12/03/2003

Remembering a great man

Abdullah Ahmad

AS I grow older, the memories of my interaction with Tengku Abdul Rahman Putra Al Haj brighten. The Tengku once told me long after he was out of power, and poor me was in the political wilderness (reading for a Masters degree at Cambridge), that the ability to forgive was the true token of greatness.

He was such a man, or appeared to be. His only son was in school with me briefly at the Malay College, Kuala Kangsar. As George Bernard Shaw said: "Reminiscences make one feel so deliciously aged and sad."

When Tengku passed away in 1990, at the infirm age of 87, he was remembered as much for what he did as for what he failed to do. That was surely a double measure of his humanity: a recognition of his historic accomplishments as well as an abiding remorse among those who lived through his era over his equally historic failings.

I lived through that era, and did what I could in the creation of a new one after he left office. The country was then under extreme duress and some have never forgotten. Time has done much healing; enough, I feel, for the Tengku to be commemorated for what he did right and forgiven for what he did wrong. I have taken part as fully as I could in this, the one hundredth year of his birth, to keep his memory alive rather than as a dead presence in our school textbooks and historical tomes.

In the rather lofty seminars and forums I have participated, I used my own first-hand knowledge of him to put his legacy in perspective. Until I was invited last week by the DAP - which had once ruthlessly assailed him - to speak on the occasion of his centenary, I hadn't found an audience so germane for a fitting eulogy. Here is the text of the speech that was delivered on my behalf by associate editor Rehman Rashid at the conference held in Petaling Jaya on Friday.

`Shakespeare wrote: "Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them."

The line is not from one of the Bard's tragedies, as one might expect of so grand and true a declamation, but from his most light-hearted comedy, Twelfth Night - and it's delivered by a Fool.

That, I suspect, would be an irony Tengku Abdul Rahman would have enjoyed - for him, it was all three.

He was born great, no doubt. As a prince of the Kedah Royal House, Tengku never lost his aristocratic bearing. He was not a `man of the people' so much as their father, Bapak Malaysia: their leader and protector; their patron, provider and benefactor.

He was a kingly man, and history shows how necessary it was that the gravitas of the traditional Malay court be borne by the founding prime minister of this country.

The Anti-Malayan Union movement was not a peasant rebellion. It was the rising of an entire society, top to bottom; a society complete, fully formed and deeply rooted; replete with a long history, a firm religious foundation, a developed community structure, and a sense of self-identity.

Tengku embodied and personified all this. The Malaya he led to Independence in 1957 left no Malayan behind - not the lowliest peasant nor penniless immigrant, nor the noblest royal families. Now, this was unprecedented in world history.

It is often enough remarked that Malaysia won its Independence without shedding blood in an anti-Imperialist war. That is, indeed, remarkable.

But we did it without running rivers of our own people's blood either - and that is virtually unique, and as a result of it we prospered. Look at those countries which achieved independence with bloodshed. Many have become banana republics.

And that was part of the greatness that Tengku was not born to, but achieved.

See how he is remembered today, here, on the occasion of the centenary of his birth. The words used to describe his legacy today indicate how he lives on in our memory: as an icon of this country's potential for harmony, happiness and prosperity.

The enduring respect and affection for Tengku stems from the two earliest masterstrokes of his leadership: first, assembling the Alliance of Umno, MCA and MIC, whose founding ethos has defined Malaysian multiracialism ever since, and then, managing an efficient and business-like transition from colony and protectorate to free and independent nation.

As a result, Tengku, Tun Razak, Tun Dr Ismail and their crew had a headstart on national development. They had no war rubble to clear; no reparations to settle; no revolutionary ghosts to lay or reactionary sins to expunge. Tengku and his team hit the ground running, achieving greatness internationally as well.

Malaysian foreign policy has long been a model for the developing world in pragmatism, farsightedness and enlightened self-interest. This was established in our earliest years as a member of the world community, following a course charted by Tengku Abdul Rahman. In this way, his worldliness continues to stand us in firm stead today.

As a product of the pre-war world - and by birth, breeding and circumstance positioned to experience it at the highest levels - Tengku could see the road ahead far beyond Independence. Malaysia's highly potent developmental combination of vision and pragmatism owes its provenance to Tengku.

He ran the first leg of the accelerating relay that passed the baton from him to Tun Razak, Tun Hussein and Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir today - and will pass to Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi this October.

Our national orientation towards progress and prosperity through teamwork, among ourselves and with the world, is part of Tengku's legacy to us.

However, there is also much that isn't.

This is, perhaps, the aspect of Tengku's greatness that was thrust upon him. He didn't care for politics, as aristocrats rarely do. He did not ask for the leadership of the Malays of Malaya after the War; he thought he'd tag along on a watching brief, just in case anyone asked for his advice.

In a rare display of true vox populi, when Umno's founder Datuk Sir Onn Jaafar parted ways with the party, Tengku was almost literally hauled by his well-tailored lapels, thrust into the captain's chair and told to take us to freedom.

It was almost a matter of noblesse oblige. And he obliged. And the rest, of course, is history.

Perhaps Tengku should have been more of a politician. Perhaps the Singapore Story would have been written differently, had Tengku been more of a politician.

And perhaps, had he been more of a politician, he wouldn't have been caught so unawares by the genuine Malay resentment that ultimately cost him his leadership of the party, the Government and the nation.

But there is this to be said for the Tengku: he may have been thrust into power in the beginning, and thrust out at the end, but in between he did wonderfully well by us, personifying this country as the best we could

be, as a people, and a nation.

It is therefore bittersweetly ironic that we honour his memory, now and forever, because he was no politician. We remember the Tengku for his love of life, his country and its people, and for the things he would have wished to bequeath us: happiness, peace, harmony and prosperity. (More-or-less in that order.)

For this, the memory of Tengku Abdul Rahman Putra shall always remain a touchstone for all Malaysians; a point of reference by which to measure how we have changed, or haven't, in the generation since his time, and in the times to come.

We remember Tengku for all the best. After all, he always seemed to see only the best in us.'

Thirteen years ago, Tengku left us for eternity. We mourn him greatly. He is greatest who is most often remembered in Malaysians' good thoughts.