

**'Najib's 1Malaysia is the only way to go'**  
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WITNESS TO HISTORY: Datuk Douglas Lee, who saw the fathers of the nation walk towards independence, reminisces about his brief, but robust involvement with the early MCA, a father who was larger-than-life and the personal moments etched in his memory. Balan Moses writes

HE was sacked twice from MCA by party president, Tun Tan Siew Sin, the Cambridge-educated and English-speaking lawyer, who did not sit well with the politics of the half-Englishman who spoke fluent Chinese.

However, Datuk Douglas Lee Kim Kiu, backed by his father, who was also one of Malaysia's most illustrious sons, Col Tun Sir Henry Lee Hau Shik, dug in to remain in the nascent MCA, which the elder Lee had co-founded in 1949.

That Hau Shik was joined in the party's formation by stalwarts like Dr Lim Chong Eu (later Tun and Penang chief minister) and Leong Yew Koh (later Tun and Malacca governor) was testimony to his political status.

"I was a pain in the neck for Siew Sin and his father, Tun Sir Tan Cheng Lock (also a former MCA president), but I did not waver," the 89-year-old (he turns 90 on Dec 4) says of the epic feuds that he and his father, better known as Tun H.S. Lee, had with the Tans, "who could not speak Chinese while we were both Chinese-educated".

The Lees, who come from a pedigree of Mandarins weaned on service to the emperor of the day and schooled in the finer graces of court and scholarly behaviour, had an initial edge over the Tans because of their close links with China and the Chinese community here.

But over time, Siew Sin, a Straits Chinese with astute political acumen, drew politically ahead of Hau Shik, who eschewed elected office and preferred the life of a successful businessman (his firm, H.S. Lee and Sons, is going through voluntary liquidation), with a commanding hand in Chinese affairs.

It was not that Hau Shik, who was the only Chinese signatory to the Malayan independence agreement in London, was lesser in social status, having been the scion of a tycoon with a vast business empire, besides having studied with the likes of King George VI at Cambridge University.

To be sure, the eccentric Hau Shik (his children's Chinese names represent the places they were born in) did not contribute much to his own political life.

He "was aloof, rigid, not well-liked and called a spade, a spade", which was in direct contrast with Douglas, who is congeniality personified.

It all boiled down to who had the support of the Malayan Chinese community and although the Lees initially held the winning cards, history records that the Tans eventually won in the game of politics.

Nevertheless, the victory was not before Douglas (Kim Kiu means "Cambridge" in Chinese) made his mark on the party as the youngest candidate in the first-ever elections in Malayan history in 1952. He won in the Imbi ward.

Later, he was Salak state assemblyman twice and MCA Youth secretary-general.

Still, that was that for the man who could not find a place for himself in MCA politics (he later joined Gerakan for an uneventful time as an ordinary member) and "bowed out of politics to become a gentleman".

As for Hau Shik, who had started life by helping his father, Kwai Lim, run a silk trading firm called Kam Lun Tai or "beautiful silk shop", Alliance leader Tunku Abdul Rahman made him the first transport minister in 1955 and afterwards, the first finance minister in the newly independent Malaya.

Douglas remembers eavesdropping as Tunku, Hau Shik and Tun Abdul Razak, among others, sat around a teak table at 22, Golfview Road (now Jalan Langgak Golf) in Kuala Lumpur, to plan their political strategies for Malaya.

The table is now at the home of his eldest son, Michael.

"Right from the beginning, I joined the right party (MCA). I still support MCA, but not the personalities in it."

He says this with a forthrightness representative of the mettle that saw him through the difficult days of Malayan politics in the 1950s that mirrored divergent nationalistic and communal sentiments.

Douglas needs only a split second to hark back in time to the heady days when the first seeds of Sino-Malay political cooperation were sown.

The last living candidate from the epochal election that heralded the formation of the Alliance party (and later, Barisan Nasional) and a life-long advocate of multiracial politics, Douglas supports the 1Malaysia concept propounded by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak.

(MIC came only into the picture in 1955 as the third partner in the Alliance, after having unsuccessfully thrown its lot earlier with the independence party of Malaya, which was led by charismatic leader, Dato Onn Jaafar.)

"This (the 1Malaysia concept) is the only way to go.

"I was born in Cambridge, England, raised in Zhenlong, China, and came to live in Malaya.

"But I am a Malaysian through and through.

"We are one country, one people," he says with conviction, almost daring anyone to disagree with him.

I am sitting in Douglas' office, shared occasionally by Michael, 64, at Wisma Central, one of the last vestiges of the Kuala Lumpur of the 1970s, with its quaint old-world ambience that has withstood the test of time.

Douglas, who used to look like one of the American actors in the 1940s, with his ramrod straight back, wavy salt-and-pepper hair, chiselled good looks and brilliant smile, is speaking to me about his nine decades of life through a haze of cigarette smoke.

Michael, who contributes to the pall hanging over us, is sitting in on the interview, which eventually stretches over two days.

He says he is here "to jog Dad's memory".

Douglas darts, instead of walks, to the washroom several times during the three-hour interview.

He is in amazingly good health, with a memory that would put people half his age to shame.

"I am one of those people who have never suffered ill health because I practise moderation in everything," says the life-long Lion and name held in awe by members of the Malaysian and Kuala Lumpur Kwang Tung Associations. He has smoked for 75 years and says his only exercise is feeding the koi in his pond at home.

Douglas' mother, Dawn Kathleen Glen, studied with his father at Cambridge University.

She fell afoul of her mother-in-law, Kam Kwok-Chun, who was a powerhouse of a matriarch who ran her husband's business empire in China with an iron fist and on two bound feet.

The resultant clash of cultures saw Dawn, who smoked and drove sport cars ("mother was very English"), leaving for home for good.

She took Vivien Leslie, her second son, with her.

Douglas remained with his father in Hong Kong.

Hau Shik eventually remarried, tying the knot with Kwan Choi Lin ("I actually introduced my stepmother to my father").

She bore him seven children, including former deputy minister from Gerakan, Datuk Alex Lee.

There is a profound sadness that I see in the recesses of Douglas' eyes when he talks about the mother he never knew ("I do not even remember her") and the younger brother he only met as an old man for four days on a visit to London.

That trip was 15 years ago.

"I spent all my life trying to find my mother.

"Eventually, I went to see her at her last known address at 42, Clareton Street, London.

"I found that the area had become a park."

He says this with the characteristic chuckle that signifies his acceptance of the vagaries of life.

Douglas also terribly misses his late wife and former Malaysian Red Crescent secretary-general, Datin Paduka Ruby Ong Chian Kim (nee Lee).

They had met in India, where both families took refuge during World War 2.

Douglas says that their parents did not like each other.

However, he is not one to be fazed by anything.

His zest for life ("I look forward to my beer and nasi goreng with fried egg on top for lunch") is never unsettled by what life has thrown his way over the years.

I leave Kim Kiu Holdings with a sense of having lived vicariously through Malaysian politics in what was probably its finest hour.

A story, par excellence, told with verve and vim, by a man who saw it unfold.

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