

# Nation-building involves all

NET-10/12/2006

I WAS turning 12. The war against Japan was finally over, and I was excited at the prospect of going to an English school, the Sultan Abdul Hamid College, no less. No more for me the nightmare of having to grapple with the Japanese and Siamese languages.

In school, I found myself with 30 others under the tutelage of Khir Johari, my history master, and a remarkable young man who was to play an important role in the fight for Merdeka.

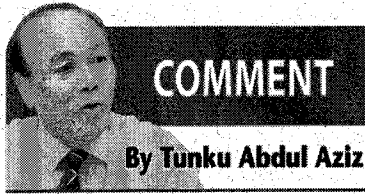
Tan Sri Khir's death recently was a matter of sadness to those who knew him as a wise and liberal man who also happened to be a great nationalist, in the best possible sense.

Years later, when I became his friend, I was allowed certain liberties with him. I often joked with him that all I ever knew of history I had learned from him. He had a way of making history come to life, "inventing events on the trot". It was always anti-colonial in tone, and I was not surprised that he left teaching soon after to devote his life to politics.

One morning, he asked us, unexpectedly, if we wanted to go along with him to listen to Dato Onn Jaafar who would be speaking later that morning on the *padang* opposite the Balai Besar, Alor Star, as the spelling was then. Needless to say, the response was a resounding "yes" — anything for a little diversion.

And so, a gaggle of the most unlikely looking anti-British fighters walked behind Pak Khir to hear Malaya's greatest orator and man of destiny call on the Malays to unite against the proposed Malayan Union.

The huge crowd, mainly of rural Malays, like the rest of us, listened with rapt attention. Onn was as charismatic as he was articulate, and had complete mastery of Malay and English. In a speech that was laced, for all it was worth, with histrionics, and sprinkled liberally with "*Hidup Melayu!*", passions were being aroused slowly and you could almost feel the tension building as the ranting continued unabated. It was a masterful display of playing to the



By Tunku Abdul Aziz

gallery to good effect.

Personally, I will not claim to have taken in everything the great man had said; my mind was on something else that I considered more delectable on that hot and sticky morning. The *ais kerim potong* peddler was ringing his brass bell just behind us, and I am afraid, Onn lost out to the humble *Ah Pek* in the battle for our attention.

The shouts of *Hidup Melayu* made me cringe. I was confused. There I was, a Malay from an old Kedah family growing up in a home that welcomed my Chinese, Indian and Malay friends and taught to treat race purely as an accident of birth, and suddenly being told that they were, perhaps not in so many words, potentially dangerous and untrustworthy, and we had better be careful.

Sixty years on, looking out of my 30th floor office in the UN Secretariat overlooking the skyline of Manhattan, and thinking about Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein and his lurid *keris*-wielding performance at the recently-concluded Umno general assembly, I am struck by the similarity in the emotional and mental make-up of Hishammuddin, the rising star of Umno of 2006 and his illustrious and mercurial grandfather.

What Hishammuddin shares with Onn is unbounded passion in the principles he espouses, and complete openness and sincerity of purpose.

His sense of honour is never in dispute. He has all the makings of a great leader of Malaysians. He has to remember, though, that while he naturally wants the best for his race, and which leader does not, the feelings, sentiments and rights of his fellow Malaysians must be respected scrupulously.

It is unfortunate if his propensity to

play to the gallery will mark him out as immature and unpredictable which I know is an undeserved reputation to bestow on Hishammuddin.

This leads me to a consideration of what it means to be a Malaysian in today's Malaysia. The idea that one can become a useful citizen of Malaysia while opting deliberately to adopt a self-imposed system of social apartheid in the mistaken belief that the other races should be politely avoided is a recipe guaranteed to enhance mutual suspicion and misunderstanding.

Many of our fears and misunderstandings spring from ignorance of other people and their way of life.

Unless we are prepared to go out of our way and engage people of other

races and religions, we will never understand that their fears, apprehensions, hopes and ambitions are not so different from our own. Underlying it all is a belief in common humanity, in our own self-respect, and the same self-respect that we must concede as a right in others.

We must all accept the fact that this is a country that sustains us; a country that expects us to contribute to its development and stability. If we sit idly by, and allow our own indifference or, worse, those forces bent on weakening our resolve for reasons not always readily understood, then we have ourselves to blame when our international reputation takes a further beating.

Polarisation must be stifled before it gets worse and consumes the very substance that is intended to nourish Bangsa Malaysia and all that it implies. The time to recover and re-establish our sense of "Malaysianness" is now.

Nation-building is a process. It is not a product that you can pick up at a *pasar malam*. We have to work at it, and not be distracted by those issues that, upon mature reflection, are not important but are nevertheless divisive. Let us all concentrate on those that matter to our long-term goals.

All of us — Malays, Chinese, Indians, Sikhs, Ceylonese, Eurasians and all people of Sabah and Sarawak — must keep an open mind and adopt a positive attitude to the rebuilding of a new Malaysian nation, based on equality of opportunity, equal treatment under the law, and all the rights enshrined in our Constitution as well as those in the United Nations Charter and conventions.

The Malays, as the majority race, have a sacred duty to protect the weak, irrespective of race or creed, and to ensure that their rights are protected.

I despair when some Malays adopt an exclusive approach to nation-building, implying that non-Malays should remain mere on-lookers in determining the sort of Malaysia we should work towards.

Malaysia is no more Bumiputera than it is Chinese or Indian. It belongs to us all who make her "the object of our love and loyalty," as Tunku Abdul Rahman used to say when Malaysia was a less divided country.

As I often reflect, the only visible national asset that is still officially designated "Melayu" is "Keretapi Tanah Melayu". With this, I urge Hishammuddin and other Umno worthies to sheath their *keris*, and think what we can all do to make this God's great little acie for generations to come.

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