

Too few qualified for top posts

NSF- 8/5/2007.



The 1955 federal election was over and 'Malayanisation' was taking place. JOHN GULLICK, a senior Malayan Civil Service officer, now in his 80s, recalls how locals took over from expatriates and who the key figures were behind the move to give Malaysians control over their own destiny

MY personal contact with the Tunku harks back to the period between 1955-67 when he was chief minister and I was working in the Federation Establishment Office.

One of the first things Tunku Abdul Rahman and his colleagues had to think about with the Alliance's sweeping victory in the 1955 federal election was how to fulfil the promise of replacing all expatriate government staff with Malaysians. It was a commitment in the party manifesto that this would be done within four years of independence.

They were anxious to avoid public recrimination that had just occurred in Singapore where the Labour Front government, under David Marshall, held public hearings on the same policy and local staff associations alleged that the colonial regime had obstructed the replacement of expatriate staff.

It was agreed that a committee on the Malayanisation of the public services with the Tunku as chairman and Abdul Razak Hussein, Abdul Aziz Ishak, H. S. Lee, V. T. Sambanthan, and the chief secretary, D. C. Watherston, as

members, would discuss the matter in private before publishing its report and recommendations.

I was secretary to the committee which met twice a week for about a year and I presented the report to the Federal Council in August 1956. The committee issued to each government department a detailed questionnaire on the progress and future prospects for the "Malayanisation" of the department.

Each department head was called before the committee to answer questions on the situation.

I had the opportunity of observing the Tunku and his colleagues grappling with a difficult set of problems.

There were simply not enough qualified Malaysians at that time to fill all the posts held by expatriates in technical departments, and in the administrative, customs and police departments (as elsewhere) experience counted for a good deal in discharging official duties, especially at senior levels. A too rapid replacement programme might lead to a deterioration in standards of performance that the committee was anxious to avoid, as public opinion would hold it accountable.

The committee had also to face the fact that the colonial government, soon after the end of the war, had launched a programme of training Malaysians (often at overseas universities) for senior posts, and this was beginning to produce more results than was generally realised by the government's critics, though it would not achieve complete Malayanisation within a generation if continued at the existing pace.

But, to take an important case, about one-third of the posts in the Malayan Civil Service were, in 1955, held by Malays and a very few other Malaysians, though they were generally in junior positions.

My respect for the Tunku increased as I watched him handle this difficult agenda. Beneath the debonair exterior, he was a serious and responsible leader, with an attentive ear for public opinion.

He also had a lot of experience of government from his days in the Kedah civil service.

He was willing to listen to the views of his colleagues, especially Razak and Lee, upon whose judgment he relied on a good deal. Sambanthan had little to say.

The really difficult one was Abdul Aziz (then minister of agriculture), who advocated rapid Malayanisation and was suspicious of the good faith of British officials.

He and the Tunku disagreed more than once, though always in a courteous fashion. It was evident that the combative approach of Abdul Aziz jarred on the Tunku as an aristocrat.

The committee produced a



John Gullick

detailed and well-reasoned report which proposed a phased Malayanisation programme over three to seven years, according to the circumstances of different departmental services.

I had gone on leave when the report was published (and laid before the Federal Council), but I believe that it was well received, as it set out a realistic programme, much in advance of previous government attempts. Its implementation also was a success.

On the whole (apart from occasional spats with Abdul Aziz), the Tunku and his colleagues were a cheerful and united group. I remember only one glum gathering at Sambanthan's house where coconut water was the only liquid refreshment.

In 1956, the Tunku led a delegation to London to negotiate successfully for a definite and early date for Merdeka. They returned to Malaya exuberant, but I felt just a little overwhelmed at the prospect of them taking over complete control of the government of their country.

When the committee had completed its work, the Tunku very kindly invited me to a dinner party at his official residence. It was an informal occasion. There were some small children and a little girl of about 3 who sat on his knee in her pyjamas after dinner.

He was in good form and told the story of his eventual success in getting a call to the Bar (just after the war). He recounted how his Earl's Court landlady appeared in his bedroom, to wake him, on the

morning on which the results of the Bar final exam were published. With *The Times* in her hand, she said, "Uncle" ("she always called me Uncle"), "You're through."

The Tunku replied, "Go away, woman, I am in no state for a joke." But it was true.

He also said that he enjoyed being in politics. If ever it ceased to be fun, he would wish to be out of it. Fortunately we do not know what the future holds for us — 13 May 1969 was a case in point.

Few Commonwealth prime ministers were as relaxed as the Tunku was at this stage in his career.

I remember the Tunku as a remarkable man, who served his country well. He would take infinite trouble in his dealings with his electorate but he avoided paperwork if he could.

I once had to seek his signature for a paper I had drafted for him to submit to the Executive Council. The Malay secretaries in his outer office said that he was too busy to see me. So I sat there until they let me in, paper in hand.

"What's it about?" asked the Tunku. I told him I would return when he had time to read it. "Oh, that's alright," he said and signed it.

In a long life I have never had another such compliment. It was a privilege to have known him.

■ The writer made this contribution to *Pustaka Wira Negara*, *Arkib Negara Malaysia* in conjunction with the upcoming Merdeka celebrations