

**THE INAUGURATION CEREMONY OF THE CHAIR OF MALAY STUDIES
VICTORIA UNIVERSITY OF WELLINGTON NEW ZEALAND**

NEW ZEALAND, 27 MARCH 1996

I would like to thank Victoria University for inviting me to say a few words on the occasion of the launching of the Chair of Malay Studies in this University.

2. I am indeed happy that the Victoria University of Wellington has been chosen to be the home for the Chair of Malay Studies in New Zealand. The setting up of the Chair reflects the goodwill, understanding and cooperation in the long established relationship between New Zealand and Malaysia in the field of education.

3. Victoria University has an outstanding international and national reputation in many areas of research and academic pursuits. I understand that the University which was established in 1899 is one of the oldest universities in New Zealand. Being located in the capital city which is also an important commercial and financial centre, the decision to set up the Chair of Malay Studies in this university is most significant.

4. It is hoped that Malay Studies in Victoria University of Wellington will become another centre of academic excellence, which will attract researchers, scholars and specialists interested in the field of anthropology, sociology, language and literature of the Malays and the Malay world.

5. The establishment of this Chair of Malay Studies, among other things, will create awareness among New Zealanders and the people in the Pacific region on the need to promote cultural understanding and to establish greater cooperation between this region and Southeast Asia, especially with the Malay world. This is also in keeping with Malaysia's own endeavour to reduce cultural prejudices and ignorance between the peoples of the two countries. We can do this by communicating with each other and the most effective way would be through the use of a common language. This cannot be achieved simply by the use of English. To understand a people and to appreciate their culture, an understanding of their language is essential. To learn about them through another language is to distort understanding somewhat due to the basic values and nuances inherent in different languages. Practically everyone has experienced the immediate empathy when discovering that a foreigner you meet understands your language.

6. The richness of the language, the culture and literature of the definitive Malays transcends the boundaries of the

countries where the Malay language or variations of it are used. And these countries include Indonesia, Brunei, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines. In terms of culture, there are many aspects of Malay culture and language which are shared with the Maoris and other Polynesian peoples. Indeed, ethnically speaking, the Malays are to be found as far east as Easter Islands and as far West as Madagascar. The Malayo-Polynesian linguistic group, for example, demonstrates the sharing of certain words by the Malays and the Polynesians including the Maoris. Except for the Peninsular Malays, the Malayo-Polynesians are obviously island people and they must have been great sailors and navigators in order to spread so far and wide across the Indian and the Pacific Oceans. A Malay Studies Centre would offer a rich field for anthropological, historical, cultural and linguistic studies.

7. The first centre for Malay Studies was established in Leiden, the Netherlands, in 1876. We also know that the University of Leiden has, until today, been recognised internationally as a leading centre for the cultural study of the Malay world. In late 1992, the Malaysian Government initiated the establishment of the professorial Chair for the study of Malay literature at the University of Leiden. By establishing such a Chair Malaysia hopes to promote the study of Malay literature in Europe.

8. It is topical and relevant that various aspects of the discipline of Malay Studies should be studied and taught to the peoples of Australasia and the Pacific. As I have indicated earlier, with the establishment of this Chair, I am sure mutual ties and bilateral interests between our two countries would be further enhanced. I hope to see the day when many people from this country will be able to speak Bahasa Malaysia as well as to appreciate and learn the cultures of the Malay world.

9. In Malaysia, efforts are being made to ensure that our economic achievements are balanced with our pursuit and sustenance of our sosio-cultural values and our religions. This balance is vital and Malaysia's Vision 2020 is predicated upon this principle of creating a society that is not only strong economically but also morally and socially.

10. Wealth and power have a way of undermining the moral fibre. If allowed to go unchecked, the deterioration must eventually lead to the destruction of the accumulated wealth and the accompanying power. The society then reverts to its former impoverished and weak status. Clearly there is a kind of cycle here. Some societies take longer, others take a shorter time to go through this cycle.

11. Whether Malaysia's attainment of a developed nation status will be short-lived or not depends very much on the ability to sustain the moral and cultural values of the people of Malaysia. And of the people of Malaysia, the Malays make up the majority. It will be largely the Malays who will determine the permanency or otherwise of the Malaysian achievement, if indeed the objective is achieved.

12. A study of the Malays should therefore be interesting. There are other people who should also be studied of course. But ever since Malaysia became independent, the Malays have undergone a remarkable change. These changes are not only interesting in themselves but are very relevant to many societies interested in social engineering. Under British rule the Malays were preserved as 'Nature's Gentlemen'. They were a contented people who accepted British rule as a matter of course. And if the British decided that they should remain the hewers of wood and the drawers of water, why, what was wrong with that? Had they not always been the hewers of wood and drawers of water? And so the end of World War II found them actually welcoming the return of British colonial rule.

13. But suddenly there was a change. Uncharacteristically, the Malays objected to a British plan for a union of the Malay states. 'Nature's gentlemen' began to behave in a rather ungentlemanly manner. They protested, they demonstrated and they formed a 'national' political party which ignored loyalty to their own states. Suddenly they were no longer the people of Kedah or Perlis or Perak or Selangor or the other Malay states. Suddenly they were Malays, the people of the Malay Peninsular.

14. With amazing swiftness, their character and creed changed. They even learnt to boo at the British Parliamentarians who came to investigate what was happening in the Malay states then.

15. The process of cultural change of the Malays which began then has not stopped. Where they once politely and deprecatingly decline nomination to lead political parties because they felt unqualified, they now campaign, blatantly and vociferously, proclaiming their own personal virtues and qualifications. Where once Malay youths would rather die than be improperly dressed, they now deliberately discard orthodox styles, wearing outlandish caps and hats and anything that they fancy. Where once they preferred the security of the Government jobs, they now plunge into commerce and industry with gusto, falling flat on their faces sometimes but more and more often making a tremendous success of their new careers.

16. The process of change in the culture and psyche of the Malays has not stopped. Indeed it appears to be accelerating. Along with these changes, their language has changed too. Some of these linguistic changes have been methodical, instituted by bodies such as the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka or the Language and Literature Institute of Malaysia. Others have literally been coined or spawned on the streets and through usage have become accepted. In the past, the Malay language had been enriched with words and phrases from the Arabic, Persian, Portuguese and Sanskrit languages. Today, English and some European languages have intruded, while Arabic remains a major source. The process is far from over. The Malay language of the future may be radically different from what it is today.

17. But, perhaps of more interest to New Zealand is the programme to bring the rural unmonetised indigenous people and Malays into the mainstream of economic activity of the nation. The programme goes under the name of 'New Economic Policy' (NEP).

18. The moment it was announced it came in for scathing comments especially from the Western media. Since bringing up the indigenous people required discrimination in their favour, it was condemned as racist and anti-Chinese.

19. But strangely the majority of the Chinese did not take offence. They in fact cooperated and helped the process of affirmative action and the equitable restructuring of the race-base economic functions. After 20 years of the NEP, Malaysia is much more balanced economically, stable politically and race relations are much improved. By comparison with other multi-racial countries, Malaysia is a haven of peace and racial harmony.

20. Unable to stir up racial animosity by exploiting the NEP, the foreign media and others now condemn the NEP because according to them it has made a few Malays wealthy, Malays who are said to be friends of the ruling UMNO leaders.

21. It is absolutely true that these Malays are close to Government leaders, but then the Malaysian Government is close to all businessmen of all races, some of whom are successful. They were usually not close before they succeeded. They became close after they showed their abilities in business. And many Malays who are friends and colleagues of the Malay Ministers of the Government are today as poor as ever. It is not being close that counts. It is the ability to succeed in business.

22. But the beneficiaries of the NEP are not only the millionaires and billionaires. Literally hundreds of thousands of indigenous business people have benefited through special

training, loans, licences, contracts and guidance by Ministries set up for this purpose. Banks and funds have been set up to help the indigenous people under the NEP. Farmers and fishermen have also received help in various forms under the NEP including free outboard engines and cheap fuel. Of course hundreds of thousands of indigenous students gain access to education at all levels including scholarships to study in New Zealand under the NEP.

23. To denigrate the NEP as benefitting only a few friends of the Prime Minister is to be deliberately untruthful and cynical. No social engineering programme can result in everyone becoming multi-millionaires. Social engineering by the Communists and Socialists succeeded only in impoverishing people equally. But the best of social engineering programme can only improve the lot of everyone depending on his own capacity and effort. If he is good, then he will benefit more. But if he is incapable of handling the opportunities and help extended to him, the best of affirmative actions cannot make him rich.

24. Affirmative action is as legitimate as any form of social engineering. Socialism is still a respectable form of social engineering in some countries. It has not done so well. But it has never been vilified in the West as the NEP is. Yet the NEP has brought about a more equitable distribution of wealth between races while at the same time stimulating the economy and improving racial harmony. That is the situation in Malaysia today and I think it is something that others might study more charitably and if relevant apply in their own situations.

25. Level playing fields are great for equality of chances. But when the contest is between midgets and giants, level playing fields are useless. Handicaps are needed. The NEP provides the handicaps.

26. Because of all these changes that are happening to the Malays, the study of the Malays should become a major academic exercise. But more than that the study will be of a people who will have a considerable role in the future of Malaysia if not the Malay world and the Western Rim of the Pacific. Academics who will be studying at this Wellington Centre of Malay Studies will have the opportunity to observe the evolution of a race, an evolution which if I may be allowed to say is dynamic and intriguing. The study would not be purely academic. It can contribute towards international understanding, at least between New Zealand and Malaysia. But I should think it would go beyond that. Our Maori brothers in particular may find the study even more relevant for there can

be little doubt that they are Malays too, or to look at it from their own viewpoint, we Malays are Maoris like them.

27. One talks so much now about the equality of races. Colour should not differentiate us. But the fact is that many people associate colour with intellectual and other attributes. Thus the remarkable achievement of Southeast Asia is attributed to the overseas Chinese. The brown Malays who are indigenous to Southeast Asia are dismissed as quite irrelevant to the progress and achievements of ASEAN. The prejudice is very much there. Practically every report or essay on Southeast Asia written by academics and journalists of various hues, dismisses as insignificant the contribution of the brown people to the remarkable achievements of Southeast Asia. Maybe it is true. Maybe not. It would be interesting to study the role of the brown Malays, their metamorphosis, their trials and tribulations and their achievements. It would be interesting because such a study could benefit a lot of people in the underdeveloped countries. The result could act as pointers. Are the brown and black people doomed to stew in their own juices, to always be dependent on others and to be colonised? Or can they claw their way up?

28. Recently an article was published entitled 'The Clash of Civilisations'. It would seem that this American believes conflicts are necessary. If there is no conflict, then invent one. The Cold war has ended. The USSR has ceased to be the enemy, to be vilified and reviled and to be the villainous enemy in thousands of novels. A new enemy is necessary to prop up the nationalist ego, to be the new villain in new novels and films. And the new enemy is Islam and the Muslims. They are shifty, unprincipled, given to violence and terror, and generally incapable of governing themselves and developing their countries.

29. The Malays are Muslims and must therefore be included in this new substitute bogey. And accordingly, in articles and reports in the media this is how the Malays are pictured. They are incompetent, incapable of being fair and just, oppressive and discriminatory, untrustworthy and are generally just plain bad people. In fact someone once described them in a derogatory sense as 'jungle Arabs' as opposed to the desert Arabs.

30. Malaysia today is a peaceful and secure nation. It has been developing at an average rate of 6.7 percent since independence, eight percent in the last eight years. Its per capita income rose from US\$300 at independence to US\$4,000 today, which in Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) terms is equal to US\$10,000. Its inflation is well under control being only 3.5 percent or less. It is industrialising. From being

dependent solely on the exports of rubber and tin, its export now is made up 78 percent of manufactured goods. It is admittedly impudent, daring to castigate big powers and build buildings higher than the highest buildings in the developed Western countries. But essentially it seems to be well governed and capable of taking care of itself, not being dependent on foreign aid or even foreign loans. It has progressed to the point where it is now investing in other developing countries, helping them to grow.

31. Yet Malaysia is largely a Malay country, governed by a Malay Muslim majority. How is it that the usual things said about Muslims and Malays seem not to be happening in Malaysia? How is it that Malaysia is able to grow and prosper and not be beset with racial tensions and fights and general instability? Is it an accident? Is it entirely because it has a vigorous immigrant population? Or is it not possible that the brown Muslim Malays have something to do with it?

32. Clearly there is a lot of material for study at the chair for Malay studies in Wellington. Academics are said to be detached and objective. I am sure their study of the Malays, their origins and history, their culture, the achievements or lack of them will be enlightening. It will not just contribute to the body of academic knowledge, but it would serve many useful purposes, not least the creation of an equitable and stable society.

33. With this hope I would like to express my best wishes for the success of the Chair of Malay Studies, Victoria University, New Zealand.