

[Full Text] Tun Razak and the Oxford Blavatnik School of Government

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By Sultan Nazrin Shah

THE following is the inauguration address by the Sultan of Perak, Sultan Nazrin Shah, the Deputy King of Malaysia at the official naming ceremony of the Blavatnik School of Government's Tun Razak Lecture Theatre at University of Oxford, United Kingdom.

Vice-Chancellor, Dean of the Blavatnik School, heads of house, ladies and gentlemen:

1. I want to begin by saying how delighted I am to be back here in Oxford. I would like to thank especially the Dean, Professor Ngaire Woods, for inviting me to the official naming of the Tun Razak Lecture Theatre. Having spent several years at Worcester College, just a few moments down the road, I must say how thrilling it always is to see the new, exciting developments that this great and ancient university has to offer, and the Blavatnik School of Government (BSG) is no exception.

The award-winning building in which we are gathered today is truly an inspirational addition to a city already boasting so much iconic architecture. In its very structure – its circular shape and stunning rows of glass panels – it embodies the values of openness, transparency, communication and collaboration, values our world is in very great need of today. This is truly a building designed to inspire change.

2. As such, the commemoration of one of Malaysia's Founding Fathers within these walls could hardly be more fitting. With his passion for good governance and deep concern for the well-being of the disadvantaged, Tun Razak would undoubtedly have felt at home here at the BSG.

There is so much that chimes between the BSG's stated vision of 'a world better led, a world better served and a world better governed', and Tun Razak's own vision for his country; and within this lecture theatre, that same vision will no doubt be instilled in the minds and hearts of many generations of leaders to come.

3. Tun Abdul Razak Hussein was born in a small village on the east coast of British-ruled Malaya in 1922, a world far removed from the hallowed halls and dreaming spires of Oxford. At the age of 12 he attended the Malay College at Kuala Kangsar — often referred to as the 'Eton of the East'. Founded in 1905, the College's aim was to produce a pool of local administrative talent to support the senior echelons of the Malayan Civil Service.

It is said that the old boys of the College played cricket and could quote Shakespeare 'with an impeccable English accent'! In 1940, after graduating from the Malay College and working for a while in the Malay Administrative Service, he went to the Raffles College in Singapore. This was one of only two colleges of higher education in the Malay peninsula at the time, the other being the King Edward VII College of Medicine.

4. His studies were interrupted by the Japanese occupation of Malaya in December 1941. At the end of the occupation in 1945, he returned to the Malay Administrative Service, through which he obtained a scholarship to study law in London, graduating in 1950 as a barrister from Lincoln's Inn.

Ever passionate about politics, he became a member of the British Labour Party during his time at Lincoln's Inn, as well as a prominent student leader of the

Malay Association of Great Britain. It was while in London that he became friends with Tunku Abdul Rahman, who would later become the first Prime Minister of a newly independent Malaya.

5. Upon his return to Malaya, Tun Razak joined UMNO and served as its deputy president. In 1955, he became Education Minister. In this role, he drafted the Razak Report, a document which formed the basis of the Malayan education system: indeed, it seems especially fitting that a lecture theatre – a hall of learning – should be named in memory of a man who had such foundational impact upon the education of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of Malaysians.

In the 1960s, Tun Razak also oversaw the formation of MARA, the Majlis Amanah Rakyat, which championed economic empowerment through education and entrepreneurship. During his tenure, moreover, some specialized schools and colleges in the country were converted into higher education institutions and eventually universities, with specialisms including agriculture, science and technology – yet another major step forward for knowledge and learning in Malaysia.

6. Tun Razak played a crucial role in negotiations with the British for Malayan independence as a member of the London Constitutional Conference held in January 1956, which drafted the terms of reference for an independent constitutional commission – the Reid Commission. It is worth noting that members of this Commission were products of Oxbridge, this great University and the other University.

The Commission's recommendations paved the way for a self-governing and independent Federation of Malaya. Tunku Abdul Rahman appointed Tun Razak as the country's first Deputy Prime Minister in August 1957 – a position he held for more the 13 years.

7. In the 1950s, when the country was facing a communist insurgency, Tun Razak, as Minister of National and Rural Development, responded to the hardships faced by the rural population by establishing programmes and institutions to alleviate poverty. Foremost among these was FELDA, a scheme to resettle the landless poor in newly developed estates, with the eventual goal of possessing their own smallholdings.

8. His view of development was that it should not focus entirely on material gains, but also, and I quote from his words in 1963:

...on the human, cultural, and religious aspects of our lives, so that we can build up a Malaysia which is not only economically stable, but which is also a nation of people who are happy within themselves, self-reliant, and secure within their own sincerity of purpose.

This was a belief that Tun Razak put into practice repeatedly, in rural development programmes that I have just mentioned, as well as in many other aspects of his policy and leadership.

9. History has given us many examples of people in authority who do not allow young talent to emerge, for fear of being overshadowed or having their power bases eroded. But not Tun Razak. Having been thrust into such critical nation-building roles very early in his career, he understood the vital importance of nurturing new talent and investing in the young. During the 1960s and 70s, many young men and women were drafted into the higher echelons of the political and administrative establishments who went on to play crucial roles in the development of the country.

10. Tun Razak's greatest challenge came after the race riots in May 1969, following which a state of Emergency was declared. Parliament was suspended, and a National Operations Council set up to maintain law and order, and reduce

ethnic tensions. It is Abraham Lincoln who is reputed to have said, 'nearly all men can stand adversity; but if you want to test a man's character, give him power'.

As director of this Council, Tun Razak was given power – absolute power. But his worldview and values were built upon a foundation of democratic rule, not dictatorship. He believed that unless power was restored to the people through Parliament, the struggles for independence and against communism would have been in vain.

11. And so, in January 1970, he established a National Consultative Council to explore ways to promote racial harmony. By September of that year, he succeeded Tunku Abdul Rahman as the country's Prime Minister, and within five months Parliament was in fact reconvened.

12. Tun Razak introduced two major and enduring initiatives to help achieve a plural society characterized both by socioeconomic fairness and by the ethic of 'unity within diversity'. First, in 1970, he put in place Rukunegara — the national value system that the country still uses today. Second, in 1971, he launched the New Economic Policy (NEP), perhaps the programme for which he will be most remembered. It aimed to reduce ethnic, social, economic and regional inequalities through affirmative action.

Indeed, the NEP has rightly been credited with restructuring Malaysian society, ending extreme poverty, and providing Malays and other disadvantaged groups with opportunities for higher education, modern-sector jobs, and upward mobility.

13. Among his foreign policy initiatives, he championed Malaysia's concept of working for a neutral Southeast Asia, a concept that in 1971 was endorsed by 53 non-aligned countries at the United Nations General Assembly.

14. Henry Kissinger described a statesman's duty as bridging "the gap between his nation's experience and his vision". Tun Razak bridged that gap seamlessly. In his cultivation of new talent, in his promotion of education, in the practical steps he implemented to reduce poverty, in his commitment to democracy and the rule of law, he transformed his vision into a reality for Malaysia's future. But good leadership is not just about vision – or even vision turned into action. There are also vital moral qualities that the greatest leaders must possess, and Tun Razak demonstrated these in abundance.

15. He was utterly dedicated to integrity and honesty in public office, and shunned all manner of corruption. He was obsessed, for example, with ensuring that not a penny of government funding was used to pay for his personal needs. Indeed, he is famously remembered for admonishing his officers for mistakenly putting a tube of toothpaste on the government tab while on an official trip abroad!

16. He only ever appointed qualified and competent administrators and technocrats, emphasizing to them that they should always feel able to speak truth to power and be honest with their superiors, without fear of reprisals. As he stated in an address to the civil service:

As civil servants, I hope you will stand up to us politicians, and not allow yourselves to be dominated by us. Because in a true democracy, the civil servants have a duty to perform. The future of our country's democratic way of life is dependent on you.

With these words, he empowered the civil servants to steadfastly implement policies for the nation's benefit, and to refuse to bow to the whims of wayward politicians. Again and again, he proved himself to be the best kind of leader, the kind that calls for their power to be scrutinized and checked, while at the same time using that power to the very best of ends.

17. Tun Razak passed away while still in office, in January 1976. His was a life dedicated to his country: a life guided by – in the words of his youngest son, Nazir – ‘what now seems a somewhat quaint and old-fashioned concept of public service – that a public servant is first and foremost a servant of the people whose trust must never be betrayed.’ Four decades later, older Malaysians of all communities still affectionately remember him for his sense of duty, his dedication, earning him the sobriquet Bapa Pembangunan, the Father of Malaysia’s Development.

Vice-Chancellor, Dean, ladies and gentlemen:

18. I have said much today about looking to the future: about cultivating fresh talent, about new buildings in ancient skylines, about making bold visions a reality. In ending, however, I would like to pause over something that might seem to hail from a bygone era. Because this perhaps ‘quaint and old-fashioned’ concept of public service – that of Sir Humphrey Appleby’s Yes Minister – is, I believe, one that our world is in great need of today. Almost every day in the news, we hear stories of corruption, of abuses of power, of leaders who put self above country.

19. I find it most heartening, then, to observe that the notion of public service is instilled in the core values of the BSG, in its vision of a world better led, better served, and better governed. Tun Razak would undoubtedly have approved! In its seven short years of existence, the Blavatnik School of Government has already educated and inspired numerous individuals now in leadership roles across the globe.

It is my sincere hope that the achievements and ideals of that extraordinary man, Tun Razak – now commemorated in the name of this lecture theatre – will serve to inspire all those who are yet to pass through this prestigious institution, to become the leaders, the visionaries and the public servants of tomorrow.

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