

Doing Away with Empty Rhetoric

From the brouhaha over gated communities to lavish government office renovations, it would seem that our politicians have nothing much of substance to say and do at times.

LIVING in the land of peace and plenty gives us an opportunity to think, say and do many things that, to less fortunate souls, are luxuries. And since we have so much time to do so, we sometimes think, say and do things that are not exactly productive.

Very often, we say something without thinking or without thinking hard enough. Even when we put some serious thought into what we say, we do not always carry it out. We have become synonymous with *cakap tak serupa bikin*.

So, when some politicians recently complained about gated properties, saying they are akin to apartheid, my gut reaction was to laugh it off. We say and do many funny things in the name of good governance, transparency and accountability.

Why should politicians as high up as ministers suddenly pounce on the subject? My best guess is that they have nothing better to do. As the saying goes, 'an idle mind is the devil's playground'.

So, the devils must be playing tricks on the idle minds of some politicians – many of whom I believe live in gated properties or are guarded by policemen and fierce dogs.

Still, I prefer having idle politicians making senseless statements than quietly renovating and enlarging their offices at the expense of taxpayers' money.

This is no joke. The Treasury must make

sure that ministers and other top officials do not lavishly spend taxpayers' money on office renovations simply because they have been assigned to a new ministry or department.

It is no secret that some people have the habit of treating their offices as private domains that must reflect their tastes, not to mention their inflated egos. Yet, we all know that ministers and top officials are provided with 'standard' offices. Thus, one minister moving from one ministry to another will be occupying about the same room as his or her previous ones.

And since the new administration has declared its dedication to good governance, which understandably includes transparency and accountability, it is imperative that ministers and top officers lead the way.

Similarly, it is incumbent upon the Anti-Corruption Agency, the Auditor-General's office and the Parliamentary Account Committee to take a closer look at the expenditure of ministers and top officials. This is especially so with the enlargement of the Cabinet and the creation of new ministries recently, which has led to the need to build new offices for ministers and their accompanying civil servants.

With the government budget in the red, ministers should lead the drive towards austerity. This is the basis of leadership by example. After all, as we have been so often

told, fish rots from the head and seldom from the tail.

LONG LIVE THE GOOD OLD DAYS ...

AS for the debate on the good and evil of living in gated communities, my thoughts have been provoked not by the infantile nature of the complaint, but by my own experience of living in many different surroundings.

I think we should learn and, whenever possible, enjoy our surroundings instead of being concerned with names and brands.

I was born in a timber house on the bank of the Pendang River, a tributary of the Kedah River, in 1947. My father and mother have always been padi farmers. Even in their old age, they enjoy farming.

When I started to remember things, the first thing I remembered was how our lives were so closely intertwined with the ebb and flow of the river. The river that brought death and destruction during the rainy season also brought glad tidings and happiness. Its annual floods enriched the soil, brought fish into the padi fields, attracted flocks of migratory birds and, more importantly, bound us together in our sorrow and happiness.

When a laterite road was constructed a distance away from the river, our family moved there. Regardless of whether we had our house by the river or the new laterite road, the principal reason was the same: ease of transportation. From the *sampan* and the motorboats, we graduated to the motorcars and buses.

Similarly, our Chinese neighbours, who were sundry shop operators, vendors, boat rowers and padi farmers, moved from the river to the road to build a new township that is now known as Tanah Merah.

Those were simpler times when the Malay villagers thought nothing of allowing their Chinese neighbours to rear pigs on their land. They even exchanged wild yam, tapioca and banana trunks for sugar and coffee, knowing the former would be fed to the pigs.

Life was blissful, to say the least. We referred Ah Ean as *Cina* (Chinese), Karrupiah as *Keling* (Indian) and Ahin as *Siam* (Siamese). Nobody told us that *Keling* was offensive. We even had our own *gendang keling* band that accompanied wedding ceremonies and other village festivities.

The more educated of the villagers knew that the term *Keling* was derived from the ancient Hindu empire in India called Kalinga.

FROM KAMPUNG PANDAN TO MIDDLE EARTH

FROM the rural kampung, I moved to an urban village – Kampung Pandan. It then comprised old Malay houses, a cluster of *Rumah Rida* and several large colonies of squatter huts. The *Rumah Rida* was so named because they were built by the Rural Industries Development Authority (Rida), the forerunner of today's Mara.

That was in June 1969 and parts of the city were yet to recover from the race riots less than a month before.

Living in a squatter hut by the side of an abandoned mining pool, I started my city life as a cub reporter for the National News Agency, Bernama. As with all greenhorns, my regular assignments took me to the High Street (now Jalan Bandar) police station, the fire brigade and the mortuary of the General Hospital (now K L Hospital).

Weeks after the May 13 race riots, Malays, Chinese and Indians were still dying in isolated clashes. When I visited the mortuary, I realised that regardless of whether the distraught next-of-kin were Malay, Chinese or Indian, they all cried the same tears. In fact, they hugged each other for comfort when hours earlier their husbands and sons were dueling each other to death in the name of *bangsa*.

From Kampung Pandan, I moved into a rented room in Jalan Puchong. It was a mixed area but dominated by the Chinese. I sought comfort in the fact that the police station was nearby and a friend, who was a police probationary inspector, lived down the road.

After three months in Kuala Lumpur, I was transferred to Penang. Sharing a room in a cheap hotel in Jalan Petani with a fellow reporter, our neighbours were a noisy young Chinese couple, two burly Punjabis, a Malay cabaret dancer and her son and an

assortment of other transients.

We were then less inclined to judge others. So, we had no problems living next door to the Chinese couple, who tended to be a bit noisy during their amorous moments. Or the Malay night club hostess who frequently received visitors. Her young son would visit us when he was alone or when his mother was busy with visitors.

A few months later, when I was transferred to Alor Star, I landed on the lap of luxury. The semi-detached house in Telok Wan Jah doubled up as my office. But living among Malays, mostly civil servants, one had to be acutely aware of their sensitivities, which was quite an effort when you were in your early twenties and most of the time restless.

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Then, for the entire year of 1971, I bumped around New Zealand, mixing journalism studies at the Wellington Polytechnic with practical training at several local newspapers and holidaying in Middle Earth.

DOES THE HOME MAKETH THE MAN?

NEW Zealand taught me one thing about life and living: that when you have everything you need for a comfortable life, wealth ceases to have meaning.

Thus, the Kiwi society is perhaps one of the most egalitarian societies in the world. The average Kiwi abhors the exhibition of wealth and opulence. So, you felt good whether you lived in a five-by-ten-ft room in a hostel in Wellington or in the country home of your fellow students, provided you loved dogs or were able to pretend that you did.

Kiwis love their dogs as companions and co-workers. They could not have raised that many sheep and cattle had it not been for their hardworking dogs.

And you were not a good guest unless you loved beer, rugby and the All Blacks all at the same time. Thus, in the recent Olympic

Games, I supported the New Zealand team first and the Swiss team second. I supported Switzerland because one of my daughters is married to a Swiss and their son – my first grandson – is Swiss.

Of course, I love to support the Malaysian team too. And I did. But since our athletes did not survive beyond the preliminary rounds, I had no choice but to support the teams next closest to my heart. And I must confess that I was not being very sporting because I celebrated each time the United States team was defeated.

Returning from New Zealand, I took up residence above a shop-house at Hwa Li Town in Jalan Ipoh, a walking-distance away from the Sentul Railway Yard. It was,

as the name suggests, a Chinese area.

But I did not live there very long because my wife, being a government nurse, was given quarters in Ulu Langat where she worked. It was a Malay area famous for its durian and *santau* (home-brewed poison).

The carefree days continued with durian and beer parties that proved to be an explosive mix. Those were also days (or more appropriately nights) spent merry-making on shoestring budgets at hotspots like the Tropicana Night Club in Jalan Ipoh and the Cave in Jalan Ampang where KLCC now stands.

Then, there was a period of cleansing when we bought a Selangor State Economic Development Corporation (PKNS) house in Bandar Baru Bangi. In the Malay dominated new town, Islamic fundamentalism ruled. There were parents who objected to their children being taught music in school and demanded that girls be exempted from sports. PAS seized the opportunity to radicalise the nearby Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) and stole the *Penerapan Nilai-nilai Islam* (inculcation of Islamic values) agenda from under Umno's feet. It culminated in the party's victory in Bangi in

the 1999 general election. Barisan Nasional recaptured the seat in the recent polls.

I would have been a lifelong hypocrite had I continued to live there. So, in the late eighties, I moved to Subang Jaya to take advantage of the 1986/87 economic recession.

Not all aspects of an economic downturn are bad. In the post-crisis period, properties were being offered at a discount in the township. A semi-detached unit was selling at less than RM300,000.

Except for the roar of the jet planes taking off and landing at Subang, Subang Jaya was a good place to live and raise children. It was and still is as cosmopolitan as a Malaysian township can get.

So, whether one lives in a squatter hut, a timber and attap house by the river or a bungalow in a gated project should not be held against him or her. A person living in a squatter hut is no less or no more likely to be a bigot than one who lives in a multi-million-ringgit palatial home.

Any attempt to draw a parallel between gated living and apartheid is infantile at best and idiotic at worst. Ministers and top officials are better off shutting their mouths if they have nothing intelligent to say.

STRIPPED OF ALL DIGNITY

SOME of us love dogs. Others hate them. Mostly, we are indifferent. But when three Vietnamese immigrants were arrested in Penang on suspicion of attempting to kill a puppy for the pot, we were horrified.

We were horrified not because the Vietnamese ate dogs. We were aware that such a practice existed. Travel magazines, television travel channels, *Animal Planet* and *National Geographic* have made us aware that dogs and cats are regular fare in many East Asian countries.

What shocked and horrified us was the fact that these foreigners, who are guest workers in our country, had the audacity to hunt down our puppies simply to satisfy their palate.

Now that the puppy's owner has made a police report and the culprits apprehended, we hope the full brunt of the law will be brought to bear upon the perpetrators. No sloppy investigations and charges please!

In recent months, we have seen many sensational criminal cases being thrown out

by the judges because they were sloppily presented.

If we can be upset with the attempted killing of a puppy by a group of three foreigners who are in this country to earn a living for themselves and their families back home, imagine the abhorrence of millions of Iraqis with the occupation and subjugation of their country.

Like us, they could have lost some puppies, camels and donkeys to American bombs, rockets and mortar shells. I can't think of the well-fed American soldiers eating dogs and donkeys.

But unlike us, the Iraqis lost more than puppies. They lost their country, their loved ones and their properties when the Americans, British, Italians and Australians came to liberate them. They lost their savings, their jobs and their businesses. All that they are left with is bitterness, suffering and tens of thousands of guns. The latter became the last remaining symbol of dignity and nationhood when the occupiers misguidedly dismantled the Iraqi army.

So, why shouldn't the jobless and homeless ex-Iraqi soldiers become highway robbers, dacoits and kidnappers? If we are angry with the Vietnamese puppy snatchers, then why shouldn't the Iraqis be angry with foreigners who stole their jobs, their livelihood and their dignity?

Are all the kidnappers anti-American extremists, militants and terrorists? Or are they people driven to crime because the Americans took away their country, their loved ones, their jobs and their dignity?

Did Native Americans not attack the White settlers who took their land and hunted their bison? In retaliation, the settlers, with the help of bounty hunters and the US Cavalry, slaughtered the Indians and hunted the bison to near extinction. Without the bison, the Indians had only two choices – to die of starvation or to live in the reservations.

So, what is so surprising about the insurgents blowing up oil pipelines in Iraq? Americans would not be too happy if the Iraqis had conquered their country and pumped Alaskan oil to pay for the cost of conquering America.

American patriots would almost certainly have blown up the Alaskan pipelines to choke the Iraqis.

MORE REASON, LESS MADNESS PLEASE

REGARDLESS of whether George W Bush or John Kerry becomes the next American president, war will continue to be an integral part of the American psyche and practice.

The only difference is a Republican president is generally a lot more trigger-happy than a Democratic one. In the last three decades, three Republican presidents have waged war on sovereign governments. Ronald Reagan attacked the tiny Grenada, George Bush attacked Panama and George W Bush invaded Afghanistan and Iraq.

The way the Americans are locked in a war of words over the war record of Kerry and the lack of it on the part of Bush suggests their fascination with war and aggression.

It is on war and aggression that the US military and economic dominance is built. The US administrations in general and the Republican in particular use the spectre of war (and now terrorism) to pump billions of dollars of taxpayers' money into the military industrial complex.

The importance of this segment of the industry to the overall American economy is so overwhelming that without it, the global dominance of the US would be eroded.

So, the talk of war continues in the White House, the Pentagon and Capitol Hill. Even as the US is mired in Iraq and Osama bin Laden is still free in Afghanistan, the American warmongers are already talking about a war with Iran over the latter's nuclear programme.

But the same warmongers would think twice about threatening North Korea, which is also developing nuclear capability, because China is important to the US economy. China holds billions of dollars worth of US Government bonds and is an important US trading partner.

So, who will sit in the Oval Office next year is important to world peace. As ongoing Iraqi, Russian and Palestinian tragedies show, military might is not the answer. The world needs a man of reason in the White House and the Kremlin. **mb**

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