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HOW many times did Tunku Abdul Rahman shout “merdeka” at the historic moment on Aug 31, 1957, to declare Malaya’s independence from Britain?

No, this is not a trick question. It’s actually what a young woman said she had to answer in her SPM history paper. And that was the only question she had to answer about the nation’s first prime minister.

She shared this at an event held at Menara Star on Saturday to announce the Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra al-Haj Cambridge Scholarship.

Never heard of it? Well, neither had I before the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (Ideas) asked the Star Media Group to provide the venue for the occasion. Not even our Education Editor was aware of the scholarship.

Perhaps it’s understandable. After all, this scholarship is open to outstanding Malaysians from any discipline to do their Masters or PhDs in the humanities and social sciences at St Catharine’s College in Cambridge University. These disciplines are not exactly popular or highly regarded in our society.

The scholarship is under the Tunku Abdul Rahman Fund that was set up in 2003 by the Government to commemorate the 100th anniversary of his birthday.

Tunku was an alumnus of St Catharine’s where he received his degrees in history and law. The fund is administered by the college and after 13 years, it is still very healthy at £4mil (RM22mil).

It is a generous scholarship as it fully funds the successful recipient for three years covering college/university and maintenance fees.

Let’s hear it for Tunku

After retiring, our first prime minister found his voice through his column in *The Star*. He needs a new voice now. Who will speak for him?

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Since its inception, it has benefited many deserving world-class Malaysian post-graduate students.

But this was still not good enough for the university. It felt more awareness of the scholarship was needed and it dispatched a team led by its director of studies, Dr Peter Wothers, to Malaysia to publicise it.

It contacted Ideas, the organisation set up by Tunku Abidin Muhriz and colleagues, who were inspired by the country’s founding father’s vision and principles.

After the relaunch of the scholarship by Deputy Higher Education Minister Datuk Mary Yap in the presence of Tunku Abidin and British High Commissioner to Malaysia, Vicki Treadell, it was during the Q&A that the young woman shared her anecdote about the question on Tunku Abdul Rahman in her history exam.

She reinforced what many of us felt: our first prime minister has become so diminished that something needs to be done to bring his vision and all he stood for back into the public sphere.

Indeed, this was what Tunku feared and fought against, using his column in *The Star*. It was, he wrote on Aug 2, 1976, a platform from which he could “defend myself

against enemies who work relentlessly to obliterate my name from the pages of Malaysian history.”

That brings me to the reason why Ideas approached *The Star*: the long and close association the newspaper had with Tunku.

The Ideas people were aware of Tunku as a *Star* columnist but what they didn’t know was that he was also a long-serving chairman of the company who played a crucial role in its survival during its early years.

In fact, that was how he got the column. It was a sweetener to the offer of the chairmanship in 1974.

During the course of the event, it suddenly struck me that I was possibly the only one in the room who had met Tunku in person.

As a young reporter in the 1980s, I was occasionally sent to interview him at his Kuala Lumpur home in Bukit Tunku. Once I had to wait as he was busying dictating his column to his long-time secretary.

Stupidly, I didn’t realise how privileged I was. In my naivete, Tunku was like part of the *Star* establishment. I also underestimated that privilege because he was so affable and down-to-earth; there was no protocol to follow in meeting him. He was just like everyone’s favourite kindly old uncle.

Two things I remember are his warm smile and his long fingers. Unfortunately, I don’t remember what we talked about.

What is fortunate, as I said at the event, is we do know quite a lot of his thoughts and views on many issues as well the nation’s history as he lived it, thanks to his column.

This is especially important in light of what an Ideas researcher found; or rather could not find: many of Tunku’s official speeches from 1960 to 1970 when he was prime minister are lost. As a former prime minister and elder statesman, he could frankly comment on many issues others could not.

The Star’s circulation and reputation rose in part due to Tunku’s writings. Older readers will remember there was a popular belief that *The Star* stood for Suara Tunku Abdul Rahman, or the Voice of Tunku Abdul Rahman.

Tunku has been hailed as a classic liberal. Liberalism in political philosophy is about subscribing to the rule of law, limited government, a free market and individual liberty.

But to be a liberal in this country is now something objectionable; as if it holds the same meaning as being a libertine.

I’ll reiterate what I said on

Saturday: Liberalism, together with pluralism and even the Federal Constitution, are under attack by extremist and ultra-conservative groups. So now more than ever our country needs to remember Tunku and all that he stood for.

If once there were forces who relentlessly tried to obliterate Tunku from the history books, it is now up to Malaysians who believe in the same things he did – liberty, justice and equality – to relentlessly fight to keep his legacy whole and relevant and not reduced to how many times he shouted out “merdeka!”

What *The Star* did over 40 years ago was to give Tunku, a voice to speak to the people again and his was a voice of reason, fair play, accommodation and moderation.

If we agree with him that this is how best to govern and live in peace and prosperity in our nation, then we must be Tunku’s new voice. And to speak even louder and stronger against those who seem bent on breaking apart our secular, multiracial nation and replacing it with something else that is intolerant, brutal and regressive.

As Tunku said his book, *Political Awakening*, “All talk on Islamic States is just an empty dream. No man in his right sense would accept a nation which bases its political administration on religion, and in a country like Malaysia with its multiracial and multireligious people, there is no room for an Islamic State.”

Aunty regrets she never took a photo with Tunku as it wasn’t the done thing in the time before the selfie. Feedback to aunty@thestar.com.my