

M'kini 'Mat Salleh' columnist to launch 4 books
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It is high time for best-selling author and long-time Malaysiakini columnist Dean Johns to finally launch his four highly-successful compilations of commentary on Malaysian politics tomorrow.

Johns began publishing selections of the weekly columns he has written for Malaysiakini back in 2007. His latest volume, 1Malaysia.con, was published in July this year.

NONETomorrow evening, Johns (left) will join Malaysiakini editor-in-chief Steven Gan in a public forum on 'The Role of the Media in a post-BN Malaysia' at the Kuala Lumpur and Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall.

The event will kick off at 7.30pm.

The Australian writer's refreshingly candid rants have covered Malaysian issues of the day and the decade, be it homophobia, recent subservient media kowtows or the prime ministers' doctoral degree.

On the occasion of his book launch, Johns shared some very private reflections on his past, his role as a columnist and the state of the country that he fell in love with.

Malaysiakini: You came to Malaysia for the first time 25 years ago. What has changed since?

Johns: This will sound very self-serving to Malaysiakini, but what has changed most is the opening up of the media by the Internet, which has been powered by Malaysiakini.

What frustrates you?

What frustrates me is that nothing ever seems to fundamentally change, despite the opening up of the democratic space for the information by the alternative media.

How does it feel to write for Malaysians about Malaysia?

I feel part of a community of like-minded people who believe in all the clichés of truth, justice and good governance.

Emotionally, I feel a great sense of kinship with my fellow pro-democracy writers and these people have been so eager to embrace me as one of them.

Several of them have gone through a lot of trouble to get together a group of fellow bloggers and invite me along to meet them. I feel emotionally delighted to be a colleague of these people.

What does journalism mean to you?

To me, journalism is about the people's democratic rights to know about what the government is doing for and to them.

In Malaysia, the people have almost no right whatsoever to know. All these guys [pointing at the dining crowd around him] should know the government is ripping them off. There should be a press that investigates and tells them so.

Was there one moment you remember that made you the political commentator you are today?

I do have one game-changing moment. I was reading the New Straits Times one day. As I was reading away, thinking 'this is a real newspaper', I come across this story saying 'No AIDS in Malaysia' and it went

on to say that the AIDS epidemic currently sweeping the world was not going to affect Malaysia, because here there are neither gays nor drug addicts.

mahathir dr m umno kulai johor 300307 standOh my God! I have never seen such a pack of lies in my life!

That was a magic moment, and having (then premier) Dr Mahathir (Mohamad) (left) backing up that story - that was my revelation about the Malaysian media and what a pack of lies the whole thing was based on.

How did you get involved with Malaysiakini?

When I came back to Malaysia in 2004, my views on Malaysian politics had changed.

Before, I've always taken the view that I'm a guest in this country, I have a work permit, I work for a company, I'm going to hurt the company if I become political, etc, and anyway it's none of my business. When I came back, I thought 'no, I'm sorry, I can't tolerate this anymore.'

Someone told me about Malaysiakini, I emailed (editor-in-chief) Steven Gan and asked him if they would have me write stories. He said, they had a policy not to employ foreigners, but he offered me to write a column for them. Thus I started writing in 2006.

Have you ever had any problems with the authorities because of your writings?

When I lived here and started writing for Malaysiakini, I was threatened with deportation by a very senior Umno figure, but nobody ever did anything. Since then, I've never had any problem.

What changes have you seen in the media landscape in Malaysia over the few last years?

I've seen no change in the mainstream media. The only change, really, and that is a highly significant change, has been the rise of the Internet news media, inspired by Malaysiakini, Malaysia Today and countless bloggers.

But some bloggers are paid and funded by political movements...

Oh, some of them are BN bloggers, but to me it's not about self-expression by the media, it's all about the people's right to know.

The alternative media reveals things about what the government does that can't be unrevealed anymore. So what can the BN bloggers do? Nothing. To me, they have very little power.

Reading through comments people made on your column, a lot of people say that you are a foreigner, the essence of the reasoning behind many broadsides would be 'who are you to tell us what is wrong in our country?' What do you tell these people?

I don't tell these people anything. But my view is that I try very hard not to think of myself as some kind of arrogant know-all foreigner. My whole emotional inspiration is my affection for my Malaysian family and friends.

When I'm writing, I feel like I'm writing on their behalf, not from the point of view of somebody who pretends to know better than most Malaysians.

And I try to make the point as often as possible that I don't consider my own country to be in any way terrific or myself to have all the answers. I just don't like crooks.

NONEWho are your top Malaysian villains?

They are pretty obvious - Dr Mahathir, (PM) Najib Razak, (Home Minister) Hishammuddin Hussein (right) - all the usual suspects.

But still, tomorrow you'll be discussing the media in a post-BN world with Steven Gan. Where is this post-BN world?

I guess the discussion is based on the presumption there will one day be a post-BN world, and I believe there will be one. How it will come about and when, I don't know.

You've observed Malaysian politics for many years now. When you're back in Sydney, how do you see Malaysia portrayed in Western media?

Malaysia is not seen as a very newsworthy country, in a way like my own country, Australia. What we mostly see in the Australian press are stories (on Malaysia) about really silly things, like a woman being whipped for drinking beer.

It's been very much a bigger story in the context of the so-called 'Malaysia Solution' that Australia proposed for refugees.

I don't believe people should be trafficked by governments, just as much as they should not be trafficked by people traffickers.

The Labour Party claims the whole idea about sending the people to Malaysia is to break the human trafficking business.

I believe that those who are enabling the trafficking and are therefore the traffickers-in-chief are governments like Malaysia and Indonesia. Far from breaking their business models, Australia is dealing with them.

I think the Australian government knows very well what the Malaysian government does and it is just playing to the sentiments of its redneck would-be voters in appearing to get rid of a problem.

This year has been a year of major social movements in Malaysia. How do you feel about the political landscape in Malaysia right now?

I feel that more and more Malaysians are becoming aware of the sort of government they are having for so long and they are starting to feel they can't really accept it any longer.

Are you thinking of publishing another book?

I have already half of the next book down. Every time I write a column, I'll think how it fits in the book.

You teach at a community college in Sydney...

I've been teaching on and off for 10 years. It's great to interact with other writers and would-be writers.

In the last years, I've completed a diploma in psychotherapy, it's like a therapeutic conversation, to keep people thinking about their problems and help people get different perspectives on what they are dealing with.

Sounds like the task of journalism for a nation.

Yeah. In order to find your own truth, and somehow then go 'am I happy with it or not?', and how much do I want to change it?

DEAN JOHNS, after many years in Asia, currently lives with his Malaysian-born wife and daughter in

Sydney where he coaches and mentors writers and authors, and practises as a writing therapist.

Published books of his columns for Malaysiakini include Mad about Malaysia, Even Madder about Malaysia, Missing Malaysia and 1Malaysia.con.

He will be launching all his four books at 7.30pm tomorrow at the Kuala Lumpur and Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall (KLSCH).

The launch will be followed by a forum on 'The Role of the Media in a post-BN Malaysia', which will include the participation of Malaysiakini editor-in-chief Steven Gan.

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