

Humour aplenty in Tunku's cabinet

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Over time, Malaysians appear to have lost their sense of humour. After 50 years of nationhood, it is time we take a leaf from Tunku Abdul Rahman's wit and wisdom, writes PRABHAKARAN S. NAIR



ONE of the greatest treasures of our independence era is the legacy of humour.

It is a legacy that Tunku Abdul Rahman used to great effect in drawing different people together to build a newly independent nation.

The process of nation building in the early years of independence was no easy matter.

None of the cabinet members had much experience, as the Member System, which had been introduced by the British in 1951, provided political experience to a completely different group of leaders headed by Datuk Onn Jaafar.

But Onn and his followers had lost the 1955 general election and the new leaders under Tunku had to grapple with the grave security situation in the country, as well as unresolved issues involving racial and religious sensitivities.

Despite these difficulties, Tunku had the knack of using humour to defuse awkward situations, putting people around him at ease and enabling members of his cabinet to discuss and solve the most intricate national problems in a creative manner.

The ministers used to have lots of fun during cabinet meetings, after which they would adjourn for lunch at one of the minister's homes where they would continue their discussions informally.

The discussions were lively and there was a great deal of laughter.

"We used to end our cabinet sessions in good humour and with a mutual sense of belonging — one for all and all for the country we love so much," recalled the Tunku in his book, *Looking Back*.

Of the ministers, Tan Sri Khir Johari had the best sense of humour, and to the last days of his life treasured the years he served on Tunku's cabinet.

"I have had the privilege of serving under the country's first three prime ministers and I must say that cabinet meetings under Tunku were

an experience I shall forever cherish," said the late Khir.

One of Khir's favourite stories was related to the cabinet decision to introduce new honorific titles at the federal level.

"During those early days of independence, Datuk was the highest title awarded by both the federal and state governments. Tunku thought the awards by the federal government should be styled differently.

"I intimated to my cabinet colleagues that in ancient Malacca and Perak, the highest title accorded to citizens was the title 'Tun' followed by the title 'Tan'.

"All my colleagues were supportive of my suggestion to use these as federal titles.

"Then Tunku said: 'Now supposing the government had to confer the title of Tan on an Indian and his name is Das, Tan Das (*tandas* means toilet in Malay) would then become the laughing stock wherever he goes'.

"So it was Tunku who proposed that the title 'Tan' which I had suggested be changed to 'Tan Sri' instead."

Khir had another interesting anecdote. Not long after independence, *Time* magazine sent a woman photographer to cover Tunku.

She would take about 50 photographs at one sitting.

At first, it was easy for Tunku to smile, but after a while, he simply could not.

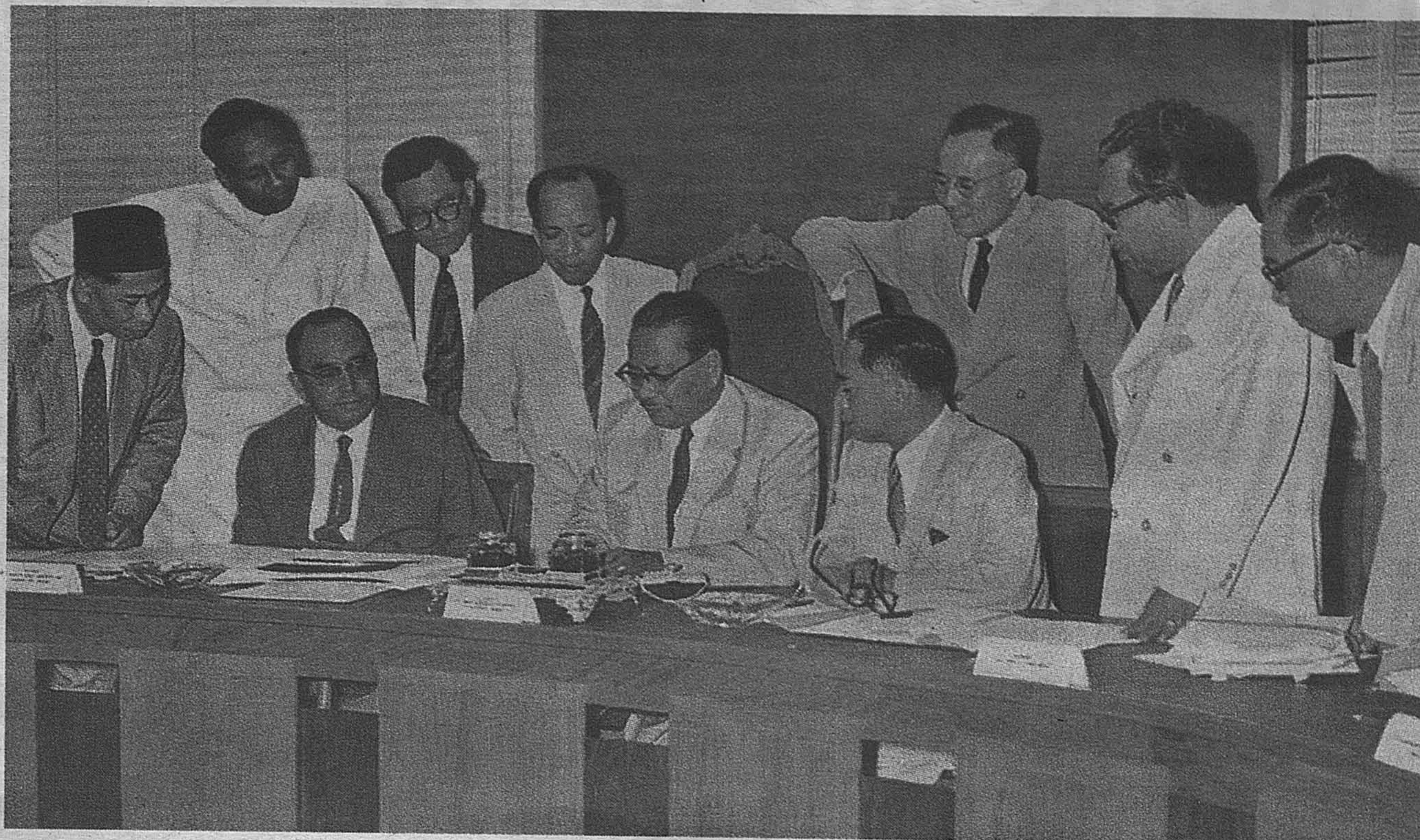
The photographer tried saying "cheese" but Tunku had a cheeky idea.

He "taught" the photographer a four-letter word, saying that it was the Malay equivalent of "cheese".

Each time she said this word, Tunku would smile broadly.

After the photographer had taken enough shots of Tunku, she left for her next assignment — at the Yang di-Pertuan Agong's Istana.

It was only after she left that Tunku realised she might use



Members of Tunku's cabinet at their first meeting on Sept 10, 1957. Seated on Tunku's right is Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence, Datuk Abdul Razak Hussein, and on his left is Col Sir Henry Lee, the Minister for Finance. Standing (from left) are Sardon Jubir (Works, Post and Telecommunications), V.T. Sambanthan (Health), Mohd Khir Johari (Education), Abdul Rahman Talib (Transport), Tan Siew Sin (Commerce and Industry), Sulaiman Abdul Rahman (Interior and Justice) and Bahaman Samsudin (Natural Resources). — *The Straits Times* picture

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that word at the Istana Negara.

Luckily, one of Tunku's aides managed to catch the photographer at the door of the Istana Negara.

Tun Abdul Razak, one of the more serious ministers in the Tunku's cabinet, was not spared either.

One day, Tunku hosted a dinner at the Residency for the Serranos, the Philippines Foreign Minister Felixberto and his wife. Razak and the other guests were also present at the dinner.

The Tunku asked Mrs Serrano to guess Razak's age and she replied that he was "probably 60 years old".

"Oh," Tunku said, "You are

paying him a great compliment." Mrs Serrano answered: "I was only being polite."

As Tunku explained, "at that time Razak was only 35, but his scowling, serious countenance and receding hair belied his age".

Tun Tan Siew Sin, the Finance Minister, told Tunku that he wanted to go abroad on a long vacation and asked who would be replacing him in his absence.

Tunku was reluctant to approve the leave, but did not want to appear inconsiderate either. So he replied: "I will take your place as Finance Minister."



A happy Tunku Abdul Rahman and a smiling V.T. Sambanthan, weaned out of his *veshti*, on arrival from London. — Picture from *Looking Back*