

Lim Chong Eu: More than a politician
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By now, there is nothing really substantial to add to the many pieces recalling the contributions Lim Chong Eu made when he was Penang Chief Minister. Lim, as readers know, was not only the founder of Parti Gerakan but also the Radical Party, the United Democratic Party and the ruling political coalition, the United Front (better known as Barisan Nasional). He is the last of Malaysia's "founding fathers", men who were involved in the writing of the federal constitution and who later contributed substantially to the making of modern Malaysia.

lim chong euIt was a great privilege to meet and have long conversations with Lim. He was like a philosopher, someone truly passionate about the pursuit of knowledge. He did not suffer fools, and conversations with him, if he liked you, can last several hours. Educated at Edinburgh University, some of the better aspects of the Scottish tradition of aggressive enquiry may have given the impression that Lim was an intellectual bully but nothing could be further from the truth. Most of the time, Lim wanted to know why and how one arrived at a particular conclusion about the subject matter. He would then set you straight and did it without much concern for your ego.

Unlike most other retired leaders, Lim kept true to his word and retired absolutely from politics. He never said a bad word about his successors. Instead, he constantly alluded to the difficulties and great challenges in managing Penang. It was not difficult for him to leave the political stage because he was more than a politician. This is a rare commodity today where some politicians know of nothing else having little life experience other than in the political arena. Lim was medical doctor, scholar, race-horse owner, and occasionally, enjoyed karaoke.

NONELim was very clear at the public lectures he gave that it was not an individual or a "visionary" that gave birth to the industrialisation of Penang. It was a team of people and the circumstances Penang was in that left him with little choice except to travel the world to get foreign direct investments that eventually gave rise to one of the world's largest electrical and electronic manufacturing hubs outside the United States.

There is no denying that Lim pursued those policies with steely determination but not because he thought he was infallible but because once a strategy to re-model Penang had been agreed upon, the only way the patient could survive would be to allow the treatment to take its course. But he was not a man who banned criticism of his policies. He welcomed criticisms from all parties and this led to a vibrant civil society that characterise Penang society today. A learned man, Lim rose to all types of intellectual challenges when the facts changed, he changed his mind.

There is little doubt that Lim's dogged pursuit of building a bridge from the island to the mainland has contributed to stronger ties between Penang and Malaysia; it has also contributed to the industrialisation of Seberang Prai and Kulim. Yet, industrialisation gave rise to its own set of challenges and Lim's last years in office were spent meeting them.

Powerless against BN policies

Those who voted him out in 1990 did not think he was doing a good enough job and he accepted the verdict without much drama. Today, some blame Lim's policies for our polluted

rivers and congested roads. Few recall that in the 1980s, before Lim retired and before Proton, Penang had a relatively good public transport system.

penang bridge 131204One could ride a bicycle from St Xavier's Institution back to Tanjung Bungah quite safely. Penang's roads are congested because there are simply too many cars (with two motorised vehicles to one human being in Penang) and no amount of infrastructure projects can help; there is simply not enough island to go around.

Similarly, there was also little control Lim or Gerakan could exert over the educational policies of the BN. Education was seen as a tool to close the gap between the different ethnic groups but its democratisation led to a downward spiral in terms of standards and quality.

Perhaps recognising how little the human being can control destiny, Lim kept whatever critical thoughts he may have regarding Penang and Malaysia out of the public arena. But many families look back and recall the dark days of the 1960s, they think fondly about him because he gave Penang leadership and direction. Many middle-class families can say that they benefited from industrialisation and those who did not, look back less nostalgically.

Ultimately, Lim's real contribution to Malaysia is his determination to promote a non-sectarian approach to politics. He started out on a non-racial platform, joined the MCA to reform it along nationalist lines and left when he could not gain any ground.

He then formed another non-racial party before Gerakan. Whilst many think he made a mistake when he decided to work with Tun Razak in the formation of the Barisan Nasional, his vision was a BN that would eventually become a non-racial platform, an opportunity to build the nation along non-racial lines. Perhaps, one real honour the BN can accord Lim is to adopt his slogan and incorporate it into the new BN logo: "Satu Hati, 1Malaysia".

Let us all remember Lim not only as a political giant or a towering Malaysian. He was first and foremost, a fallible human being but a man with principles and worked tirelessly for his beloved Penang.

In his long retirement, he had the opportunity to leave the political stage and resume normal life. Apart from the occasional public lecture, Lim lived a private life. We would all like to believe that he was a happy man and we are sure that he wished the best for Malaysia.

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