a website and the KL Monorail is in final trials. (Not counting that of whoever sabotaged its earlier trials, if they're ever found.)

Twenty years ago, the authorities seized 33,000 pornographic video-tapes in a nationwide crackdown. Now, they seize about 10 million illicit VCDs a year, a testament to both the advance of ICT and how much effect all these seizures have on either supply or demand.

Violent crime was a west coast problem then and still is, while the east coast was just as flooded 20 years ago this week as it is this week.

Twenty years after Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu was among the 54 people hurt when the stage he was standing on collapsed at the Thaipusam ceremonies in Batu Caves, he remains Works Minister and President of the MIC, but there have been no such mishaps at Thaipusam ever since.

So usher in the New by all means and with all due revelry, but don't be too hard on the Old as you show it the exit - a respectful salute is more in order than an unceremonious boot - lest we meet again, some sunny day.

Newness is what we live for and our economy demands, no doubt, and we've acquired a lot of it over the 20 New Years past. New cars, houses, roads, railways, ports and airports; new homes, buildings, deputy prime ministers, Cabinet members, party presidents, and parties.

Bit players have come and gone, fortunes have risen and fallen, but to quote the Canadian poet Leonard Cohen, much of it has been "new skin for the old ceremony". Much has not changed, perhaps cannot, maybe should not, nor ever will in any case. Perhaps 20 years makes the difference between seeking the Utopian dream of conflict resolution, and settling for the Machiavellian advantages of conflict management.

Which hypothesis shall doubtless be tested again this year, as it was back then and has been every blessed year since. Still, 2003 will offer a particular novelty. Twenty years ago, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was in but his third year as Prime Minister. This year, his last.

Perhaps it's for such transitions, and the changes they portend, that Robert Burns so sweetly reminded us to raise that cup o' kindness for

Auld  
Lang Syne.