

Sorry Minister Mentor, but you got it all wrong

NST - 1/10/2006

ONE often encounters foreigners who on the strength of having been here six months or six years think they know all there is to know about Malaysia. Even after half a century I would not so presume, being constantly reminded that it is still possible to be taken totally by surprise. As happened recently.

The source was our nearest neighbour, who should have known better. I thought verbal histrionics were the prerogative of this side of the Causeway, especially of late. But Lee Kuan Yew's latest broadside, extraordinary and preposterous as it was, took most of us by surprise. To say that I was floored is an understatement.

How could anyone say our Chinese are "marginalised" and "compliant"? Coming from such an outright authoritarian state, it was almost impertinent. They seem capable of the most staggering obedience.

The answer is not far to seek and goes directly to the Minister Mentor, He Who Must Be Obeyed (with apologies to John Mortimer). Lee is perceived to have inherited the Mantle of Heaven, which in the Confucian ethic inspires the utmost allegiance, for which read compliance. Newcomers on first acquaintance with that well-ordered, disciplined city state are apt to exclaim, "But it's just the West with palm trees". This it is decidedly not. It is a Confucian Chinese society with its own special brand of *kiasu*, to boot.

Kiasu is what Lee seemed to be exercising in his unprovoked remarks. And as for being marginalised, Singapore's minority race is arguably the most qualified for this.

But not the Malaysian Chinese. Has Lee not heard of Francis Yeh (about to send in a bullet train to his island and other daring ventures)? You just can't keep them down, our commercial warrior class.

After all, if they hadn't ventured, their ancestors would not have left China in the first place. And successful they are now, the backbone of our economy.

Robert Kuok, Lim Goh Tong, Quek Leng Chan, Teh Hong Piow can testify. The roll call is endless of all those who have responded with the work ethic and the success ethic to the business opportunity Malaysia gave them, and now have overtaken most of the rest of us.

As for the Chinese being "compliant", we may be forgiven for thinking this was some kind of joke. I can hardly say I have noticed this in my own irrepressible colleagues and friends. Is Lee unaware of Lim Kit

Siang? Latterly, we may cite Mathias Chang, hardly quiescent, or Tian Chua in Keadilan. The Opposition in Parliament is led by DAP and very vocal they are, too. One is reminded of the well-worn joke about a fishing contest either side of the Johor Strait. The Malaysian caught all the fish, the Singaporean none. The explanation — on this side the fish are allowed to open their mouths.

If being "marginalised" produces a Vincent Tan, I have probably not understood it. In any of those fashionable rankings of our richest citizens there is hardly a non-Chinese among them. We need to contrast this with Singapore where the most glaring phenomenon is what has happened to their local private sector.

Now the latter is dominated by MNCs (once 70 per cent of the corporate sector) now joined by GLCs. It would appear that it is their entrepreneurs who have been marginalised, to the point of extinction, except for a few hardy family businesses in construction and finance.

And the non-compliant also tend to disappear. Where are Francis Seow and J.B. Jeyaratnam? The late Devan Nair, the late James Puthuchery, the late Sandra Woodhull were disgraced for non-conformity — two went to jail, then were dispatched across the Causeway where they were allowed to be independent and became prominent members of the community.

The Chinese this side are taken care of in another way — their educational privileges. We kept the Mandarin schools, the only country in the region to do so. Singapore did not.

Besides the linguistic advantage for our Chinese, it allows them to preserve their traditions and pride of race.

Nor can one even begin to consider that the Malaysian Chinese are politically marginalised. On our side they are recognised by a very Malaysian form of proportional representation in government that has yielded six Chinese ministers in Cabinet, 13 Chinese deputy ministers and five parliamentary secretaries. Singapore is lucky to have one Malay in the Cabinet.

Here there is a sizeable contingent of Chinese in Parliament on both the government and the Opposition benches. Altogether they are accorded a place in the political scheme of things commensurate with their share of the population and their interests are well catered for.

This is thanks to our unique political coalition formula. The Malays, despite having the strategic vote and a clear majority, choose to share power in an inclusive system, accommodating Chinese parties like the MCA or Gerakan, and their political brothers in Sabah and Sarawak. One state is controlled by them — Penang — with a Chinese chief minister.

But where Lee got it most seriously wrong relates to the comparative social and economic standing of the different communities. Our "marginalised" Chinese have exceeded the 40 per cent of the corporate wealth allocated to them by the NEP (the lion's share, I may point out), while the Malays have yet to reach 20 per cent, let alone the targeted 30 per cent. There is an embar-

assing income disparity — the average income of the Chinese being 1.64 times that of the Malays.

But back to Lee and what possessed him. Was it a fit of pique or was there a hidden agenda in bracketing us with Indonesia? The Chinese there are different.

They are disguised Chinese to begin with, having had to assimilate. Only three per cent of the population, they are irrepressible economically, with 70 per cent of the corporate wealth, a cause for resentment, and periodically they are set upon for it.

Is there a fear factor here? Does Singapore see itself as in a precarious position — this tiny Chinese enclave squeezed between two larger Malay neighbours?

It ought rather to align itself with Malaysia as an oasis of mature democracy, economic development and stability in a region currently in turmoil.

And in all this we claim for Malaysia a unique status as a role model. Its competitive edge is its diversity, a microcosm of the future globalised world.

Instead of marginalising any one race it aims for an interracial synthesis that respects the culture and integrity of each community and strives towards the ultimate of that diversity — a Bangsa Malaysia.

But what will the world believe? In a situation where true identity is based on reality and image on perception — perception drives. Lee carries the legend. This writer feels like David tilting at Goliath but dare not hope for the biblical outcome.

We need to get our story out.