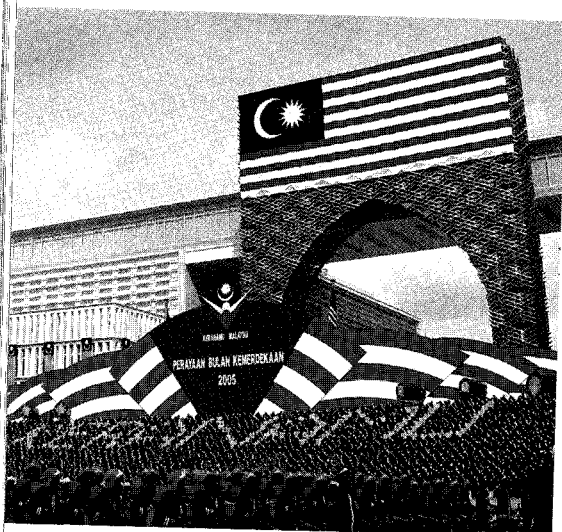


FIRST WORLD INFRASTRUCTURE, THIRD WORLD MENTALITY

Dr. Tarcisius Chin



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In true *Malaysia Boleh* style, Malaysians tend to go euphoric over our phenomenal economic growth and development since Merdeka. Yes, we have one of the world's tallest buildings, superhighways and fantastic shopping malls, all examples of first world infrastructure. But development is not to be measured only in physical terms but, more importantly, in a holistic sense. Without principles of foresight and sustainability and the courage to change for the better, we will always fall prey to the third world mentality of style over substance, of favouring quick fixes and easy solutions. Ultimately, we may fall short in our quest to become a developed nation.

A Bandage Culture

Too often, when we are caught in a crisis, our knee-jerk response is to apply a bandage. One of the most visible bandages is the national service scheme, which is the band-aid aimed at fostering racial integration.

True, national unity is a major concern, and racial integration has been articulated in Vision 2020 as the number one challenge of the country. But the time horizon for national service is three months and only selected candidates are given the opportunity.

Creating and sustaining national unity is a lifelong process, not a quick fix. The process should start from the cradle, not at 17 years of age. Our school system has much to blame for the current racial polarisation. Students are divided by race through kindergarten, primary and secondary schools. We should make deliberate

attempts to bridge the divide by creating opportunities for our young people to mix and interact continuously throughout their formative years. Ask any older Malaysian who has benefited from mission schools; they will tell you that among their closest friends in school were classmates and schoolmates from other ethnic groups. Sadly, over the last 30 years, our schools have made us build walls of difference rather than platforms of common purpose. Setting schools right would be the right prescription; national service is just another quick fix and a prime example of short-term thinking and third world mentality.

Another band-aid is the government's Human Resource Development Fund, which is a private sector-funded training scheme for jobless graduates. Isn't readying graduates for working life the province of universities? Unfortunately, local degree qualifications are irrelevant to the job market, resulting in some 40,000 unemployed graduates in the country. Just as school leavers require national service to fit in the melting pot of Malaysia, it would seem that university graduates are also not fully qualified for release into the real world, lacking fundamental skills including literacy in the English language, computer proficiency and the ability to communicate and interact with others.

The fault really lies with the low quality of our university education. In the past, University Malaya was listed as the top Malaysian university and was rated among the top dozen universities in the region. In recent years, University Malaya's position in the region has nosedived. Singaporean,

Hong Kong, Japanese and Australian universities continually hog the top spots. We don't lack facilities. Our universities are physically endowed with first world infrastructure, but where is the corresponding commitment to academic excellence? Is this not again an example of third world mentality?

Poor Maintenance

When I was living in Manila in 1978 as Visiting Professor of the Asian Institute of Management, I was appalled by the poor road conditions. My Filipino friends informed me that roads in the Philippines had a useful life of only one year, as the object was as much to create employment as to provide infrastructure. In my mind, this was twisted economic logic as poor roads increased transport costs, lessened productive time and hindered economic growth, which should be the real source of employment.

Fortunately, Malaysia's infrastructure is of first world standard. Roads and buildings are built to last. But regular maintenance has not been consistent. Just a few years after completion, signs of ageing, disrepair and neglect are very noticeable on our buildings, drains and parks. The issue of sustainability and peak conditioning of our infrastructure on a continuing basis is a critical weakness in the management of our assets. We are good at hardware, but deficient on software. We try to grow our assets, but take less effort to protect what we already possess. Are we not sacrificing long-term benefits in favour of short-term gains? Isn't this policy a perfect example of third world mentality?

Creating a Civil Society

Vision 2020 is an example of first world thinking. It is a robust vision of what we want the nation to be by the year 2020. It spells out our economic expectations as well as the society we desire. We want to be economically developed, yet united, secure, progressive, tolerant, caring and morally good. And most of us in Malaysia are aware that there is such a vision and subscribe to it.

What falls desperately short is execution. It is now 13 years since Vision 2020 was first unveiled. While economic achievements are being tightly monitored and backed by impressive statistics, the same vigorous attention is not given to social

indicators. In many respects, we have regressed when it comes to building a peaceful, progressive and crime-free society. Instead, we have come to resemble other third world countries and ghettos in developed metropolises where crime is rampant and social crises like murder and the abuse of foreign workers hog the headlines.

The root cause of our social dilemma is the lack of a civil society where there is respect for law and order, and in which we treat others as we wish others would treat us. Three interrelated contributing forces in the formation of a civil society are upbringing, education and religion. Proper nurturing in the home, holistic education at school and spiritual awakening help shape us to be good and responsible members of society. Any attempt to revitalise our society should seek answers in these root causes rather than apply knee-jerk responses to current social crimes. It is not by demonstrating public whipping to school children, but by the tedious and painstaking process of inculcating universal values and good behaviour that will help develop our young to be good people.

The way forward, above all, is to have architects as well as drivers for our social vision who possess a first world mentality. With long-term foresight and courage to act for a better Malaysia, the key players must reach out to transform our troubled society into one that is already so well described in Vision 2020. In the process, our young people will also develop into leaders who will give priority to prevention rather than cure, focus on the sustainability rather than the short-term value of our scarce resources, and safeguard the dignity and rights of others. ■

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