

Of events coming full circle

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IT'S history repeating itself. Yes, in a certain way, the controversies and heavyweight flaps arising out of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's opposing views on the cancellation of a bridge project to replace the Causeway over the Johor Strait have brought about an uncanny sense of *déjà vu*.

Open letters, retired leaders giving opinions, charges of unwarranted interference and people pleading national interest as grounds of argument all have a familiar ring about them if we look back at some of the events that have shaped our political environment over the years.

Dr Mahathir features prominently in the episodes but far from casting aspersions on anybody, this flashback is aimed at only looking at the factual turn of events — and most certainly not designed to pass any judgment on the merits of the cases, no matter how clear they have been made out to be.

After commenting that the Malaysian Government should have gone ahead and built the bridge, Dr Mahathir, as former prime minister and "concerned citizen", sent an open letter last Tuesday expressing his displeasure at the decision to call it off.

The six-page letter, which was sent to politicians and community leaders, among other things, explained why he thought the project, which he mooted 10 years ago, should have proceeded unilaterally.

The letter also had an appendix of 13 pages of correspondence between him when he was prime minister and Singapore leaders Lee Kuan Yew and Goh Chok Tong.

Writing open letters seems to be Dr Mahathir's way of showing his displeasure. About two years ago, he did the same, telling Muslims in America not to vote for George W. Bush who was seeking re-election for the US presidency against John Kerry.

Thirty-seven years ago, before he became prime minister, Dr Mahathir also sent one of the most well-remembered open letters in Malaysian history, addressing it to Tunku Abdul Rahman, whose tagline of being "the happiest prime minister in the world" had just been shattered with the outbreak of racial violence on May 13, 1969.

He was at that time a radical Umno supreme council mem-

“
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Dr Mahathir in his letter dated June 19, 1969, to Tunku Abdul Rahman

ber and the letter, dated June 19, 1969, among other things, said he was only trying to convey to the Tunku the actual feelings of the rakyat.

This, Dr Mahathir said, was because Tunku was surrounded by people who would only tell him what he wanted to hear rather than the truth.

Addressing himself as *patek* (a humble term referring to oneself when speaking to a King or royalty), he went on to give his thoughts on why the May 13 incident happened and told the Tunku to stop deceiving himself because "how can one person be right all the time and the rest always wrong? I wish to convey to you the people's true sentiment — that is, the time has come for Tunku to retire as Prime Minister and Umno president".

Dr Mahathir was sacked from Umno for this but it became quite clear that the letter was also one of the things that hastened the Tunku's retirement not long after.

However, it was most ironic that the situation was reversed a few years after Dr Mahathir became prime minister succeeding Tun Hussein Onn in 1981 because both Tunku and Hussein were critical of his administration.



Dr Mahathir's letter to Tunku (left) hastened his retirement.



Tunku especially did not hide the many things he disliked about what Dr Mahathir was doing, particularly the way he handled the Umno crisis in 1987 when the party was declared illegal by the court and efforts had to be made to salvage the situation.

At one point, Tunku, who became adviser of Semangai 46 led by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, even issued a most

forceful challenge to Dr Mahathir to step down.

Of course, there were signs of a reconciliation towards the end of 1989 when Dr Mahathir went to see Tunku, kissed his hand as Malays do, and talked about Malay unity.

But it proved to be only temporary because the first prime minister continued with his broadside, often triggering reactions from ministers in Dr

Mahathir's Cabinet who came to his defence.

These ministers (a few of whom are still in the present Cabinet under Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi) would reply by saying things like "Tunku should not lower himself by saying all these things" or "We have the highest respect for Tunku but he has aggravated the situation and this could result in disunity".

Sound familiar? That's because the same thing is being said in the present day, the only difference being Dr Mahathir finding himself on the receiving end when he criticised the Government's way of dealing with Singapore.

So life does seem to come full circle for Dr Mahathir.

As for the merits of all the cases mentioned above, only history can be the judge.

'Gatal': Uniquely Malaysian

GATAL is such an awfully Malaysian word because there is no accurate English equivalent.

And it proved to be quite awkward for some newspaper editors last week when Pas MP Abdul Fatah Harun uttered the word in the Dewan Rakyat, as reporting it would mean having to translate it into English for English newspapers — more so since it was a

key word as the entire story revolved around it.

It was obvious the Rantau Panjang MP didn't use *gatal* to mean an itch that needs scratching (which is the common literal meaning) since he was using it in the context of divorcees who misbehave.

So what should the translation be then?

Flirtatious? No, it's more serious than that.

Loose? No. Randy? Not quite. Amorous? No. Lecherous? Maybe, but still not right. Promiscuous?

The list just went on and on and none actually fitted the description well.

Which could mean only one thing — *gatal* (or *gatai* for effect) is a peculiarly Malaysian affliction.