

Mr Karpal Singh, my Boss
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COMMENT So much has been written about Karpal Singh the lawyer and Karpal the politician – statesman, however, I do think that there is literary space for Karpal, my Boss.

This piece intends to lend an insight as to my working relationship with my former employer (boss), Karpal Singh, for more than a decade.

After completing my CLP (certificate of legal practice), I joined Karpal Singh & Co as a legal assistant.

Karpal was my boss for the next 10 years until I set up practice on my own in April 2001. Karpal was the first and only employer after my qualification as a lawyer.

‘Mr Karpal’ as I used to address him was a superb mentor. Just six months after having joined him, I was tasked to handle a case at the Supreme Court (the then Federal Court) and I managed to get a decision in my client’s favour. Such was the intensity and quality of training and mentorship by the Tiger of Jelutong.

I assisted and appeared together with Karpal on many landmark cases where the judgments in our favour eventually led to significant changes in our laws by the Legislature.

An eminent example is the case of Arulpragasam v PP. In this historic matter before the Supreme Court, a full bench acquitted Arulpragasam because Karpal managed to persuade the Court that the Law requires the prosecution in criminal cases to show evidence, beyond a shadow of doubt, on the guilt of the defendant at the close of the prosecution’s case, before defence can be called.

Knock first, no barging in

The historic decision of the Supreme Court led the Government of the day to amend the Law pertaining to the standard of proof in criminal cases by using its overwhelming majority in parliament.

Karpal was the epitome of humility in the office. Such was the measure of the man that he would never fail to knock on my door before entering my office.

A tough work master, he would ensure that we prepared meticulously before a trial; and this meant working late at the office.

We would brainstorm legal strategies for hours, after which we would go our separate

ways to work on our individual research and preparations.

The eminent lawyer felt that clients were parting with their hard earned money to pay us and we were duty bound to reciprocate by giving our best.

I hope that I have lived up to this ethos and continue to do so for the rest of my legal career.

Victories for our clients at the Courts were followed by Chicken Beriyani lunches. Karpal really relished a good battle, hard won, and the Beriyani as a just reward.

Justice first, rest can wait

It would not do justice to this piece if some of the more prominent landmark cases that received wide publicity during my stint with Karpal are not mentioned here.

As widely reported after his death, he was fearless when it came to the Law. Whether it was royalty, dignitary, politician or even the common thug, it was game for the Tiger of Jelutong.

He acted in a matter against the Sultan of Selangor in 1988, represented Faridah Begum against the Sultan of Pahang in the very first case in the newly set-up Special Court and also issued a Notice of Demand to the Yang di-Pertuan Besar of Negri Sembilan, when the latter was The Yang di-Pertuan Agung.

Of course the last matter involving the royalty was something he did not choose on his own volition.

He felt he was unjustly charged with sedition for merely offering a legitimate legal opinion regarding the role of Sultan Azlan Shah of Perak in the takeover of the Perak state government by the Barisan Nasional in 2009.

During my time with Karpal, I also had the unusual opportunity to be a witness for him in a defamation suit brought by DP Vijandran against my Boss.

Suffice to say that it was a unique experience to take the witness stand in a trial involving two lawyers and not the counsel assisting Karpal.

Vain side of Karpal exposed

The much respected lawyer loved to keep his hair neat and well-trimmed. Often, he would disappear during a busy working day. Just as we were wondering as to his whereabouts, he would suddenly appear with a neat haircut and a mischievous smile on his face.

He had had just visited the barber down the block. It was not unusual for this to happen about twice in a month.

It was certainly an irony that Karpal was well known as a 'Penang Lawyer' when, strange as it may seem, 80 percent of the legal cases that he handled were from the Kuala Lumpur office.

Most weekdays would see him in the KL office, allowing him to be in Penang only during the weekends.

Due to the limited time he was at the Penang office, it was common knowledge that a long queue outside the Penang office signalled his presence in town.

In those days, it was common to see him work late into the night and only retiring, after everyone had left, to his living quarters upstairs.

Not fazed by threatening fists

For all his bravado, Karpal was a calm and cool character, even in the midst of physical provocation. One such incident that I bear witness, was when a datin came with some others and physically threatened him.

While I was frantically attempting to avoid any violent acts from taking place, Karpal just stood still, a picture of calmness and serenity.

I doubt that he would frown upon the antics of Raja Bomoh Ibrahim Mat Zin on ridding our highways of some mischievous elves but would rather find it hilarious.

My boss once defended the assistant of the notorious bomoh couple, Mona Fandey and her husband, in his murder trial and never felt threatened even when they insinuated that the murder of the late Mazlan Idris was entirely the work of their former assistant.

This couple claimed to possess supernatural powers that would be brought to bear on anyone who irks them.

The eminent lawyer was also a pious, religious and a God fearing man who would offer his generous support whenever it was genuinely needed.

I have accompanied him numerous times to the Gurdwara, not far from the office in Jalan Pudu. On those occasions, I would wear a handkerchief over my head just like him when in the Gurdwara.

It pains me to see people accuse him of insulting the faith of others. He never did that, because the man feared God, but only took a sharp exception to anyone who challenged the secular character and foundation of this beloved nation of ours.

I pray that Mr Karpal, my Boss, finds eternal rest in the presence of the Almighty.

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