

## The Sunday Column: A few good men...

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IT has been almost three years since Tun Dr Ling Liong Sik retired as minister and president of the Malaysian Chinese Association, the country's second largest political party, which has been in power within the coalition Government since Independence.

Dr Ling is a medical doctor but for most of his life, he has been a politician and, more importantly, a politician in power. He was the longest serving MCA president in its more than 50-year history. As a politician in power, he has experienced the proverbial slings and arrows. The perks that come with power were there for him to enjoy; as were the anguish and grief his family and he had to endure in that often sullied world called politics.

Just as there are among us those who believe that politics is not worth it, there are those who feel they have a calling, and there are those who actually relish being in the thick of the constant conniving and scheming that goes with trying to stay in power.

For all the years I have known him, I would place Dr Ling as among those who believed they had a calling to serve their country and believed they could make a difference.

The MCA, a divided party when Dr Ling became president in 1986 after a protracted divisive battle for power, was one of Barisan Nasional's strongest components when he handed the leadership to Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting. And he left at a relatively young political age of 59.

The MCA succession issue had been resolved quite effectively, unlike in some of the other component parties of the BN or opposition parties like the DAP and Pas where aging leaders tightly hold on to office, unable to let go.

The aspersions and innuendos aside, on that score at least, Dr Ling will be remembered for bequeathing his successor a party stronger than the one he inherited.

That, in itself, is a commendable achievement.

Dr Ling and I still meet regularly and speak over the phone. The journalist-politician relationship that we once shared has, I believe, developed into a friendship; one where I think of him as a good friend.

By and large, when you take away the fluff and rumples, Dr Ling is a decent man, a Malaysian who loves his country with a passion.

He loves Elvis and rock 'n roll, sings and does the twist, used to drink hard and still enjoys his food. But most of all, he is always calm and measured in the manner he speaks.

For a politician, he is a rarity, because in the 26 years that I have covered him as a journalist and known him, I cannot remember any occasion that I witnessed when he was mean or spiteful with his comments.

He had to make some calls as a leader and he made mistakes; he, like others of his profession, played his own politics to outmanoeuvre his foes, sometimes, harshly. But that was his world.

Certainly, there are those, including his political foes, who have contrary views; but I judge him by how I know him.

We had dinner on Tuesday and I invited some of his friends and their families, all of whom have their own busy schedules.

Everyone came and that was a sign of the regard they held for Dr Ling.

Many politicians have found that once they vacate that chair of power, few remember them and even fewer want to be seen with them in public.

At the dinner, as happens when old friends gather, lots of stories were told but through it all, Dr Ling was repetitive in his stated affection and concern for another person from his home state, Penang, a politician who is now Prime Minister — Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Shortly after he retired, I remember asking Dr Ling over dinner about a story that I heard from one of Abdullah's closest friends, about when Abdullah had been dropped from the Cabinet in 1987 and became a political outcast overnight.

Those were the days when lesser politicians and the media had developed a surreal skill for survival, and to please their masters, were shamelessly sycophantic and brutal in their treatment of those deemed as political foes of the establishment. Abdullah was such a foe, ignored by the mainstream media, and harangued and insulted by these people. Many of them, including some editors, were rewarded, some with positions, others with privatisation projects and management buyouts of their companies.

But such is the will of the Almighty that fame and fortune derived on the back of the misery of innocents has a way of dissipating in ignominy.

Abdullah was shunned by "friends" and "supporters" and few were willing to be seen with him in private or public. Some of those who met him in the small office space he occupied in the Pernas building in Jalan Raja Laut would take a lift to a floor above and walk down the staircase because they feared being seen visiting him.

Dr Ling was then a recently elected MCA president and a senior minister; Abdullah, though still an elected Umno vice-president, was jobless and having always led a modest life, was living on savings.

Twice, when he saw Abdullah and his family dining at their favourite steakhouse, Dr Ling came over and spoke to him fondly and both times Abdullah, when leaving, found that his bill had been settled by Dr Ling.

It was not the meal which mattered as Abdullah could still afford to pay.

But at a time when people avoided him like the plague and when so-called friends embarrassingly averted their eyes and hurried on, such gestures of friendship meant a lot.

Dr Ling smiled each time I asked him, not wanting to confirm the story that I had been told. He never denied it either.

But one thing he would always say was that Abdullah had always been a very decent and sincere person, and that, for Dr Ling, was reason enough to continue being Abdullah's friend.

Today, almost 19 years later, it is Dr Ling who is no longer a minister but he has not changed his views of Abdullah. In fact, his regard and respect for Abdullah, he says, are greater than ever.

Dr Ling is now 62 and looks as young as he always did. Yet, there is a little tiredness about him. He hardly drinks, goes to bed earlier and is more reflective and philosophical.

Since his retirement from politics, he has worked hard at developing University Tunku Abdul Rahman, traversing the world for academic tie-ups with the best institutions of learning.

In that sense, he shares Abdullah's passion for capacity building, for trying to nurture a desire for lifelong learning, of enhancing Malaysian human capital to face an intensely competitive world. He has shared his views with the Prime Minister when a recent 30-minute appointment dragged on to 90 minutes.

They discussed how to develop the mind, how to change old mindsets and how to create tougher, more resilient and highly capable Malaysians who can take on the best in the world; how to translate the current administration's stated mission to have the software to match the country's first world hardware.

Dr Ling is enthusiastic about the soon-to-be tabled Ninth Malaysia Plan.

He believes that there will be great emphasis on capacity building, on eradicating poverty across the board, of forging greater unity among the races, and of building up learning institutions geared towards meeting the new challenges Malaysia faces.

Because, he says, these are the things Abdullah firmly believes in and is committed to. This, Dr Ling believes, is the only way to go for Malaysia.

Dr Ling has been an exemplary political retiree, keeping his peace and volunteering his assistance when asked, never interfering but still providing his views and inputs privately.

He deftly sidesteps discussions on the political intrigues of the day, be it within his own party or elsewhere, and he continues to be respected by his former colleagues and friends.

It is not easy to let go, but Dr Ling has managed well so far.

But one thing Dr Ling will unhesitatingly comment on is that his friend, Abdullah (Ahmad Badawi), is among the most sincere and decent persons he has ever known.

He sees the Prime Minister as a man who loves his country and his people, irrespective of race and religion, and a man who has the burning desire and passion to leave a stronger, better and more resilient country to his successor, Datuk Seri Najib Razak.

And that, Dr Ling believes, bodes well for Malaysia.

Source: NST | [www.nst.com.my](http://www.nst.com.my)

