

The never-ending story
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Tunku Abdul Rahman inspecting troops being sent to fight the common enemy of communism in defence of the common cause of nationhood.

TWO things unite a nation: A common cause, and a common enemy.

Our first generation had the best of both. They had the common cause of Independence. A cause so great, so good, so sweet that there are still about 3,000 nations-in-waiting thirsting for what 150 or so have tasted in the past half-century: The nectar of their very own Merdeka Days.

Our founders had their founding enemy in imperialism: The force that had to be repelled — and was obligingly disposed to do so anyway, now that colonialism had become a bit of a tiresome embarrassment to the colonisers.

Besides, in Malaya the White Man's Burden had shown itself sufficiently adept at consociational politics and usefully appreciative of the finer points of a British education and administration.

Hardly had the Federation of Malaya Agreement spelled the end of British Malaya, however, when by fortuitous historical happenstance, a perfect new common enemy emerged. What could be more useful in uniting a nation than an armed insurrection?

The Malayan Communist Party's baleful escalations of 1948 were a death-or-glory play: They would unite Malaya in a communist "people's republic" or rip it apart in the effort. But their timing sucked. Malaya was still enough of an outpost of Empire to deal with obstreperous natives — especially murderous ones.

In the decade leading to 1957, a time of new visions and New Villages, this nation-in-waiting played common causes and common enemies like a string quartet with Vivaldi.

Our founding generation achieved their common cause 50 years ago today. Just three years later, in 1960, they were able to declare the defeat of their common enemy, the communist insurrection, ending the Emergency. And twirled immediately into another unifying cause-and-enemy tango: The formation of Malaysia and the Indonesian Confrontation. Another common cause attained; another common enemy foiled.

We celebrate our first generation's success today, and remember them with fondness and gratitude. But we do not forget the darker consequences of their success in attaining stated goals and overcoming sworn foes. The nation's moral compass swung freely in the absence of the polar gravities of cause and enemy, and people found them where they could.

After the riots of 1969 emerged the second generation of an independent nation, no longer Malayans but Malaysians, Bumiputeras or otherwise; a generation redefined for redesign. There was a new common cause for this nation: The New Economic Policy's twin objectives of eradicating poverty and "eliminating the association of race with economic function".

And there was a new common enemy; one all the more insidiously dangerous for not being a foreign import such as colonialism, imperialism or communism, but deeply internal, home-grown and personal: Race hate.

A much more strictly controlled nation emerged from the restructuring, not just in new policies, legislation and systems of governance, but also in the concerted education of an entire generation to pursue these goals and embody these ideals.

In another of those dazzling historical conjunctions for which this country isn't famous enough, the tenure of the nation's second generation coincided with the administration of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad. The educated discipline of the NEP generation, along with its burgeoning crop of new technocrats and professionals, could therefore be tapped for what history will surely remember as Malaysia's turbo-charged acceleration phase.

Most of the quadrupling of gross domestic product since 1970 took place on Dr Mahathir's watch — which means it wasn't entirely about 22 years, three months, two weeks and a day of megaprojects, but more disposable income for just about everyone.

But that was that. The NEP, as its designers wished, bought time for one generation. Its continuing influence, as they feared, shows that the generation so favoured hasn't gained the self-confidence to stand unaided.

This passes an onerous burden to the third generation: Anak Malaysia coming online in the 21st century. Their name is We: There are more Malaysians under 25 today than all the people in Malaya at Independence.

They would seem to have inherited common cause aplenty. In some things we're fast learners, and the years since 1970 have been jollied along by one restatement after another of national principles and purposes: Tun Razak's Rukunegara, Dr Mahathir's Vision 2020, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's National Mission.

But what is their common enemy?

Let us here revisit the good and ancient wisdom of "The Third-Generation Curse". All dynastic traditions know and understand it: The first generation gets something going; the

second grows it; the third blows it all to pieces.

Break the Third-Generation Curse and your family will live long and prosper, honouring the memory of their ancestors and building the future on a solid foundation of the past. Fail, and they'll forget even themselves.

Why does this awesome threshold, this moment of truth, loom into view with the advent of G3? Very simple:

G1 is born poor, but is determined not to die poor if he can help it. So he works like a dog. He marries a good and diligent partner who also works like a dog. They have children and work together to send G2 to school to be educated — not so that they won't have to work like dogs, but to do so more profitably.

G2 is therefore not born as poor as G1 was, and grows up appreciating G1 for making that possible. Filial piety and respect is genuine between first and second generations. Parents are proud of their dutiful children — whose very existence is testament to their success — and children are motivated to do their parents proud, taking over their family firms and turning them into public-listed companies and multinational corporations.

G3, therefore, is born rich. And it can be astonishing how far away Grandpa's humble hovel can be to the bemansioned children of the nouveau riche. Grandpa himself is an old codger by now, and Dad, he was always his papa's boy, everything Grandpa said he did, he wasn't a founder but a mere executive, and who wants to run this old business anyway? We're rich spoilt brats with trust funds.

The third generation can feel oppressed and constrained by dynastic burdens. Beneficiaries of their predecessors' success, they are born wealthier and more comfortable, with greater mobility and better opportunities. They would naturally perceive their future to be far more theirs than anyone else's to determine, and would surely resent too stifling an imposition of the traditions, ideals and realities of generations past.

Understandable.

They should be given rein. Let them chart their own paths. G1 and G2 did what they could; it's up to G3 now. All their forebears might hope, as they exercise their right to a future of their own design, is that they see how selfishness, ignorance, arrogance and disrespect invalidate the very notion of common cause.

After burying imperialism, communism and poverty in the course of our first 50 years, our common enemy now is the Third-Generation Curse. We must break it. We have no choice. Otherwise, there is no "we".

Naming the national language

ANTHONY Burgess (1917-1993) may have embodied much that was odious in a colonial writer, but he loved us, you know. His grumpiness was a foil against the lush seductions of this country. Malaya in the 1950s had an irresistible hold on his soul: its green, blue and gold; its women with "faces like open flowers".

Miserable, cynical, supercilious Burgess loved, studied and cared about this country. He

feared for it, too, this impossible amalgam of ours. He could not see how this chimera of a country could have the audacity to even consider self-rule — but was beguiled all the more for it.

Burgess was wrong about some things, but his genius was such that when he was mistaken, he was greatly mistaken.

About 30 years ago, back when Bahasa Melayu first became Bahasa Malaysia, Burgess grumbled about it in an article for a London newspaper. We meddled too much with ourselves, I think he felt. He noted the irony of the Malay language becoming the "national" language by removing the word "Malay" from its name.

He recalled when this had first happened, in 1967, the stipulated 10 years after Independence, when Bahasa Melayu officially became... but here Burgess got it wrong again. It had become "Bahasa Kebangsaan", "Language of Nationality". Burgess thought it had been renamed "Bahasa Negara", "Language of the Nation".

Perhaps it should have been.

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