

# A PEOPLE'S POLITICS

GOH KEAT PENG



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The **Strategic Information and Research Development Centre** (SIRD) is an independent publishing house founded in January 2000 in Petaling Jaya, Malaysia. The SIRD list focuses on Malaysian and Southeast Asian studies, economics, gender studies, the social sciences, politics and international relations. Our books address the scholarly community, students, the NGO and development communities, policymakers, activists and the wider public. SIRD distributes titles (via its sister organisation, **GB Gerakbudaya Enterprise Sdn Bhd**) published by scholarly and institutional presses, NGOs and other independent publishers. We also organise seminars, forums and group discussions. All this, we believe, is conducive to the development and consolidation of the notions of civil liberty and democracy.

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With grateful thanks to  
*Grace, Chee Beng, Chee Leong, Pei Shee, Aletheia & Atticus;*

with ultimate gratitude to

*THE LORD*

Who brought us together  
and blessed us as a *family*.

*“I will give to the LORD the thanks due to his righteousness, and I will  
sing praise to the name of the LORD, the Most High.” (Psalms 7.17)*





## PREFACE

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# AN AUTHOR'S MIND

1. This author exercises his right to his own opinions and style of putting things across. No book has been written and published that is not opinionated to a good extent. If this isn't the case, what is there to write or to read? An author thinks, mulls, ponders, organises and reorganises the written material countless times over many moons to finally produce and have in hand a book he can live with and which he considers worthwhile to be criticised for. Why would he go through the hassle of writing a book only to say nothing definite, or to camouflage his innermost thoughts and hard-learned lessons distilled from many years of observation and reflection?

Others are free to write and publish their own writings and say their own piece. All authors are in turn subjected to the criticism of readers. In this way, an open discourse on critical matters that concern us all will be facilitated.

2. This author has therefore not set out to write an uncritical book, only a fair one (at least to his own mind). To be fair does not mean to be uncritical. Nor does being critical necessarily mean to be unfair.

To speak critically of a sitting government's policies or its implementation of policy is not an unpatriotic act. The government is the executive branch and hence the chief practitioner of public policy and programmes. It has access to enormous powers and resources which are at its disposal. Since what it does or chooses not to do affects a lot of people on the ground, the absence of critical comment on a sitting government anywhere on the planet is as strange as it is downright irresponsible. In the Malaysian case, it should not be overlooked that the loyal federal opposition happens to be the sitting governments in four of the 13 states in the Federation of Malaysia and, as such, the state governments of these particular four states are as exposed and subjected to critical review and examination as the sitting federal government and the state governments headed by it.

Without constructive criticism, sitting governments at state or federal level will do what they themselves think is right. Worse still, they will think they have the divine right to do what they propose to do. It is one thing for the Divine Being to have Divine Right. It is quite another matter that earthly and earth-bound governments comprising mere human beings, no more perfect than the rest of us, should have any notion of 'divine' right to do as they please. By the same virtue, neither this author nor other critics have the last word. Being critical does not mean one is automatically right. All critics must have the etiquette and integrity to admit any mistake or misrepresentation they may be responsible for. Since none of us is perfect, it is best that we who are collective stakeholders of the political process - citizens and politicians alike - talk to one another and learn to listen more to one another.

3. This author strives to be impartial, not neutral. To be neutral is not aligning with or supporting any side or position in a given controversy. To be impartial is to apply the same standards and requirements to all parties or persons concerned. Right is right, wrong is wrong. Both sides are to be assessed or adjudged by a similar set of standards and rules.

This author does not allow his personal friendships with politicians on either side of the parliamentary divide to dictate or impose their political ideologies on him. Exposure to varied political positions is fine provided all including himself understand that he alone determines what he stands for, and that he is finally responsible for what he himself professes. Healthy friendships do not exclude differing points of views. This author does not advocate personal animosity between friends or family members on the basis of political differences.

4. This author subscribes to the principle of check and balance in all human enterprises and endeavours to mitigate the effects of human sin. Therefore he supports a two-party system as the only legitimate democratic process whereby contesting sides in an election to parliament, state legislative assembly or local council may not take their constituents for granted.

A two-party system of government can only take effect in a country if and when the parties or party coalitions are able to take turns to form the government at federal, state and local levels, so that no political monopoly is allowed to be established, let alone be entrenched, in the land.

Be that as it may, at each election, there is no free ride for contesting parties. Both sides must still face the

electorate and it is incumbent on them to have adequately, convincingly and effectively answered the critical questions and argued their respective cases. Voters must never be taken for granted.

5. This author places hope in a new generation of politicians in every political party who will, in time to come, take the government, opposition and citizenry to a new level of political understanding, practice and participation hitherto not seen in our first 55 years of independence as Malaya (49 years as Malaysia). Given a few more years of opportunity and experience, this new generation of political leaders will come of age and hopefully the nation will then see them increasingly preside over a more viable and functional democracy and society that will set the stage for greater integrity and integration. It will then be a joy to watch question time in parliament live on TV!

Reflecting his hope and belief in the next generation, the author is overjoyed that two young mothers - next generation elected representatives of the people - have written forewords for this book. A nation which invests in and gives opportunity to its next generations shall thrive.

6. This author believes that any betrayal of the people's trust must not remain hidden and that information is key to the people's education, decision-making process and level of trust. He therefore supports a freedom of information policy and any initiative, both government and non-governmental, to put before the people, accurate, comprehensive and trustworthy information about how public funds are being used, and to whom government contracts are being awarded, and why.

7. This author is conscious of the fact that while elections are crucial because voters are given a chance to make a statement about how they feel and the opportunity to make choices, the period between elections should not be neglected and may warrant even greater vigilance of and involvement in the political process on the part of a nation's citizens.
8. This author celebrates the fact that Malaysia is a plural society, blessed with an ethnic and cultural diversity that so enriches our national consciousness, experience and collective life – an asset that money cannot buy. Our ancestors came to this land and made this so. In embracing this phenomenon, and in encouraging our children to value it as they grow up, we shall be able to realise our potential and prospects as a nation more fully and freely.
9. This author advocates gender respect. Hence, this book uses both masculine and feminine pronouns even though it may seem tedious at times to both writer and reader. The principle and value of gender respect are worth emphasising.
10. This author believes that many in the civil service, police, military and other branches of public service - not unlike others among us, common, ordinary Malaysians - love their family, country and next generation, fear God and carry out their duties through hard and honest work, and are very much in favour of righting wrongs and ushering in an era whereby Malaysians will be more united, free and motivated to make the nation more just, accountable and fair.
11. This author intends no disrespect to anyone on the basis that this book carries no honorifics whenever any personal name is mentioned. Rather, emphasis is placed on the individual as his or her own person. This demonstrates the author's view

that a person has value in himself or herself. If an official recognition is given to a good person by means of an award, his or her own goodness honours the award rather than just the other way round.

12. The author wishes to say *ribuan terima kasih* (a thousand thanks) to Helen Heng and William de Cruz for their kind hospitality and patience during the critical period of the composition of this book along with their professional editorial support; Nurul Izzah Anwar and Hannah Yeoh for their forewords to this book; A. Jayanath, Peter Kallang, Philip T.N. Koh and Simon Sipaun for their comments; Peter Yee, G. Nanda Gorban, Jimmy Lee and team for their generous assistance; the publisher SIRD, and the GB Gerakbudaya production team and editor for their professional expertise, competence and geniality; Ng Jen Ling for her cover design; and the person who in the first instance told him that he must, of course, write a book on this subject in his own characteristic way, and later on, when he began dragging his feet on the project and started to entertain doubts, had told him to get on with it! And so he did.
13. This author can be reached by readers at *authorgoh@gmail.com* and *www.ongohing.com* and welcomes all comments, feedback and recommendations for the pursuit of freedom of speech and dissemination of issues critical to democratic principles and practices.

**GOH Keat Peng**

*December 2012*

## FOREWORD

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# PEACE WITH JUSTICE

Mr. Goh Keat Peng is a blissful picture of peace, which envelopes his clear passion for justice like a halo. Such was his effect on my turbulent thoughts the very first time I had met him as a young teenager – in the uncertain political terrain back in 1998, jointly charting a course in the stillborn social reform NGO, *Adil* (Justice).

Years on, he has remained true to his calling – to provide clarity in troubled times and to remind us to never waver in our convictions.

W.B. Yeats wrote:

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.*

A People's Politics tells a story of a Malaysia where the best shall never lose sight of their convictions. It is a Malaysia that



celebrates its diversity, protects its integrity, and is guided by a moral compass that sheds light in times of darkness.

In a time of tribulations – whether it be political, economic, or social, Malaysia would need to constantly keep in check the blind passion of those who lack all conviction and render them silent as the problems are handled head on. Tacit support for extremist group *Perkasa* (powerful, strong) is a case in point. Bigoted calls that tarnish sensitivities toward the non-Malay community are tolerated. Political violence committed goes unpunished whilst those who voice dissent against the government of the day are penalized on a daily basis. Such clear bias destroys the very credibility that any elected government needs to obtain the respect and trust of its citizenry.

As such, Mr Goh reminds legislators to never lose sight of the processes in ensuring proper governance takes place. Oftentimes, many forget the inherent need for criticisms of sitting governments, and the requirement of a vibrant civil society and democratic institutions to ensure, in his words, “*that each entity may function independently, with no one of these institutions having undue influence over any other in a way that will impede or interfere with the performance of their respective functions*”.

Malaysians will find this book a heartfelt reminder of what is most precious and beautiful about Malaysia. We are a people bound by a shared history, peaceful transitions, and a fated engagement with diversity that have brought us to what we are today, summed up by the author as “multi-racial, multi-religious, multilingual, multi-faceted and multi-cuisine”.

However, Mr Goh is no armchair critic. His direct involvement in many of Malaysia's crucial movements makes his writing all the more compelling. Much as it is a matter of great importance, the author is also a subject of his very own comic

relief when one pictures this gracefully aged man braving the water cannons and Federal Reserve Units-filled streets of Kuala Lumpur to make his presence felt during the Bersih rallies. His rationale for being part of a peaceful demonstration was simple, “*For what are a nation’s elections if there is no assurance that the electoral rolls are authentic and the conduct of the elections would be squeaky fair?*”

And therein lies the crux of the book: legitimate and fair processes. The *journey* matters as much as the *outcome*. Much as I appreciate the pains he has taken to explain the reasons for the positions he has taken vis-à-vis the current federal government’s failings, I value most his appeal for *respect* across the political spectrum.

Yes, he has taken partisan positions but he remains impartial not necessarily neutral. And in times such as these, being neutral would be an utmost folly. May he continue to provide us with the moral compass Malaysia needs.

**Nurul Izzah Anwar**

*Member of Parliament for Lembah Pantai,  
Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur,  
January 2013*

## FOREWORD

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# A TIMELY WORD

I cannot be more thankful for the author's decision to write this book. The proverb '*Timely advice is lovely, like golden apples in a silver basket*' rings true with the arrival of this book as our nation anticipates the unveiling of its destiny in year 2013.

I am a young career politician, being thrust into frontline politics at the age of 29 during the 2008 General Elections. The first half of my term as the State Assembly member of Subang Jaya hit a very steep learning curve. I struggled in confusion over my purpose in politics and almost drowned with the stress of managing a very demanding constituency. I badly needed a mentor and a friend. An unexpected surgical procedure in 2010 allowed my path to cross with Goh Keat Peng's and my experience in politics has never been the same again.

There are many books and articles written about Malaysian politics but many are theoretical and academic in nature. The author is a practitioner behind the limelight of Malaysian politics. Through my close friendship and journey in politics with him, I am fully assured of his qualification in writing this book. I am confident this book will serve as a manual for Malaysians who are excited about embarking in nation-building through politics. I believe this book will also provide signposts

for those who are already engaged in the political process in various ways and at different stages.

I have found that this book does not only address the wellbeing of our nation but it also tackles the personal challenges at home. I am being reminded of my priorities as a career politician through these words concerning setting our parameters and involvement in the political process, “*In our own respective experiences, we have found that it is only too easy to neglect the very people for whom we work our hearts out*”.

And the above illustration probably best describes who the author is to me. The man who is in touch with the huge affairs and importance of national politics, and yet personal and gentle enough to advise my husband and I on our marriage, our role as parents and as Christians.

I trust you will be blessed and refreshed by the chapters of this book. By the time you complete reading the book, I hope you will be just as hopeful as me, a young Malaysian who is convinced that the best is yet to come for this land.

Politics is definitely *the road less travelled* and may this book also remind those who are already walking along it that our labour will not be in vain. Generations to come will know of the author’s hope that “It will probably take quite a while before we can imagine Malaysian parents and families saying to their young ones, *When you grow up, darling, papa and mummy will like to see you take up politics and become members of parliament or the state assembly*”!

And may we the young inherit a righteous nation because there are many forerunners like Goh Keat Peng who did not despair and simply chose not to give up on Malaysian politics.

**Hannah Yeoh**

*State Assembly member for Subang Jaya, Selangor  
January 2013*



## CHAPTER 1

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# A PEOPLE'S JOURNEY

### **A Plural Society**

From 1957 as Malaya, and then from 1963 as Malaysia, we Malaysians have been on a journey together, going forward from the pre-independent pioneering journeys of our forefathers. From the earliest times, we were a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-lingual, multi-faceted, multi-cuisine people. Our ancestors came from a multiplicity and plurality of the human race from numerous parts of the planet. There are nations where an overwhelming ethnic group predominates with much smaller pockets of minorities. Not so with Malaysia.

Malaysia as a pluralistic society is a boon for tourism, offering limitless varieties of human ingenuity, creativity and innovation to every foreign visitor. But, apart from what it offers to foreign visitors, Malaysia as a pluralistic society is, in fact, even more of a boon for its own people. If our pluralism can be sincerely, sensibly and properly perceived, welcomed, employed, mobilised and nurtured, our nation has every potential to be a shining light among other nations, a genuine example of a plural society.

With each passing year, however, we as a nation seem to be losing rather than gaining momentum in coming to terms with our pluralism. If anything, in this our 55<sup>th</sup> year of independence since 1957, our journey seems to have become more difficult when the policies of the administration and their implementation seem to many Malaysians more exclusive than inclusive in nature. The country will see an election campaign very obviously waged along ethnic lines, notwithstanding the rhetoric about us being one nation.

Everywhere, separation rather than integration meets our eyes and ears, sometimes provoking our minds to harbour negativity and our mouths to say things that will not help the situation. In housing areas, shopping centres, education facilities, even public squares, the way we group and come together, or just hang around, is still very much along ethnic lines.

Quite clearly, some major policy shifts, rather than mere semantics, are necessary to set a different pathway to a more promising future. Failure to change minds and hearts, and to continue along the more-of-the-same, business-as-usual mode will be disastrous for Malaysians. There is no magic wand to wave this complex problem away. Only a sheer, single-minded, deliberate, resolute and urgent shoulder to the plough approach will do. And we, the general populace, must constructively engage in *rebuilding* our society in this most urgent matter, rather than just leave it in the hands of the powers that be.

## **A Political Solution**

Such a goal is, of course, not an easy undertaking. Many other nations, economically bigger and with a much longer political history than our own humble nation, have stumbled and grumbled their way through their own journeys to harness their own pluralism to a manageable and functional organism. But in

Malaysia, the chance remains to make our pluralism work for us and the world, by the grace of God.

In a situation where the potential and serious threat of social conflict is ever present, a political solution is the better and saner choice, rather than a free-for-all, take-things-into-your-own-hands, to-each-his-own approach. This is because a political solution is the outcome of a series of negotiations involving all stakeholders. In place of violence (God forbid), the way forward is for responsible, reasonable and listening adults, sitting around the table, to negotiate a political solution that is a win-win formula for our common good. We can only achieve this if the political process inspires greater confidence and hope by being more inclusive, rather than exclusive, more open than intransigent, in favour of all rather than just some Malaysians.

And so, we find that politics is unavoidable, needful and desirable. A people's journey or a nation's destiny is via the political process. And we the general populace must necessarily understand politics in a more substantial and extensive way in order to participate more effectively in the process and bring about necessary and desirable changes.

## **Parable of the Road User**

A simple, real-life understanding of politics in a plural society comes to this author every day, when he takes to the road. As a single road-user, he immediately comes to realise there are many like him, driving, riding or walking on the same roadways. We may have different reasons, different destinations, as well as different temperaments when we hit the road. Like our vehicles, we road-users may be young, old or middle-aged, slower or faster, newer or older for wear and tear, better equipped, with hi-tech or with yesterday's technology. Despite our considerable differences, for better or worse, we are all on the *same* road.



For some road-users, it is OK to arrive tomorrow, while others feel they should have arrived yesterday. For some, two-thirds of the lane *dah cukup* (is sufficient), but for others only one-and-a-half lane *baru puas* (will do). Some drive or ride with the attitude that they paid road tax three years in advance and are thus entitled to all three lanes as they please; others act like they last paid their road tax three years ago, and thus travel gingerly and surreptitiously, ever on the lookout for the police and camera, holding up traffic behind them; still others drive or ride as though they don't pay any road tax at all, period!

Each festive season sees some Malaysians use our roadways, when they *balik kampung* (return to their outstation family homes), in ways that cause terrible and fatal accidents. It's like how some people in the world out there celebrate New Year's eve with such exuberance and abandonment as to throw all caution to the wind, with the end result being that they and innocent bystanders do not survive beyond the first day of the new year!

It seems not all road-users clearly understand in their hearts and minds that they need to be considerate of other road-users for their own safety and well-being.

My chance of surviving a journey without harm to myself and my vehicle is to make sure that I drive in such a way that does not cause harm, or at least reduces the risk of harm, to other road-users. If enough of us think, ride, walk and drive responsibly, we can substantially reduce the number of accidents, or at least contain the mayhem on the road.

Awareness of other road users and where they are in relation to where we are in any given moment on the road is the very basics of road safety. For this reason, our vehicles are fitted with rear and side-view mirrors which help us to know where the other cars or bikes may be at any one time.

One other vital point we must never forget when on the road is that not all road-users are in fact in or on motor vehicles. There are also road users on pedal bikes and there are also road users on nothing else but their own two feet - which further complicates matters but their use of the road is as legitimate as those of us who are in the relative safety of our motor vehicles. There again some of our vehicles are on four while others are on eight, even sixteen or more wheels!

Thus, to be on the road is a matter of necessity but road travel is complex and risky.

For us to be careless and selfish road-users is suicidal. When I drive, ride or walk carelessly, I not only harm others, I risk harming myself. I am never alone on the road and all of us road-users need one another's wisdom, patience, consideration, knowledge and practice of basic road-safety principles to ensure safe travel. Defensive driving is good for every road-user. Giving way is an essential manoeuvring option, and it is often the safer option. To always insist on my right of way, rather than putting safety first, can send me to the intensive care unit in hospital.

## **The Political Highway**

In much the same way, we can't live in the same country without being always aware of, and having due regard for, the presence and whereabouts of others who are not of our own faith, culture, or community. I hasten to add here that becoming more aware of others is not for the purpose of surreptitious surveillance so as to plot against them! Rather, it is for the sincere purpose of really getting to know our neighbours, their concerns and aspirations so as not to misunderstand or misjudge them. That is, to see them in better light.

The dynamics of safe road-use apply to living together in the same land or neighbourhood. I cannot just care for myself.

My personal interests are best served if the interests of others are also being served. No particular ethnic or religious community or income-bracket sector of society can just care for itself without caring for others. There is a price to pay if we couldn't care less.

The political solution is arrived at by a critical mass of citizens engaging in the process of conversing, consulting, hearing and understanding that there are other inhabitants in the country, and their respective concerns, needs, fears and aspirations are as legitimate as ours.

As in road traffic, giving way is a given in our collective national life. In the political process, giving way must be rooted in the same sense of reasonableness - that it is not an intransigent one-way street that provides space only for any one community's perspective and welfare, and that it does not encourage the ill-conceived culture of driving against traffic, which predictably leads to chaos and mayhem.

The die-hard intransigent few in each respective community with blinkers to their eyes, who talk like they are the only dwellers and owners of the land, should not deter the rest of us from seeking consensus through mutual respect and due consultation on a fair, just and reasonable platform for the common good.

Each community needs to inculcate in its members the virtues of fairness, reasonableness and goodwill as the basis of respect for others. The goal is like the objective of a journey on the road: to ensure that all users have their due space, right and guarantee to safe travel and safe arrival. The travel process is fraught with danger, risk, and complications. Accidents will still occur, but the risks and casualties must be contained as much as our resolve can and must muster.

As a nation of people, we must always deal effectively with the drunken, inconsiderate, selfish, foolish, couldn't-care-less

and egoistic travellers in our midst because of the harm they can inflict on others. Personal freedom and rights come with responsibilities vis-à-vis to oneself and others. I am only free to do right.

This parable reminds us that whoever, whatever and however we may be, there are many others in this country with us. And each community, no matter how different from our own, has every right to be in Malaysia, and reasonable, adequate space must be made for its cultural and customary distinctiveness, so that our collective life as a nation will not lose its rich cultural mix while it functions and progresses as an integrated nation.

It is not about attracting tourist money, it is about what is right. We must behave ourselves vis-à-vis one another not only for the sake of our foreign guests. The message on our well-funded tourist brochures must be the same message to our own domestic residents as it is to our foreign visitors. There must not be a schizophrenic double-mindedness in this. Advertisements are famously known for being a far cry from reality.

We must behave toward one another for our own sake as a nation. Embracing our fellow human beings is the right thing to do, and to deny another human being primarily on the basis of ethnicity, religion, gender, language, economic difference or social status is clearly wrong. We need constant reminders that other communities are present in the land and the Golden Rule of social conduct that we do to others what we would have others do to us must apply.

## **A Worthy Destination**

The end of the road should not be a dead end. As a nation, we cannot afford to be on a road to nowhere.

The roadways we are on must lead only to legitimate destinations. Therefore, there are laws against dangerous driving.

The political highway will always have its share of people with anti-social, contemptible, despicable, ultra-religious, ultra-conservative, and undesirable goals. If given too much leeway, such people will destroy national harmony and integration. The contesting parties in an election will each try to stigmatise its political foes by labelling them as extremists, while turning a blind eye to its own supporters' extremism.

Like the traffic police who combat rain, sun and smog to maintain order on our roads, we who share this country, politicians and plain citizens alike, must insist that those who have stewardship of the government will keep peace and order, and responsibly hold the country's resources in an accountable manner while reining in their supporters - not just their opponents - who do and say things that are detrimental to the social fabric of the country as a whole.

The paramount value and attitude all Malaysians must possess, treasure and practise is respect for one another. In this matter, it is high time we retire the ideas, attitudes and conduct associated with the term 'tolerate' or 'tolerance'.

Tolerance is most decidedly not the equal of respect. It pales in comparison. In inter-personal relationships, tolerance as the basis of attitude and conduct is insulting, belittling and offensive. It smacks of condescension.

In marriage and family life, if I just tolerate my parents-in-law or my children's spouses, rather than truly respect them, I set my marriage and family life on a downhill course.

Political leaders who merely tolerate sections of the populace, rather than sincerely respect them, have effectively set the nation on a similar, downhill course. Such political or administrative operatives must not be allowed a day longer in office to infuse their malice and ill-will upon Malaysian society, which is generally founded on goodwill.

Human beings anywhere have what it takes to muster the necessary will, resolve, volition, focus, inspiration, discipline, diligence, urgency - whatever it takes - to ensure safe arrival at a singularly worthwhile and valuable destination. Thus, human beings through the ages have undergone sacrifice, hardship and the most stringent regimen to conquer Everest; to overcome poverty, or physical, mental and emotional disabilities; to achieve excellence, not just as athletes, captains of industry, educators, manual labourers, technicians, engineers or medical professionals, but also as parents, caregivers, social workers, and neighbours.

Provided the goal and destination are worthy, and those in leadership and authority at all levels are fair, just, exemplary and genuine in their conduct and practice, the people in a given country can rise above themselves against all odds and obstacles to achieve the just goal of harmony, integration, justice and peace.

## **Peace with Justice**

But there is no peace without justice.

Wrong in any form, by any personage of whatever *pangkat* (rank, status) in any office or station in life, must not be allowed or condoned, let alone encouraged. We need people with *pangkat* who are clearly seen to behave in an exemplary manner in all dealings with the general populace, rather than the mightier-than-thou, you-are-lower-than-me, I-take-what-I-want kind of nonsense we are used to seeing, hearing and enduring.

Discrimination along the lines of ethnicity, creed or gender cannot be justified. The same moral measure and standard must apply to all human beings. While there may be different management or positional levels in human institutions and organisations, governmental or non-governmental, a rank or

honour does not exempt the bearer from accountability and adherence to common law and public morality.

Truth be told, the higher one's rank, the greater one's responsibility to adhere to good conduct and attitude must be.

Low-class behaviour is low-class immaterial of a person's so-called high-class status. Hence the adage, '*Leadership by example*'. Conversely, high-class behaviour and demeanour on the part of a so-called lower-class person is a high-class act! Taking advantage of and abusing one's rank to cut corners, demand and receive, plunder and steal, assault and pilfer, lie and cheat, bully and persecute with impunity is despicable, disgraceful, shameful and immoral. The notion that only the lower-ranked (in a society that accords such arbitrary ranking to its people) are liable for their misconduct, and that leniency or penalty is dispensed according to rank rather than the actual nature or weight of the crime, is a travesty of justice. It shames a nation and emboldens perpetrators of so-called white-collar crime.

Hence, we call such criminal actions *day-light robbery*! And white-collar criminals are blind as bats (no insult intended to these innocent night-creatures) because they can only see in the darkness of the night.

## **Inspiring Effort**

If there is no level playing field, there can be no incentive for superlative efforts by those involved in any endeavour or enterprise to co-operate and put their shoulders to the plough, to achieve and accomplish sublime goals, since in reality their labour seems only to benefit their superiors. If hard work is meant to make the top echelons of society, industry and government gain more and look better, that agenda or goal will not inspire walking the extra mile, nor will it qualify as a

worthwhile destination for common travellers. Who in their right mind would want to do donkey's work year-in and year-out only to promote the egos and make the donkeys of society look good? (Again with due apologies to donkeys who from time immemorial have been indispensable beasts of burden to humans.)

Leaders of any corporation, organisation, community or nation must know instinctively that they cannot expect their staff, members, communities or citizens to put their bodies, hearts, minds and souls into any enterprise or objective, the end result of which disproportionately benefits the favoured few in the upper ranks.

Leadership must inspire effort on the part of all on the basis that the whole venture will fairly benefit all.

On this note, this author is reminded of his appointment to take charge of a humanitarian aid organisation in Timor Leste (East Timor), when it was nearing the end of its second year as an independent nation. He remembers that upon his arrival at the airport in Dili, he was driven straight to his new office compound to immediately address his 100 staff, who had assembled to greet him. His first words to them were, *"I cannot succeed unless YOU succeed. Therefore, I am here to facilitate your success."*

Clearly, his role was to boost the morale and capacity of local staff and wean them away from over-dependence on expatriates. After all that they as a people had suffered at the hands of foreign powers and interests, they needed to find their self-worth and learn to believe in themselves. Their success was his main concern and, ironically, if he failed to help them achieve their own success, his time with them would have ended in his own failure. In all of life, we strive for a win-win situation or else lose-lose will be the unfortunate outcome.

An equitable distribution of wealth and wellness is a given



in the pursuit of success in a corporation or nation. A genuine win-win situation is the only just way forward in any demanding journey. Hypocrisy at the top is not an incentive for sacrificial labour on the part of the lower ranks of the workforce.

And so it is with the citizens of a country, where answering the patriotic call to love their nation and the impassioned demands for nationalistic fervour seem only to advantage and further elevate the powers that be, rather than meet the needs of the *rakyat* (people at large).

## **The People is the Nation**

A nation is not just some inorganic, impersonal concept or mere political vocabulary. It is from the original Greek, *ethnos*, commonly translated as 'peoples'. So, '*Kerana mu, Malaysia*' (a worthy previous theme for National Day celebration), in fact should be taken to mean '*because of you, Malaysians*' or '*for you, Malaysians*'. The emphasis is on the people, rather than the symbolic flag or name of a nation.

Symbols are surely not nearly as important as what they symbolise.

We fuss over and are meticulous about symbols - that they be understandably treated with much reverence and respect - but neglect and do not show the same reverence and respect for the people that a national flag and name represent. To love a nation and respect its flag is to love and respect its people. Mere homage and reverence toward the symbols are no comfort to the people of the nation.

Frequently, the powers that be seek to rally citizens around the national flag but flagrantly ride slip-shod over these same people. What good does it do?

*The people are the nation.* The nation is its people. Its people as a whole must thrive, and be cared for.

Do we know Malaysia and Malaysians? Each of us in the main is familiar with our own respective circle of contact. Some circles of contact are small, others are bigger. But only a very few of us, if at all, may be able to say our circle of contact is big enough. There is for each of us a far larger Malaysia out there of which we have little contact with or notion of. Rural and urban folks have different outlooks and challenges. Semenanjung (peninsular) Malaysians do not always understand nor appreciate the struggles and contributions of Malaysians in Sabah and Sarawak. And vice-versa. We are a plural society of many cultures, religions and languages in our respective locales.

When we listen to some politicians, we get this feeling that they don't have the sense of the whole nation. But we ourselves as the general populace need to check ourselves too. There is a diversity in Malaysia which we as citizens and as politicians don't realise or pay enough attention to. Sometimes this author catches himself saying something which tugs at the corner of his mind and heart warning him that he is really on very dicey ground. He thinks he knows when actually he doesn't know. He doesn't know Malaysia or Malaysians to an enough extent to think or speak about the people and country as a whole as he sometimes carelessly does.

Our rallying point should in fact be: Many Malaysians make Malaysia. The resources of the nation must work for its people as a whole and enhance their aspirations and welfare. The chances of that happening can only improve when the people ensure that their government is on its mark to do so.

Together we shall stand. Or else, we shall ALTOGETHER fall.

## CHAPTER 2

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# A NATION'S GREATNESS

### **True Greatness**

A nation's greatness lies not in its own claims, protestations or boasts about itself, but in the way it does business and shows concern and respect for its people and their inalienable rights and resources.

A nation's government, being such a major, prominent and powerful player in its national life, must be fearful of God and, accordingly, be upright, honest and responsible to its people and must oversee and manage the nation's resources with fairness and integrity.

Accordingly, a great nation must have in place mechanisms and instruments of government that will:

1. *Safeguard* the legitimate rights of its people with guarantees of fundamental liberties through just implementation and enforcement protocols;
2. *Interpret* its Constitution according to the spirit and not just the letter of the law, being very mindful of why and

how certain sections of the Constitution were historically included;

3. Respond to criticism and concern put forward by the people through opportunities for direct contact with their government through their duly elected (or appointed) representatives in the federal parliament and senate, state assembly or local council;
4. Guarantee clean electoral rolls as well as fair and clean elections that are scrupulously conducted on a level playing field for all contesting parties and candidates, and subjected to professional, independent scrutiny so that the polling and counting of votes and the ensuing results will be accepted without question and beyond any doubt;
5. Apply the most stringent standards, procedures and protocols in the stewardship and management of the nation's natural resources and its taxpayers' money;
6. Ensure, without fear or favour, transparency and accountability at all levels so that integrity can be convincingly demonstrated, and wrongdoers, regardless of status, rank or political persuasion, will be seen to answer for their wrongful deeds, sending a clear and unequivocal message that no one, indeed no one, is above the law;
7. Facilitate the equitable distribution of wealth to earnestly and effectively ease the hardship of poorer segments of the population with affordable housing, necessary infrastructure and utilities, which will enhance their health, livelihood and gainful employment;
8. Keep separate the three main institutions of state, namely, the executive, the legislature and the judiciary, so that each

entity may function independently, with no one of these institutions having undue influence over any other in a way that will impede or interfere with the performance of their respective functions;

9. *Require* that all personnel in public service undertake their duties with integrity, honour and justice without being beholden to any political masters, realising that they serve the people and nation rather than any political faction; and that, like every other citizen, they each have one vote and that after any elections they must have the integrity to co-operate and serve with whichever political faction forms the government, regardless of their own individual preferences.

These are but some of the principles that, if earnestly and sincerely pursued and enforced by the people's government, will move the nation forward, and toward the worthwhile destination the people deserve.

The people of the nation must in turn play a most vital role in being vigilant over the government's key performance indices toward such a goal, and in being responsible and co-operative participants in their own elected government, paying just taxes, observing just laws, integrating and relating well with all communities and segments of society, giving credit to whomever credit is justifiably due, and fair criticism where criticism is warranted.

A nation's citizens contribute to the nation's greatness, or otherwise. In the case of our own country, we the people need to shine most when we rigorously fight off the temptation to think of our plurality - our multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-religious background - as a discount or disadvantage. In fact, our plurality is, and can continue to be, our greatest asset. Because

God made us so and since He does not make mistakes, this is a glorious experience for us, a spiritually educational advantage about the limitlessness of our Creator, so that in relating to one another we have to span so many aspects and levels of human plurality, the better to appreciate and experience our God of such breath, height and depth.

## **True Patriotism**

A truly great nation must understand true loyalty, patriotism and nationalism. The nation must readily recognise the principles and characteristics of a loyal citizen, a true patriot and a responsible nationalist.

The history of our country, not so unlike that of others, has been punctuated by notions of loyalty and patriotism that make thinking people cringe with shame and horror. Should a true patriot, for example, be one who is like the three proverbial monkeys, with hands clamped tightly over mouth, ears and eyes, displaying blind patriotism, unthinking nationalism and undiscerning loyalty? Are citizens of a great nation required always to be pro-government in everything and above all things, ever claiming that their country can do no wrong and is better than other countries in every respect? And even when the country under its government does wrong on occasion, must we maintain a stoic silence and not speak about any wrong, no matter how blatant or obvious, simply to spare the nation embarrassment, shame and disgrace before a watchful world?

Who is a true patriot: the person whose award and use of public funds is questionable or the person who raises questions and proffers evidence that may lead to earnest investigation, prosecution and sentencing of a wrongdoer?

While it can be argued that critique should be performed in as respectful a manner as can be mustered, it is nevertheless vital

that we as a nation accept and appreciate criticism as much as accolade, never mind how artfully or otherwise they may have been delivered.

As individuals or a nation, if we seek only praise without blame, we can only slide backward, regress rather than progress. As such, critics through their chosen medium of prose, verse, film, drama, song, dance, painting, comic strip, animation, letters or coffee-shop talk, should be regarded as doing our nation a huge favour by pointing out certain things in their own unique ways, which would otherwise be lost on us.

If we are sincere in requesting feedback, we shouldn't prescribe the format. We should not insist on sanitised messages to suit our taste. As a nation, we should be big enough to accept that some people think we are wrong in some things, or that we can do better in other things.

Blind patriotism on the part of its leaders and citizens, far from leading a nation to greatness, will only bring ruin, disgrace and misery to the nation and its people. Self-delusion isn't complementary to greatness. A nation will be great only if it has the courage to face up to its own shortcomings, and not be blind to its own wrongdoings, failings, mistakes, imperfections and impurities.

Wrong is wrong, right is right, no matter the colour of our flag, the name of our land, the location we occupy in the map of the world, the size of our population, or the duration of our history. We are wrong not simply because another nation says so. We are wrong when we are wrong. By admitting we are at times wrong about some things, it does not mean we are not right about anything, nor do we necessarily become less than other nations. By the same virtue, other nations are no greater than us simply because they wish to continue to be blind, deaf and dumb to their own shortcomings.

In international diplomacy, understandably, our representatives don't necessarily have to go around confessing our sins as though others in the international community are our confessors (priests authorised to hear confessions). Be that as it may, when we are wrong about something, it is much better and more favourable for our nation if we ourselves just accept the fact, right the wrong ourselves and go on from there, rather than invite lingering attention of the wrong kind from the international community.

## **A watching World**

The international community cannot be silent should there be blatant violations. Commonly, nations big or small that are accused of such violations will take shelter under the umbrella of their independence and tell other nations to please mind their own business, thank you! While there is much precedence for this line of defence, and certainly, the accused nations must have recourse for pleading their respective cases since mere accusation is no confirmation of guilt, there are some things that others cannot ignore.

For example, if I were a practising spouse-beater and child-abuser (or maid or pet abuser), and my neighbours hear and see, and know so, can my self-defence be that those nosy-parkers should stop interfering in my domestic affairs and mind their own business? If such self-defence were accepted, won't that be tantamount to disregarding evidence of a criminal act and encouraging repetitive acts of battery or verbal abuse?

This human world can be a better place if we stop being unsuspecting accomplices to powerful people who do wrong things to those who could not resist their bad behaviour. There are different ways to be witting or, more likely, unwitting accomplices. One effortless way is to maintain silence compared



to speaking up and out (which granted isn't always easy or safe to do).

A neighbour's silence may lead to serious injury, the next time round, to another human being, if not worse. Minding one's own business is the kind of excuse we use when a neighbour turns up the TV and sound system to share it with neighbours, even when it is not welcome; or when a neighbour takes delight in revving up his souped-up car engine and drives at full speed in neighbourhood roads where children are on their bicycles. One of these days, a serious accident may happen and someone's child will pay the price for such wanton conduct. A bad neighbour cannot always be ignored or left to continue his anti-social acts.

When is one's house boundary not within a bigger neighbourhood? Therefore, what one does in one's home is not always contained therein but can affect all others in the neighbourhood and wider society, for better or for worse.

In a similar vein, a nation with thousands of nuclear warheads cannot tell us, other nations in the international community, to keep our opinions about their nuclear arsenal to ourselves for the simple reason that obviously, these weapons are not for them to use on themselves. These nuclear weapons, while produced in their home country, are of course not for the domestic market, but for export only! They are meant to blow up not their own but other people's countries under hostile circumstances.

So to say that what happens within our own shores is our own business alone is naive to a fault because we cannot just do business within our own country. Our economic viability lies within our participation in international trade. When we do business with other countries and regions, certain things can and are imposed on us. This arena is by no means always fair

to us smaller players and, thus, we the smaller countries have to resort to coming together to formulate our own regional trade pacts. But despite such faults and weaknesses in the international system, some useful role is definitely played by the world community at critical times.

Take for example, Myanmar, whose internal affairs made its membership within ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) highly controversial. But ASEAN, with Malaysia's active involvement, played a critical middleman's role in the process. Myanmar, a full member of ASEAN, was hit with economic sanctions. The social and economic stigma that came with it, as much of the world pulled away from doing business-as-usual with them, recently led to the relenting of Myanmar's intransigent and tight-fisted military regime, after many long years of stubborn resistance, much to the relief of many countries of the world. Although these are very early days yet, there is good reason for optimism that sufficient change is being planned and effected so as to usher in a brighter future for the people of Myanmar. The world holds its breath and encourages key reforms to continue.

The sustained pressure from the world community to draw such a response from a regime that had infamously overruled the results of an election that it had conducted in 1988, jailing many of those who won while committing the nation's favourite daughter to a total of 15 long years of house arrest, is a clear reason why intervention by the international community into a given nation's affairs is at times necessary and should be welcomed by other nations.

The person who was the bane of the autocratic rulers and treated as an enemy of the nation for so much of the country's recent history, is now the face of the nation, and the powers that be now work with her in the hope that they will win the nation

some much needed consideration. She is now her erstwhile foes' chief reconciler to the world. Who would have thought of such an improbable scenario! But, indeed, sometimes fact is stranger than fiction.

We have here shades of the case of the arch-enemy of unconscionable apartheid rule, emerging from 27 years in prison to become the founding president of the new South Africa. There was no overnight makeover, and reform is still far from finished today, but the turning point did come, in no small part because the world community was united against an immoral philosophy of political domination and enslavement of human beings on the basis of skin colour.

## **Taking Ownership of Our own Problems**

Be that as it may, while we must subscribe to protocols that govern our inter-relationship with the rest of the world and, where necessary, even be humble to accept questions from without about our own country's affairs, self-censure and examination is of course best. And what's best about this solution is that it lies with our own selves. As a nation, let us fix our own problems. Better still, let us conscientiously be humble enough to listen early and attend to problems when they begin, to nip them in the buds before the problems intensify and reach the point where outside intervention is justified. It is all in our own hands. We can stay arrogant and risk eventual exposure and intervention, or we can face our problems squarely with both government and people sitting down and hearing each other out to agree on a good way forward.

The point here is that in our own country and with our own people, we must not pretend that all is bright and rosy and that there is no dirt, thievery, deceit and disgrace within our own national borders. In this respect, the only NO we can proclaim is

to SHAME (as in '*no shame*').

Our top guns can sometimes be intransigent and adamantly see clean where ordinary people see dirt. Sweeping things under the carpet is not how we as a nation should manage our affairs and critical problems. For that matter, no individual person or family or community can afford to adopt such an approach as a problem-solving tool, let alone a nation. In life, we ignore problems at our own peril! Problems don't get solved simply because we deny their existence or potency. What we don't resolve today will come back to us an uncontrollable monster tomorrow. Hence, this author and many other Malaysians cannot stand the way the government sometimes answers questions put to them in parliament or the way it treats parliamentary *Question Time* itself and, indeed, the parliamentary process as a whole. Rightly or wrongly, we catch the hint that the parliamentary process is an inconvenience to the government, that they *main wayang kulit* (shadow play) and merely tolerate it, to use our local parlance.

Denial can and does take many forms. As we have seen, nations under criticism will cry foul and resort to insisting on their sovereign and independent status. Another excuse that is put forward is the uniqueness of one's own country. '*Don't compare an apple to a pear*' is one expression of this sort of excuse. But are there not fundamental human rights and freedoms that come with responsibilities? These are universal and apply to the entire human race regardless of culture, ethnicity, language, creed or nationality. If the world community were to reject this premise, no agreements can ever be reached, let alone enforced.

The equation for international relations, be it in the sports arena or for economic co-operation or in peace negotiations, must be based on commonly accepted values. International sport is possible only because the various sports have their respective

rules, and wherever they are being played, the same rules apply. That is why the Olympic Games can be staged and almost all the nations of the world can participate.

The sense of natural justice cannot be kept out by nations on the basis of their independence or uniqueness. National borders or cultural differences cannot negate natural justice.

If I commit rape in one country and run to another country, steal money from one country and take it across the border, or break a business contract and go somewhere else - will I, should I, be left alone, or should efforts be made to hunt me down to make me answer for my crime?

If I father a child in one country then abandon the child and relocate myself to another country, is the child any less mine? Am I any less the father who has responsibility over his child? Can cannibalism be acceptable anywhere? Can we eat up another human being because it is our culture, our unique way of life? Is rape or spouse or child abuse permissible as per a given culture? Can bribery and corruption ever be right anywhere?

What sort of world will this be if natural justice is not commonly held universally?

## **Justice applies to All**

Therefore, certain acts, conduct or practice are unacceptable. Denial in the face of definite wrongdoing is not a virtue but a symptom of self-delusion. Deflecting attention of our wrongdoing while directing attention to others' wrongdoing is self-serving and disingenuous. Other nations' wrong does not make our own nation's wrong, right.

Sometimes we speak and behave as though the only injury to our national pride is committed by the *jaga kereta* (illegal parking attendants), petty thieves or drug addicts, whereas white-collar crimes, including those committed in the corridors of state,

are accorded much more dignity and decorum.

Crimes blatantly committed by so-called (or is it self-called?) 'high-class' people are still what they actually are, blatantly low-class conduct. Such sleights of hand and supple semantics, when employed to deny wrongdoing, only serve to confuse our children and bring scorn upon the good name of our nation. It is high time we learn what children know and practice naturally, and that is, to call a spade a spade. If Shakespeare was indeed right, that 'A rose by any other name will smell as sweet', then inversely, a foul act will smell as repulsive no matter how expensive the perfume we may apply in order to hide it. Where there is hype, fact is endangered.

We cannot make truth disappear into thin air. There is no wand so magical or camouflage so effective or censorship so iron-clad that a truth or untruth can be hidden for long from public scrutiny. I can be as dishonest as I wish and plan to be, or project a contrary image and sound reasonable and honest, or dress smartly and stunningly, but the honest truth about myself will come out for all to see – sooner or later. If only we – as a people and nation, and among ourselves – would view ourselves and our deeds through clear rather than glazed glass, imagine what a country and how proud our people shall be!

Hypocrisy never prospers a society, nation, culture, creed or community. Blaming and accusing others does not ever make us look or sound better. Critique affects both the critic and the criticised, and both must be humble or both shall be humbled. The two roles are in fact interchangeable. Today I may be a critic, tomorrow I may be the person rightly criticised. By the same virtue and the same process, both the critic and the criticised can benefit and improve. "*Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser; teach a righteous man and he will increase in learning.*" (Book of Proverbs 9.9,10, Holy Bible)

The whole point of critique is that it applies both ways and is capable of educating and enriching both sides. The desired outcome is improvement and progress.

## **Bringing Disrepute upon Ourselves**

Nothing reflects more poorly on a nation's image than when sex, alcohol and gambling are hurled upon political rivals in an election campaign and irrefutable evidence does not see the light of day because that campaign period is so short. If indeed these three behaviours rank so much higher than others, why limit them to election candidates or election campaigns? Better we be serious in our wish to become a model moral society and publish the entire '*Who's who*' of those who have indulged in these three '*super-grade*' sins, regardless of rank, file or connection. Let's publish this list and be damned, and go down altogether.

Hypocrisy is always the greater sin. In the words of Jesus, "*Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.*" (Matthew 7.3-5, Holy Bible)

By allowing and encouraging hypocrisy, we tolerate and elevate the ultras of every creed and race, so they may run riot, promoting their pseudo theologies, always declaring the sins of others as greater than their own and, thus, excusing themselves as lesser sinners.

Loyalty, sacrifice and sentiments for one's nation are not the same as loyalty and support for the ruling political party (regardless of whichever side forms the government).

A nation is not indistinguishable from its sitting government. While it acts for the nation, no ruling political party should ever

think itself synonymous with the nation. This notion must never even be conceived, let alone be acceptable to the people of any land or tribe. No people or political party should even think so.

My vote, should it go against the ruling party, is neither treacherous nor a betrayal of my country. Periodically, we go to the polls to vote for our government. A change of government is no betrayal of the nation, it is a normal process in a democracy. A change of government is not a change of country!

Blind, unquestioning support for any political party, now and always, ultimately will never be good for the nation. A government must be based on stewardship principles and practice, and it can only commend itself to the people when it acquits its task with dignity and good conduct. Any elected government will only have limited authority to govern and a specific time-frame within which to use that authority. Being elected as a government of the nation for a given term is not to be mistaken as ownership let alone a lifetime's right to govern.

A government is elected for a maximum of five years. The term of a government after general elections is only until the next elections, when the people again vote and choose who will govern them.

Voters elect a government to hold office. They don't elect permanent owners of the country. The country is not for sale. It will forever be owned by the people.

Bad governance clouds patriotic sentiments and sours the pride one has for one's nation. Don't blame the *rakyat* (the people) for voting to change the government, for not renewing the incumbent's term, for choosing a new government formed by a different political party or coalition, if it comes to that. It is their constitutional right and it may be precipitated by how the sitting government's performance is perceived by a majority of voters.



Any blatant misconduct on the part of the government and public officials, as well as the people at large, brings disrepute to the nation. But more importantly, every just and appropriate act or decision by government, officials and people will truly enhance the reputation of their nation, and set it on the path to true greatness, not as a matter of pride in comparison with other nations, but for the goodwill, welfare and morale of the people.

## The Measure of Greatness

Humility on our part as a nation inclines us to be willing to learn from others and other contexts. It reinforces what we know within our own selves. It brings us to focus more sharply and accurately on what will make us a better nation.

*“A nation’s greatness is measured by how it treats its weakest members.”*

(Mahatma Gandhi)

*“False greatness is unsociable and remote: conscious of its own frailty, it hides, or at least averts its face, and reveals itself only enough to create an illusion and not be recognised as the meanness that it really is. True greatness is free, kind, familiar and popular; it lets itself be touched and handled, it loses nothing by being seen at close quarters; the better one knows it, the more one admires it.”*

(Jean De La Bruyere)

*“The greatness of a country is to be measured by something more than its rulers, its military budget, its instruments of dominance and destruction, and its profiteering giant corporations. A nation’s greatness can be measured by the democratic nature of its institutions, by its ability to create a society free of poverty, racism, sexism, exploitation,*

*imperialism, and environmental devastation. There is no better way to love one's country, and strive for the fulfilment of its greatness, than to entertain critical ideas that enable us to pursue social justice at home and abroad."*

(Michael Parenti, *Democracy for the Few*)

## CHAPTER 3

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# A PEOPLE'S SCEPTICISM

### Politics as an Irritant

There are times when reading the papers or online news portals - mainstream and alternative - we may have caught ourselves thinking about politics and politicians through expressions such as,

*“Politics is a waste of time.”*

*“Politics is no action, talk only (NATO).”*

*“Politics is not everybody’s cup of tea.”*

*“Darnest thing I’d heard!”*

*“We have better things to do. Leave politics to the politicians!”*

*“We go about our own lives and leave the politicians to go about theirs.”*

*“Our world is not the same one as the politicians’ world.”*

*“I can’t take politics seriously. One day it is this, next day it is that. One day they say this, next day they say that.”*

*“The politicians’ words have many more meanings and interpretations than ours.”*

Admittedly, our feeling of fatigue, distrust, disillusionment and despair - when politics is in display - is a common issue and justified at several levels. Often, politicians and politics can seem very negative, irrelevant, trivial, full of arguments, childish, petty and unending.

Politics seems to generate more questions than answers.

The people's scepticism about politics is no surprise, given its torturous, circuitous path to problem-solving. There seems never to be a simple and direct way to a political solution or settlement. Not every one of us readily takes to a trip on a very winding, uphill road. The destination seems to always lie only after the next corner and you can't ever see it straight ahead. On such roundabout routes, ordinary citizens get carsick, seasick and homesick, and wish we had stayed at home than to have set out on this never-ending road.

With each unending journey and the denial of the little satisfaction we may derive upon arrival, scepticism grows. More than the political process itself, the antics of some politicians, especially in their role as drivers through stretches of winding road, expose them as experts in cutting corners. Cheating, stealing and then lying about their wrongdoing seem to be the hallmark of such politicians whose self-interests come before the interests of their constituents.

So not only do we have to cope with winding roads, we have drivers who cut corners, endangering their passengers, and who remain ever on the lookout to overtake other cars with or without the opportunity to do so. So what are the chances of safe and satisfactory arrival for us ordinary citizens? Thus, there is reason for scepticism about politics among many people.

To many of us, politics is rather like what Shakespeare said through the mouth of Macbeth,

*“To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,  
To the last syllable of recorded time;  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!  
Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player,  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
And then is heard no more. **It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.**”* (Macbeth; Act 5, scene 5, 19–28)

While his words seem to fit the kind of politics that we know so well, Macbeth is in fact talking about life itself. The fact that his description of the life he faces reminds us so much of politics demonstrates all the more that politics and life are so intertwined as to make it hard to separate life from politics or politics from life. Macbeth’s cynical view of life in fact is uttered when he sees that his own ambition - fed, stoked and encouraged by the three witches - is embroiled in palace politics, much of which is of his own doing, and which in turn leads to his undoing. Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* is an intensely political drama and, had the playwright been our contemporary, writing in today’s political climate in our country, we can well imagine how he would have been served notices by many agencies from various government ministries. The attorney-general’s office would have been so busy determining what sedition charges to haul him to court with! Needless to say, together with him in court would be the producer and actors and the owners of the theatre, not to forget a few selected members of the audience who might have unfortunately laughed or cheered too vociferously or enthusiastically at certain

lines of the play, which could have been construed as being especially more seditious than other lines.

Mind you, the feelings and sentiments as expressed by Macbeth may actually apply both ways, that is, to politicians and voters alike. Politicians, especially the people's elected representatives, could also be reminded of these words in the face of incessant demands from their constituents, which burn their ears in a broad spectrum of tone and volume. So the feelings may be mutual! Both voters and their elected representatives can at times be dismayed, each with the other, and both with pressing issues at hand that seem inexhaustible and defy satisfactory solution.

## **Politics as Comic Relief**

Political antics make for good comedy except that Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is very much more tragic than comic. And so it is with politics as it mirrors human life and relationships.

The comic side of politics can come from nothing or everything and, in the art of skilled actors, writers or stand-up comedians, there is comedy in anything. Yet as we know in real life, many humourists and comedians may be leading a somewhat sober, even sombre life of their own, based on the realities of home and family, income and expenditure. Just as a sober and sad writer can come out with hilarious comedy, on stage the stand-up comedian can nevertheless perform to unstoppable laughter from the audience, regardless of the real feelings the performer himself or herself may harbour underneath the humour he or she is delivering to an audience. The same may also be true of the audience, who, despite their vociferous laughter and enthusiastic response for the duration of the performance, may in fact be going home to unresolved issues of tragic consequence.

Such is *life in reality*. In whatever situation of life there is often a tragic as well as comic element. It makes us cry, but from another angle, the same thing may also make us laugh out loud. Crying without laughing or laughing without crying is neither a true depiction nor understanding of life.

Our laughter does not turn something deadly serious into something flippant and ridiculous, and our tears do not rob something deadly serious of its comic side.

In like fashion, politics deals with real life despite the way it may be perceived or pitched by politicians and voters alike. In the comment sections of the online news portals, a host of expletives is in vogue to express people's dismay and disgust at their politicians and the political process itself. And while we may not condone such offensive tirades, we can surely understand that there are people out there who are really angry about how politics in a given case or situation is being handled or ignored, and we are able to identify with their frustrations. In disliking the way things are expressed or communicated by some writers, some of us may turn away not just from the writer but also the truth they may in fact be conveying. As parents and grandparents, aunties and uncles, we can miss a lot if we don't listen to our children, no matter how artlessly or rudely they may be expressing themselves in anger, frustration or over-exuberance, and we shall be the poorer for it.

Very pertinent things may be said to us despite the impertinent way in which they are being conveyed to us.

For that matter, the expressions may also be furious or comic or jumbled or obscene, and we as voters and politicians alike must accept the truth contained therein. There are times when we need to listen to *what* is being conveyed, rather than *how* it is being conveyed.

Humour is used to articulate the frustration and disdain many

have about politics and the actors who star in these real-life political dramas, comic or tragic.

At the height of the political and tragic drama that followed the assassination of Benigno ‘Ninoy’ Aquino in the Philippines, the general populace was in genuine shock and grief over the sudden and ugly death of their returning hero, whom many saw as the alternative to a much scorned head of state who had overstayed, but humour and wit were what an outraged and bereaved people frequently resorted to.

Tears were interjected with amazingly witty jokes, provoking much laughter. Tears and laughter were the proven panacea that brought relief and release to a distraught and embittered people.

Humour does not detract from the tragedy. It brings relief to despair but does not make us forget the wrong that has been committed or the adverse impact it has brought to many lives.

*Galman*, the man whom the administration and the military blamed for Ninoy’s killing, became instead the rallying cry of an outraged people who did not buy the allegation that he was the killer, and instead saw him to be as much a victim as the beloved hero he allegedly killed. Galman’s body was riddled with numerous bullets and he never had the chance to plead or defend his case in court.

One day in that sad period of the Philippines’ history, I took time off from my seminary classes to catch a *Tagalog* film. The audience was in rapt attention and totally engrossed when, without warning, the film stopped dead in its tracks as the electricity supply ceased and the screen went blank at a critical juncture. At that precise moment, a member of the audience shouted out, “*Hey, Galman!*” as though to blame Galman for the electricity cut-off and unwelcome interruption. The entire cinema instantaneously erupted into laughter. Chorus upon chorus of “*Galman*” reverberated through the cinema hall, amidst boos,



hoots, whistles and laughter. When electricity was restored and screening resumed, the audience no longer cared about the story-line or whether the heroine would get her man!

In countless such situations and places throughout the land, the people played out this comic tragedy and demonstrated their utter contempt for the regime's attempts at hoodwinking the Filipino people. And quite rightly so!

## **Politics as Check and Balance**

Governments wherever they may be should be shown the door if consistently they don't take stock of the people's interests and continue to display their incapability to respect the people's intelligence and awareness of truth and their status as masters of their own destiny.

Governments insult and mistreat the people who put and keep them in office at their own peril! There is no legitimacy in a government that acts for its own sake. And no people anywhere on God's earth should tolerate a government that thinks and behaves as though it has a life of its own. And if the powers that be do not respectfully listen to the people but behave and speak with impunity, regime change is not only possible but necessary.

That being the case, nothing provokes me more than the kind of answers that this present government gives during Question Time in parliament. By the answers given, one can tell whether a sitting government treats the *Dewan Rakyat* (the people's parliament) with respect or with contempt.

This author was emphatically not amused by the empty government benches in parliament during the recent (October 2012) debate on the budget, the day after the Finance Minister (and Prime Minister) had tabled it. The government MPs remain duty-bound to explain their absence.

Why table the budget if the debate on it is treated as a non-

event and there is no meaningful role for the loyal opposition? By that same token, there is no meaning to the house of parliament and, subsequently, no meaning to general elections and all the expense and fuss that come with it. Why go through the pretence and farce?

Any sitting government that devalues the people's parliament devalues itself and its own role no less than the loyal opposition it seeks to spite, not to mention the possible denigration (intended or otherwise) of the constitutional monarchy under whose auspices parliament is convened.

A parliamentary democracy explicitly prescribes a check-and-balance protocol whereby parliament (the legislative authority) must vet, debate, raise questions and check the sitting government's (the executive) performance of its duties on behalf of the people; hold it to the required standards of good governance; and scrutinise proposals for budgets and bills before they are approved. But how can this check and balance be effected if a sitting government cuts all sorts of corners to its advantage by sending bills at very short notice to MPs? Even as important a matter as the national budget is kept secret until the Finance Minister reads it out in parliament. (It matters not in the least to this author if this is the practice of the British parliament - for why ever should we blindly follow the way our former colonial masters go about their affairs?) Even a small-time, low budget, registered society's honorary treasurer is required to send the proposed budget to committee members for their prior scrutiny before an annual general meeting!

It gets worse after the reading of the bill when the debate on the budget begins, senior government ministers go missing including the one who tabled the budget, leaving the loyal opposition to address the Speaker of the House amid rows of empty benches on the government benches. Yes, we know that

the government has other important and legitimate work and people to see to, and reasons for their absence from parliament can easily be proffered. But isn't a national budget, which affects more people in the country than any other bill put before parliament, important enough for all MPs to free themselves of other things so that both sides of parliament may demonstrate that the parliamentary process to pass the budget does assume the significance and attention it deserves?

If a matter as serious as the national budget cannot command the focus of parliamentarians, what is parliament worth? What is the parliamentary process for? And consequently, what role do MPs perform? By downgrading the role of parliament, its members downgrade their own importance.

Nothing short of an authentic debate on the budget and other bills brought to parliament will convince the people that the parliamentary process can and ought to be taken seriously. And if the parliamentary process cannot be taken seriously, then it is as clear as daylight that the people's needs, concerns and aspirations are not being taken seriously by the government of the day, and the loyal opposition's main role in parliament - to act as the people's check and balance on government plans, intentions and execution - cannot be accomplished.

How not to be sceptical about politics?

There is yet another grievance about the parliamentary process which concerns this author. How do MPs vote on bills tabled in parliament? If an MP votes all the time with his or her side of the parliamentary divide, then he or her cannot be voting according to personal conscience - a sense of right and wrong - and is instead only voting under the party whip, who ensures that the party will muster sufficient votes to either pass or defeat the bill. Obviously, MPs will understandably vote along party lines, seeing that they were elected as candidates of their respective

parties and therefore subscribe to party positions on key issues.

But is there no place for personal conscience at all in parliament! What kind of logic is at work here?

During general elections, we the general public are unfailingly urged to vote according to our *conscience*. But as it turns out, the candidate, for whom we voted according to our conscience, himself or herself is required to leave conscience behind when he or she steps into the august house of parliament! As we say in Malaysian fashion, “Where got meaning?” How do we expect people not to be sceptical about politics?

## **Politics as a Determinant of our Lives**

For us, the people, there is a time to be flippant about what we face as a nation, provided there is a time to get serious and summon the will to seek real remedies to problems of our collective national life. Despite the disdain that many may feel towards politics and its practitioners, with good reason, the fact remains there is no alternative to the political process whereby communities with different needs, aspirations and agendas may seek consensus in a legal, orderly, civil and responsible way.

Consensus cannot be arrived at by the law of the jungle, the survival of the fittest (or wealthiest or most powerful), or a to-each-his-own way. So, despite the general failings of human beings and, sadly the unsatisfactory ‘*human fix*’ (that is what politics is realistically able to achieve), the political process is nevertheless indispensable, a necessary evil, as some may say.

As fallen human beings, we do everything (not just politics) imperfectly. But imperfect though our thoughts, plans, acts and words may be in any field of endeavour, we must still plod on and get the necessary things done. So to say we want nothing to do with politics will in fact be impossible in real life and practice. Which part of human life does not generate politics?

Which part of human life is unaffected by politics?

Politics defined in its broadest sense is the dynamics whereby collective human life is being organised, generated and sustained. Politics may be understood to be “... *a process by which groups of people make decisions. The term is generally applied to behaviour within civil governments, but politics has been observed in all human group interactions, including corporate, academic, and religious institutions. It consists of ‘social relations involving authority or power’ and refers to the regulation of a political unit, and to the methods and tactics used to formulate and apply policy.*” (<http://www.notfallinginline.org/>)

Should we, in utter dismay, disdain and disgust, decide that we have nothing to do with politics, the ramifications of politics will nonetheless reach, encroach upon and affect us.

There is no human life that is unaffected by political decree or political action or non-action.

I can install or erect no door or lock or wall to keep out the effects - good or bad - of political action or inaction. I can remove myself to the deepest jungle (that is, if the long arm of the law does not catch me first) and live out my own life. But one foul day, the smoke from nearby burning forests or cultivated plantations (caused by political action or lack of political resolve) will drive me suffocating from my peaceful abode. If not this, then worse still, my tree house will crash to the ground when some crony, armed with the concession he or she has obtained from his or her political masters, is without scruples about harvesting the entire forest for his or her profit, not mine.

Who among us can escape rising prices of essential commodities (such as petrol) and services, which are the outcome of political action or non-action, and political failure?

We put locks and grills, fences and gates to our houses, humble or luxurious. But each house is in a *kampung* (village)

or housing estate, which in turn is in a sub-district, which is in a district, which is in a town or city, which is in a state, which is in the nation. My personal safety is relative to each of these larger domains. If my own home is heavily secured (and well it should be) but the wider domain it is located in is not, then my family's security is not assured.

Fulfilling my personal requirements and meeting my standards do not depend entirely on myself, my family and my circle of friends, but involve the wider society I live in. Hence, the need for an orderly, quality, reasonable, fair, sensible and collective co-existence, within which my family and I are necessarily recognised as a part of a wider, multi-ethnic society, and wherein the rules of engagement and co-existence must be agreed upon and observed by one and all. Such regulations, agreements and protocols are arrived at and pledged to via the political process.

There is no *escape* from politics!

Each adult citizen will - love it or hate it - have to participate in the political process because you don't join it as in signing up as member, rather it joins you! Politics gets involved with you and your life without your expressed invitation or approval. (Do I hear a "*So bold!*" here?) Faced with such an all pervasive, encroaching and won't-take-no-for-an-answer suitor, our only recourse is to set our own parameters and make our own decisions as to what, and to what extent, our involvement in the political process will be, and review and recalibrate these decisions from time to time.

But engage it we must!

## CHAPTER 4

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# A PEOPLE'S VIGILANCE

### **Imperfect does not mean Irrelevant**

Despair, disillusionment and frustration in the political process, which arise from below par delivery and poor yield from politics and politicians over a staggering amount of time, energy and money, need to be addressed so people are not put off the political process altogether.

Any endeavour or enterprise without the involvement of the biggest stakeholder, in this case, the people themselves, is of course doomed to fail. The way forward is not to lower expectations, since to lower the benchmark is to take a step backward. But while it is good that high standards are set and expected in all human endeavours, as human beings we must nevertheless learn how to cope with less than full compliance with, or failure to attain, the highest standards desired.

We aim high not low, but must not be discouraged to the point of surrender should the result fall short of the ultimate target.

Excellence is not found only in first place. The gold medal

is not necessarily the only goal worth achieving. While we don't want a Malaysian athlete to be just an also-ran in the Olympics, if that individual surpassed the national record, participation in the Olympics would be justified, and higher goals might be set for future attempts. Didn't one of our athletes make it to the semi-finals in a track event? At the Tokyo (1964) and Mexico (1968) Games, M. Jegathesan ran in the 200m semi-finals, dramatically raising our country's benchmark. Even if we don't ever make Mt. Everest, to stand on the summit of Mt. Kinabalu, though only half the height of the ultimate, is still an achievement, far more than nothing! Today, Kinabalu, next time Mt. Kilimanjaro, and after that...!

Life is about making progress. It does not necessarily come by leaps and bounds. Remember the Malay proverb, '*Sikit-sikit, lama-lama jadi bukit*' (which means even little grains of sand will, over time, build a mighty mountain), a lesson about taking small steps toward bigger achievements. This author attended a school in Melaka (Malacca) that had a Portuguese motto, '*Meliora Hic Sequamur*' (which means it is here that we strive for better things).

Imperfect outcomes in any endeavour aren't necessarily the end of the road. Imperfect outcomes do not mean we lay down our tools and stop altogether - that would be allowing circumstances to defeat us and dictate terms to us. On the contrary, mistakes and far-from-perfect results present us with the opportunity, impetus and necessity to seek wisdom, guidance, understanding and improvement. We keep trying again and again, learning what went wrong and what would make a difference next time round. To be competitive in the real world, we need to keep learning from our previous mistakes, keep raising the benchmark, keep keeping up our efforts and keep making progress through *doing* rather than *stopping*.



What will happen if we stop altogether on account of the fact that we are not doing it right, in whatever area of life it may be? If the cooking is not done just right and to everybody's liking, is dinner cancelled for the night? No, if at home, we eat what is on the table, and next time we try to do a better meal, taking into consideration the respective tastes of family diners and coming up with a more varied menu. With practice plus encouragement plus appreciation plus cookbooks plus family members coming home more consistently for dinner, the dishes and appetite will see dramatic improvements before long! If we eat out and are disappointed, we go to another restaurant or hawker stall next time round. If food preparation or customer service is at fault in a given eatery, it does not mean that *eating* itself is condemned.

If at times parents are found to be doing some things below par or unreasonably, do we ban them from the family and let the children go free and fend for themselves? No, parenthood and parenting do not go out of the window in such cases. As a society, we help parents to do better, and in more severe cases, we facilitate their rehabilitation. There are also other facilities whereby teachers and peer group members can provide exposure to more positive relationships and learning experiences to these children of parents who need help. If all attempts fail and natural parents really can't make it, as a society, we turn to foster care and other recourse of childcare and nurture as the case may be. As they say, you don't throw the baby (or the parents) out with the bath water.

If a given government fails, we give it feedback and another chance. If it still doesn't get it after a few chances, we change government and the failed government is sent for rehabilitation on the other side of the parliamentary divide where for a time it learns to be the loyal opposition and ruminates where it might have gone wrong.

But bad government does not mean we retire the political process and try anarchy and the law of the jungle instead.

## **Managing our Own Affairs**

In our everyday life, we don't just lay back and let other people make the decisions and arrangements for the important matters of our life. For instance, we don't just buy or rent a house by letting the real estate agent rush us into just anything that is available in the property market. We at least do a little research of our own, consult friends and relatives, visit likely residential neighbourhoods and familiarise ourselves with pricing in the target areas. Most of all, we talk to our spouse, parents and children. It's a family project. We do all this so that by the time we have a serious talk with the agent, we know our own mind, plans and budget. And we talk with more than one agent and consider more than one house. We make comparisons, do our arithmetic and consider the opportunity cost. It is only after all this, when we think we are ready, do we commit ourselves to the purchase or tenancy agreement.

Likewise, we don't simply send our children to just any school, kindergarten or university. And even if our only option is the kindergarten or school nearest to us, then we must still see to it, for our children's sake, that the teaching standards, teachers' personalities and temperaments, facilities, environment and playmates that our children will have in that school are in our mind favourable to their progress and development. In fact, the parents that this author knows personally, and mothers in particular, would have started this process years ahead of their children's first year admission to school. If our choices are limited, because of budget or location, it does not automatically translate into a *tidak apa* (couldn't care less or give up) attitude and approach. The more parents know about the education

centre their children may go to, the more they are able to plan for supplementary measures to compensate for what that centre or school may lack.

Likewise, we don't ordinarily let the market vendors determine our menu for us. Instead, we buy their wares, produce or catch according to the meal we plan to serve. Of course, the more trustworthy the vendors, the more we as their regular customers can chit-chat, accept their recommendations and amend our planned menus accordingly. In many cases, regular customers receive new recipes from their vendors.

A win-win situation is the best option, the most sensible attitude for all concerned. You have what I need, I have (hopefully) what you need. We'll drink to that!

Medical professionals and practitioners, with years of training and hands-on experience, obviously know about illness and ailments a lot more than their patients, and they are in the position to diagnose the patient's medical problem. But patients suspected of or diagnosed with a serious illness can and should seek a second opinion.

A doctor's diagnosis and prescriptions for medication and treatment do not preclude the need for the patients themselves to think, weigh and consider the next steps to take. In their considered opinion, the doctors have come to their conclusions, and we as patients need to decide on the way forward for ourselves. The doctors have done their job. The patients must then do theirs. It takes two (or more) to get the whole job done to satisfaction, or at least bring the consultation and decision-making process nearer to completion.

## **Politics must not be Left to Others**

Government policies, arrived at hopefully via the political process, once decided on and legislated into policy and law,

regulate our public life and affect our private life as individuals, families and communities. Young and old, rich and poor, employees and employers, businesses, civil society, church, *vihara*, *gurdwara*, temple and mosque alike are affected by these policies and their enforcement, like it or not, for better or for worse.

In a democratic system of government, we as citizens can either engage the political process as eligible citizens and active participants, or we can choose to remain by-standers, and let the powers that be decide and manage those matters that involve our fundamental liberties, our resources, our education, our schools and universities, our essential commodities and services due to us, our real estate, our businesses, our markets, our utilities (supply and rate), our roadways and transportation systems, our natural resources of oil, water, rivers, seas and forests, our poor, our disabled, our golden years, our next generations, our long-term prospects, our competitive edge as a nation, our morale...

There are also *direct* taxes, and individuals have been estimated in the 2012 budget to be paying RM21,347,000,000 which does not include a whole host of *indirect* taxes borne by us, such as service tax, sales tax, import duty, stamp duty, quit rent and assessment, etc. ([bloomberg.com/news/2011-10-07/malaysia-s-2011-2012-budget-revenue-expenditure-table-.html](http://bloomberg.com/news/2011-10-07/malaysia-s-2011-2012-budget-revenue-expenditure-table-.html)).

Should we in utter dismay, disdain and disgust decide that we would have nothing to do with politics, the ramifications of politics will nonetheless reach, encroach upon and affect us.

In the light of this, leaving these matters and other concerns solely to politicians and the elected government does not seem the smart or best thing to do. Thus, the post Second World War French President, Charles De Gaulle, advised, “*I have come to the conclusion that politics is too serious a matter to be left to the politicians.*” In similar vein, Chester Bowles, director of the

US Office of Economic Stability, Governor of Connecticut in 1949 and US Ambassador to India observed, “*Government is too big and too important to be left to the politicians.*”

Politicians are of course the key practitioners in the political process, but we as the people must not cede to them our own rights, but must make our concerns, aspirations and feelings known to them, for they are our representatives in the business and conduct of government. Of course, we mustn't nor can we afford the time to camp on the grounds of parliament or the state assembly to watch over every minute detail of what they are doing. That will surely attract the wrong attention from the men and women in blue and earn us free transportation to the nearest cell where the locks are supplied and applied free of charge!

By our votes, we elect members of parliament and state assemblies. Again, like in other aspects of life, as we have seen, there are two or more parties or players in any contract or agreement: real estate agent and tenant or buyer; market vendor and home-maker; parent and child; parent and teacher or school; doctor and patient.

In the case of political and public affairs, there are *citizen* and *government*, *voter* and *elected representative*. In each case, both players are necessary and each needs the other. Unless both play their respective roles responsibly, dutifully and diligently, we will be denied the desired and necessary outcome.

Let us elaborate on this with a more graphic illustration.

## **A Load of Rubbish**

Garbage collection is a most vital service in any neighbourhood and a most *political* issue by virtue of the fact that all five senses of touch, sight, smell, hearing and taste are evoked, and spectacularly displayed in the worst light when things go wrong! You won't need an independent panel or external auditors or

scrutinisers to verify the evidence!

If garbage disposal is not done to proper standard, you immediately see and smell it - and it's horrid, repulsive, revolting, disgusting, gross, nauseating and, in the common vernacular, *shit*! The sense of taste comes when otherwise prim and proper domestic pets like dogs and cats are irresistibly drawn to sample the uncollected stuff, to the chagrin of their masters and mistresses. After a few days of inertia and inaction comes the time when shit becomes even more repulsive, and the sense of hearing is invoked in shouting matches between the service-provider, our representatives in the state assembly, the local council and the residents themselves!

In such a situation, all parties concerned in the first instance need to heed one another and bring about the clearance of the foul mess as a matter of urgency. Then, when calm is restored, the parties or players concerned need to sit down together to co-operate and collaborate to achieve a *win-win* mechanism, whereby each *stakeholder* comes away deserving praise and respect. In issues of this sort, the public at large and the residents also have a very major and vital role to fulfill, that is, to educate households to observe hygienic, environmentally friendly and civic-minded practices to never dump garbage in public areas, but only in stipulated places and by the method prescribed and to ensure that their household pets do not rummage through garbage bins.

But quite clearly, the path to healthy and peaceful co-existence is goodwill, co-operation and collaboration, with all stakeholders playing and fulfilling their respective roles for the *common good*. Deviation from this sensible formula can only lead to ill-will and lose-lose acrimony that benefit no one. The blame game that situations of this kind invariably set off never resolves the problem at hand, but instead aggravates the situation even further.

A lot of sour faces, sulky temperaments and insulted egos do not together make a formula for positive fixes. It takes the collective wisdom and collective will of all stakeholders to break through stubborn intransigence and unhelpful politicking to get the garbage collection done.

This is the way forward, whereby the political process can serve all involved and all concerned. A triumph of the political process is a triumph for all.

### **All Eyes on the Road**

No one stakeholder on his or her own can resolve the problem. So we the people or residents won't and can't do it without the other players involved. *We do it with them.* They propose and recommend. We need to listen but also make interventions and changes to ensure that our views, needs and concerns are taken into consideration. We too must play our role and co-operate with them. In residential areas, *residents' associations* may be formed, formally or informally, and will be in the position to represent our interest vis-à-vis the authorities, provided such associations are diligent in getting residents' feedback and acting accordingly. Resident associations are the *grass-roots* of the political process. It is probably better that such associations are not led by career politicians - former or current - so that the interests of residents are not subsumed under the agenda of any particular political party.

The people's role in the political process is primarily to keep watch on policies and actions that utilise our own rightful resources and affect all levels of our lives; to be ever *vigilant* about how the powers that be shape and fashion the country of which we are a part; and to see whether we want to go where the government, at any level, wishes to take us.

As ordinary citizens, we should become more involved

in the planning of our national journey, to be in the position to determine the final destination and the route that will get us there; as well as the driving skills and the manner of the driving, not to mention the manners of the driver. Are we satisfied or comfortable about the driver's road sense and road handling? And what if we wish to have another destination than the one the government is speeding us to?

And don't forget, we are paying the *driver*!



## CHAPTER 5

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# A PEOPLE'S PROTEST

### All Over the World

Mass protest is taking place the world over against overly entrenched political entities and institutions. Protestations for change are in the air, political and economic *monopolies* are the targets. This does not come as a surprise since human history through the centuries has been marked by protest.

In most if not all cases, the entrenched powers have brought this upon themselves. Monopolistic powers could have helped themselves if they had spared some of their time, extended their hearts and ears to listen to what others in their respective countries or institutions had thought and said. When there were ample time and opportunity for these relatively simple acts of attending, listening and feeling for people, of which the Creator has equipped all human beings, these monopolistic powers chose not to act. The evidence of this is in indelible history.

Of course, this propensity for not doing simple things when time and opportunity present themselves also happens among employers and others in authority, even parents. And the failure

to do so has given us much cause for colossal and enduring regret. As history reminds us, we as national leaders, captains of industry or heads of families could have prevented tragedy and irreversible harm to country, business, family and society if only we had but taken a *few moments* to take a small step in the right direction.

## Counting the Opportunity Cost

For instance, this author has often wondered why strikes planned by airline industry personnel are seldom resolved amicably. Instead, the industry left thousands upon thousands of unprepared travellers who paid very good money stranded; caused havoc in packed airports; worried relatives on the other side; put at risk people who ran out of their medicinal supplies; lost millions upon millions of economic currency (which could, albeit in a smaller way, have paid for the remunerations that the workers had staged their strike for). Then later, we will hear of messed-up reunions, appointments, lost workdays, insurance claims, stressed relationships, broken promises. All because a win-win solution could not be found!

Monetary loss is one thing, but there is no way to measure the emotional, non-quantifiable loss, the opportunity cost of the whole mess. Why couldn't both corporation and union have worked harder to find a win-win settlement before the predictable damage? Even for the sake of the airline vis-à-vis their passengers, and the unions vis-à-vis their workers, imagine the loss of reputation and the public relations damage left behind! *Lose-lose* all the way.

Such cases remind us that prevention is better than cure and this is applicable to many areas of life. Those in all positions of authority need to bear this in mind, not just for the sake of the masses, employees or citizens, but for their own sake as well.

## The Cycle of Greed

Monopolistic powers cross the line countless of times and, consequently, end up as *enemies of the people* in so many instances. They take what belongs to the populace and in doing so seem to feed themselves and become monstrosities that gather speed and strength, tornado-like, building into a cycle that one day turns against themselves. The cycle of greed, excess and abuse will destroy the masters who manufactured it in the first place.

In numerous countries, the sins of government or recalcitrant and errant former heads of state have caught up with them, and they have paid the price. Their days of pomp and plunder have come to naught, leaving behind a trail of lost properties (ill-gotten in the first place), frozen offshore bank accounts, warring families, broken relationships, broken societies, dark and contemptible legacies, lost reputations, lost lives (including their own) and, worse still, lost opportunities to do the right thing. Invariably, such powerful figures in government would have in the first place won elections many times over and with ever bigger margins of victory because they controlled and managed the electoral process. Yet after they have been forced out, unforgiving people spit on their pictures, drag to the ground their larger-than-life statues, heap curses upon their names whenever and wherever mentioned, even stomp upon their graves, etc.

This author remembers how when the people finally triumphed in the Philippines and caused the abusive powers that be to flee, many ordinary people entered Malacañang Palace for the first time only to discover for themselves that the rumours and gossips fell well short of the reality. They saw, among other things, those infamous shoes – hitherto mere rumours!

Governments who have the trust of the people, and the resources and wherewithal to do so much good, resolve so many

problems, fix so many wrongs, provide so much relief for the marginalised and needy, leave behind truly great legacies. Yet so many governments in human history actually choose to do almost the opposite, become self-serving and fall upon their own sword.

But not before they cause so much pain, shame and damage to their respective peoples and nations. It seems so wasteful, so incongruous to ordinary minds, so needless, so illogical, so insipid to be giving out paltry non-lasting cash hand-outs instead of putting in place on the ground long-term, sustainable, effective programmes which could have truly tackled hardcore poverty. Why squander such resources, powers and opportunities, instead of doing great and responsible things for the country and people, and retiring in the glow of the people's praise and gratitude?

## **Making Wrong Turnings**

In the face of this propensity on the part of the powers that be to make wrong turnings, given the very high risks and stakes to the people, it should not be a surprise to errant authorities that sentiments are growing against them.

Arbitrary actions seen in a wide range of flippant or indifferent answers given to questions posed in parliament, the high costs of procurements by certain government departments, how government contracts are given ... they all add up, and the spin from the powers that be is not believed by the people.

You cannot win the people's sympathy and patience if in the wake of exposure after exposure you simply attempt to deny the ever-growing number of allegations, or shrug them off without convincing answers or sincere actions to seriously probe such cases, let alone prosecute them. People are not amused and the powers that be must pay careful heed to a changing tide that can sweep them from their comfort zone.

There is no fixed deposit or any kind of guarantee for an errant government anywhere in today's world.

All it takes is for some conscientious individuals or groups to document and systematically list the number and type of abuses, the degree of improprieties involved and the amount of money involved and lost. If a tabulation of such incongruous and inexplicable occurrences is widely disseminated by the time general elections are called anywhere, it will open many more eyes and ears to the staggering magnitude of strange occurrences for which there are no satisfactory or believable answers.

Can any sitting government in any working democracy in the world survive such appearances of misdeed?

When people lose savings, jobs, property and homes while the entrenched monopolists of the world continue to favour themselves and use their ill-gotten powers to personally thrive, protestations will surely take place and continue despite the inconvenience that protestors and demonstrators have to endure, the risks they have to face, and the sacrifices they have to make.

## **Furthering a Higher Cause**

That there should be protests in the face of blatant injustices and anomalies is not in doubt. More important to most of us is that they should be done with proper thought and planning and that the intention is to further a higher cause worth fighting for, so that the means of doing so will, from the protestors' side, be beautiful rather than ugly.

This being the case, what *Bersih* (the movement for clean and fair elections in Malaysia) stood for was right, justifiable and commendable. What *Bersih* stood for led to a mass peaceful demonstration in the nation's capital, *Kuala Lumpur*, as well as in several other key cities throughout the country, augmented by Malaysians abroad doing likewise in their respective host countries.

Who does not want clean electoral rolls and clean elections? This is a very noble cause which the people have taken up. For what are a nation's elections for if there is no assurance that the electoral rolls are authentic and the conduct of the elections would be squeaky fair?

The fact - parents with young children, a considerable presence of the elderly, a good ethnic and religious mix - was so obvious to all, except the few who could not bring themselves to believe their own eyes, ears and hearts. It was also lost on some of the media which worked in tandem with the entrenched powers and routinely under-reported the attendance and, even more importantly, the positive and constructive aspects of the day.

That the intention of the demonstration was peaceful, the turn-out (without compensation or lure of food, drink or cash) massive and the participation of the people voluntary were self-evident. This is an example of why supporters of a just cause must make the point of BEING THERE.

## **A very Personal Involvement**

We rode the many stages of public transport, sat or stood beside strangers, made eye contact, rubbed shoulders, conversed, laughed, joked amid huge crowds of people in our rainbow heritage of humanity that cut across the ethnic, religious, linguistic, cultural, economic, material and even political divide.

That was Malaysia and Malaysians in their true colours.

It wasn't just a promise. It was and always can be the reality. WE united for clean and fair elections, for an authentic electoral roll, and we were willing to link arms and ask for change for the better for our country.

A just cause attracts and deserves the people's support. And the general populace, entire families - from the very young to the

very elderly - turned out in sizeable numbers for this cause.

Take the young man who weighed the differing reactions from his school-mates, made a conscious decision for himself and told his mother he would like to go. His mother turned things over in her mind. She went through with him the reason for the march and in turn learned more about his thinking and reasoning concerning the decision he had arrived at. She had a good idea of where he was at in the matter. Nearer the time, she picked one of the five gathering points and carefully charted out the best means and route to get there, just as she had approached ferrying her boys to school and extracurricular activities, planning the family meals, doing the marketing, cooking the meals, baking the bread and pastry. Mother and son shopped for his yellow or green shirt. The young man found what he wanted, and it was exactly as he had wished for. The night before, the mother systematically packed the essentials: wet face towels (to ease the pain of tear-gas), water bottles, good sports tie-up shoes, caps to shield the bare head from the sun, etc. Then, on the day, they scrupulously followed the planned course, arrived at the selected gathering point. They started the march through streets they had previously only been on in the family car, but on foot everything looked so different. They interacted with fellow marchers. Then, surprise, surprise, near the planned destination, the son met up with his favourite political cartoonist whose work has been *outlawed* in the country and had his picture taken with him!

## **Not by Cash but by Indignation**

People did not just stray into this demonstration or join it without serious thinking or preparation. They knew what they were going for and how they wanted the day to be but remained ever aware of possible twists and turns that would not be under their control.

Much as they had prayed for a good outcome, they were

conscious of what might happen beyond their control, but they were willing to risk that too.

For the authorities to claim that somehow this was against our Malaysian culture and way of life is a bit thick. What are we saying here to ourselves and the world? That Malaysians should never care about clean electoral rolls and clean and fair elections? That we should at all times stay at home, despite the fact that we are not convinced or assuaged by official responses and answers to our serious concerns?

Are we saying that in our country, the best of the best citizens are the stay-at-homers, regardless of how shabbily they *feel* their elected government has tended to treat their concerns or bend the rules?

A people's protest is where people are present not by cash but by *indignation*. In all history, there has been and there will be a people's expression of outrage against what they see as blatant and flagrant acts.

## **All Over a Patch of Grass**

Even explaining the '*need*' to rain tear gas and act heavily-handedly on the demonstrators was unconvincing to thinking people. In fact, even when some demonstrators were obeying the order to dismiss, they were accosted by the long arm of the law in dead-end lanes, and yet *no* harmful objects were later found in their possession.

This author can testify as a participant in a much earlier demonstration in the country's history: When orders were given for him and others to disperse, (orders that were given from behind the row of lean and hungry looking uniformed men he was facing), even as he had immediately obeyed the orders and turned around to leave, several hard baton blows were landed on his back. Beaten when you wish to obey the orders and turn your



back to disperse. But how else could you obey the orders unless you turn your back to the uniformed men? Walk straight at them?

What ultimate harm might have been caused even when the barricades were breached? So what if some demonstrators entered the ‘*sacred*’ grounds of *Dataran Merdeka* (Independence Square). If left at that, what harm would it have caused Kuala Lumpur’s City Hall, the official custodian of the square? How would the city or country have suffered had the barricades not even been there in the first place?

As someone had so simply put it to this author, the strong-arm tactics visited upon the demonstrators, the hue and cry over the dismantling of some metal fencing, the confiscating of scores upon scores of cameras that had captured the events of the day, the shooting of canisters upon canisters of tear gas into the crowds, the beatings that so many people received, the numerous arrests made, the temporary closure of the nearest LRT station which effectively stopped hundreds upon hundreds of people from leaving the scene ... these and more were all over ‘*a patch of grass*’!

Truth be told, that patch of grass has over many years seen a lot of sporting events, community fairs, rock concerts, and masses of people standing upon it during National Day ceremonies, festive occasions and family outings.

It would have survived a peaceful demonstration.

The fight over *Dataran Merdeka* wasn’t necessary. The irony of it all is that the venue marks the lowering of the British flag (popularly known as the Union Jack) and the first hoisting of the Malayan flag (more recently named *Jalur Gemilang*, or Stripes of Glory) during the first seconds of August 31, 1957, and the ushering in of *INDEPENDENCE* for the people.

The word *Merdeka* stands for freedom and independence, and is said to be a derivative of *Maharddhika*, the Sanskrit for

power, wealth and prosperity.

A people's protest *rightly belongs* on *Dataran Merdeka*. What could be more fitting? The anomaly was the presence of crude barricades to prevent the people from entering the very place at which, 55 years ago, independence had been hoisted before the very eyes of the people in the form of the national flag!

If allowed to proceed peacefully, and if heavy-handedness had from the outset been *rejected* outright by the authorities and the powers that be, the police and even City Hall would have been praised to the sky, rather than just the organisers and demonstrators. Malaysia and Malaysians on whatever side of the political divide would have been the clear winners before themselves and a watching world.

## Clearing the Air

Peace comes with *justice*. If all doors and windows are arbitrarily shut, no fresh air comes into the room and the atmosphere becomes stuffy, unhealthy and oppressive. Then the occupants would have no choice but to find a way to let themselves out for their own sake. They must go out and fill their lungs with fresh air, as per their Creator's kind provision.

And if they had been allowed the freedom to do so in the first place, they would willingly have returned to the room infused with good oxygen and gone about their normal lives.

But if the authorities always forcibly keep all doors and windows shut tight to hold all the occupants in, then the consequence will always be that the latter would have no choice but to find a way to let themselves out for their own sake.

People need oxygen not tear gas! Tear gas cause much money; atmospheric oxygen is free!

Any country in the world needs not only good citizens,

but also good governments that think and resolve problems reasonably, calmly rather than heavy-handedly. In the *absence* of a freer press, a more independent parliament (as the legislative branch of a democratic system), and a clearer display of transparency and accountability on the part of the executive, protestations by the people will be inevitable as well as necessary. Such protestations are an integral part of the check-and-balance that a functioning democracy requires.

In many parts of the free world, demonstrations are common. In neighbouring Jakarta, this author recently witnessed an orderly and long procession of protesters during the busy lunch-hour, with only two police personnel on domestic size motorbikes keeping an eye on traffic-flow to prevent congestion and they did not even have to intervene. Motorists were themselves patient. There was no honking or any show of annoyance. Instead, they exhibited a *practised patience*. It took about 15 minutes for the procession to pass each road intersection. To a foreigner like this author, the protestors, the authorities and the motorists were collectively a picture of *equanimity*, having long since learned to attain *equilibrium* (*a state of rest or balance amidst opposing forces*), and built *mutual* respect for one another.

Quite remarkable!

This is the change that we look for in Malaysia. It is not just about protests and the right to do so. It is about ourselves, government and citizens, *at ease* with each other, treating each other with *mutual* respect, and whenever necessary, putting our respective case before each other. It is about not sweeping anything under any carpet, but mutually listening and taking seriously each other's concerns. Dissent is not forbidden or clamped shut. And, if need be, demonstrations may proceed without heavy-handed consequences.

For the sake of all Malaysians!

## CHAPTER 6

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# A PEOPLE'S POLITICS

### A Wistful Thinking

Our collective life as a neighbourhood, or an ethnic, religious and cultural community, or a nation, is negotiated, organised and regulated through a political process. In the light of our sizeable population, the country's resources, income and expenditure, the mind boggles at the sheer complexity of what needs to be considered, planned, decided upon and implemented in order that our collective life may be orderly, safe and constructive.

We may think with Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady*.

*"... all I want is a room somewhere,  
Far away from the cold night air;  
With one enormous chair,  
Aaw, wouldn't it be lovely?"*

Many of us will agree with such plain and simple sentiments. Make things simple, think small, something manageable, contained in time and space. A place we could call home with spouse and children, paid for via a stable job, where we would

watch Premier League football or rugby-union, exercise, eat, sleep and be merry. There would also be basic transport to ferry us to work and bring us home. We take care of ourselves and let others around us take care of their respective families.

Sounds ideal, but in fact it is *idealistic*. Self-regulation may work for a while with a few families. But even within a single extended family, all sorts of issues engage our minds, hearts and ears and stretch our patience. Self-regulation certainly will not work with thousands or millions of households. To each his own will not do without commonly accepted regulations and proper co-ordination for all things that involve and impinge on our daily lives. The alternative is *chaos* amid an avalanche of *cross-purposes*.

No, we can't dismiss politics as the organising and co-ordinating process of our collective co-existence. We can't not engage the political process. No matter how much it puzzles, frustrates, confounds, mystifies, infuriates, disappoints, repels or fails us. But one thing we can do with the political process is to decide for ourselves the degree or extent to which we are prepared to engage it.

## **Making Decisions to Make a Difference**

Rather than sit back and let things drift or let others do it for us, by *making decisions* about various areas and concerns of life that affect us, we are in effect taking charge of our lives and resources. In whatever decision we make on whatever matter, we switch from *hands-off* to *hands-on* mode. We wrest back our lives instead of leaving it to chance or to others or to the system. By making decisions, we as adult individuals and in groups effectively give notice to ourselves and others concerned that we are intentionally and deliberately involving ourselves with the issues at hand in whatever area and sphere of life.

Like in other areas of life, we need to set parameters on how, when and what our involvement in the political process will be. There is a limit to involvement with anything or everything in any person's life, since time and energy are not inexhaustible resources. There are already things and persons on our respective indispensable lists. Of course our own turf - home and extended family, work, social and community networks, leisure, studies and enlarging our sphere of knowledge - inevitably and sensibly takes priority and it already demands a large chunk of our attention and commitment. What's the point of heavy involvement in politics or hobbies or entertainment, as the case may be, if we leave our home life in shambles, or do poorly in our workplace or leave the really important matters in our own life unattended and allow the weeds to take over what is precious to us? In our own respective experiences, we have found that it is only too easy to neglect the very people for whom we work our hearts out.

Indeed, numerous career politicians (no less than other professionals with equally 'break-neck' job demands) have reason to rue the day they entered politics. "*Is it worth it?*" is the question many would have asked themselves.

The cynical response to such a question may be, "*Of course it is worth it for them. Think of all the 'profits' they are making!*" Well, to be fair, not all politicians who have made and are making sacrifices have been or are in the position to make such *profits*. As for those who have indeed made such a pile for themselves, rest assured the time will surely come when they would in a very literal sense be asking themselves the question, "*Is it worth it?*" as they leave a trail of damaged relationships, families, businesses and reputations punctuated by choruses of curses and damnations, if not litigations.

It is precisely because we already have busy lives that

making conscious decisions to admit other things to our schedule is a most necessary thing to do. Some serious thoughts are required as to how much involvement we could afford to allocate for engagement in the *political process*, and in doing so to also reflect on what would be the *opportunity cost*, which is not just in economic terms, but social as well. What we may or will have to forgo should we commit ourselves to this. And to what extent will something else be sacrificed as a result of this additional demand on our time and energy.

Thus, it is best to set parameters about how we wish to and can be involved in the *political process*. This will also make our involvement more intentional and purposeful than merely incidental or by the way. Which also raises the question of how significant we want our involvement in the *political process* to be. If we intend our involvement to be only casual and by the way, then no major decision-making would be needed. If we wish to make a real difference, then we will need to make the necessary decisions to make that happen.

### ***A FUNCTIONAL DISTINCTION***

Our respective decisions about our involvement in the *political process* will necessarily be varied from person to person. There is a very wide spectrum of opportunities and ways to be politically involved.

Only a very few people among us will need to make the difficult and *brave decision* to become *career politicians*. Normally this will require a companion decision to join a political party, to be in the position to climb to the top of the party hierarchy, and then possibly to be considered a candidate for public office. This would be, in the words of Robert Frost's poem, "*The road less travelled*".

On the other hand, the rest of us are only required to take

a more familiar route as voters, stakeholders, advocates of vital issues, or change-agents in our respective stations in life. Thus, a *functional distinction* can be made between engaging the political process as *career politicians* and engaging the political process as *concerned citizens*. This is of course a distinction that is drawn on the sand, not concrete, as the line can sometimes be blurred over time and people on either side may choose to cross the line, as dictated by circumstance or deliberate choice. A citizen can along the way decide to be a career politician, and a career politician may - after his or her immersion in real-time politics - decide to revert to being a citizen engaging the political process in a more supporting role. Both roles are important.

### ***CITIZEN POLITICS***

Concern on the part of citizens can be channeled at many levels and take many forms. As such, as many as there are genuinely concerned people, there are enough areas of concern that could do with their help and involvement.

### **Levelling the Playing Field**

1. *Be informed* - Information is as essential to politics as oxygen is to life. The withholding of information can be an asset and advantage to the sitting government, but the resulting scarcity of information means that the dissemination of information is an asset to the loyal opposition. In other words, the knife can cut both ways. What a sitting government fights to keep secret, the loyal opposition fights to expose to the general public. It being such an invaluable commodity in politics, the place to start for concerned citizens is to be informed, to look for necessary information.

In this matter, regrettably, Malaysia is placed lower compared to other ASEAN (*Association of Southeast*



*Asian Nations*) countries like the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand in the matter of press freedom, according to Reporters Without Borders (<http://www.rsf.org/>). Even a cursory reading of newspapers in these other countries will quickly confirm that. For one thing, most major mainstream newspapers and television networks in Malaysia are owned by political parties of the ruling coalition. For another, the news media in the country is expected to practise self-censorship or else!

You have to apply to the Home Affairs Ministry for the licence to operate a periodical of whatever focus in terms of subject matter which of course means that editors must be super careful about what their papers or periodicals should carry. There have been numerous instances when editors have been called up by Home Affairs to explain certain stories or features, and given due warnings.

There is also the Sedition Act, which covers quite a few things that make publishers liable if it is deemed that a given published article is found to have contravened sections of the Act. Furthermore, a new act is being mooted to cover online postings, with similar provisions that may make the owner of a website liable for comments posted by their readers.

Under such circumstances, the first task of concerned citizens is to find alternative sources of information so that another angle may be obtained and a fuller picture may present itself for our consideration. Here, concerned citizens should alert one another to websites and blogs that they have found helpful, and ‘*helpful*’ does not necessarily mean chilly-hot, scandalous or libellous content.

Serious citizens may not wish to plough through sensationalised writings or reports. Truth need not be spiced, sexed or souped up. No exaggeration is required. Truth

can stand upright on its own. Especially if we readers or listeners put on our own thinking caps and figure out things for ourselves. We can also follow the initiatives of others who identify good key postings on the web and take the trouble to print copies for circulation among those who are not so savvy with online technology.

2. *Be convinced* — Listen and read critically and with discernment whatever that is said by whichever side and not just swallow everything as plain truth. Ask questions, weigh the likelihoods and come to our own conclusions of the claims or charges being made. Then make our own decisions about the action we wish to take. The path to obtain the much needed information is within our own selves in the form of our God-given faculty to think, ponder and figure out matters for ourselves, read between the lines and, if necessary, *call the bluff* on official versions of news reports.

Mainstream or alternative media portrayal of the happenings in national affairs can greatly influence people's sentiments and thinking. How the headlines are couched and the kind of photographs which accompany the stories can create very different impressions. Those who were there sometimes cannot recognise the news reports of the events they had participated in.

It is not always the case that there is no truth at all in the official versions, just that it is sometimes not the whole story. It is not even that we need to believe the other side's version. The fact is that we cannot get the full picture if only one side of the equation gets to tell the story all the time and repeatedly. It is an exercise of knowing fact from fiction. Thus, sometimes it may be necessary for us to join the dots and see another angle of a given incident reported in the

media, or at least raise a few common-sense questions, even if not all the answers are immediately available. *Apa boleh buat* (what to do) if even published photographs are not what they seem to be, and crowd attendance at key events is much less or much more, depending on which side of the parliamentary divide has organised the event? Such occurrences have in fact been commonplace for such a long period of time and newspapers or telecasts have been very propagandist in nature. If under such circumstances, we the people are still not sceptical, then we have only ourselves to blame.

As concerned citizens, we only want a level playing field so that the will of thinking people has a glimmer of a chance and that of the majority of legitimate voters is respected and upheld without unfair intervention - that's all. It helps to make the political playing field a little more level if we just suspend judgement on reports regarding incidents that are obviously important instead of instantly swallowing them and coming to premature conclusions.

3. *Be a messenger* - Spread the message of fair play. Talk to our circle of friends about the need for a level playing field, so that any contest or competition, be it in the field of sports, music, or politics, is conducted fairly enough to allow either side an even chance of winning. Post our views or recommend and link certain must-read articles to friends in social networking sites.

Talk about the critical issues that the country faces and how they will affect the people and the next generations. Talk about the weaknesses as well as the strengths of the country and the need to correct what will pose problems for the country's longer term economic prospects. Talk about what it will take to achieve harmony and peace among all

Malaysians. Do not disseminate wild allegations or suspicious postings, or those that assail people through name-calling.

Even though this author understands the anger and frustration out there, some of which have merits, it is best that we leave the door open for reconciliation and keep things civil. It is never wise or smart to unnecessarily sour relationships. As concerned citizens, it is preferable that after the match ends, the door is still kept open for us to come together.

4. *Be respectful and inclusive* - There are many levels and perspectives to constructive conversations. Some may be too fast to disparage coffee-shop talk as mere ignorant gossip. Yet, coffee-shop talk does reveal the general views or impressions of many Malaysians. It could be that some of us too quickly dismiss common conversations because we may subconsciously wish to draw attention to our own superior level of knowledge on the subject. The trick about coffee-shop talk is that, if we listen intently and intelligently, we almost always catch gems of wisdom that the halls of elite universities don't deliver to us - especially when it comes to politics, which after all is about what affects people in *general*.

The truth of the matter is not in the venue where the talk takes place, but in the subject matter and the common sense that come through in these conversations. There are of course other forums and platforms where political issues are being discussed by rather more acknowledged, eminent and learned personages, but political issues cannot be and are too important to be exclusively left to academicians, commentators or writers any more than they should be left just to professional politicians themselves. While all these personages do invaluable contribute to overall knowledge

of the issues, political talk should not leave out the most important stakeholders of the political process, who are the general populace, the people on the ground, upon whom the impact of political decisions or non-decisions is felt the hardest.

I say, let the coffee-shop talk continue and may it enlarge its circles to include even more audiences and venues wherever family, friends, colleagues or neighbours gather.

Such conversations are casual, informal and spontaneous by nature (without undue arrangements or publicity or even necessarily a fixed agenda). But casual does not necessarily mean irrelevant or worthless. The conversations may well start with a report (maybe by way of the latest rumour!) but before long, they lead to other more substantive issues, if those present can steer them from *fiction* to fact.

But the big difference between formal and informal political talk is that informal gatherings provide more space for people to express their views, whereas experts take up all the time and even the Q&A is more A than Q in formal events. In politics, *questions* are no less important or significant than *answers* in formal events. So why not let the pundits go down to the coffee shops and join the coffee-shop talks as some are already doing? I see a win-win opportunity in this. In informal discussions, *conversations* take place, instead of a *lecture*.

In similar vein, print as well as online media should give much more space to *letters* and *comments* from readers than they do now. The point here is that, in a context where there is so much censorship, direct or indirect, by decree or official advice and persuasion, if we limit *people's talk* on political matters by either belittling it or extending the censorship *fear factor* to include even informal chats, the attempts by

the powers that be to curtail dissemination of vital political themes and issues will succeed and we the people will be the poorer for it. For this reason, this author appeals to all leaders of the people in their respective spheres of influence to remove the *taboo* on discussion of the political process, issues of good governance and public morality (or immorality), and the concerns of the people.

For example, this author disagrees with the view that *religious* communities should limit their interests to religious affairs and discuss only issues that directly encroach upon their religious freedom. It is such *self-imposed* taboos that enforce a virtual ban and thereby effectively favour the political status quo as such. By all means, have clear and reasonable rules of engagement in place. Such guidelines are helpful and welcome. But political talk does not necessarily have to be irreligious. And by the same virtue, religious talk does not have to be apolitical. There are many religious values we hold in common and such values can inform and educate the political process for the better, especially in issues of good governance and public morality.

Keeping *a level playing field* in the political process is the main theme of the general populace's political talk and that is in the general interest of all Malaysians.

5. *Be eligible* - In Malaysia, citizens who are at least 21 years of age are eligible to register as voters. Registration can be done with your identity card at any major computerised post office in Malaysia or online at <http://www.spr.gov.my>. Those who have already registered can also check the status of their registration and where they should go to cast their vote online. It has been announced that unless you register to vote several months ahead of an election, there is no guarantee that your registration submission will be processed in time. But you

never know. Better late than never is good advice to follow. Register as a voter as soon as possible all the same and just keep checking on the status of your registration at the SPR site named here.

And should you fail to get on the electoral roll because of late registration, there is an avenue whereby you can render excellent national service by volunteering to be polling and counting agents (*PACA*). You will need training and orientation to qualify and be deployed. Please urgently consult *Tindak* at <https://sites.google.com/site/pacabatraining/>. After training, you may want to consider deployment to far-flung corners of the country (such as Sabah or Sarawak), where your *vigilant skills* would be even more needed. Sign up for *PACA* training and see Malaysia and Malaysians as you have never seen them. You will have an education that neither school nor college could offer you!

6. *Be conscientious* - Each of us registered voters must of course turn up at the right place within the stipulated time to actually vote when the day comes. Neither distance (and some voters may need to take a flight, boat, bus or train to go back to their *kampung*, that is, village or town) nor weather (wind, thunder, rain or flood), nor transport problem, nor any other inconvenience or excuse should stop us from being present to cast our votes. This means careful and meticulous planning and preparation, and the resolve to make your vote happen. It has to happen for it to count!

In every election, we have exemplary citizens who brave distance, illness, disability, age or poverty to present themselves with their respective singular vote. Each vote is important in close races and can swing an election either way. Like in a keenly fought football match, a toe stuck out in the

final minute of play can send the ball across the goal-line and make the vital difference between winning and losing. And no matter which way the match may go, all effort must at least be made, than lose the match by default. As someone once told this author, *“Let’s give it a good run!”*

7. *Be the catalyst* - The political process can do with an infusion of more heads, minds, hands and feet to initiate help where help is needed just to further level the playing field. I know a couple who made it a point to get involved in a residents’ association and sat on the committee for several years to be able to initiate various services and programmes that greatly helped their residents, thus heightening their consciousness of what is their due and of the association as a channel for redress when needed. I know a couple of moms in the semenanjung (peninsula) who, after seeing their children through school, put their heads, minds, hands, feet and purses together and started an information and mobilisation agency to help level the playing field in Sarawak. They hold forums to disseminate vital information on what is actually happening on the ground and what kind of help is needed. They recruit *PACA* volunteers. They even canvass help for remote villagers to get basic amenities and utilities, and deploy limited human resources to secluded locations. Others I know start online blogs that carry the message to those who need more information and understanding.

*Where there is a will, there is a way.* Put our money where our mouth is. Put our shoulders to the plough. If we are unhappy about the situation as we find it, then we, although few in number, can come together and start something that will in turn attract others of like mind. If we see a gap, we can plan and move to fill it, instead of just making noise and expend our energies grumbling.



*A people's politics* is possible when we the people are incensed and concerned, and feel the urgent need to do something about blatant and insidious injustice. After all, *gotong-royong* (co-operation among many to accomplish a common goal) is a very Malaysian and Indonesian way of getting things done. It also sows an abundance of goodwill and brings people of diverse backgrounds together around a common cause. Worthwhile causes that benefit Malaysians as a whole are worth our attention, support and participation.

The small groups of belligerent people who want the country divided along ethnic or religious lines need to know that many more of us don't want to go down the same road as them. Neither do we want to do things in a belligerent or intransigent way. We don't fight fire with fire. *Water* is the softer and more effective way. It is better to use water to put down any dangerous and unwanted act of arson. It is not the loudest that wins. It is not the biggest mouth but the bigger mind and heart that will set the people's agenda and accompany the people to realise it.

8. *Be helpful* - Many in our respective neighbourhoods and other parts of our country need help. No government anywhere could possibly reach every one with special needs. There will always be a need for kind people to lend a helping hand. Volunteers and voluntary groups will always be needed to fill the gaps in government initiatives and programmes. The government should provide support as needed for such voluntary service to be effective and sustainable. A spirit of volunteerism and personal initiative has been of course already evident over the years. Many are now involved in such acts of unselfishness and generosity.

There are many examples for others to follow and we

should join such ongoing efforts, if not start new initiatives as needed. If the government has shown its will and resolve in giving urgent attention to those who are struggling with poverty and its attendant needs, we the people must do the necessary to *bridge the gap*. Such voluntary involvement by kind souls and bodies is intended to supplement and further enhance what the government with public funding and staffing is already doing rather than render government involvement unnecessary. When people have a heart for others in need, inspiration and ingenuity will guide them to find ways, means, ideas and solutions to do the job of assisting fellow human beings in their time of need.

Many such examples are already in place to inspire us. There is a Buddhist group in the state of Selangor that takes the trouble to grow enzymes so as to introduce them into the drainage of factories in the industrial estates to neutralise toxicity. What an example to the rest of us! There are Muslim centres to help single mothers with young children; Hindu initiatives helping widows; Taoist education programmes for children from not so well to do families; dialysis facilities run by Christian churches. The Sikh temples have been well known never to turn anyone away who needs a meal or a place to sleep. The respective faith communities are doing so many things for so many people in so many places.

Who is not concerned? Yet what is the use of concern if those who are concerned don't get involved or that their concern is not made known, for whatever reason? Making known one's concern is not for the purpose of drawing attention to oneself but to the cause one is concerned about. This author is concerned and hence, he writes this book to make known his concern but the result which he hopes to see is that other commonplace, ordinary, plain citizens will

be encouraged to also put pen to thought or do whatever else they think is necessary or make any contribution they can to society.

As a nation, we must be able to call upon the able and willing among our people to render voluntary service and we must properly acknowledge their kind help.

Such work is also an important part of the political process, whereby ordinary citizens can work hand in hand with the government and civil society to extend help to designated communities in need. Such involvement with needy communities, in urban as well as rural locations, is not merely technical but also educational and social in nature. It bridges social, cultural, language, knowledge, economic and religious gaps. In its own way, it levels the playing field.

9. *Be there* - This author has found over many long years that just to say, “*I support what you all stand for and wish you every success*” isn’t good enough. Solidarity with others in a common cause deemed worthy of support, especially when the author himself will be a direct beneficiary, must mean more than mere *verbal sentiments*. The author recalls his first year as a school teacher, when the teachers’ union decided on a nationwide picket for better terms of employment. A number of teachers, the author included, were unsure, even wary about joining the campaign. It triggered a big debate in the staff room, and arguments went back and forth. But for the author, what tipped the scale was the inescapable question: If the picket action was successfully carried out and he had opted not to join the campaign, how would he feel about receiving a better take-home pay package? He imagined the embarrassment and shame he would have felt in receiving a benefit that others but not him had risked fighting for.

In the same way, what *BERSIH* stood for was a clean

electoral roll and clean elections, that is, ensuring a level playing field for the electoral process which is necessary for a fair election for both the incumbent government as well as the opposition. In turn, this ensures that the winning side will have the majority number of seats to form the government as per the voters' wishes. A level playing field is such a just demand, as is surely the case for any sports competition.

Unfair advantage must never place a competitor on the victory podium. It is alright for other competitors not to win, provided the declared winner had won without unfair advantage. And as we have seen over the years and again only just recently in the world of sports, if indeed the winner had won by unfair advantage instead of hard work, discipline and tactics, the winner's medal would be taken away, no matter how long an interval had lapsed since the awarding of the medal. This is a commonly accepted value.

To put it mildly, should an election to vote in a country's government be fraught with inconsistencies and instances of unfair advantage, that election in actual fact should not give legitimacy or credence to the winner who will form the country's next government. And the competition in a country's elections is far more crucial than any sports contest. The impact of the victor's prize in any election is far in excess of an Olympic gold medal. Yet, the mechanism and prescription for a clean and clear victory in the Olympic Games seem far more superior and worthy of confidence than those of some elections in a number of instances in human history.

This being the case, we the people must be in solidarity with one another and join hands to initiate and participate in just causes that will bring about a level playing field. We must BE THERE!

## ***CAREER POLITICS***

### **A certain Aptitude**

Politics as a professional career, as with other professions, has its own requirements: a certain aptitude, skill, capacity, acumen, gift and attitude that some have in larger supply than others. But this is not to be confused with differences in personality type. This author does not believe that career politicians need to be of a certain personality type any more than teachers, doctors, lawyers, not to mention parents, etc. There is room in any profession for the whole spectrum of personality types and traits. More important is the matter of fitness for any particular occupation.

For example, *career politicians* need to have the resilience to withstand reversals and sudden turns in fortune or popularity for better or for worse. They must be able to run the marathon and sprint event as necessary. Yes, all of us need a dose of resilience as we also face such challenges, though perhaps not with the same frequency as *career politicians*, for whom ups or downs are like the daily weather in Mongolia, where it is possible to have four seasons in a single day! For *career politicians*, mental and emotional strength must be in abundant reserve.

But there again, none of us should be discouraged to go down (or is it up?) the path of *career politics*. One never knows what one may in actual fact have within oneself until one embarks on the actual journey. Like learning to swim, it could be that one has to be thrown in the deep end to start the limbs flapping to keep the body afloat! The technique and mechanics of swimming can come naturally when one has no choice but to keep one's head above water. Those with a mere inkling of an interest should be encouraged to join as volunteers or staff of a political party, an elected representative's office or service centre.

Be prepared to do anything and everything (legitimate, that is), keep eyes, nose and ears (but not mouth) open. See, hear, smell and process and learn as much as possible. Observation and self-processing are the best mediums of self-education. Pick up healthy practices and attitudes (discretion, respect, appreciation, diligence, prudence, forbearance, patience, insulation, humility, generosity, graciousness, courtesy), while discarding the not so healthy attitudes that may come with the profession, bearing in mind that all professions generate their fair share of both healthy and unhealthy attitudes. (As we say, “*It comes with the job!*”)

With *mouths closed*, however, one will learn much more and faster than otherwise. The mind closes in proportion to the extent the mouth opens! When one observes predominantly through mind and heart, for every *negative* confronted, one also learns its *positive* counterpart. For example, confronted with rudeness, one immediately realises the beauty of courtesy.

Imagine the win-win effect if one replaces the negative with the positive.

As a volunteer or apprentice to the career politician, one is not directly involved with most conversations or dramas that are being played out. There is therefore the luxury to keep the mouth shut, the better to relax, observe and learn. There is time to think of alternative ways of conversation or action that will yield better results. All this will be good preparation for a possible career in politics. The history of politics in various countries confirms that many top-rung national leaders had their start as *volunteers* or apprentices in the way we have just described. Start humbly, already in the deep end, but not yet responsible for the consequences. That's good going for an apprenticeship.

Give it a try and give yourself a chance!

## A Lot of Plusses

Having said all that, embarking on the path of career politics is, for all our sakes, something that *more people*, especially among the younger generation, should be encouraged to do. Sure, it is a tough road, perhaps more rugged and winding, with more than its share of potholes than most other career paths. You will likely get your feet wet more often than with a regular white-collar job. But if you don't want a routine, boring job, this will be a *smashing alternative*. You learn as you go, you become a better driver for having negotiated through a host of people and groups, conflicting needs and demands, and for having attracted more criticisms along the way. But in facing and overcoming all these challenges, you also build more negotiation and people-skills than you would have in an average job or in an average day at work. Never a dull moment. There are a lot of plusses in this job.

The general complaints we often hear (or make) about politicians are how ignorant, untrustworthy, arrogant, insensitive or insincere they are. This author (who is not a career politician) does not think that the track records of professional or career politicians are any worse than those in other professions. To be fair, the preceding directory of negatives is equally applicable to any given profession. We will find the good, the bad and the ugly in any profession. However, if and when we are fair and follow the career paths of politicians more closely and get to know them better personally, we will find *decent*, *diligent* and *professional* politicians on either side of the parliamentary divide.

The truth of the matter is that politics is so important and career politicians are so crucial to the political process and we the people do need to have *good models* of professionalism among them. It will probably take quite a while before we can imagine Malaysian parents and families saying to their young

ones, “*When you grow up, darling, papa and mummy will like to see you take up politics and become members of parliament or the state assembly*”!

## Back to School

But the path to this worthy end must come with a *conscious switch* within the profession to a new brand of politics with its own code of acceptable conduct and high standards of propriety. The emphasis here is not that we leave behind old politicians as such but that we must leave behind the old school politics in order to make room for a new politics of greater transparency, accountability, fairness and integrity.

Robert Louis Stevenson’s observation that “*Politics is perhaps the only profession for which no preparation is thought necessary*” is worthy of serious thought. The time has come when career politicians should be provided with some formal professional training from a public-funded but privately-run (non-partisan) school for political practitioners.

To be sure, all representatives in the federal parliament, state legislatures or local councils must bring to their jobs their own hometown manners, folksy knowledge, homegrown sentiments and personalities because these are the things that will keep their two feet on hard ground and retain their affinity with the people they represent. Let career politicians keep their common touch, which is a very good and most proper trait. That unique personal and natural part in each of them must remain, and they may take a train to work, cycle to meet their constituents, eat with the humblest of folks and comfortably chat with one and all. But we the people and the nation cannot accept these traits as the *only* qualifications required of our MPs and state assemblymen.

So how come (and my grandchild would say, “*why come?*”) there is no formal education and training required for



professional career politicians? Professionals don't necessarily have to be from a university. Many great professionals have done well in various areas of work without a formal academic degree. But surely career politicians should go through a crash but formal professional course that will better prepare them for a profession in politics - rather like a diploma in education for teachers? Should not aspiring career politicians attend classes on political philosophy and ideologies, the mechanisms and mechanics of the political process, principles of parliamentary democracy, code of conduct, service centre management, human resource management, project management, finance for non-financial management, people skills, listening and communication skills, good governance, constitutional provisions, public speaking, etc.?

The point here is that we won't put untrained personnel in the classroom with our children from kindergarten upwards nor in the hospital ward or clinic with our patients. We have such stringent prescriptions for a valid driver's licence. For instance, after passing the highway code, road-safety and driving tests, newly qualified drivers have to display a 'P' (as in 'provisional') on their cars for two years, during which time any accident will virtually and automatically be attributed to him or her. So how come a *kopi lesen* (non-regulated licence) MP or *Adun* (state assemblyman) can go to parliament and the state assembly?

How can the people not be *sceptical*!

A hands-on, pragmatic and interactive course, rather than an academic one, should do the trick. Various models from around the world can be sourced to ensure the briefest yet most appropriate, practical and helpful orientation and training. Recognising such a course, if available, as the required professional training for professional politicians will also give credence and impetus to younger people who are considering politics.

Correspondingly, there should be a course, perhaps, to prepare citizens to understand the political process, the better to constructively engage in it and fulfill their duties as citizens, especially if these very short informal courses are delivered and completed online and/or via residents' associations or other easily accessible facilities. Among other things, it will be useful if such a course will include a module on how to recognise a media spin or partiality when one sees it in a newspaper or television programme. How to read the papers will be a most educational seminar!

Perhaps in going back to school in this manner both citizens and career politicians may prove their earnestness to engage in the political process, learning how best to understand, conceptualise and fulfill their duty to one another and the country. More importantly, perhaps by raising our level of understanding of the political process, we as citizens and career politicians will then be able to stop calling one another '*fools*' (or other such names) and start to respect one another more.

We citizens and politicians *together* must put our shoulders to the plough to do the necessary to raise the level of our performance for the good of our collective life as a nation.

## CHAPTER 7

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# A NATION'S OPTIONS

### **Exercising our Options**

The right to vote is the right to choose.

Choice is fundamental to human life. Personal growth involves learning how to make choices. From the cradle to near the grave, *making decisions* is part and parcel of our lives. Choice makes sense only when there is freedom to choose. And freedom to choose takes on meaning only if there are in fact available options and alternatives. What is not by choice must be by force. We either live by choice or we will be made to live by force. Either we make the choice, or other people or circumstances will make the choice for us.

So, in human life there are choices to make at every turn over careers, activities, locations, friendships, menu, causes, designs, colour schemes, and the shapes and sizes of almost everything that human lives are built around. Poverty and health may limit freedom of choice but to manage one's life through decision-making, whatever our circumstances, is the way we human beings cope with our respective given conditions. We live

by *exercising our options*. Life proceeds along these lines.

We need to recognise the fact that some people generally or in specific situations or in relation to certain issues, may well prefer to have less choice and may be grateful if they could leave the choice to others. They keep the necessity to make decisions to a minimum. There are those who go easier on most things, are less fussy perhaps and have the capacity to not mind about most things too much. Their attitude borders on apathy which is, in fact, the choice they have made for themselves. That is how they cope with life. We all have our respective ways of coping with life's situations. It is important that we *respect our differences* in this matter and leave each person to his or her own choice.

Some things or people won't leave us alone though and, like it or not, they will attempt to impose on us the need to make decisions and choices. Commercials and promotions can intrude on our private space and force upon us the necessity to make decisions, at least to say no, if nothing else.

Consumers always have alternative products and services, or alternative service providers and product manufacturers. If the food is not to our taste or worth the price or the service is bad or the place isn't clean enough, diners need not return and may, if they so wish, go to another restaurant. If the workshop isn't careful or thorough enough, we may seek out another workshop the next time the car or bike is due for a service. If the airline's check-in or drop-bag counters are always so crowded that some customers can't make their flight on time and are unfairly compelled to forfeit the reservation they paid for, or if after having booked and paid for their trip they are told months down the road that their destination has been withdrawn by the airline because of cost-cutting, there is nothing to stop affected travellers from taking their business elsewhere. They would be *wiser* the next time round.

So it is with our national affairs. When to its people's mind, the government has failed to come up to speed, the logic is the same. The act of choice is founded on a principle worthy of our attention. That principle holds that those who pay for goods and services should get to choose their service provider.

When things aren't right in our national life, citizens don't necessarily leave the country. We stay, but the government goes.

## **Understanding the Electoral System**

While the principle is clear enough, the voters' right to choose a government, however, is perhaps more complicated than the average voter may think. The Westminster parliamentary system, which our former colonial masters had left behind and upon which Malaysia's own parliamentary system is patterned, is in effect less fair a system than meets the eye. A party's candidate who wins the majority of votes in a particular constituency becomes the member of parliament (MP) for that parliamentary constituency, and the party or coalition of parties that commands the majority of constituencies gets to form the government. That seems fair enough on paper.

However, the trouble with this system is that the voting populations in parliamentary constituencies may vary drastically from constituency to constituency. For example, a constituency with say five times more voters than that of another constituency with five times fewer voters would still have just the one member of parliament – the same as the latter. This being the case, it is conceivable that there may come the day when the will of the majority of voters nation-wide does not determine which party or coalition of parties gets to form the new government. That has not been the case thus far. However, in a few instances, where the total number of votes cast for each side does not show a wide gap in votes between winner and loser, the number of

parliamentary seats (constituencies) by the winning side has been disproportionately greater.

For example, in the last general elections of 2008, out of a total of 7,878,875 votes cast, the sitting government won 4,082,411 versus 3,796,464 for the opposition. As a result of that same election, the sitting government won 140 seats in the Dewan Rakyat (parliament), versus 82 for the opposition. In other words, while the difference in total votes counted was 3.6 per cent in favour of the government, the system nevertheless accorded 26.1 per cent more seats in the Dewan Rakyat to the sitting government. In effect, the sitting government had 63 per cent of all parliamentary seats.

Now here's the rub. Imagine a scenario of an elected government that ends up with a two-thirds – roughly 66.6 per cent - majority in parliament by thus winning two-thirds of the constituencies of disproportionate sizes. However, the absolute number of votes in its favour could well be, in such a scenario, less than 50% of all votes cast nationwide. Notwithstanding this, it could virtually pass bills or amend any existing act without worrying about the parliamentary opposition's support (or non support). Effectively, this means that the very reason for the existence of parliament, which is to provide check and balance, is nullified. It is a system that is fraught with prospects of, and potentials for, unfair advantage and abuse.

Among other things, a sitting government with a two-thirds majority (with or without a majority of votes) in parliament can move to redraw constituencies, citing justifications of various kinds, virtually any way it wishes. Naturally, such *gerrymandering* exercises will favour a sitting government. For why indeed would a sitting government, facing the next elections, initiate a realignment exercise of parliamentary constituencies that would not be in its favour? The incumbent government thus always has the upper hand.

By adjusting the number of voters per parliamentary constituency as often as it is legally permitted to do so, it is conceivable that a sitting government may virtually assure itself of a head-start toward re-election, time and time again. The task of the opposition to wrest control of parliament is therefore made doubly difficult. In such a situation, there is no level playing field.

Opportunities such as gerrymandering which is “a practice that attempts to establish a political advantage for a particular party or group by manipulating geographic boundaries to create partisan or incumbent-protected districts” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gerrymandering>) may virtually thwart the wishes of a large number of voters. This may arguably be a reason why only one coalition of parties came to effectively rule Malaya, and subsequently Malaysia, for the entire combined period of the country's independence that is 55 long years.

## **Recognising the Sad State of Affairs**

Many Malaysians now think that their country is in very serious difficulty. This is not the time to beat around the bush and hedge and spin. This is not the time to pretend that all is well with the nation. There is nothing worse than an ailing patient who ought to be in a hospital ward thinking that he or she can go about business as usual without professional help. The time has come for some very honest examination of facts and figures – to see and tell it as it is.

For example, the issue of rare earths. What another country (Australia) most certainly does not want in its own backyard, our country (Malaysia) seems so happy and so determined to have in the capital city of one of our states in the east coast of the peninsula. It's a very odd way to show concern for our people, if you ask me.

The federal government says it is safe.

“NO it isn’t,” says the MP for Kuantan.

“YES it is,” says the MP for Pekan.

Well, if it is really so safe to have the rare earths processing plant in Kuantan, my town-in-law (that is, my wife’s birthplace and hometown), it should be equally safe to move the plant to Pekan in the same state of Pahang, wouldn’t you say? But what is decidedly unbecoming and disingenuous is for the MP of Pekan to say, loud and clear, that one of the world’s largest, if not the very largest, rare earths processing plants is safe in and for Kuantan. Why only Kuantan, then? Correct my logic if you wish, but surely what is safe for Kuantan should be safe for Perth or Pekan, no?

Well if this is as he says it is, then the people of Kuantan would understandably want to have some proof that the MP of Pekan would have no qualms to advocate that similar plants be set up in Pekan as well, given his whole-hearted conviction that there is no safety issue involved. At the very least, the MP from Pekan should demonstrate his good faith by purchasing a second live-in home in the vicinity of the rare earths installation for all the 12 years during which Lynas, the operator of the plant, is exempted from tax, courtesy of the government. This is especially because the folks there believe that value of their property will be adversely affected as a result of the presence of the rare earths plant.

The point here is that there are political fall-outs in decisions being considered and made which are an integral part of the political process. These impact certain Malaysians in their respective locales. In humanitarian aid work, you never just go to a given community and unilaterally start a project no matter how much you think it will benefit its people. Having done all the necessary planning and detailed development of a programme



initiative, you always need to pay numerous visits to the target communities to *socialise* the programme so that the communities themselves understand, make the decision to accept and therefore agree to take substantial responsibility for the programme. Only then can a programme be sustainable. The people need to be consulted.

It is all very well for politicians to make pronouncements and speak volumes of reassurances involving other elected representatives' constituencies when the deed is not in their own back yard, as it were. Once again, the people's sceptism lies with the common practice of incomplete or unconvincing disclosure as to why certain decisions have been made (or not made).

In Malaysia today, we are not just seeing isolated acts and practices that do not pass the test, but rather a *pattern* of practices over many years that can only come from a certain attitude and presumptuousness on the part of the powers that be, which clearly disturb many of us and threaten the very fabric of our society and tarnish the image of our country, with very serious ramifications for the nation as well as implications for the long-term prospects of our national wellbeing.

The people of Kuantan and all Malaysia need to be and must be convinced and shown that this sitting government is sincere in its rationale for what it says, plans and does, because for an increasing number of Malaysians, the very credibility of the sitting government is in question and well it should be! Convincing answers to questions being raised by the people on specific projects country-wide had better be found mighty fast and if this author may say so, in a more serious and humble way.

## Effecting Change

The fact that things have come to this sad state of affairs does not mean that we as a nation need to accept such a situation and must quietly and stoically brace ourselves to just let the consequences hit us with full impact like a typhoon, or worse still, a tsunami. On the premise that it is never too late or at least that it is better late than never, we should do whatever we can and be prepared to do the necessary to mitigate the adverse effects upon us.

Through their votes, concerned citizens will have the opportunity to effect change, not for the sake of change itself, but because the country desperately needs another way of thinking, doing things, and serving its people. Change must be brought about because the country cannot afford to remain the way it is. Change must come because we, as a nation, are in urgent need of a boost to our *national psyche and morale*.

This author believes that we the people are prepared to roll up our sleeves to do what it takes to turn the country around. But oftentimes, we find ourselves demotivated by the actions (or non actions) of a government whose deeds do not always match its words. Change must come because we desperately need to give our people a reason to believe that there is something they can put their minds, hearts and hands to which will effect major improvements to the country instead of the country remaining in the *status quo*.

We Malaysians desperately need to have a change of national mood which will convince us that it is worthwhile for us to make major sacrifices for the nation's good.

## CHAPTER 8

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# A PERSON'S VOTE

Having spoken throughout this book about the *people* as a whole, this author now comes to his own *person* moving from the plural to the singular, as it were, from the third person to first person pronoun. This final chapter takes on an even more personal tone than the rest of the book. For a person's vote is his or her own. Here, the author speaks of his own vote. No one is required to reveal how he or she will vote and why, inasmuch as no one is required to have to listen to (or to read) how another person is likely to vote. There is no compulsion either way. Like others, this author is not compelled to make such revelations, but on his own conscience he consciously and knowingly reveals here what he is not required to do. That is surely his choice to make.

Through my vote, as a concerned citizen, I will have the opportunity to possibly effect change. Change because my nation can definitely do better. Change because my nation must and can have better leadership.

The next government needs to take the country to another level, taking cognisance of new developments in such fields as education and medical science. To do this, the next government

must be clear that it should keep the country's best human resources in their respective fields in the country or accept their offer of service even if they are presently outside the country and not allow some silly reasons to stand in their way.

## **Getting Back the Keys**

Alas, change is necessary so that we, as a nation, may begin the herculean task of cleaning up the junk and mess, accumulated from the negligence, misconduct and lack of due process left behind by successive tenancy terms of a bunch of people in denial of their misdoings because they are so full of how well they have been doing.

To clean up a neglected house that has fallen to disrepair, you need to first get its present occupants out. It might be, as we see in many other nations that after so many years of neglect, successive changes of government would be needed to finally get our house up and running. The clean-up will require time, diligent resolve and co-operation. It won't be accomplished easily or quickly. So be it.

Commonsense tells us that, to start the cleaning process, we need to get the long-staying (or over-staying) tenant out. That first act of evicting an over-staying tenant is key to getting the whole nation used to changing its tenants every now and again until successive future tenants get the message that they need to do better and pass the test of the watchful, critical eyes of voters who can make or break incumbent governments.

As they say, don't let the grass grow around your feet. That is, don't allow any sitting government to get so used to sitting in our house so much that they start behaving as though they are landlord and we are the tenants! Ask any landlord. It is very hard to evict tenants who really like the house they are occupying, despite whatever may have been attested to in the tenancy

agreements. You can serve notices on them, but you will not see them leave quietly or immediately. Tenants famously have 101 reasons why they can't leave just yet: youngest daughter will sit for final school exams end of the year; son is attending college just two bus-rides away; *rambutan* tree planted is just about to bear first fruits, pet cat is buried in the garden, etc.

I, having been a tenant myself in several instances (twelve times since setting up family to be precise!), plead the case of honest tenants of houses owned by my readers and urge the latter to be as merciful as their situations may allow to extend the term of their present tenants. Because it may often be better to lose 50 *ringgit* or 100 *ringgit* a month and keep an honest family as tenants, rather than exchange them for strangers who, though paying MR100 more, may burn your house down or use it for illegal activities!

But the preceding plea only applies to tenants who occupy individual houses we may own. It most certainly does not apply to the house that we, as a nation's people, own collectively. We are plagued by a tenant who has stayed for so long that it seems practically impossible, to most of us, to get him or her to hand back the keys to the house.

In all the years since we allowed this particular tenant to occupy the house, he or she has had the run of the house, sublet rooms to his or her cronies and used our house as surety to get soft loans to run businesses - successful or otherwise. As landlords, we have also been kept in the dark about goings on in our own house, almost all the time. We would still be in the dark if not for those people who '*whistle a happy tune*' (to many people's ears) when they stumble on some evidence or tales of this and that, which seem odd and irregular even to the uninitiated. But these odd jigsaw pieces do not assure us that we will have a full picture of the goings-on. We may not even

witness the process of these jigsaw pieces being presented and tried in open court.

But for me, I have seen enough to say, “ENOUGH IS ENOUGH”!

## **Being my own Person**

The polling booth has room for just one solitary voter at a time. And here, I must necessarily get *personal*.

Comes the time when I - a son to my parents in Taiping, a son to my widowed mother in SS3 in Petaling Jaya, a brother to my six siblings from Taiping, a friend to my schoolmates in Taiping and Malacca, a student to my teachers and professors in Kuala Lumpur and Quezon City, a school teacher to my students and a colleague to my friends in the staffroom in Sitiawan, a boss to my staff in Kuala Lumpur and Dili, an advocate to poor communities in East Timor, a Bible teacher to Christian groups throughout the country and abroad, a facilitator to field staff ministering to university students across East Asia and beyond, a counsellor to friends in temporary distress, an early dawn white-haired biker to those out for exercise in my neighbourhood, an occasional blogger in cyberspace, an avid fan of track and field, rugby union, cricket and badminton, a spouse to my wife of 41 years, a brother-in-law to her 10 siblings from Kuantan, the uncle of my nieces and nephews, the father of my two sons, father-in-law of my daughter-in-law, the kong-kong (grandpa) of my two grandchildren, a citizen of my country of 28.9 million people - yes, I, who am all of the above, weighing but 55 kilograms and standing at a mere 5 feet 2.5 inches, - will step into a mini booth, ballot paper in hand, put a little cross beside the name of the candidate of the party of my choice and emerge to put the ballot paper, bearing my choice, into the ballot box.

For that one fleeting moment, I am on my own, with no one

from my past or present physically with me. Once every four or five years, whoever, whatever, wherever I may be or may have been, I become a plain voter. My own person.

But my stamp of approval will only be available to just one candidate representing one party on the ballot paper. For the one particular candidate and party that I have said “yes” to, means in effect that I have said “no” to the other candidates and parties.

Like all other voters across the nation, my vote is to say YES as well as to say NO.

My vote will say NO to something, and YES to another thing. My vote will REJECT something, and AFFIRM another thing; STOP something, and START another thing; say “SORRY” to one side, and “A CHANCE FOR YOU” to the other side.

Alone for a mere minute or two in the polling booth, I alone will know what I will do or not do. I alone will know where the hand-drawn cross will be placed or not placed on the ballot paper. At that precise moment, in a twinkling of an eye, with my vote, I may be responsible for moving my nation (within which live my family, friends, colleagues and neighbours) BACKWARDS or FORWARDS, for RICHER or POORER, for BETTER or WORSE.

My vote may conceivably RETIRE one government, and INSTALL another!

So despite the very short time it requires, casting a vote is a most intricate, complicated and involved act, because of the sheer responsibility of a seemingly simple act. So full of import is a person's vote.

## **A Vote of No Confidence**

For the author, this time round, the path to his final decision at the polling booth isn't as complicated as it had been in previous

elections. This coming one is an uncommon election for the country. It has been billed the *mother* of all elections, a landmark election that to many Malaysians represents the best chance to effect a sea change that would usher in the most fundamental changes to how we as a nation define and envisage ourselves, go about doing business with our resources, as well as regard and utilise the democratic processes contained within the Federal Constitution. This sea change embraces how we, as a people who are the nation, will be vigilant and insistent on being respected by the government we have put in office as well as our demand that it stops talking down to us but shows proof that it is listening to us. This sea change where the newly elected powers tackle the most critical issues the nation faces. The list for a sea change literally goes on and on, like the Hobbit's journeys.

With many critical issues yet to be resolved, abundant anomalies in the system itself, plus the human weaknesses of the nation's political practitioners (which, truthfully speaking, may also be ailments that similarly plague us, the nation's voters), I do not believe in salvation on earth. Nothing will work perfectly. We will not find perfection this side of heaven.

I do not hero-worship anyone, nor do I advocate any such sentiments for any one person or political party. None of us – politicians and citizens alike – should be encouraged to trust or view any one as totally reliable, nor consider anyone deserving such terms of grandeur. No one human being should be trusted in everything every time. The Holy Bible firmly declares, “*For there is no distinction; since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...*” (Romans 3.22, 23)

Even so, despite our human fallibilities, progress must be made whereby the system, governance, fairness and justice are all seen to have improved. And the key indices of this would be that hard work pays; honesty valued; fair play, sincerity and good



conduct encouraged, acknowledged and rewarded; and creativity appreciated. Furthermore, the deserving in any field and endeavour will be promoted, while the undeserving and cheats of society faulted and made accountable, and the determined and enterprising in society encouraged and assisted to meet their goals. Other key indices would have wrong declared as wrong and right as right whoever the perpetrators may be from top down and down up. The same rules, conditions and requirements must apply across the board, without fear or favour.

## **Voting for a Two-Party System**

Since there are no perfect candidates, party coalition or manifesto to vote for, I will look at nothing more keenly and critically (when I spend the minute or two in the secrecy of the polling booth), than the concept of a TWO-PARTY system prescribed by a democratic system of government.

This is the one thing that makes the most sense to me. Monopoly in any sphere or industry is never good and political monopoly is arguably the worst of all human-perpetuated and human-administered monopolies. Monopoly is NOT GOOD for the general populace, economic enterprise, national morale and even the monopolists themselves.

A move to effect a two-party system of democracy is long overdue. It is the only guarantee whereby the people can retain power over those they elect to serve as government. It is the only way they can remind any serving government that it may not take the people's votes for granted and ensure that all members of parliament will take the parliamentary system of check and balance solemnly.

## Taking Political Responsibility

This author has met and had very involved conversations with politicians on either side of the parliamentary divide. After so many years, he has yet to meet any stupid political leader. Not one. They are articulate and know what they are saying and doing or not saying or doing. What they say or do may possibly be stupid, but that does not mean they themselves are stupid.

On the contrary, many of them are highly intelligent and accomplished people and therefore can be held responsible for their conduct. Take the example of the drunk husband who comes home and pours a boiling pot of instant noodles over his wife's head. Were he stone drunk, his action may be excused and his liability for a criminal act reduced. But as this particular husband is not so drunk as to not know what he is doing, he must, therefore, be held responsible for his act. Likewise, people in charge of families, communities, organisations, businesses and corporations, religious institutions, political parties, and especially, sitting governments at federal and state levels, should be responsible and answerable for their actions or omissions.

The only fear that an elected government has is the fear that it can actually lose an election. Then and then only will it know (*baru tau*) what defeat is, and how and why it happens. Then only will members of an unseated government, sitting across the parliamentary aisle from the newly elected government members that have replaced them, have recourse and urgency to stop their act of self-denial and think deep and long about how and why their circumstances have changed. These ousted members should see that it is not because the other side told lies about them or that the electorate believed in these lies, but that there were things they did or said (or did not), and the way they did or said these things that brought about their downfall.

You lose a match on the field not just because of how the other team played, but principally because of the way you yourself played (or did not play) the game.

In any area of life, if the only excuse you have for not making it is because of the other person, then you can only stare at a solid wall since there's nothing you can do about it. I can learn lessons and correct failures only if they pertain to my own self because the person I can change is myself. I cannot change the other person. Thus, I do not believe that any political party, since we are talking about politics and elections here, will ever seek its own reform, let alone effect real change from within. Yes, change must necessarily be from within and no political party or any human institution for that matter, will voluntarily move for change within itself until and unless it has been forced to. In politics, the forcing will effectively only come from electoral defeat, which, in this country's case has not occurred for 57 years!

Even in sports competition, if any one team dominates, dystrophy will set in affecting not only the dominant team itself but also the particular sport, not to mention the loyal and long-suffering fans of the game. If in rugby union, each and every time the New Zealand All Blacks *turun padang* (turns out for a match) its victory is assured, this will neither be good for its own players and coaches nor followers of rugby union nor the game of rugby union itself.

## **Ending the Political Monopoly**

Since monopoly, especially political monopoly, is GOOD FOR NOTHING, this author's vote will be cast toward effectively ending the political monopoly that has had the run of the country since the 1955 general elections (two years prior to the attainment of independence of the Federation of Malaya).

The score today stands at  
57 - 0.

My vote will go up the very tough path of making it  
57 - 5.

And in my simple mind, how risky can this be for the nation, as the advertisements of the side that wants to make it 62 - 0 seek to portray? How frightened should I be of the prospect of ending what is essentially the same political coalition's 57-year hold on the seat of government?

I am in the business of CALLING THE BLUFF and not trusting the advertisements. I do not see a 5 - 57 score as a risk. No sir, no ma'am. If anything, to this voter, a 5 - 57 score delivers much, much better prospects for HOPE and CHANGE than a 62 - 0 score.

I have but ONE vote, no more, no less. My solitary vote, on its own, will change almost nothing - a most humbling and sober fact. However, if my one vote so happens to coincide with an extensive shift in voter sentiment across the country, then on one, fine, soon-to-come evening, a sea CHANGE not ever seen between 1955 and 2012 or 2013 will be effected.

The scoreboard will need to depend on very many more votes that favour SOME CHANGE over the STATUS QUO, some prospects of DIFFERENCE rather than the probability and predictability of MORE OF THE SAME.

My prayers dictate my vote. My vote reflects my prayer. My prayer is the END of the political monopoly.

To my mind, the CHANGE that many Malaysians wish to see will be how the next government they elect into office shows that it will be more afraid, attentive, responsive, respectful to the people and of the people. Yes, RESPECT for the people!

Let us be crystal clear about this. The message this author sends to bid goodbye to the long-staying government is, by the same virtue, the very same message he sends to bid welcome to the next government:

**LISTEN OR PERISH! LISTEN AND FLOURISH!**

## EPILOGUE

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# AN ONGOING JOURNEY

Politics is not just about elections but what goes on in between elections. The road goes on and on ...

This author's prayer is that whichever side wins the coming elections, once the contest is over, we the people, and they the political factions, will respectively do our utmost to accept the elections results.

The end of the elections should not see – at state or federal level – what took place following the previous elections of 2008, that is, the frantic shredding of documents on the part of the outgoing state governments. In praying and pleading for peace and calm, this author does not advocate the willful and intentional destruction of state property. The incoming federal or state governments, whichever side they may be from, should not be subjected to the indignity and chaos of inheriting empty filing cabinets. This is a criminal act that should be punishable by the full force of the law. The implications of such blatant acts of cynicism and contempt are staggering to the human mind. Our nation should not be subjected to such a disgrace. Let democratic protocol prevail, please.

Should any quarter feel that there is a case to challenge any result of the elections – be it in part or in whole - let it be through and within the law of the land and may all in authority over such procedures be swift and visible in the dispensation of *justice* to whomever justice is due.

PLEASE let the rest of the human world see and be inspired that we as a people know how to win, and how to lose, how we keep the peace and how we dispense justice, how we give criticism and how we receive criticism.

PLEASE let our children and their children in turn live in peace, justice and righteousness. Let my generation show how we know how to bequeath a better future to our next generations. Not a failed state but a viable, vibrant and progressive society.

Should the next elections deliver a hung parliament, may the political leaders sit around the table and learn to respect one another, be reasonable and demonstrate humility, generosity, wisdom and maturity; put the people first, show us your best qualities, close ranks and form a peace and conciliation mechanism with which to govern the country.

In between elections, we the people must necessarily continue to be vigilant, watchful and cooperative with the government, opposition and one another. Let us as a people work for progress, raise the benchmarks, achieve higher and nobler objectives; be a *competent* nation, a *caring* society, a *compassionate* community.

*KERANA MU, Malaysia ... (For you, Malaysians ...)*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Goh Keat Peng is happiest when he is at home where everything and everyone is familiar to him and where the least fuss is generated. Yet he has traversed the country and the world to pay his dues to humanity by way of teaching, training, counselling as well as humanitarian services. He has been an avid observer of politics the world over since his school days with a compact shortwave transistor radio close to one ear well past midnight, listening to speeches, interviews and news. Comparative politics is what he calls this approach of observing, learning and appreciating how diverse situations and challenges impact the political equation and how the political dynamics in turn respond with suitable problem-solving leads to meet these various demands. In this way he understands and appreciates politics but only as long as he is not conscripted to vie for political or public office. When things get really complicated, he takes whatever time there is on the bicycle under the open sky, with the breeze on his face.







# A PEOPLE'S POLITICS

"*A People's Politics* tells a story of a Malaysia where the best shall never lose sight of their convictions. It is a Malaysia that celebrates its diversity, protects its integrity, and is guided by a moral compass that sheds light in times of darkness."

**Foreword by Nurul Izzah Anwar**

*Member of Parliament for Lembah Pantai*

"I trust you will be blessed and refreshed by the chapters of this book. By the time you complete reading the book, I hope you will be just as hopeful as me, a young Malaysian who is convinced that the best is yet to come for this land".

**Foreword by Hannah Yeoh**

*State Assembly member for Subang Jaya*

"An excellent contribution, written by a true patriot, to the rich and evolving narrative on *being Malaysian*. The author succinctly expounds the meaning of nationhood, democracy, good governance, and the ubiquity of politics. A veritable guide to all citizens on their rights and responsibilities and the steps needed to take ownership of our beloved Nation. Notwithstanding the somewhat partisan call to change, a timely reminder to all politicians and the new government post GE13, never to forget that the Rakyat will always be the Boss. In essence, this is Mr. Goh's clarion call to all Anak Bangsa Malaysia *to put the shoulder to the plough for the good of our collective life as a nation* in the 21st Century."

**A. Jayanath**

*Saya Anak Bangsa Malaysia*

"Adoption of the election process alone does not mean that a country is democratic. Rather, democracy begins with the institutional respect for all aspects of human rights and the freedom of involvement by the people in the formation of accountable and people-centred governance. This book is a call for a more just and democratic Malaysia."

**Peter Kallang**

*Orang Ulu and Kenyah community leader who is experienced in trade unionism and church leadership; currently Chairman of Save Sarawak's Rivers Network*

"As Malaysia matures into a functioning democracy we deserve better governance, renewal of our institutions and more choices. This work is a clarion call for critical conversation and engagement which we cannot abdicate from."

**Philip TN Koh**

*Corporate governance lawyer*

"The ordinary peace-loving Malaysians, politicians and non-politicians, will find this book refreshing and interesting because it is authored by someone who is not a politician. I can sense that the author is not pro-government, not pro-opposition, only pro-good governance. He is just being sincere and honest."

**Simon Sipaun**

*PSM, Founding Chairman of the Association for the Promotion of Human Rights, former Sabah State Secretary, former Chairman of the Sabah State Public Service Commission and former Vice-Chairman of the Malaysian Human Rights Commission (SUHAKAM)*



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