

Leadership In Challenging Times

Written by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah
Saturday, 08 December 2012 13:17 -

I am singularly honoured to have been invited by Rotary District 3300 to deliver the keynote address marking its 78th Annual Conference.

2. We know that Rotary brings together leaders from all walks of life to provide services with very high ethical standards in accordance with the organization's credo of Service Above Self. We also know that these services helped contribute towards the building of peace and goodwill across the world. We never tire of admiring Rotary for the movement's exemplary arrangement to draw Rotarians from all walks of life – enterprise, public service, the professions and politics. Given that Rotarians are leaders in their own right, I thought, therefore, it is apt if I were to spend some time and share with you my thoughts on leadership.

3. I seek your indulgence, ladies and gentlemen, to take a slight detour and step back to a month ago yesterday. On the 7th of November, leadership – or rather, the quintessential quality of leadership – was visually defined on television, much to the admiration of the world. For long stretches of time on that day, a particular 24-hour satellite news channel repeatedly aired two news clips showing the reactions of two presidential candidates in a just concluded election for the head of government in a matured democracy across the Atlantic.

4. One clip showed the victor's magnanimity in embracing his opponent. This could, in a manner, help to close whatever chasm and divide that had developed across the differing political sides in the aftermath of the hustings. Any politician seasoned enough with the ways of elections could tell us that such a chasm is potentially cancerous and could, if not properly attended to, fester into a permanent scar damaging to the nation. This could very well have been the case had the victor not held out his hand in a symbolic gesture to register his intent to dress the wound of defeat suffered by the loser.

5. The Other? A clip on the vanquished. It registered the loser ever so gracious in offering his congratulations and good wishes to the winner after the people had made known their choice. Cynics would have us believe that on show was the handiwork of professional image makers designed to create a mirage of civility to hide the gloating and the disappointment across the

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two political aisles. But the truth comes across as more sincere and thus the poignant scenes that I had drawn your attention to.

6. In contrast to this, in newer democracies, the practice of the winner taking all has been so ingrained in a party's psyche that it has come to be a part of the political culture. The sad thing, in this case, is that there is a wastage of talent as, in many instances, losers in a contest of political parties are still useful since their capacity to contribute would not have diminished, even though they had suffered a loss. At the same time, the country as a whole will, in the long run, feel the detriment of this wastage of talent, which talent could otherwise be deployed for the country's greater good. In view of the foregoing, it is perhaps timely for us to look at how we view leadership.

7. The conventional way of looking at leadership is that a leader has followers. Taking this a step further, it follows that a good leader works for the followers. It is not uncommon for leaders to want to be in a position of strength because strong leadership would mean that the leader's work could be carried out smoothly with minimal interruptions. In such a case, the leader is seen as effective and the person is therefore considered a successful leader. Herein lies a possible danger; and that is, the followers being in awe of a leader considered to be brilliant because of his or her high success rate. This could very well be the beginning of such a leader being autocratic in the way he chooses to lead. The possibility of this type of leadership rearing its head in new democracies is not an impossibility. The challenge before us, therefore, is to coax society to the next level where a matured form of democracy is practised as a matter of course. In such a scenario, the various political factions should be able to rise above petty partisanship following a contest or an election, notwithstanding their vehement struggle to garner political power. I would submit that it is incumbent upon politicians to rise to the occasion and close ranks as well as bridge the divide in the greater interest of the nation after such a flashpoint.

8. But, what is a good leader, one might ask. Management primers will give us any number of views on good leadership. However, for me a good leader is one who is honest, hard working and efficient. These qualities must be enhanced further by the moral character of the person in adhering to the highest ethical standards in whatever he or she does, while at the same time being a person of absolute integrity. Such a leader as described will automatically be looked up to by the followers; for he or she will not fail to command their respect.

9. There will always be those who would say that the leader that I have just described is more a Utopian concept than someone whom we can readily find among us in the here and now. Well, I beg to differ. I have had the opportunity of working with such a man – the first Malaysian Governor of Bank Negara, a person held in awe by the banking community and a central banker

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respected in equal measure by his peers for his banking and economics expertise, and for his leadership style where no detail is too small and perfection is a norm. I have no doubt that you will agree with me that Tun Ismail Ali fit to a “T” my description of a good leader -- honest, hard working, efficient, adhering to the highest ethical standards and a man of absolute integrity. It was an open secret in Bank Negara that festive hampers sent to him were returned to the givers or were distributed among the security personnel on duty during the holiday period. Tun Ismail Ali's august sense of righteousness and his high standard of morality gained him much respect. At the same time, he was feared. A joke that was often told by friends behind his back went something like this – even the ringgit is scared of Tun Ismail Ali; that is why its value never falls. In looking back, the proud legacy of Tun Ismail Ali must essentially be that he had set in train a set of management standards at Bank Negara upon which the central bank's ethos and corporate culture had been built.

10. The notion of the followers as leaders with the leader per se taking actions according to the wishes of the followers is not as ridiculous as it might sound. The philosopher Bertrand Russell, in his book entitled “Power” [Unwin Books; London; 1971], speaks of power – which itself is derived from one being a leader – as having two forms. It is explicit in leaders and implicit in their followers. Going by this argument, it would seem that followers, in exercising their power in an implied manner that is not plainly expressed, are a legitimate source of leadership. It therefore stands to reason for our leaders, as understood in the more conventional concept, to pay more attention to the grassroots rumblings of dissatisfaction by the followers in the last several years.

11. Good leadership must necessarily bring about and put into place good governance, much welcomed and accepted by the people. And the hallmark of good governance is transparency in the execution of power by the Administration of the day. It is also true that the business of politics is to gain power and having got the power, politicians will fight tooth and nail to retain it, possibly, permanently. Towards this end, a leader tends to amass power and unbridled power tends to come in the way of good leadership. An overly strong leader could be drowned in euphoria and should this happen, it could spell trouble and be the beginning of the breakdown of good governance. It is not unusual for such a breakdown to be followed by the start of politics of patronage by the party in power. Once this happens, you can be sure that the practice of corruption would not be far behind.

12. It has been said, time and again, that no society can be completely free of corruption; that corruption is the means providing the wherewithal in lubricating the mechanism helping the world go round. It is often thought that an Administration is considered to be relatively clean by the way it mitigates corruption to its barest minimum. The danger in this thinking is that the thin line of acceptability is very blurry and that corruption is cancerous in nature. It has a nasty habit of morphing into a part of everyday life. It is at this juncture that the practice could be viewed as

part of a society's culture. It is at this point that corruption becomes part of "the way we do things." Given its cancerous nature, it is at this point that the public services would tend to develop inertia, inefficiency rears its head and they become political powers unto themselves. In doing so, their apolitical nature is compromised and its role as policy implementer, tarnished. The rearing up of corruption's ugly head is a blight infecting many third world and emerging economies. And the sad thing is that Malaysia is not averse to it, regardless of the denial that we have been spouting about on the surface of things.

13. But it has not always been this way. Those who are middle-aged among us here could hark back to a time when the professionalism of our civil service was second to none. The skills of our diplomats made them much sought after members of the communiqué drafting teams at international inter-governmental conferences. Our well disciplined and professional soldiers were – as they still are – much in demand for international peace keeping duties. There was never any doubt as to the prestige that Malaysia enjoyed on the international stage. However, we are now seemingly bogged down in the same spot, struggling to progress further while not a few other countries appear to have passed us by either in their economic progression or in international stature or in both areas.

14. The situation that we find ourselves in begs the question, what happened? What did we get wrong? Good leadership would mean a good working relationship between the Executive, the Judiciary and the Legislature. Are the three branches of government working in tandem? Is each of the branches stepping on the others' toes? Has there been any tinkering around such that the idea of the Separation of Powers has been trampled upon to the extent that there is a crippling after effect? I would go so far as to suggest that in a matured democracy, the amiable relationship between the three branches of government is achieved with the Press – or the Media in current parlance – playing the crucial role of the watchdog of the people. Again, a question needs to be answered here. Are media owners stifling the Press in carrying out its watchdog role and the role of the conscience of the country?

Ladies and Gentlemen,

15. Let me ask another question. Where do we stand in the larger scheme of things? How do we fare in our setting out to do what we had wanted to do? What have we achieved? Is our achievement consonant with what we had set out to do in the first instance? The answers to

these questions would show us whether we have been led by good leaders. What did we set out to do, anyway? Undoubtedly, a different person would spell this out differently. To my mind, what our founding fathers wanted – both those responsible for removing the colonial yoke from the Federation of Malaya and those responsible for her coming together with her co-equals from across the South China Sea – was to guarantee each Malaysian a just and equitable place under the sun of this fair land. They had wanted Malaysians to enjoy their rights and liberty with access to the best education that a progressive Malaysia could offer. They had wanted the people to make a difference and be competitively at par with the first world, thereby being able to take our pride of place within the community of nations. In the process, it was the dream of the founding Prime Minister – the Malaysian dream, as it were -- to shape the country in his own image; that is, having a happy people led by the happiest Prime Minister in the world.

16. However, the reality today is a far cry from what the founding fathers had envisaged. Young Malaysians of all walks seem to be disillusioned with so many things in their lives. One is the apparent lack of opportunities to get involved in business activities unless you were active in the parties forming the government of the day. Another is the blatant practice of cronyism and nepotism. And of course the disappointment is most glaring when it comes to the issue of corruption which is, as a matter of course, linked to the abuse of power. This situation is not helped by the existence of the denial syndrome and the culture of “shooting the messenger” by the power of the day or its party apparatus in trying to make ticklish issues go away.

17. What is worse is that political parties tend to justify an inexcusable practice by drawing public attention to similar practices of their opponents. They tend to make light of the people’s perception of the burning issues of the day. But perception, as marketeers love to remind us, is reality. It is therefore critically necessary for political leaders to keep their parties clean of unsavoury practices linked to patronage such as corruption, cronyism, nepotism, rent seeking and other suchlike activities. The moment these practices stop, the credibility of political parties will improve exponentially.

18. The question to ask, I think, is where do we go from here? How do we proceed given the highly emotive nature of the issue? Have we been effective at all in combating corruption? Whether we like it or not, our success in fighting corruption will have to be measured against the number of charges preferred against the purported perpetrators. I believe this approach will convince the public of MACC’s (Malaysian Anti Corruption Commission) professionalism and independence in tackling the scourge without fear or favour. There is no doubt that MACC has done a good job, but the popular view is that the body suffers from a less than positive perception. In the mind of the public, the body – rightly or wrongly – is seen to pursue corruption on a selective basis. The public seems to think that charges that matter are not preferred. This credibility gap helps to confirm the public’s disbelief in MACC’s independence. Worse, the popular belief – albeit unspoken and untrue – is that the MACC is beholden to the Executive.

As a comparison, Hong Kong's ICAC (Independent Commission Against Corruption) prosecuted an average of 386 persons a year during a 33 year period from 1974, the year that body came into being, to 2007. As a result, the ICAC enjoys very high credibility among Hong Kongers.

19. The MACC is by no means the only body suffering negative perception. There seems to be a general belief that the Election Commission is not quite independent in carrying out its tasks. The Commission has been so badly politicized that we seem to forget that it is a constitutional body appointed by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong upon consultation with the Conference of Rulers as provided for under Article 114 of the Federal Constitution. This fact has been conveniently forgotten in the frenzy of politicking. Perhaps it is time everybody took a breather and allow the Election Commission to operate at an arm's length to all parties, thereby allowing it to recoup its delicate credibility. I am concerned about the dignity and credibility of public institutions such as the ones just mentioned; concerned because we are measured partly by how they fare. Therefore, these bodies must be able to deliver their services without being doubted by the public. For this to happen, their image must be in good order.

20. Apart from ensuring that these public bodies carry out their tasks at without interference, we must also protect members of the public who come forward to volunteer information on alleged wrong doings. This will be consistent with the idea of good governance. The practice of "shooting the messenger" to mitigate the embarrassment from such a disclosure is neither right nor honourable and should cease forthwith. In this regard, we must stop the practice of using, say, an Act meant to protect State secrets from being circulated, against anyone who brings the attention of the public to a scandalous wrong doing. Specifically, it is time we seriously thought about repealing the Official Secrets Act. At the very least, the OSA should be reviewed. Its existence is akin to having the sword of Damocles swinging above the people's necks that instil fear into them. In particular, the provision for incarceration for those guilty of contravening the Act must be done away with in the name of justice and in order for the authority to be seen to be just. The public must be protected, by an Act of law, against prosecution in its effort to have access to information, even if that piece of information embarrasses the government of the day. Only in this way could transparency and good governance be exercised, and excesses in the action of the authority be checked and eliminated.

21. There has been admiration among Malaysians for the way South Africa went about its business of healing the wound, the pain and the anguish brought about by the practice of the apartheid policy. That country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission was very successful in addressing and making good on the atrocities brought about by the much-loathed systematic segregation of its African nationals. A good part of that success was greatly due to the republic's leader of the day, President Nelson Mandela, who was very statesmanlike in not seeking vengeance for the pains and psychological sufferings of black South Africans. Rather, he showed himself to be a dignified statesman in focussing on uniting the country divided by the

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colour of the people's skin. He used sports successfully to bridge the racial divide. In particular, black sportsmen were encouraged to take up rugby, a sport synonymous with the country's white minority. This non-violent approach was so successful that before long, a good number of black rugby players represented their country as members of the world renowned Springboks.

22. Undoubtedly this non-violent leadership style has been well tested and applied by great leaders throughout history. For instance, Islam's Prophet Muhammad, Peace Be Upon Him, having moved to Medina to avoid continued flashpoints with the Meccan non-believers, was able to convince the Meccans, through peaceful means the righteousness of the beliefs he was divinely enjoined to preach, upon his return to the city of his birth. As was the case with Gandhi's Satyagraha and his salt march, from Ahmedabad to Dandi to protest the tax on salt, which marked his passive resistance to free India from British colonial rule.

23. Having seen how effective the Truth and Reconciliation Commission had been to South Africa in bringing that country together without any incrimination, many quarters in Malaysia think that there is merit in having such a body. It would help us address the issue of good governance by discovering the truth about the prevailing state of corruption, the extent of its practice and how to eliminate it as a way of life. The body must have the status of a court of law with the requisite judicial power so that it has enough bite.

24. Such a commission must be able to provide amnesty to those who used corrupt means and abused their positions, while in power, to amass wealth. Upon coming into force, the commission could, for instance, declare a grace period of, say, six or 12 months or such other reasonable period to allow abusers to come clean and make amends for their misdeeds. During this moratorium no action would be taken against them. However, if it is subsequently determined that a declarant had not been truthful, then he would be pursued and the full extent of the law would be applied against him. A corrupt person taking advantage of this amnesty would be required to go through a rehabilitation programme. He, and this includes both the taker and the giver, would also be required to declare that he would not practise corruption again and express regret for having indulged in it in the first place. The rehabilitation and the oath might sound drastic, but they are not so in the context of the corrosive effect of corruption on the national economy and on the moral fibre of the country. Given corruption's endemic nature of late, the prescription for its permanent elimination is completely justified.

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25. I have, in the final several minutes, shared with you my thought on the debilitating scourge that has come to inflict our beloved land. I have no doubt that as Rotarians, you feel very much the same about corruption, for the practice must surely be anathema to your credo and core belief. It is therefore my earnest hope that this disease be given serious thought so that it would continue to be given due weightage it thoroughly deserves and, in the process, a permanent solution for its elimination found.

26. I take this opportunity to congratulate you District Governor Mansoor Saat and members of the organizing committee for having organized this conference in the most professional of manner and wish you all the success you so richly deserve. Thank you and good morning.

Keynote Address at the 78th Rotary International District 3300 Conferenc on Saturday, 8th December, 2012, at 11.40 a.m at the Sunway Resort Hotel & Spa, Petaling Jaya