



Balancing Progress with Principles

For all our development as a nation, it would seem that there are things that just cannot be changed — with corruption, passing the buck and a lack of accountability ranking high on the list. Isn't it time we take a good look at ourselves and stop the rot before it is too late?

UMNO Deputy President and Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Mohd Najib Tun Razak said on Feb 20 that Umno is not for those who hang out at coffeehouses and carry tales.

But in the post-New Economic Policy plutocratic environment, coffeehouses — like palatial homes, luxury motorcars, golfing holidays and expensive cigars — have become part and parcel of the trappings of success and power for the political elite.

If there was a major unhappiness with former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad among some Ministers, Menteri Besar and Chief Ministers, it was his introduction of Proton Perdana as the official car. But since Tun Dr Mahathir himself rode in a Perdana, they had no choice but to fall in line. There were exceptions of course. Some politicians were, and still are, above the rule. For the rest, the Perdana rule did not stop them from enjoying expensive rides when not on duty or during weekends.

Going to coffeehouses and expensive cigar bars is only a small part of opulence that some politicians have become addicted to. Still, it does no harm for the *Yang Berhormat* (YB) to frequent coffeehouses and coffee-shops occasionally. The visits can even be highly rewarding and beneficial. Many useful tales and tips on legitimate issues and subjects affecting the people can be picked up at these watering holes.

These days, more padi farmers, rubber tappers, fishermen and low-ranking civil servants visit coffee-shops more regularly and stay longer to read newspapers, watch *Astro Ria* and exchange tales.

The recent hefty increase in the price of cigarettes and the rise in the cover price of some newspapers have forced many low-income people out of the newspaper market. Between smoking and reading the newspapers, it would seem that the majority have opted for the former. Since they now have to pay more for cigarettes and tobacco, they

have stopped buying newspapers.

So, while enjoying a smoke and a cup of *teh tank*, they share the newspapers and swap tales. The latest media statistics suggest that more people are sharing newspapers, particularly in the Bahasa Malaysia segment. A copy of *Berita Harian*, for instance, is being shared by 6.13 persons, *Utusan Malaysia*, 6.02 persons, and *Harian Metro*, 6.1 persons as opposed to 5.53 persons for the Chinese language *China Press*, 3.26 persons for *The Star* and 2.38 persons for *New Straits Times*.

Also, with the mainstream media becoming increasingly homogeneous - telling more or less the same feel-good stories — the swapping of tales, rumours and pillow talk has gained popularity.

It was only through coffee-shop talk that we know, for instance, that there was a major rice crop failure in the Muda Irrigation Scheme during the last planting season due to a fungal infection.

I cannot recall reading it in any newspaper. But farmers claim that their harvest had fallen by as much as 30% to 50%.

The question must be asked not only about the delivery system for goods and services to the people but also of information from the people to the government.

No *bidan terjun* please!

SO, coffee-shop talk and tales are not necessarily bad. Unfortunately, few or no such stories will get to the coffeehouses and cigar bars of five-star hotels in Kuala Lumpur.

The talk and tales there are more likely to be about major contracts, impending IPOs (initial public offerings), political manoeuvres and schemes, golfing holidays, expensive cigars and fine wine.

Talking about tales, with apologies to Najib, I would like to recall an incident that happened not too long ago.

An up-and-coming Cabinet Minister, for reasons known only to him, had invited me for tea. He sounded so sincere and earnest that a meeting with me sounded like a matter of life and death. I told him that I was essentially a *teh tarik*, *kedai mamak-type* of person - read cheapskate, tasteless, unsophisticated - and went on to name my venue of choice.

He said no and suggested that we meet at a five-star establishment in Bukit Bintang (BB). I have nothing against BB. From the late 1960s until much of the 1980s, it was my kind of place - crude and rude but full of fun.

But since the 1990s, it had become a bit too snobbish for my simple tastes. The pretentiousness of some of the characters that call BB their kind of place has put me off.

The same, however, cannot be said of Kuala Lumpur City Centre (KLCC) that cleverly mixes the ordinary with the more pretentious side of life, giving it a wholesome family environment.

On the appointed day (or rather night) and time, in deference to hierarchy and protocol, I waited for our *YB Menteri*. It was embarrassing to begin with because, by sheer coincidence, a certain corporate Tan Sri was feting editors of local newspapers in a function I was not invited to.

These days, not being at the helm of a newspaper, such an invitation is few and far between. I have no complaints. Being on the sidelines has its rewards. I have more time to myself and more freedom to make an absolute nut of myself and speak my mind.

After waiting for almost two hours and making countless, albeit futile, telephone calls to him and his Press Secretary, I concluded that the *YB* had forgotten about me, and left. I was right. The *YB* had forgotten all about the meeting, which I later learnt was to be at his favourite cigar bar, because he was entertaining the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister to dinner at his ministry.

He called to apologise and suggested another date for the meeting, which I politely declined. A few months later, in the post-2004 general election Cabinet reshuffle, he was assigned a less strategic ministry. Less is heard of him

in the newspapers now.

Having been in the journalism business for more than 34 years now, I have grown accustomed to being stood up. But the people may feel differently when Menteri Besar, Chief Ministers and Ministers pull out of a function at the last minute and send junior officials to replace them. This appears to be happening with increasing regularity.

A story was recently told in a Petaling Jaya coffee-shop of a Selangor Umno division turning away a Parliamentary Secretary who acted as a *bidan terjun* (last-minute replacement) for a Cabinet Minister.

APATHY AT ITS WORST

IT would seem that no matter how advanced we have become as a nation - or so we think - we are actually not very different from what we were in the more backward days.

People continue to die of malaria and dengue. Of course, more die of overeating and sedentary lifestyles now. Children continue to fall off broken bridges and drown. Rivers, lakes and seas continue to be polluted despite laws, rules and regulations. Ministers, Menteri Besar and Chief Ministers plead ignorance and shed crocodile tears each time a tragedy happens.

Dereliction of duty, abuse of power and, most of all, corruption are eating away our souls and eroding the very foundation of our society.

The drowning of a five-year-old girl in Kampung Kok Pasir in Kota Bharu, Kelantan recently is a case in point. She fell off a bridge that was damaged by last year's floods. What can be more sickening and pathetic than a Department of Irrigation and Drainage spokesman, when asked by the Press, washing his department's hands of the incident by contending that the bridge was not repaired because the department had not received any appeal for a new bridge or for the damaged ones to be repaired?

This kind of attitude, irrespective of promises by the government and the lofty client charters, appears to be the norm in the civil service and political hierarchy.

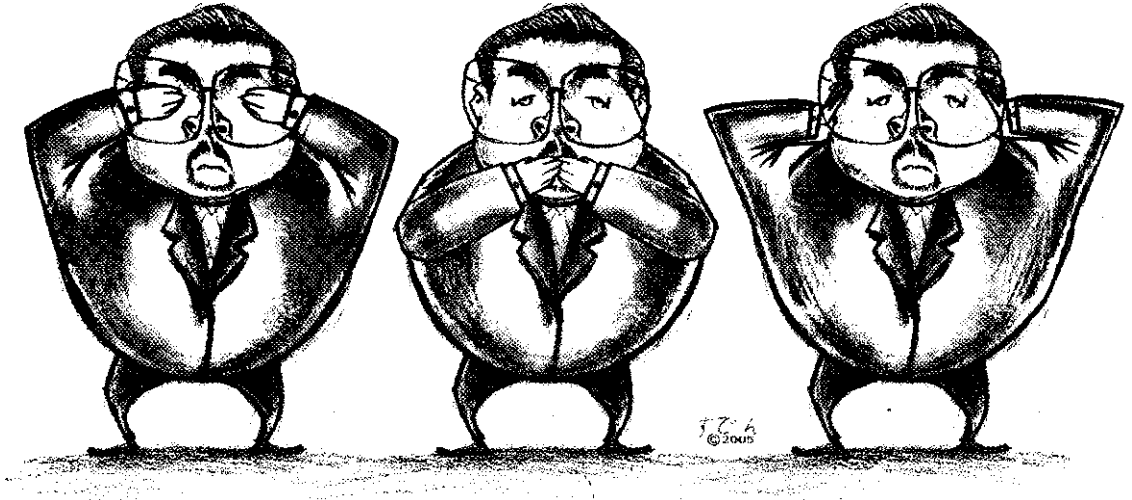
It would seem that no matter how advanced we have become as a nation - or so we think - we are actually not very different from what we were in the more backward days. Dereliction of duty, abuse of power and, most of all, corruption, are eating away our souls and eroding the very foundation of our society.

When I was growing up in a village in Kedah in the 1950s and 60s, scores of my schoolmates drowned during the rainy season when rickety bridges were swept away by floods and the swift-flowing rivers overturned leaky sampans. Many more died of common illnesses like malaria, asthma and influenza or of unknown causes that would be summarily blamed on ghosts, demons and an assortment of other evil spirits.

member of the ruling party who has grown accustomed to media pampering, Mohamad Khir had not anticipated such persistence from an otherwise friendly Press corps.

It is gratifying to note that a section of the media and a handful of journalists and editors are taking the risk of reporting politically incorrect stories.

A note of caution, however. Those who are pursuing Mohamad Khir should not take comfort in the fact that



WITH POWER COMES RESPONSIBILITY

DENIAL has long become a syndrome with many Malaysians. The difference then and now is merely in the degree of severity.

So, when the newspapers asked the Selangor Menteri Besar, Datuk Seri Dr Mohamad Khir Toyo, about the indiscriminate development around the Bukit Cahaya Sri Alam Agricultural Park, his response was, '*Saya kecewa*' (I am disappointed).

Even that tentative reply, according to the *Utusan Malaysia* newspaper, came after much hesitation - *teragak-agak*.

It would appear that *saya kecewa* has become the standard reply for an increasing number of Ministers, Menteris Besar and Chief Ministers to tricky questions.

I wonder whether the Menteri Besar was caught off guard by the Press or by the indiscriminate cutting of the hills by scores of developers in that area.

He could not have been surprised by the wholesale slaughter of the environment by the developers because he approved the projects and they are located a stone's throw away from his office and residence.

So, it has to be the Press query. Being an important

the Selangor Menteri Besar appears vulnerable. He may not have handled the Press very well but being the Menteri Besar, he is not without means of extricating himself from this tight spot and turning the tables on the Press. Already, he has passed on the responsibility of handling the issue to the chairman of the State Committee on Housing, Building Management and Squatters, Datuk Mohd Mokhtar Ahmad Dahlan, who, in turn, has blamed the Shah Alam City Hall.

As is usually the case, some minor civil servant would get the blame, the politicians would get off scot-free and the media would be accused of sensationalising.

But if the government is serious about its pledge of transparency and accountability, and is committed to integrity, then the politicians and their top civil servants should start accepting responsibility.

If indeed the Shah Alam City Hall is responsible, then the Mayor, Datuk Ramli Mahmud, must answer for it. But the ultimate responsibility must be borne by his political boss, the Menteri Besar. **mb**

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