

**Freedom of information culture: How I wish
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By R. Nadeswaran**

THIS is my last column from London as my tenure as *theSun's* first (and probably not last) UK correspondent comes to an end. Although short, it has been a stupendous stint for a variety of reasons. A new experience in a foreign land and working in unfamiliar surroundings is always a challenge, but a more media-friendly society outweighs everything else and makes plying the trade here much easier. No obstacles to cross, no hurdles to jump, no pitfalls to avoid and there's always room for straight-talking journalism.

Many new friends and contacts were made in the course of work; a few treated me as the "enemy" because I became aware of their wayward operations, others were helpful in terms of providing background information on issues I was not familiar with; publicans loaded me with bits and pieces of gossip and useful tips on football; and local scribes gave their regular dose on the local political scene.

Above all, I learnt to work with a new "culture" called freedom of information, for which every British journalist worth his salt would be grateful to the politicians who pushed for greater transparency and accountability in not only managing funds, but also the system of government.

Also worth noting is the clear distinction drawn between civil servants and their political masters; and the disagreements, however trivial, are not discreet either. Whitehall officials are willing to stand their ground on principles and often, ministers are left flat-footed as the "you make the policies, we implement them" is exercised to the hilt.

There is no interference in the system or issuance of *surat sokong* (letters of support) for tenders. Even the slightest hint of impropriety leads to resignations as in the case of defence secretary Liam Fox. He resigned after a week of pressure over his working relationship with friend and self-styled adviser Adam Werritty. Fox was investigated amid claims he broke the ministerial code. In a letter to Prime Minister David Cameron, he said he had "mistakenly allowed" personal and professional responsibilities to be "blurred". How I wish we had such a culture in Malaysia!

Through the Freedom of Information Act, nothing is more sacrosanct than the truth. Facts and figures, however embarrassing to the government or the opposition, were open to scrutiny.

There were no forms to fill and no fees to pay. Any information deemed not "security-sensitive" was dispensed within days. Material on even what prison inmates eat can be obtained and every penny is accounted for. And for good measure, there's also a list in the public domain of "individuals, now deceased, who were refused honours (titles) between 1951 and 1999".

That's what *theSun* and this writer in particular have been campaigning for over a long period – accountability and transparency in the use of taxpayers' money and openness.

It's not exactly returning to the grind in Malaysia as I have been in touch with the happenings and events that have taken place over the past 16 months. It will be good to once again keep a ear close to the ground with eyes wide open for more stories to write and more scandals to expose. It's good to be back.

R. Nadeswaran has ended his stint in London and returns to theSun to continue where he left off. He is still reachable at: citizen-nades@thesundaily.com

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