

Engaging characters: The Tunku and Dr Tan Chee Khoo were colourful personalities in the House who freely aired their views.

Memorable MPs

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Do we have Members of Parliament who are memorable or have done "something extraordinary"? Yes, but they are mostly those who have passed on and were legends in their time.

BRING back the glory days of parliamentarians. This was the task given by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi to the Barisan Nasional Backbenchers Club (BNBBC) last month. He urged them to "do something extraordinary" to commemorate the country's 50th Merdeka this year.

In a meeting with BNBBC, he said he wanted the elected representatives to raise and champion issues that would bring about a better civil administration and to engage in a higher quality of debates.

According to BNBBC acting chairman Datuk Raja Ahmad Zainuddin Raja Omar, the PM did not elaborate on the "something extraordinary" he wanted the backbenchers to do but left it to their interpretation.

Sadly, today's MPs are less memorable than their predecessors. Ask about who are still remembered till today, the top of recall are those among the early batches like the Seenivasagam brothers and Tan Sri Dr Tan Chee Khoo.

Our own Bapa Malaysia was a colourful and unforgettable persona in the House. In paying tribute to Tunku Abdul Rahman, retired judge Datuk Mahadev Shankar shares an exchange in Parliament between the prime minister and Dr Tan Chee Khoo.

"His compassion for the weaker members of the community came out best when Old Victorian Dr Tan Chee Khoo demanded in Parliament that our then High Commissioner in Australia be stripped of his title and his post for going missing for two weeks in the bosom of some sultry Australian siren.

The Tunku challenged: "Let any one amongst us who is without sin, stand up and cast the first stone." Tan Chee Khoo was the only one who stood and remained standing while looking at Tunku straight between the eyes.

After a pregnant silence, Tunku who at first seemed at a loss for words said, "David Tan Chee Khoo, I really pity you."

In the uproarious laughter that followed, an

embarrassing situation was averted.

There are many others with fond memories of the MPs whose careers they followed or they knew personally. These MPs made their mark in and out of the House. *Sunday Star* catches up with some who were touched in one way or another by an MP, whether then or now.



Tan Sri L.C. Vohrah

Former High Court judge and an ad litem judge of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, the first and only Malaysian to hold an international judicial post.

"Tan Chee Khoo and the Seenivasagam brothers were those outstanding ones who were not ministers. The rest like (Tun) Sambanthan, (Tun Abdul) Razak, (Tun Dr Lim) Chong Eu were patrician gentlemen.

"The Seenivasagam brothers were able and ethical lawyers. They were formidable participants in debates.

"Chee Khoo was a politician with constructive views. He was a man with conscience, a quality recognised by the government of the day.

"All these people were respected for their conduct and selfless dedication for the good of the whole country.

"Off hand, I remember Chee Khoo used to have a column in the newspaper called 'Without Fear or Favour'.

That's what he was famous for too."



Tan Sri Lamin Yunus

The country's first Court of Appeal president, he was an assistant secretary in the then external affairs ministry before joining the judicial and legal service as a prosecutor.

"I remember the Seenivasagam brothers. S.P. and D.R. Both were lawyers and very decent fellows.

"During the 60s, people were more dedicated to building a good nation. The issues that were being debated those days were more on building up the country.

(S.P. Seenivasagam and his brother D.R. Seenivasagam were the founding leaders who helmed People's Progressive Party during its heyday.)

Datuk P.G. Lim

Lawyer and former ambassador to the United Nations, she shares how she was responsible for bringing Dr Tan Chee Khoo, former MP for Batu, into the Labour Party.



"Dr Tan Chee Khoo made an excellent Mr Opposition. He did not oppose for the sake of opposition. He used his position not only to disagree strongly about policies he did not favour, he was gracious enough to accept and agree with government policies which met with his approval. And that accounted for the respect he received from the members of the government.

"He was well-versed in military history and his library had the best collection of books on that subject. Nobody could beat him in his knowledge of military history.

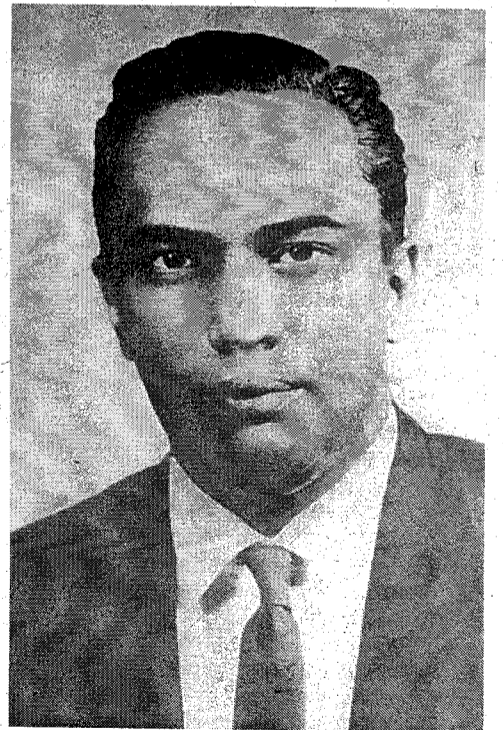
"He was also able to espouse any cause he believed in with great earnestness and sincerity, and in this way, won many people to his cause.

"He was very popular with his constituents in Batu who appreciated his sincerity. As a medical doctor, he did a lot of pro bono work for the poor. He set up Sentosa Clinic which catered for the needs of the poor. That clinic proved to be very successful and still exists today. That is his legacy.

"He was, in addition, a patient man and,



D.R.: Was fair in his criticisms



S.P.: Known to be a formidable MP

being a true Christian, very forgiving.

"I was responsible for bringing Dr Tan into the Labour Party. At that time, he did not seem to be interested in politics but he soon proved to be an outstanding member of the party. When the Labour Party refused to participate in the 1969 elections, Dr Tan formed the Gerakan and contested the 1969 elections on the Gerakan ticket. In those elections, the

Emulate our former greats in the House

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Umno in the state elections.

"He was an exemplary parliamentarian in every sense of the word."



Tan Sri Rama Iyer

Global Maritime Ventures chairman and former secretary-general of the Primary Industries Ministry

"It is not possible to do justice in sketching the pleasing traits of Tun V.T. Sambanthan's personality and his immense contributions to the party, community and nation building in the course of his political career spanning almost 25 years.

"What stands out is his passionate belief and his commitment to the imperative of national unity in a multi-racial society. His secondary education in Clifford in Kuala Kangsar had exposed him at an impressionable age to a multi-racial milieu and to both its challenges and strengths. This belief was further fortified as a student in Annamalai University. This was a period of great political ferment in India striving for independence and for Sambanthan, it turned out to be a valuable learning experience which taught him how divisive and unproductive communal and sectarian politics was.

"He also saw the relevance and importance of non-violence as espoused and practised by Mahatma Gandhi in the struggle for independence.

"When he returned, entered politics and became the fifth president of the MIC in 1955, he expressed his abiding belief in national unity by espousing the partnership concept. MIC joined the then Alliance Party represented by Umno and MCA and the enlarged Alliance party scored a resounding victory of winning 51 out of the 52 seats contested in the first General Elections.

"He was ever conscious of the overriding importance of national unity and his last ministerial post was appropriately as Minister of National Unity.

"Prior to that, when Parliament was suspended, in the wake of the May 1969 riots, during the period of the National Operations Council and the National Consultative Council, Tun Sambanthan as a member of both bodies placed great importance on the theme of unity in diversity.

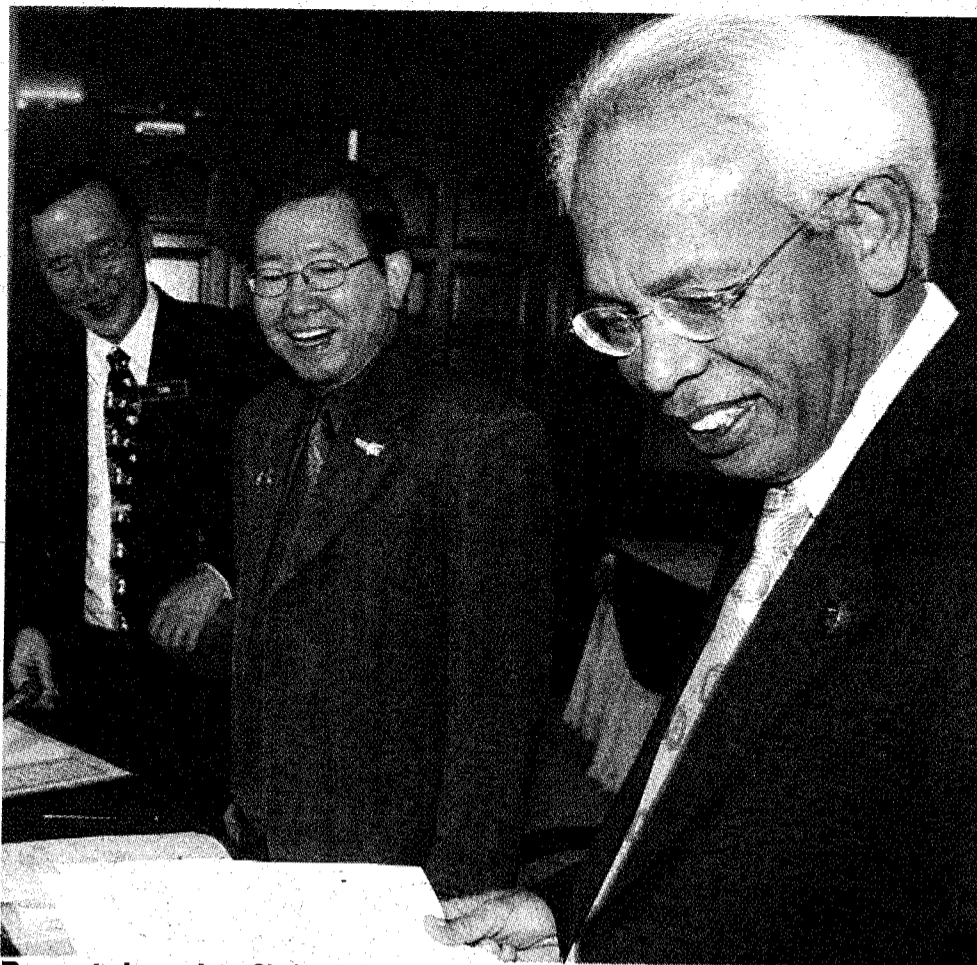
"Tun, remembered and respected as one of the founding fathers of the nation, was a signatory of the Merdeka agreement 1955 and also the agreement establishing Malaysia. Apart from his participation in the important milestones of the nation, Tun Sambanthan is also remembered for his stewardship of four Ministries that he served.

"As for his personal attributes, one cannot but recall his kind, genial, calm and pleasant demeanour. He enjoyed close working relationships with his colleagues in Cabinet and also the respect and confidence of the party MIC, of which he was a leader for 18 years. On a lighter note, his personal attire not only distinguished him, but reflected the multi-racial fabric of the nation.

"In whatever he undertook, he gave a lot of thought and put his analytical mind to good use. He did not believe in hasty responses to issues and problems encountered.

"One good example of his approach was to the problems of fragmentation of rubber estates which took place in the years immediately after independence.

"He conceived a holistic and sustainable solution which led to the establishment of the cooperative National Land Finance Cooperative (NLFC). This development mitigated the loss of employment and instead gave the workers an ownership stake by subscription to the capital of the cooperative which purchased the estates. The very success of this solution is seen today in the large membership and the wide scope of economic and social activities of NLFC.



Respected member: Shahrir, who also heads the Public Accounts Committee, impresses Datuk Abdullah Wahab with his outspokenness.



Sambanthan: Is remembered for his quest for national unity.



Fan Yew Teng

Fan, a former MP, DAP's ex-organising secretary and social activist, remembers D.R. Seenivasagam as an exemplary MP with a reputable public image and a sharp lawyer who fought for the downtrodden in society.

When Fan was blocked from getting a teaching post at a school in Kampung Kerinci along the Federal Highway in Kuala Lumpur in the 1960s, the first person that came to mind to help him was D.R.

Fan, who had legitimately secured a place to teach at that school, was told by the Selangor Education Department that there were "some oversight" and he could not serve there.

"I called D.R. who did not know me well then for help. Immediately he told me not to worry and he would take up my case."

"But the case did not proceed because when the HM (headmaster) knew I had contacted D.R., they dropped the case.

"D.R. had touched his life in many ways. My own interest in politics was aroused by D.R. He was a fiery speaker who spoke sense and not just one who was shouting slogans.

"He could put across arguments very powerfully. They were not just noise but also substance.

"You may not agree with everything he said but the way he put across his ideas and arguments was very impressive

"D.R. was also fair-minded in his criticisms. Although he was critical of the government and Tunku Abdul Rahman, he could see the other person's point of view.

"It's a quality not common in most politicians. Most politicians would say all the fellows on the other side are bad. But D.R. was able to make that sort of distinction.

"I recall an incident in which D.R. accused then Education Minister Abdul Rahman Talib of corruption in Parliament. The Minister challenged D.R. to repeat the accusation outside the Parliament.

"D.R. invited Abdul Rahman to attend a press conference at the Chinese Assembly Hall in Kuala Lumpur where he repeated the accusation outside the Parliament. Abdul Rahman sued D.R. for it but D.R. won the case. "It was one of his crowning moments and it boosted his public image.

"D.R. also chaired the 'Great Cultural Debate' between Gerakan and the DAP which was held at the old Mara Building in Kuala Lumpur in 1968.

"By that time, D.R. was quite sick but he still chaired the debate on issues like the position of Chinese schools, what the Malaysian culture should be, cultural and socio-economic matters, university enrolments, language and education.

"There were four speakers on each side and the debate went on for three to four hours. I remember D.R. was a very good and fair chairman. It was not easy when you have supporters making a lot of noise and heckling the speakers but he handled it very well because of his personality and reputation."

"Even the day D.R. died in 1969 was a significant day. It was on the day Gerakan, DAP and the PPP were united through an electoral pact.

"We met at Dr Tan Chee Khoon's house. The PPP was not represented because D.R. was very ill. Gerakan and the DAP were there and we decided not to fight each other in certain seats. An understanding was reached and later we got a call that D.R. had passed away.

"Among the most unforgettable deeds of D.R. was when he would follow the police in his car to make sure that the authorities did not abuse their powers when the students protested over issues relating to Chinese schools. He would do the same for hawkers, rickshaw riders and market traders. He would champion them.

Tan Sri Abu Talib Othman

Suhakam chairman and former Attorney-General



"The three who stand out for me were Tan Chee Khoon and the Seenivasagam brothers.

"Chee Khoon was very thorough in his research and his comments on current affairs were objective and constructive and made at the right time. He had his finger on the pulse of current issues and he addressed them in a large way, considering all the different aspects.

"Chee Khoon did not always criticise the government. If a policy or project were beneficial to the country and the people, he would support it.

"The Seenivasagam brothers, being lawyers, raised many issues pertinent to the law.

"I saw a change, however, when the PPP joined the coalition. They were less critical and more acquiescent like most Barisan Nasional MPs who support the government all the way.

"Even today, only a few back benchers are objective in debating government policies."

Datuk Mohd Yusof Latiff

Political secretary to former Penang Chief Minister Tun Lim Chong Eu



"I still remember during those days when leaders like the late Tun Sardon Zubir cycled into the kampungs to meet the people to find out how they were doing.

"Sardon's shirt was soaked as he was sweating profusely but this did not dampen his spirit to get close and be with the people.

"During those days, leaders took time to stay and eat with the people in their kampung houses so that they understood their problems better.

"Likewise, leaders now should not go and meet people in chauffeured-driven limousines or cars but take a ride on motorcycles to show the people that they are their true and down to earth leaders."



Datuk Abdullah Wahab

The first name that comes to mind for the recently retired Secretary of Parliament is Johor Baru MP Datuk Shahrir Samad

"Shahrir is not afraid to speak his mind. You just have to look at his record, especially when he was in the opposition (Team B).

"We need someone like that, who is strong and makes us work with him. As Federal Territories minister, when he gave instructions, he himself knew how the job needed to be done.

"Yet he never claims credit. But you know it is his initiative. Shahrir never wavers from his position. To me, he should be prime minister. He is prime minister material.

"He has no problems saying what he should say. And that is because he is not afraid to hold down his own job. He has no qualms wearing jeans and a three quarter sleeved T-shirt, unlike the others today, who must wear oversized linen shirts, big rings on the finger and Bally shoes.

"There were others who were good MPs like Datuk Affudin Omar (Padang Terap), who spoke a lot on regional development and its impact on the people, and was a professional.