

# When patriotism isn't first instinct

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IT'S that time of the year, with Merdeka Day just a few weeks away, when we are supposed to be wearing our patriotism on our sleeves.

The most common form of patriotic display is of course flying the *Jalur Gemilang* — the bigger the better.

Many do so, one would like to believe, because of their sense of patriotism. Cars and buildings will soon be decked red, white, blue and yellow.

Others, swept by the momentum, will be flying flags, since it would be odd if they didn't when everyone else did. It's like a standing ovation; if everyone stands and applauds, you are likely to look like a jerk if you remain seated checking your fingernails.

And now, we may have another category — people or organisations that could be shamed and compelled to hoist the flag by the Government, if the Culture, Arts and Heritage Ministry has its way.

Apparently, patriotism police may be going around checking to see if we are flag-compliant. And if we aren't, we may be ticked off. Minister Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim said that individuals or companies could get a visit soon if they fail to fly the flag during this Merdeka month.

"We're not saying they are unpatriotic. Rather they take things for granted. It would be embarrassing if an officer knocked on their door and asked them why they were not flying the flag. The same goes for owners of large properties and prosperous companies," Rais was quoted last week by newspapers.

Flying the flag is, of course, the preferred course of action this August, but there is something else to be said about compelling people to do so, no



A moment from the first Merdeka celebrations shows the Yang di-Pertuan Agong and his consort, and the country's first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman and his wife seeing off the Duke and Duchess of Gloucester at the airport. The Duke represented Queen Elizabeth II at the Proclamation of Independence on Aug 31, 1957. — NST file picture

matter how noble the intention.

I believe that compelling people to be happy, sad, proud, in love, hateful, patriotic, etc, is a rather meaningless exercise, since the outcome is often skin-deep. Feelings are instinctive, nurtured by our experiences, conditioned by our surroundings and driven to drivel by the chemicals in our bodies.

But since we are talking about patriotism and the need to instil patriotism, permit me to share a preliminary finding of a *New Straits Times* study

with a group of largely urban young people, from teenagers to college students, of various races on what Merdeka means to them.

Though unscientific and anecdotal, the findings suggest there is more that needs to be done than just getting people to fly the flag.

Much like our religious celebrations that have been hijacked to promote conspicuous consumption rather than the spiritually enlightening occasions that they are, Merdeka Day has been stripped of its political, nationalistic and pa-

triotic fervour.

What we have, instead, according to the young people interviewed, is a day off from work or school, to wake up late, crawl the malls, and watch the parade on TV.

Born in the 1980s, and having grown up in the most prosperous period in the country's history, most of these Generation Ys admit that they cannot really appreciate Merdeka. They also cannot relate to the struggle for independence, as it was well before their time.

And, not surprisingly, they said they took the freedom of

the country for granted.

From the group interviewed, only a few, and they included college students, instinctively put Merdeka and founding father Tunku Abdul Rahman in the same context.

And thus, I am willing to wager a small sum that quite a number of those in this age group would not be able to say how many times we have celebrated Merdeka.

Their understanding of Merdeka, freedom, independence, is largely coloured by history books — the fact being we are no longer colonised. On

a personal level, Merdeka means that they can do whatever they want, within reason of course.

There is something else for Rais to chew on: Most of those interviewed felt no tugging of heartstrings singing *Negara Ku*. Some said it was boring and the tempo, perhaps in the highly-charged pop environment of the day, was a tad too slow. Some even suggested, since we were dealing with urban kids here, that the lyrics be changed to English.

Many do not remember the last time they sang *Negara Ku* with the passion and conviction befitting a national anthem, and some may, they added, never will.

Many of the students said they could not understand what patriotism was about, how it should feel like, and why they should be patriotic.

They love Malaysia but there is nothing about these facts that would make them feel patriotic.

They also did not have any idea how the Government could instil patriotism in them.

Nonetheless, their loyalty should not be in doubt, for apart from the few who said they would flee at the first sign of trouble, most said they would stay and defend the country in any way they could, should we be at war.

They believe they are the future of the country, and that they are the key to maintaining national unity.

But they do not really know how to go about doing it, and feel that they needed guidance from their parents or teachers or leaders and the Government.

This is a tall order, since many of their elders are already naturally bent on their divisive ways.