

# Keng Yaik steps down in style

NST- 1/4/2007.

■ By Sarban Singh

*PLEASE release me and let me go...* This Engelbert Humperdinck evergreen number has always been outgoing Gerakan president Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik's favourite at karaoke sessions with party members or media people.

He was so good at it that some members of the media would call him Engelbert Lim and request the song. Dr Lim, who studied

medicine in Belfast, would only be too happy to oblige.

"But what is the point? They (Gerakan) never let me go," he would regularly tell reporters. The last time I heard this was in 2001 at a Gerakan media function.

Seven years later, party members are finally letting him go.

Next Sunday, an extraordinary meeting will be held where Tapah-born Dr Lim will officially retire as president after 26 years and seven months and hand over

the reins to Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon, who has served as Penang chief minister for 17 years.

His peers would readily admit that his long service as party president has been as colourful as the man.

A chain smoker, Dr Lim must have received his best birthday present at 30 when practising in Chemor.

The young Dr Lim was hand-picked to contest the Pekan Baru seat in Perak on an MCA ticket.

It was fiery political baptism of fire for the young Lim as his opponent was none other than the charismatic opposition leader, D.R. Seenivasagam.

Although Seenivasagam died two weeks before the elections, Dr Lim was mauled by the replacement PPP candidate by close to 10,000 votes.

In 1972, the media-savvy politician was the youngest Cabinet minister at 32 when he was made special functions minister (new

villages).

But this was short-lived when Dr Lim was sacked from the MCA a year and a half later for "going against the aspirations" of party president Tun Tan Siew Sin.

But Dr Lim, who studied at St Michael's Institution, did not allow this episode to affect him.

He eventually admitted at the tail-end of his political career that Gerakan was not a multi-racial party but one that was non-racial.

**Q:** Finally you are handing over the reins to your deputy. It was years ago when you first made this announcement.

**A:** The truth is that I am seven years late in retiring. Over the years, I have said many times that I would retire but it never happened.

This was because the party's top leadership never accepted my resignation. After the party elections in August 2005, when we had many new leaders, I told myself that enough was enough.

Since there was a good succession plan, and with the party more stable than ever, it is the best time for me to go.

**Q:** Was Dr Koh Tsu Koon your "appointed" successor?

**A:** Dr Koh was not my choice. The party leadership felt he was a better choice. But the incumbent (deputy president Kerk Choo Ting) got angry and accused me of betraying him (for supporting Dr Koh in the election for the No 2 position).

I had no reason to support Dr Koh and retire 18 months later. But I must say that Dr Koh has the intellectual capacity and a better grasp of things.

**Q:** Didn't Kerk deserve to be president after serving as number two for 15 years?

**A:** I was Perak MCA branch chairman in 1971 but was never given a chance to contest in the 1974 general election.

In 1976, I was already deputy president but again was not given a seat in the 1978 elections.

I only got a chance to contest when Gerakan members in the Jalong constituency told the Gerakan candidate that he would lose if he contested; as the DAP candidate was too strong.

I only knew that I was contesting two days before nomination day. (Dr Lim won the seat with a 152 majority). And yet, I had no government position.

When I became president in 1980, I was only a Perak exco



member. I had a chief minister (Penang), a minister, deputy ministers, parliamentary secretary and excos under me. I was angry but I had to obey the party.

When I won in the 1982 general election, I again kept the exco post and allowed the person who challenged me for the presidency in 1980 (Datuk Paul Leong) to fill the ministerial post.

And when Dr Goh Cheng Teik contested against me and lost in 1987, again I allowed him to keep his deputy minister's post. In Gerakan, there is no such thing as the winner takes all.

I have been challenged five times — by Datuk Paul Leong, Tan Sri Michael Chen (1984), Dr Goh Cheng Teik, Datuk Joseph Chong (1996) and Kerk Choo Ting (2005).

We may have had differences of opinion, that is all right, but when it comes to the party, there are no two policies. We have to obey the majority.

**Q:** Any regrets?

**A:** None whatsoever. If given the choice, I would want to go through everything again. I thank the members for electing me. I don't know how I lasted. But I think it was probably due to my principle of the winner not taking everything.

**Q:** You seem to be nostalgic?

**A:** Why should I be? I am not leaving the party. There is plenty more that needs to be done. This is not a *perjuangan yang belum selesai* (a struggle that has yet to be completed). This is a *perjuangan yang tidak boleh diselesaikan* (a never-ending struggle).

**Q:** Close to 27 years as president and five challenges. What do you cherish most?

**A:** I must admit that every day was a nightmare, because when you make decisions, it would surely hurt someone. But I cannot forget the "Port Dickson Spirit" of 1980 after I won the presidency.

Datuk Paul Leong, the other contestant, had the support of then chief minister of Penang Lim

Chong Eu (now Tun), but I won.

Despite our differences, we stuck together and put Gerakan's interests before anything else.

**Q: Have you forgiven the MCA leaders who sacked you in 1974?**

**A:** I was sacked because I was trying to reform the party. I must say I was successful because today the MCA has full-time politicians. They don't mix business with politics.

Before I came into the scene, no MCA ministers were visiting the new villages or towns.

Today, if you don't know your grassroots, you can never survive in politics.

Before I was sacked, I wanted the party to hold seminars on issues affecting the country, such as the New Economic Policy.

I felt we should have explained the policies of the government to the people so that they get the right message.

I cannot forget one quote by Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman (who was then deputy prime minister). He said the MCA was a party which *tak mahu hidup, tak mahu mati* (neither wanting to live nor die).

**Q: Do you hold any grudges?**

**A:** Whether I have forgiven them or not is not important. What is important is that the MCA is today a much better party.

**Q: What about your relationship with your challengers?**

**A:** Normal. Only two months ago, I attended Dr Goh's son's wedding.

In fact, through my medical experience, I told him to get himself checked for a medical ailment he might be suffering from. I hope he is getting treatment for it.

As for Joseph Chong, I met him in Bangladesh some three years ago. We are all friends.

**Q: How did you get involved in politics?**

**A:** It all began when I was studying medicine in Belfast. Malaya had just obtained independence and being a new and multiracial nation, obviously there were many issues that were being discussed.

When I returned and began my practice in Chemor, the people who came to me for treatment would also pour out their grievances to me. Slowly, but surely, their problems became mine and I became a politician.

**Q: Did anyone in your family object to this?**

**A:** My dad, a small-time tin miner, did. He said if I was interested in politics, I should have studied Political Science as it was cheaper.

When I was working in Chemor, in 1969, the then Perak MCA chairman, Datuk Yeoh Kian Teik, approached me to contest the Ipoh New Town (Pekan Baru) seat.

I was pitted against D.R. Seenivasagam, the opposition leader then. Although he died in a road accident two weeks before the elections, I still lost to the replacement candidate.



But when I became minister in 1972, I knew my father was the proudest man in the country.

**Q: Have you favoured anyone in Gerakan?**

**A:** Never. In my years in politics, the only person who was considered to be in my inner circle was Lim Ah Cheng.

He left the MCA with me and used to travel with me for my *ceramah*. Being close to me, he thought he could have a position in the party.

He was always hoping to be made an assemblyman and exco member in Perak. But I never gave him the opportunity as there were others who were better than him.

In fact, in the 1986 general elec-

**“**  
**We may have had differences of opinion, that is all right, but when it comes to the party, there are no two policies. We have to obey the majority.**  
**”**

tion, Ah Cheng had printed posters of himself as he thought I would allow him to contest the Changkat Jering seat.

But he never got that chance. If he was alive today, he would have been in his early 50s.

**Q: Your son, Lim Si Pin, has followed in your footsteps and is today deputy Youth chief. Did you have anything to do with this?**

**A:** My principle is not to help my own. He is deputy Youth chief today because that was what the Youth wing wanted.

As a father, I never wanted him to delve into politics but as presi-

dent, I have no objection.

**Q: Why not?**

**A:** Because it is not an easy job. You must have a big heart to accept the good and the bad.

You cannot make everyone happy. The fact is, different people have different aspirations.

It is not easy. You make a lot of people unhappy. For example, I changed more than 50 per cent of the party's candidates in the 2005 election.

I just had to. People who had been with me for over 30 years had to make way. And, eventually, I have to.

This must have made a lot of people unhappy. I had no choice. Gerakan had to have a proper succession system in place.

**Q: Would you want any position in Gerakan after you retire?**

**A:** I don't. I have already told them. I don't want any position which could create uneasiness in the party leadership. But I will keep on working. I will sit on Gerakan's life member council.

**Q: You served as primary industries minister for a long time. Your biggest achievement?**

**A:** I was happy when I managed to get the leaders of three countries to sign a pact to control the production and price of rubber.

I had been trying to get them to do this since 1989 but finally succeeded in 2000 when (former prime minister Tun) Dr Mahathir Mohamad, former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and former Indonesian president Megawati Sukarnoputri signed the pact in Bali.

As big rubber producers, we were always at the mercy of rubber consumers, with 75 per cent being dominated by foreign tyre producers. After having controlled this, rubber prices have never looked back.

**Q: You are 68 and still considered young? What will you do after this?**

**A:** Play golf, mahjong and look after my five grandchildren.

## Four shortlisted for the No 2 position

**PUTRAJAYA:** Four candidates, all from Penang, have been shortlisted to fill the number two post in Gerakan, which will fall vacant on April 8.

Outgoing president Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik said the four were "very capable" and have had enough time in politics to continue with Gerakan's ideology.

"I can confirm that there are four, and they are all from Penang," he said.

Although the energy, water and communications minister did not elaborate, the four are believed to be Deputy Health Minister Datuk Lee Kah Choon, Deputy Information Minister Datuk Chia Kwang Chye, and Penang exco members Datuk Teng Hock Nan and Teng Chang Yeow.

Another long-term serving exco, Datuk Toh Kin Woon, has been ruled out as he would also be retiring from politics.

Deputy president and Penang Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon will take over as acting president next Sunday when the party president steps down.

Asked whether it was proper for the party to have both its president and deputy president from Penang, Dr Lim, who will turn 68 this month, said this was inconsequential.

"Until recently, both the president (Dr Lim) and deputy president (Kerk Choo Ting) were from Perak. So it may be time the top two positions be given back to Penang," he said in jest.

Dr Lim is Beruas MP while Kerk had for many years served as

Taiping MP until the seat was given to the PPP in the last general election in 2003.

(Kerk had served as deputy president for 15 years but had to make way in 2005 when he challenged Dr Lim for the top post and lost. Dr Lim had been president since 1980).

Asked whether he would in any way influence Dr Koh in the appointment of the No 2 man, Dr Lim said he would not.

"When I was president, I never allowed anyone to do that. Dr Koh should decide who he wants."

Dr Lim added that the party's Central Working Committee would have to endorse Dr Koh's choice. "I just gave him some ideas and a little advice. I think he will take his time."

He reminded party members not to pressure Dr Koh into naming his number two.

When told that it was an open secret that he always had a soft spot for Dr Koh, whom he had groomed since 1981, and was influential in his appointment to the number two position, Dr Lim said it was still the party members who elected him.

"In the 1990 general election, I had prepared three PhD holders to sit in the Penang exco. They were Dr Koh, Datuk Kan Chin Seng and Dr Goh Cheng Teik."

"When the then Chief Minister Lim Chong Eu lost, the most suitable candidate to replace him was Dr Koh."

"He has since proven himself to be a capable and intelligent leader."