

Challenges in Nation Building

Written by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah

Wednesday, 16 September 2015 10:04 - Last Updated Wednesday, 16 September 2015 10:11

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am singularly honoured to have been invited to deliver the keynote address to signal the start of the National Unity Youth Fellowship Conference jointly organised by IDEAS and Merdeka Centre for Opinion Research. The theme – Nation Building, Unity and the Malaysian Dream: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow – is apt; apt because it summarises the reason for being of politicians of whom I am one. I also think that this conference provides the appropriate forum for a meeting of minds to address the socio-economic dysfunctionality afflicting our beloved country today.

2. At the same time it offers you the opportunity to explore the ways and means of overcoming it. The significance of this proposition is not lost upon us; for you, being of Gen Y, are arguably among the more important stakeholders of Malaysia. Your finding ways to rectify the sorry mess that we are in and putting the country back on an even keel in accordance with what our founding fathers had in mind would most certainly not be lost upon the powers that be. If nothing else, it would register your legitimate position to offer your views – critical or otherwise – of how the Malaysia of tomorrow should shape up as she takes her place within the community of nations.

3. It is timely for us to remind ourselves that Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, our founding father, had wanted a multiracial, united democratic sovereign state when he held the Merdeka talks with Lennox-Boyd in London in January, 1956. This was reflected by the composition of his team which had representatives of the MCA, MIC and the Malay Rulers. It did not matter to him that the country was a Malay state. He accepted the plurality of our society and the multiracial facet of the country. He was very focussed in wanting a democratic nation that guaranteed human rights such as freedom of speech and free, peaceful life as its cornerstone.

4. He cherished peace very much and was willing to negotiate for an end to the insurgency by the militant Malayan Communist Party which started after the Second World War and dragged into 1960, even though the economic cost of that insurrection was high. The Tunku had wanted to leverage on the country's potential wealth to wipe out this menace and the people rallied around him. All the communities rejected the brand of government being touted by the MCP which had shown that it would use violence as a tool of governance.

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5. The Tunku had wanted to build a nation that used its wealth to create a happy people in his own image as, to use his own words, the happiest prime minister in the world. Being tutored in law as a barrister, he had wanted a country where the separation of powers between the Executive, Judiciary and the Legislature are honoured and practised in the true spirit of democracy, thereby providing the checks and balance against each other. He had wanted the instruments of state such as the civil service and security enforcement bodies to operate professionally as policy implementers.

6. The sad reality is that we have been badly let down by both the three branches of government and the government bodies. The Executive has, once too often, been known to be brow beaten by the head of government. Our Judiciary had been weakened in the past and is perceived, rightly or wrongly, as less than effective. And in regard to the Legislature, it is not unknown that matters which are within the purview of the Dewan Rakyat had often been discussed by the executive committee of the ranking party within the coalition forming the government of the day. This amounts to usurping the power of the Lower House of Parliament. At the same time, one or two government bodies are becoming political forces unto themselves. Apart from these abuses, politics in our country has long been colluding with business which has led to unbridled corruption. It would seem that honour has deserted our leaders and insatiable greed for wealth has taken over its place.

7. Apart from the abject state of our governance, our effort to build a nation is nothing to shout about either. Our political leaders keep on parroting in a mantra-like manner that Malaysia is a nation. We are not; and that is the sad truth. We are polite to each other in public but there is, at times, a lack of sincerity in it. In group interactions, we are not above breaking into a language not being understood by everybody in our effort to not share our inner thoughts on whatever we have in mind with everyone. In the privacy of our homes we can be scathing in running down, for instance, cultural traits of other Malaysians that we are not familiar with.

8. Much as we hate to admit it, we live a compartmentalised life. This is compounded by the pluralistic nature of our society and our lackadaisical attitude towards the ethos and worldview of Malaysians who are not of the same ethnicity as us. In the end, unless we come from a family background that includes the presence of interracial marriage, we will not be able to understand their philosophy of life or their world view or their attitudes and aspirations. We will not be able to come as one and develop a Malaysian culture made up of the cultural traits of our various and diverse racial make-up. Our inability to evolve a Malaysian culture has a negative effect on nation building for culture is a key element in such a process.

9. Ladies and gentlemen, much as I hate to say this, I think the Malays must admit that they

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have a blinkered view regarding other Malaysian communities. As Malays we are proud to think of ourselves as democrats; but we forget the very essence of democracy which promises equality to everyone. We forget that democracy is government by the people as a whole rather than by any section, class or interest within it.

10. In our desire to remain on top of things, we conveniently forget that our other Malaysians have contributed more than their fair share in the service of the country. We choose to forget that there are other Malaysians who, upon coming to these fair shores, adapted and assimilated themselves into the dominant native culture. We choose to forget that there are other Malaysians who accepted the Malay hierarchical stacking order with the ruler at the apex; and that this harmony had convinced the British that we were ready for independence.

11. But the Malays, to my mind, are short on confidence and this makes us a scared lot especially in our relationship and interaction with other Malaysians. We are even given to jealousy and are not above harbouring ill will among ourselves. This has become a marked characteristic of the Malay psyche which unfortunately has found its way into politics.

12. It is quite normal for religion to be used in Malay politics in an effort to attract mass support. Given that Malay values are generally derived from Islamic values, this is not unusual. The sad thing is that a religious issue is sometimes given different explanations by ulamas to suit their political leanings. These, more often than not, lead to confusion. It does not help that these religious scholars sometimes do not fully explain the backgrounds to such issues which leave those who are not familiar with the intricacy of the religion having wrong ideas about it. It is therefore time that the ulamas addressed issues of religious concern with clarity and avoid the confusion that befuddles the people. More importantly, these ulamas cannot, willy-nilly, make religious pronouncements which are in effect fatwas. Such an authoritative ruling of Islamic law can only be made with the assent of the Sultan who is the head of Islam for his state.

13. We can conclude from the foregoing that we are still muddling through 58 years after 1957. We make believe that we are a nation. The reality is that we are not. We justify our watered down democracy by rationalising that there are democracies and then there are democracies. But we are never told by what yardstick our democracy is measured.

14. The gloomy picture that was painted notwithstanding, you – of Gen Y who will be in the proverbial driving seat within the next few years – can brighten and change it. You must shoulder the task, for you are the inheritors of this rich and beautiful land. You should and must

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be at every level of decision making in government and politics. In this way, you do away with the cynicism of being consulted by politicians only during the hustings once every five years. You will be able to build a Malaysia that your children will be proud to inherit – a confident and united nation whose sons and daughters are equal in her eyes, a proud nation admired and respected by the global community.

15. As a gentle reminder of the dire strait we are in, the rapid decline of our quality of life and the serious attention that you need to give to the ever sagging Malaysian morale, allow me to draw your attention to two emotive areas that are close to our heart. In the recent past our national football XI was given a 10-0 drubbing by a side not known for their footballing prowess. That is sad, tragic even; for we used to defeat the likes of South Korea and Japan which have now progressed far beyond us to find parity with European and Latin American football. Our mismanagement of the sport has led to the drying up of talents. Gone are the days when such idols as Chandran, Mat Che Su, Soh Chin Aun, Mokhtar Dahari, Santokh Singh and Ghani Minhat struck fear in our opponents. The same goes for our field hockey. We used to be in the top four in the sport, but now our hockey performances are just as lackadaisical as many other sports that we involve ourselves in. Given that sports are an effective tool to cultivate unity and, by extension, to build nations, this regression is a blow we can do without.

16. The other negative development that is sagging our morale is the indifferent economic performance and in particular, the value of the Ringgit that continues to drop. Countries that used to lag behind us such as Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar are now beginning to draw away foreign investments from our country. On the other hand the floundering Ringgit is drawing sighs of frustration from traders and importers. The same is the case with parents who have to grimace and bear the pain of underwriting their children's tertiary education outside the country.

Ladies and gentlemen, these then are the challenges before you. Thank you and good morning.

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

AT THE INSTITUTE FOR DEMOCRACY AND ECONOMIC AFFAIRS (IDEAS) CONFERENCE

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ON NATION BUILDING, UNITY AND THE MALAYSIAN DREAM: YESTERDAY, TODAY AND TOMORROW

ON WEDNESDAY, 16.9.15 AT 9.00 A.M.

AT THE INSTITUT INTEGRITI MALAYSIA, BUKIT TUNKU, KUALA LUMPUR