Pegged for leadership

Datin Peggy Taylor says the Alliance Direct Membership Organisation (ADMO) was like the Tower of Babel but it was hers, and her members' knowledge of colloquial Malay, that saved the organisation and the day. But who remembers ADMO or the Alliance Party now? And who remembers Taylor?

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By WAN A. HULAIMI

AT the recent launch of Tun Dr Ismail's political biography, *The Reluctant Politician*, on hearing a message of goodwill passed on to him from Taylor, Tawfik, Tun Ismail's eldest son, took a copy and inscribed it to "Auntie Peggy".

Many politicians of a certain age, and many children of politicians who were active in the Alliance party (precursor to the present day Barisan Nasional) still remember her as Auntie Peggy. In fact some still phone her – very long distance on Auntie terms – to where she is living now.

It is fitting that a lady, daughter of a suffragette mother and merchant navy father, who once so formidably led a party that brought the novelty of direct membership into the Alliance party now lives in South England, in a village outside a town called Battle.

"Here I am in my room, *kelamkabut*," she says. Kelamkabut seems to be her favourite word, after *bangsawan* and a few others remembered from days when she had to conduct ADMO meetings in the vernacular.

Her journey to Malaya in 1953 came via a long way. She was born in Burma, served in the Women's Auxiliary Corp during the war in India, then followed her husband Eric Taylor (later Datuk) to Singapore to join the local council.

From Singapore they came to Kuala Lumpur where Eric got a job as municipal architect in the town council. The Taylors etched for themselves a high profile society life, hobnobbing with politicians and community leaders and soon accepted an offer of Malaysian citizenship from Tunku Abdul Rahman.

While Eric busied himself with city planning and building, Taylor was into tea mornings, business ventures and of course, ADMO.

After public service, Eric in private venture left many marks in Kuala Lumpur: Bangkok Bank, and the Pakistani Mosque in Kampung Baru, to name but two.

For Taylor it was ADMO that she considers the high point of her life in Malaysia, and it all started for her at a dinner party.

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>
> DATIN PEGGY TAYLOR

"Sometime in 1972, in the home of Datuk Dr Dharmalingham and Datin Dr Juliet, Tun Ismail mentioned this political party to me and suggested that as I was very *au fait* with local politics, I should perhaps get involved by becoming a member as the party was about to be resurrected," she says.

Taylor attended her first ADMO meeting the following week at the Sultan Sulaiman Club in Kampung Baru and was enrolled as a member. Not long after, the Selangor Committee was formed and Taylor was elected chairman.

"I suppose I was seen as quite a maverick then, being a woman and an *orang putih* entering the fray of Malaysian politics," she says now.

Datin Peggy Taylor, still sprightly at 82.

ADMO soon filled up its membership book. For a party that started life as a holding area for people who, like Taylor, did not qualify for membership of the Alliance through its racially based component parties, it soon scaled heights beyond its modest dreams.

"Well, ADMO was now up and running and it was as if the floodgates were opened. The membership multiplied but it seemed to attract Malaysians of every race, which was not the object of the party, but neither was there any restrictions to joining," says Taylor, smiling broadly.

Yet, with this success also came deep anxiety. Taylor recalls a headline in *Utusan Malaysia* that claimed "200 DAP members had joined ADMO". But more than that, she says:

"I don't think the MCA or MIC liked what they witnessed. Chinese and Indian people were joining by the hundreds. My Selangor branch catered mostly for the grassroots, those who were ignored by the leaders of the other two ethnic parties. Even Umno raised its eyebrow when Malays started to join. It was only a matter of time before there would be rumblings and repercussions."

But she recalls what happened next with glee. "Someone complained to Tun Abdul Razak that 'this woman is stealing our members'. Tun Razak jokingly enquired if I was carrying them away in gunny sacks!

"As soon as my then secretary Gopal Raj and I got Selangor off the ground, I called an ad hoc meeting and named interested members as chairmen of their respective states. And then Datuk Senu Abdul Rahman was sent by Tun Razak to be our national chairman. We were indeed Malaysian, representative of all the races comprising Malaysia!" she says.

ADMO was now making its presence felt in the national political life. It campaigned successfully for Datuk Harun Idris in Morib, then gave the fledgling Alliance candidate Datuk Idris Ibrahim a boost in Setapak, an area where ADMO had strong support in the squatter areas.

Taylor remembers another contribution she made to rouse the spirit of Malaysia. "I can claim to be the person who introduced the *kompang* to state ceremonies," she says. "I took a team to Subang airport when Tun Razak returned from his visit to Peking. We gave him a rousing welcome home."

Taylor, now a sprightly 82, is looking back through her notes, photos and memorabilia in a battered briefcase that has travelled with her halfway around the world. She plans to write a book on her life in Malaya/Malaysia. After all, she saw the country before Independence, attended the ceremony at the Selangor Padang at midnight on 31st August, and led a political faction that surprised even her.

She came back to Britain as she arrived in Malaya, via a long route. She and Eric left Malaysia for England in 1992, then after Eric's death, she went to live in South Africa before coming back again to England in 2004. – MPS