

The Launching Of Promuda Lecture Series : "Perspectives From The Past, Paradigms For The Future"

Mandarin Oriental Hotel, Kuala Lumpur 6 March 2002

Thank you for your kind invitation to launch the Promuda Lecture Series and to speak on "Perspectives from the Past, Paradigms for the Future."

2. The future is for the young. The old must go, whether they want to or not. Youths by nature are idealistic and often impatient. Sometimes this nature manifests itself in ways that may blight the very future that the young will inherit. It is therefore important that we temper idealism and impatience with pragmatism and a willingness to learn from the mistakes and the successes of the past so as to ensure that the mistakes are avoided and the successes are repeated.

3. Our country, Malaysia, is a young country. For 450 years we were a colony of one country or another. We were divided then. There was no Malaysia. There was only a collection of small Malay states stitched together by the British into what was called by them Malaya.

4. The Malays in the Malay states owed loyalty only to their State's ruler. The Chinese still believed almost until the end that they were citizens of China although some became Straits British Chinese, vaguely owing allegiance to the British Crown. The Indians were citizens of British India.

5. These three communities lived separately, work separately and seldom cross each other's paths. They were referred to, for convenience, as Malaysians but there was no Malaysian citizenship. Then when the recession of the 20s and 30s struck Malaya, most of the Chinese and Indians packed their scanty belongings and went back to China and India.

6. There was no such thing as racial unity. There was no sense of belonging. There was no common goal for the different races in Malaya.

7. In Sarawak and British North Borneo things were not much different. The British ruled through largely Malay administrators, while the others were denied education except by Christian Missionaries. The Chinese as usual provided the farmers and carried out what business activities, which were not monopolised by the colonialists.

8. This divide and rule strategy worked very well. There was no demand for independence as the races not only did not get

together but also were mildly antagonistic towards each other and looked up to the British to settle any interracial problem.

9. The country developed very slowly. There was no development plan. Whatever infrastructure that was put in was to serve the need to exploit the tin deposits and the rubber industry.

10. The peoples of the Malay States, Sarawak and North Borneo were generally docile until the country was invaded by the Japanese. The myth of the invincibility of the white men was broken and ideas about independence began to take shape in the minds of some people.

11. It is boring to listen to the naiveté, of Malaysians of the colonial era. But we all sprang from them, and we may yet learn something from them.

12. When the war ended with the defeat of Japan, the Malays thought in terms of a return to strictly Malay ownership of the Malay States for the treaties were between the rulers of these States and the British. A small segment of the Chinese wanted a Chinese dominated Communist Republic. The Indians were largely enamoured of the struggle for Indian independence. And a substantial section from all the communities merely wanted a return to the status quo ante, to continued benign and paternalistic British rule.

13. But the British decided to annex the whole peninsular and create a Malayan Union, reducing the Malay Sultans to Chief Kadis, and ignoring entirely their commitment to protect the Malays and their rights as the indigenous people. Indignant over this cavalier treatment the Malays set aside their loyalties to their own state and united to oppose the British. And the Chinese Communists began an armed insurrection.

14. The only thing common between the Chinese Communists and UMNO was the opposition to continued British colonial rule. There was no desire to set up a common front against the British. There was no talk of racial unity. Each was going its separate way.

15. UMNO secured the dissolution of the Malayan Union but the Chinese Communists were less successful. To counter balance Malay unity the non-Communist Chinese, and the Indians set up their own political parties. The three racially-based political parties did not see eye to eye on the future of the country. The Federation of Malaya which replaced the Malayan Union was regarded by non-Malays as a step backwards, denying

a majority of them Malayan citizenship. The stage seemed set for interracial confrontation, which could be exploited by the British and would delay independence.

16. It took giant statesmen like Tunku Abdul Rahman and Tan Cheng Lock to appreciate the need for Sino- Malay cooperation in the interest of achieving a quick independence. They were joined by K.L. Devasar from the Indian community.

17. It is from such beginnings that we built racial harmony in Malaysia. We have succeeded as no other multiracial country has succeeded. Today Malaysia is a model of interracial tolerance and unity. The whole world marvels at the achievement. Even those races originally from countries where racial enmity is prevalent, are able to work and play together in Malaysia.

18. The ability of the different races to live, work and play together in Malaysia has contributed to the stability of this country. And this in turn has led to its rapid development, making it the best developed of the developing countries. It makes possible the achievement of Vision 2020, the vision to make Malaysia a developed country by the year 2020.

19. The first eight years of the Vision 2020 effort were great years. We grew by more than eight percent per annum. Achieving Vision 2020 seemed a breeze. All we had to do was to keep growing at seven percent per annum and our GDP would increase by about eight times, i.e. about as high as the GDP of a number of countries considered as developed.

20. But in 1997 - 98 came the attack on our currency, its devaluation and the collapse of the stock market. We overcame this assault and again grew at eight percent plus in 2000. But US recession and the 11th Sept attack undermined our efforts. We still have 18 years more to go before the target date. Can we do it? Can we make up for the delays, and can we insulate ourselves against future uncertainties?

21. We are hopeful, but there are some disturbing signs. The early Malaysians overcame their segregation and suspicion of each other in order to create racial harmony and unity. We are seeing now a resurgence of the old distrust and dislike. There are now people demanding that no effort be made to bring the people of different races, especially the younger people, the people of the future together. Not only should they not go to the same schools but their schools should not be anywhere near each other. School children of different races must not mix, must not come in contact. There should be a Malaysian apartheid.

22. In the universities students of different races must not stay in the same hostels, belong to the same societies or play games together. Racially or religiously-based activities ensure that students remain separated.

23. The mushrooming of private institutions of higher learning has amplified the separateness. Students at these institutions are often from one race or another, never a good mixture of races.

24. The NEP designed to reduce the imbalances in economic development between the races has achieved minimal success not from want of effort on the part of the Government, but from a tendency to seek the easy way on the part of the Bumiputeras. They have become almost totally dependent on the Government. Sino-Malay joint ventures exist but many are still Ali Baba in nature. Bumiputera contractors depend exclusively on Government contracts. Remove these and they will mostly collapse. Harassed by accusations of cronyism, the Government is tempted to abandon the NEP. But the future generation will have to make this decision.

25. Despite the attempts by the Government Party to reduce racial politics by coalition of race-based parties and government by consensus, the racist appeal of the opposition has retarded the progress towards integration. Failure to respond to racial appeals may cause the ruling parties to lose their support.

26. Then there is this so-called demand for an Islamic State. Actually Malaysia is already an Islamic state because the official religion is Islam and the titular heads are all Muslims. And Muslims can practise their religion without hindrance. In fact they are assisted in every way by the Government. But an Islamic State permits the practice of other religions and so the Malaysian constitution defends the rights of non-Muslims to their religion.

27. All these have been agreed to by the leaders of all races and religions at the time of independence. No one should question the status of race or religion, language or culture of Malaysia. But these quarters insist that Malaysia is not an Islamic state and it is their intention to make it an Islamic State according to their own interpretation.

28. This in itself is a non-starter for the large number of non-Muslims would ensure through the democratic process that the proponents of this so-called Islamic State would never win and translate their threat into action. But precisely because they are not likely to achieve their goal through

democratic process, they have encouraged the achievement of this goal by other means--namely by violence.

29. Their younger followers, impatient and naive perhaps have already made two attempts to seize power by force of arms. The Al Maunah and the Militant group plotted to seize power believing that when they launch their attacks the people will rise to support them.

30. They are mistaken of course. The majority of Malay Muslims, are not so enamoured with their kind of Islamic State, nor are they keen on a religious rebellion against the Government. But fanatics are not likely to be deterred by their own naiveté. They will try again.

31. Despite all these travails Malaysia has managed to make tremendous development and progress. At independence the per capita income was less than 300 US Dollars, the population only five million, the economy totally dependent on rubber and tin. The roads were poor, electricity and water supply available only in the bigger towns. There was no manufacturing industry to speak of and unemployment was high, as was the level of poverty.

32. Today the per capita income is 10 times higher at almost 4000 US Dollars, the population has grown to 24 million and there is full employment. Expressways, frequently six laned criss-cross the country. Water and electricity is supplied to all towns and 90 percent of the rural area. Electric trains, LRT and motor coaches provide transport to every corner of the country.

33. Air travel is common and modern airports dotted the country. Kuala Lumpur the capital is now a vigorous metropolitan city. From a population of 300,000 at independence, we now have almost two million people in the Wilayah and altogether about four million people in the Klang Valley.

34. This is where we stand today. We are not without serious problems, problems of national unity, of imbalances between the races, of threats of extremism. But we have also been able to maintain peace and stability, to develop and progress and to contain extremism .

35. We had adopted various strategies and policies, some of which have worked but all of which have defects. Perhaps the defects are in the policies and the strategies themselves; perhaps they are due to human failures. We definitely have a need to study them closely, to identify their weaknesses and to make adjustments where necessary. Perhaps we should just

drop some or all of these approaches to Malaysia's major problems, but before we do so let us not be carried away by the idea of change for the sake of change.

36. Change is always disruptive and we have to be careful not to fall into the trap of changing simply because the failures are highlighted. Whenever something is done many will be quick to point out the failures and to condemn. But there is no perfect alternative nor perfect solutions. The alternatives and solutions themselves will soon be condemned as implementation shows up their imperfections. Then the whole process will have to be gone through again.

37. Reengineer by all means; shift the paradigms, and entertain brilliant new ideas, but remember today's much criticised ideas and policies were yesterday's perfect ideas and solutions. By the same token the new ideas of today will be the subject of much criticism for their imperfections in the future.

38. A society regresses, stagnates or progresses because of the culture of that society, the values that society holds and practises. Most frequently it is not the strategy or the policy that is at fault, it is the society which fails to implement it successfully. It fails because it does not have the right values and the right attitudes. In such a case introducing new plans and approaches is not going to do any good. They will all fail again.

39. Vision 2020 will not be a success if only a segment of the community achieve developed status, if only a part of the country progresses. To be meaningful all the people in every part of the country must gain from the developed status of the country.

40. Because of this we cannot apply a uniform plan or single strategy. We have to focus on the capacities of the different segments in order to benefit from the plan and the development.

41. Still a matter of concern is the seeming inability of the Malays and the Bumiputera community to benefit from the opportunities created for them. They tend to abuse the opportunities and to be too dependent. They like to seek the easy way out. And plans and policies for their development are likely to fail. They are likely to fail because they have the wrong set of values, the wrong ethics and culture.

42. These have to be corrected. They can be corrected, not overnight of course but over a reasonable period of time. They must be made to realise the need to put in maximum

effort. The recent decision to admit students into the Government universities based on merit is one such strategy. It is not that they don't have the ability. It is just that they do not try, thinking that the Government is always there to look after them.

43. The 2020 Vision can be achieved but it is not going to be easy. The people who are going to inherit this country, the young people, must realise and appreciate this responsibility and do their bit.

44. In history great empires have been set up which eventually failed. If we care to study their failures, we will find they are due to a loss of stamina, a change in values and culture, and a lackadaisical attitude of the succeeding generation. Life became too easy and no more effort is put in to pressure and sustain what had been built in the past. And so the empires collapse.

45. The same things are happening to countries. The moment complacency sets in then the process of decline will follow.

46. We are encouraged that Malaysia's young people are concerned enough to begin thinking about the future. This is a good sign. And I am sure this is going to result in the desire to achieve greater things than those achieved by our forebears and ancestors.

47. With this I have pleasure in launching the Promuda Series of Lectures.