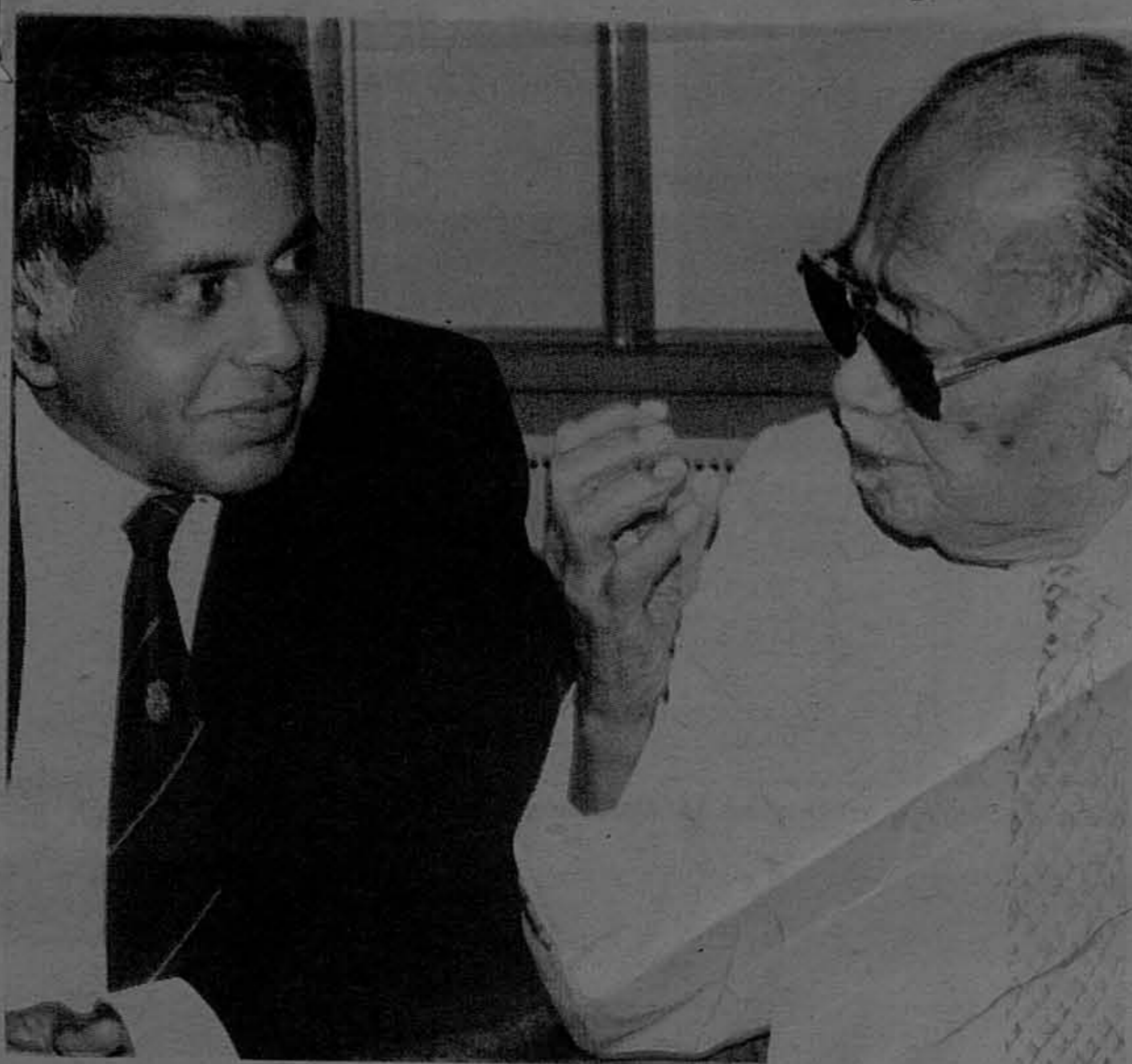


Integrity personified

The Star - 20/8/2007

Fundamental rights meant so much to Tunku that he helped set up the first human rights NGO.



Making a point: Tunku explaining his views on establishing a national human rights society to Param on Dec 10, 1988.

By DATUK PARAM CUMARASWAMY

TUNKU Abdul Rahman was a lawyer, a barrister-at-law from the Inner Temple. He never practised law. He was not all that interested in the law but he felt that some knowledge of law would be useful for his civil service career. It took him 25 years between the time he was admitted as student and finally passing his exams and getting called to the Bar. On his call night before the Benchers of the Inn, being the most senior student, he had to make the speech to mark the occasion of all those being called.

Usually it was a formal speech. Tunku broke traditions of the English Bar and made what observers considered a memorable and remarkable speech. He said, "Tonight is a unique occasion for the Inn, because it is the first time a student has been called after staying with it for 25 years. Tonight I not only celebrate my being called to the Bar, but also my silver jubilee as a student at this Inn."

The fundamentals and principles he learnt in law school became useful for his political career. He applied them in the structuring of the Federal Constitution and the administration of the nation as the first Prime Minister.

In proclaiming Malaya independent on Aug 31, 1957, Tunku declared it "shall be forever a sovereign democratic and independent State founded upon the principles of liberty and justice and ever seeking the welfare and happiness of the people and the maintenance of a just peace among all nations".

The nation was therefore structured on the principles of democracy, justice, fundamental rights and liberties of the people.

On fundamental rights, Tunku said Malaysians then were used to freedom of speech, movement, worship, assembly, and freedom from want and fear. While assuring the continuance of these freedoms he cautioned the need for some restrictions until the end of the emergency. He assured, however, that there would not be any abuse.

He valued the importance of an opposition in Parliament as one of the cornerstones of democracy. He showed great respect for D.R. Seenivasagam, the firebrand in the opposition then. He never interfered with the judiciary or resorted to constitutional amendments to suit his needs or that of his government.

Operation Lallang in 1987 and the Executive assault on the independence of the judiciary in 1988 were events which deeply hurt him.



Excerpt from
Prince Among Men
Published by Arkib Negara

He often called me on the telephone expressing his concern that we should do something about the deteriorating situation then. I was then Chairman of the Bar Council.

On Dec 10, 1988, at the seminar to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the NGO community in Malaysia with the support of Tunku, Tun Hussein Onn, Dr Tan Chee Khoo and Tan Sri Ahmad Nordin declared to form a National Human Rights Society to promote and defend human rights in Malaysia.

It was also decided to apply to have the society registered under the Societies Act. Tunku gladly agreed to be the pro-tem President.

When I received confirmation on Dec 6, 1990 that the society would be registered, the first human rights NGO to be registered in Malaysia, Tunku was seriously ill in Kuala Lumpur General Hospital. I rushed to his bedside to give him the good news. He was then in a coma. I kept whispering to his ear of the news hoping that he would respond. There was no response. That day Tunku passed away at 10.25pm.

He died a humble Prince but with noble virtues. What then was his legacy? INTEGRITY - a value so essential for dignified human development and national and institutional leadership.

Pursuit of materialism appears to have eclipsed integrity. We are today all the poorer for that.

Datuk Param Cumaraswamy was, until recently, Transparency International (Malaysia Chapter) president. He is a founder member of the Bar Council's human rights and legal aid committees.