

Dynamo for social causes

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His interest in the environment took root during his childhood in rainy Taiping with its beautiful Lake Gardens. There, 100 years ago, the Larut mangroves were already protected forests. His range of interests have grown vastly and at 66, Datuk Anwar Fazal is still active as a social activist, consumerist, health activist, environmentalist and human rights crusader. He has been called the Ralph Nader of the East, received the Right Livelihood Award, popularly called the Alternative Nobel Prize, in 1982; the Global 500 award from the United Nations Environment Programme in 1988; the International Health Award in 1995 from the La Leche League for his work in promoting the welfare of mothers and children the world over. He shares with **REGINA WILLIAM** his passion for social causes.

theSun: What started your involvement in social activism which has led you to this stage?

Anwar Fazal: I grew up in the town of Taiping and it was one of the most beautiful places to grow up in... and 16 years I spent there, I could relive them 1,000 times. It was a town that was small enough to have a heart and yet big enough to have good schools and you could walk from home and climb up a 5,000ft mountain every week, and go camping and connect with nature. You have the Lake Gardens. We hear people talk about the Paya Indah Wetlands, and here were old tin mines over 100 years ago that were converted into one of

the most beautiful lake gardens in the country...

which is rather remarkable that you have this kind of restoration organised. And just further down, we have the first railway (line) in Peninsular Malaysia from Taiping to Port Weld.

Was this what stirred your interest in the environment?

Taiping was where it took root. The Larut mangroves, what we call the Matang mangroves, were 100 years ago gazetted and protected forests and to think, 100 years ago in this country we were legally protecting wetlands, that is one of the best examples (of nature conservation) in the world.

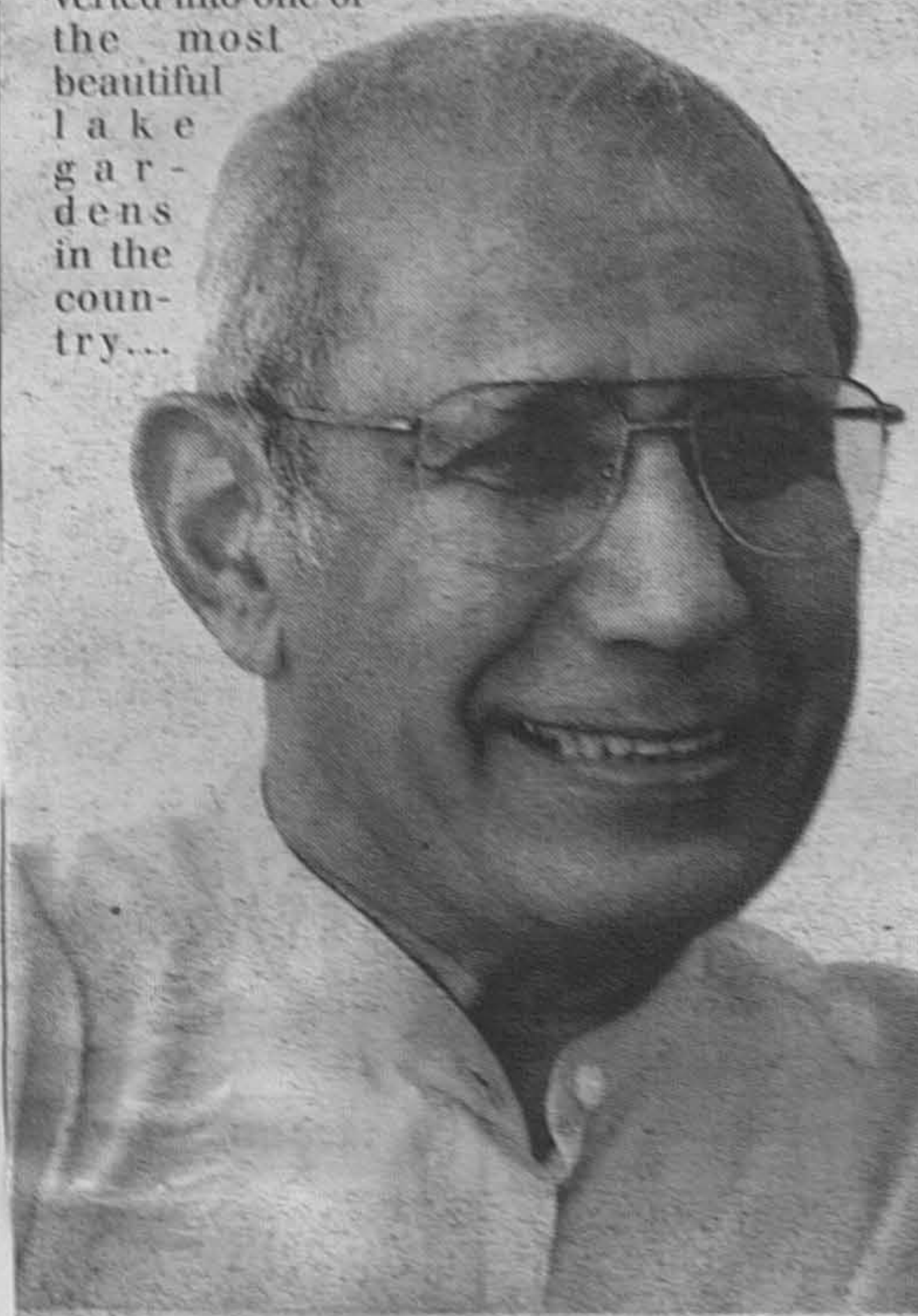
The mangroves were linked to the charcoal industry then, which was (the) equivalent of petroleum. You wanted energy and fuel, you looked upon charcoal, so the need to regulate the intake of the mangrove trees for these purposes... and also it was the most important item for the building industry for making piles and scaffoldings.

So sustainable forest management was built in there. We have a wonderful legacy of forest management right down there and now the charcoal factories are still there, they take a certain amount and make (the charcoal) still very much in the traditional way.

Besides the environment, what inspired you to go into social activism?

Taiping was also a cantonment town and it was a very important military outpost and you had soldiers from all over the Commonwealth - Fiji, Africa, India, Pakistan, and so you actually lived in a very international community, and with World War II, I remember my first feeling of war. Of course, I was very small.

I remember a Japanese soldier regularly coming and always wanted to show the picture of his children to me because the second and third waves of the soldiers were all civil servants or teachers who had been compulsorily recruit-



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ed and they missed their families and so they were friendly and showed a little bit of their humanity.

Behind the war, there were human beings on all sides caught in the struggle. Then suddenly, he disappeared and he and the other Japanese soldiers were made to collect the garbage and the sewage buckets as prisoners-of-war.

At that age, I could not understand what had happened in terms of the transformation of power. Another thing that captured my mind was what happened after the war, when there was a lot of fear about people who were collaborators and one of the sad things about war is people get caught in all kinds of struggles and

in getting caught, they become the "enemy", and so the tragedy of retaliation. These things made a special impact on my life, this diversity and struggle in the war, the humanity behind it and also retribution and fear.

What influenced your decision to stand firm on issues related to integrity and social justice?

One of the things I did was I took charge of the meteorological station and it was interesting that my school, King Edward School, had such a station. I was only 12 or 13 and I had this fascination for the climate, mainly, I think, because Taiping was rather unique in its being supposedly one of the 20 rainiest towns (in the world) and with the mountain so close and the mangroves, it was a very special place and the cli-

mate to me was so interesting. My ambition was to become a meteorologist.

Until today, I have a fascination for clouds and just look out and understand the different kinds of clouds or even follow a cloud moving or changing shape and breaking up and merging into another cloud, different colours... and if you grew up in a certain time these were special sights.

To watch it and enjoy it brings all kinds of memories and tells you about the power of nature and the way nature is functioning and particularly, it reminds you about water because water is one of those special things, every breath we take has water and growing up in a place where water was so central, so now you can see why I set up Water Watch and I was very much involved in

You find it (Taiping) a very nice, small-scale microcosm of all the goodness. And people who come from all over the world say, My God, this is the kind of future of the world that we would like to see, this beautiful harmony of food and people, places and colours, and reminders about very essential elements of what I call the triangle of peace - peace with yourself, peace with other people, and peace with the environment.

Water Watch Asia and the Water Movement.

My childhood has a lot to do with what I did in life. And being in charge of the meteorological station, wow, I was going to be in charge of measuring something that was so powerful. Every morning I had to go and take the temperature and check the humidity and measure the amount of rainfall and put the results on a board in the school where the assembly was held.

Once I overslept and didn't do the readings. I felt like I had let down everybody. So what did I do? Do I quietly put a reading and cheat or look at the average, or look at last year's reading and put in that, and all those thoughts went through my mind... I decided after thinking that I should just go and tell the teacher that I didn't do it. That was my first lesson in integrity.

I went and told the teacher and she said I did the right thing... she said one day's statistics didn't make a difference, but honesty made a difference.

You did not pursue your ambition to be a meteorologist?

My parents moved to Penang because they had a business there and I moved to Penang Free School. When I finished my Form Five, the headmaster met every single student and talked to us about our future and he asked me what I wanted to be. I told him I wanted to be a meteorologist. He told me I was in the wrong stream and I should be in the Science stream as I would have to do Physics to be a trained meteorologist. I didn't realise that one could be blocked out of being what you wanted to be by being streamed. So I had to think about something else to do with my life.

So, now it could be anything, so I decided to do the best in everything I did... and I was just going to enjoy life to the fullest.

Another big lesson from school was when I obtained the best results in that school in the Arts stream and I applied for scholarships and I didn't get any. Since I was from Perak, I could not apply for a Penang state scholarship even though

I had left Perak and I went for a federal scholarship interview and I wasn't successful. I was wondering why I didn't get the

scholarship and that was another lesson in history for me. I found that it was nothing to do with ethnicity. It was a question of who you knew, and influence and connections that people had and somehow I was not connected.

I didn't know anybody, my family was very small, we didn't even own a house, we were staying upstairs of a shop in Chulia Street. Those who were given scholarships were people from communities that were richer and (their) results were worse, so it was an interesting lesson. That reinforced the one thing that I learnt - that I would just continue to do the best. But it imposed a strain on my father because I was the eldest. I got a place in the university and my younger brother never failed to remind me of what a strain it was for the family. The moment I went there, one of the things I decided was I was going to be active. I became president of the University of Malaya students' union and national union of Malaysian students.

Then came Merdeka and Malaysia, and I lived my student life in both events. Each one had so much learning (to offer), one freedom from the British and the other, an enlargement of Malaysia to include greater diversity... and also because then, for the first time, we began an engagement with the rest of the world, politically. The year 1957 was all innocence and we were celebrating our independence. But suddenly, with 1965, with the formation of Malaysia, Indonesia was challenging us, Philippines was challenging us and people were talking about the Non-Aligned Movement, new imperialist countries and neo-colonialism was the word that we suddenly woke up to.

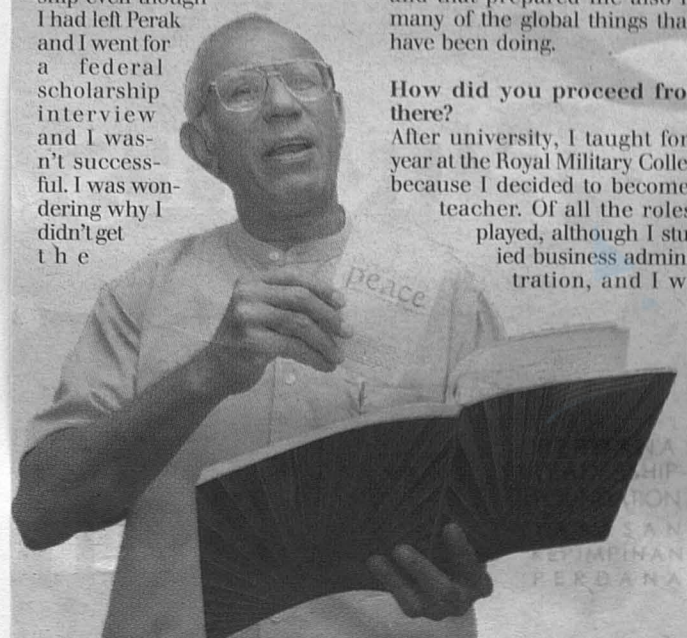
As students, we were all grappling with the dynamics of this and the embassies were very interested to talk to us. The Indonesian embassy invited me and my union exco to have a meal with them because they wanted to explain the Indonesian point of view of the Confrontation. We accepted the invitation because it was at a place we've never been to - Bok House - it was the best restaurant then.

They explained and we listened. The British High Commission also invited us because the British government was also very involved and we were invited to high tea at Carcosa, and they also explained.

So growing up was learning... with Vietnam War and the Confrontation, you can say, an immersion course in global politics. And that opened up your mind to what were global issues then and that prepared me also for many of the global things that I have been doing.

How did you proceed from there?

After university, I taught for a year at the Royal Military College because I decided to become a teacher. Of all the roles I played, although I studied business administration, and I was



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among the earliest groups that did business administration, I felt my vocation was elsewhere. So I stayed on one more year in the university and did my diploma in Education. Then when I finished, I had to teach in a primary school as part of my training and I was in a girls' school. It was very interesting at that age to go to a primary school. Being very enthusiastic, I used music to teach them. They were learning about Geography in North America and I played the song *Cotton Fields* because we were studying the south of North America and the cotton areas and playing this song in class created such an uproar. I was called up by the headmistress who said I should not be doing these things because it was interrupting school and here I was trying to be creative and innovative. You learn in life that sometimes you are taught to be creative but there are all sorts of rules that you have to live by.

Then I saw an advertisement in the papers for an assistant secretary in the Penang city council and decided since my parents were getting old, I should come back to Penang. I applied, but I didn't know anybody, I didn't speak to anybody. I just came for the interview and that time, the city council of George Town was an elected city council. I was interviewed by a team of elected councillors and civil servants and it was run by the Socialist Party.

A position had become vacant because Abdullah Majid, who was later private secretary to (Prime

Minister) Tun Razak, was a development officer and he left. They took me in, maybe they saw my student activism. I had not known anybody at all on the board, so it was nice to be selected based on merit and the fact that they felt I had something to contribute. Working in the local authority that time was such a joy. There were many unusual things, we started the city service training centre. We removed the (parking) meters because of unemployment. And we got young people, we trained them four hours, they worked as parking attendants. And they were trained to be courteous, to carry umbrellas to help people to park, if it was raining. So the idea was like a street jockey to actually help people. Can you imagine, to have someone like that on each street!

Then, for four hours, they had to study at the service training centre in Macalister Road to learn a trade. The idea was to groom a new group of young people who could actually work in factories, and the idea of giving them free technical education so that they get paid half a salary and the other half of the time they were given a scholarship to study.

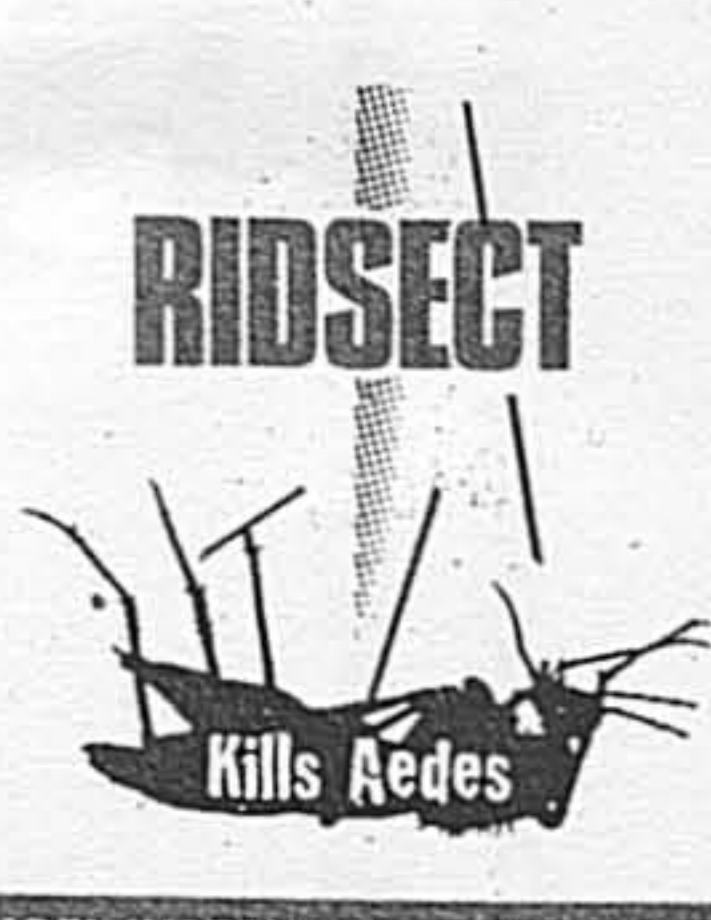
How long were you in the council?

I was in the council for seven years, then I was private secretary to the chief minister. All the time as a civil servant. Then I went abroad to study urban studies for a year, came back and worked with the Penang Development Corporation for a year and while I was working in the city council. I was active in several organ-

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isations and one that made a tremendous change in my life was starting CAP (Consumers Association of Penang).

I was behind the founding of CAP and at that time, I was also running the Penang Library as a volunteer. I was the honorary supervisor of the library which was a voluntary organisation - the oldest English public library in this part of the world, older than even Singapore's.

We decided the library should

be much more proactive in the community and we invited people to give talks and lectures and we had art exhibitions. It was then that we decided to start CAP and it was a project actually of the University of Malaya Graduates' Society. The society was one of the very active groups discussing social issues. So CAP was founded and I was secretary. A few years later, I left my job in the government in 1974 to work full-time on consumer issues by setting up the International Organisation of Consumers Unions office for Asia and the Pacific and after that in 1978, I became president of the world organisation for seven years.

I retired in 1990 and joined the United Nations for 12 years to come back to my city issues, working on urban governance but I kept my involvement in NGOs. We started international organisations like the world breastfeeding movement and the world headquarters is here in Penang, the Pesticides Action Network that also internationally is done out of Penang. Health Action International, which is all the work on pharmaceuticals and drugs and for a long time the base was here. So Penang became the world headquarters of the consumer movement as the operational headquarters for many of these organisations.

It was a very remarkable period ... the 70s... If anyone in the world wanted civil society leadership on an issue, they actually looked to us in Penang, with the International Organisation of Consumers

Unions and later also Third World Network. The first network of civil society in the world was the International Baby Food Action Network on breastfeeding. We took the global lead on the breastfeeding (campaign). And then we had the whole spinoff with lots of people using this terminology of getting many diverse groups together through like participatory but action-oriented frameworks.

Participation was very important and each time we began a movement, we talked about issues that would capture people's minds. Even in CAP, one of the early research efforts we did was on *belacan* because we found that they were using colouring in *belacan*. The colouring was paint colouring and not approved colouring, to make it look red. We found that *belacan* was tainted by carcinogenic chemical paint. And when did we release it (the finding)? We released it the day before the Umno general assembly so everyone would be talking about *belacan* (at the assembly) and it was the first story from a consumer group to get first-page headlines in the biggest newspaper ... at that time, to get front-page coverage was quite a remarkable thing.

A lot of things were also organised in terms of Days* - Human Rights Day, Wetlands Day, World Breastfeeding Week, International Day of Solidarity with Migrant Workers - global days that we began because when you talk about popular mobilisation, you need focus and memories, you

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need important occasions. So, issues which we handled later in the 1990s were about migrant workers, water, transport, interfaith and these were all critical issues of the new era.

Did you ever feel you wanted to stop and just concentrate on one cause?

I have been immersed in every one of these issues as I believe these things are all connected and so, to me, you cannot actually be in just one movement. If you are involved in social change and social justice, then you become involved in every issue because the core issues of rights, responsibilities, respect underline every single issue and these are things you can address.

We are a world of migrants, everybody in the world. We are actually a nation of migrants and how do we treat migrants? We have to look at ourselves, at our own history. Look at ourselves when we go to other countries, how would we like to be treated? That is why I live by these two rules: treat others like you would like to be treated and two, if you want to make change, I think Gandhi said, you must be the change that you want to be.

Compared to the time when you were first involved in consumerism and environmentalism, how has the consciousness among the people changed?

We have taken the environment for granted because we were so blessed and we have systematically damaged it in very severe ways. Examples in Penang are the death of Sungai Pinang and Sungai Juru. Their death is proof of how we have mismanaged the environment. Lots of places are worse, but we don't compare our-

How can we work towards bringing our ethnicities together? ... It is a challenge for civil society to play its role to demand for a transparent and just government. However, this effort must be the effort of every Malaysian. If everyone plays their little role, these little things can change the world.

selves by saying that other places are worse (off).

Here, we have such a wonderful environment. After all, we have done well in so many things. If you look, people come from Africa, Latin America, Europe to find the balance in terms of inter-ethnicity, food, whatever you would like in terms of what would make the quality of life. They find us a very remarkable model of these things. But these models have to be striven for, proactively and we should not only be looking for value for money, we should be looking for value for the environment, value for the human being and so the issues of social justice and the issue of the environment.

Taiping gave me 16 years of the best childhood and some people in Taipung asked me: *Anwar, come and talk about Taipung*. I said I'll come and talk but I also want to do something and I gave 16 years back of my life. So I started the Taipung Peace Initiative, and how a town that got the name 'everlasting peace' can now become a model for learning. We have training workshops there, conferences and the Malaysian Interfaith Network was born in Taipung.

You find it a very nice, small-scale microcosm of all the goodness. People come from all over the world and say, My God, this is the kind of future of the world that we

would like to see. This beautiful harmony of food and people, places and colours, and reminders about very essential elements of what I call the triangle of peace - peace with yourself, peace with other people, and peace with the environment.

So if you take Vision 2020, we have this remarkable economic growth but also great distortions in terms of equity issues. We made the gaps between the rich and the poor, we got a bigger middle-class which is good for any democratic society because it gives you a certain stability, but there is also a built-in instability because you have a big middle-class but you also have the two extremes now, one getting very wealthy and one getting very, very poor and finding it difficult.

Another flaw in our system is Vision 2020 which has got nine challenges. When we read the nine challenges, it talks beautifully about the economics, our need to have harmony as one nation under the

concept of Bangsa Malaysia, but it has one blind spot, which is the environment. Perhaps the PM can introduce the 10th challenge, and that is the environment challenge. The Minister of Natural Resources has been speaking very strongly on environmental issues and quite bluntly, about the fact that certain states are not taking responsibility, states are responsible for forests and rivers and water management and we are making critical errors. There must be a turnaround in the way we treat our environment.

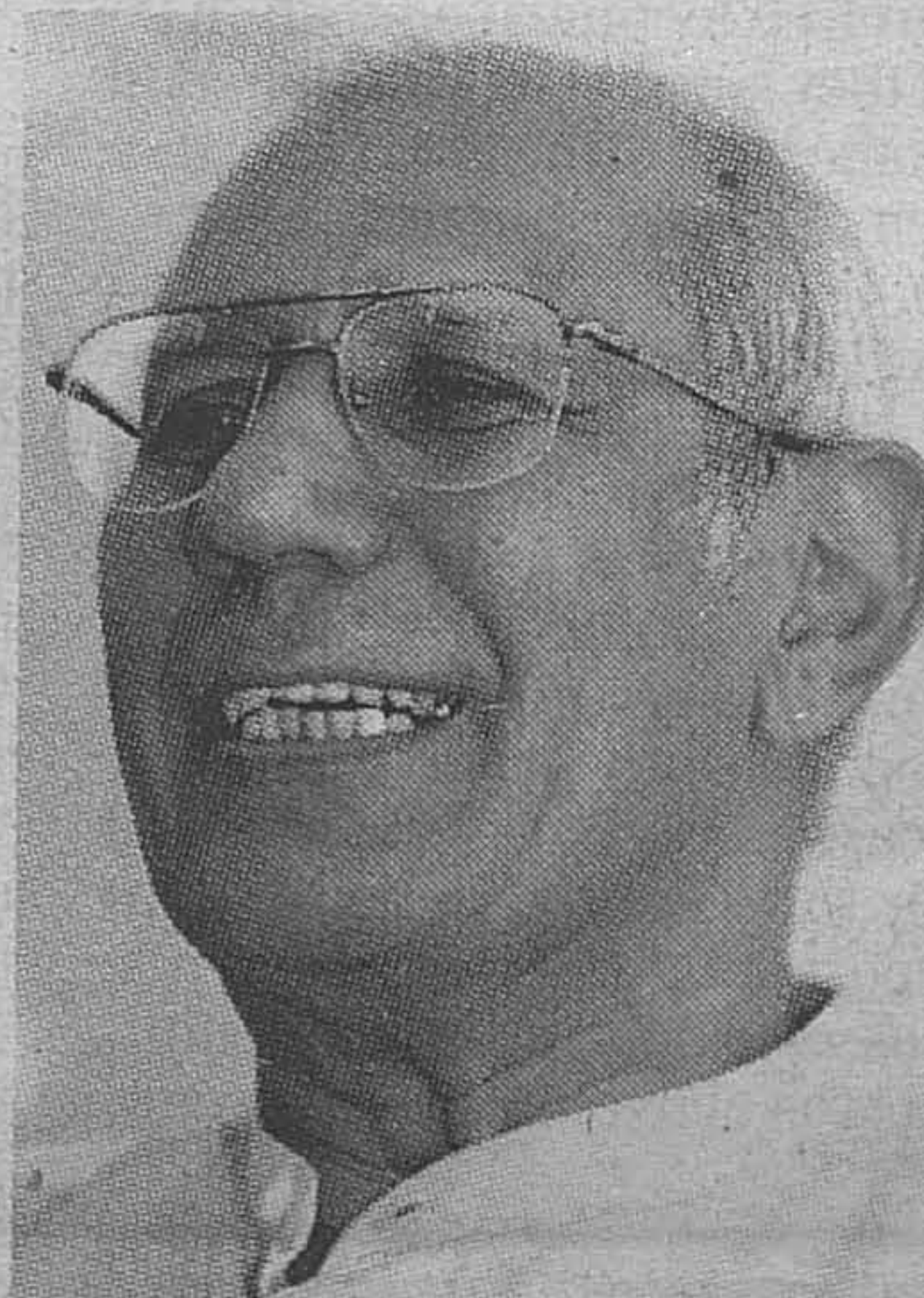
What other issues do you feel very strongly about?

One of the issues which I feel civil society can play an important role in is bridging the gap among the people. We grew up in a divide-and-rule system left by the colonials. The seamlessness of our multi-racial society was supposed to be a wonderful formula and a role model to the world.

We are supposed to show the world how we can live in harmony but just like our nation's economic cake where tension prevails, these are also present in our communities. We need to face up to new challenges on how to retain the Bangsa Malaysianness in this world of openness.

These tensions, either negative or creative, can actually be harnessed. How can we work towards bringing our ethnicities together? It is not going to be easy as the divide-and-rule facet still exists.

This is where civil society is important as it transcends all these issues ... However, this effort must be the effort of every Malaysian. If everyone plays their little role, these little things can change the world.



Full interview at sun2surf.com