

Bridging intellect and character

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Comment

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I COULD not wait to get a copy of *A Doctor in the House*, the memoirs of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The title implies solutions, as the good doctor prescribed, to be found in some 60 chapters. Plus, you can choose the chapter which you prefer to consult first.

Though some information sound familiar due to the author's adamant stance even until today, it provides the context of how and why things were done in certain ways.

And this is often missing in other memoirs, leaving many clueless about how decisions were made, rightly or wrongly!

One thing that cannot be disputed is when the writer expressed that "education should not only be about acquiring knowledge".



"Intellectual and character developments are not separate processes — they go together... (because)... nothing is more dangerous than knowledge in the hands of a corrupt and untrustworthy individual."

The issue is striking a balance.

Intellectual performance is obsessively tracked, graded and rewarded while that of character development seems to be left unattended, academically speaking.

Yet the latter often overrides the former when it comes to the crunch.

Nowadays, the issue is almost a daily occurrence, taking on even larger dimensions than before, leading to what Dr Mahathir alluded to as a problem when one is poor, but upon being rich, there is a bigger dilemma.

This predicament continues to be unresolved as we steam ahead creating even greater wealth but remain loose in adherence to principles which build and safeguard character-building.

Interestingly, Singapore's former premier Lee Kuan Yew has retracted his accusation that the city-state's Muslims are facing difficulties integrating into the population.

In his book *Lee Kuan Yew: Hard Truths to Keep Singapore Going* released earlier, he stated: "I would say today, we can integrate all religions and races except Islam."

This is allegedly "because of their (the Muslims) strict adherence to Islamic tenets."

The blame was squarely put on the time frame referred to as "today" in the controversial statement.

It was actually some two or three years ago based on the interviews conducted and incorporated into the book.

It is therefore said to be "out-of-date", implying that Singapore Muslims, over the last few years, are "less strict on the Islamic observances", which is what Lee wanted in the first place.

The so-called "hard truths" as suggested in the book title are malleable after all, especially amid growing expectations of a coming general election, and what with the unhappiness of the Muslim community which deemed the accusation unjust.

Fortunately, the timely memoirs of Dr Mahathir help to provide the context of what "truth" is to some leaders and statesmen, especially when it comes to the issue of "integration" and being "less strict" in observing a particular tenet as a matter of principle.

In this case, Dr Mahathir's experiences in dealing with the Singapore leadership over two decades as Prime Minister, and even longer before that as part of the Malaysian government officials, afforded readers an idea of the psyche that they are up against.

Perhaps the attempt to resolve the issue of water supply is classic when it comes to how "less strict" you need to be in moving towards an amicable, if fairer, solution.

Certainly, the memoirs recorded many more instances that lead you to realise that "hard truths" only count if your self-interest is served.

To this, Dr Mahathir aptly testified: "But I know Singapore, I negotiated with them for more than 20 years but none of the outstanding issues between us were resolved. Singapore always delays, withholds agreement, and demands outrageous concessions in exchange for consenting to what is rightfully ours."

Consequently, referring to his then counterpart, he remarked pointedly: "Lee has come very far, but his reaching across the Causeway into peninsular politics came to nought." (page 179).

Is this a case of intellectual and character dichotomy?

Although I still have some pages to go, *A Doctor in the House* seems more than just the memoirs of an extraordinary person in the history of his country and beyond.

Despite the fact that the author makes no pretence that "there is no point in trying to show people how brilliant you are when you are not," the fact remains that his brilliance will outshine many generations to come, though not without controversies.

My fervent hope is that this monumental work will not suffer the fate of the Interlock affair where shallowness between intellect and character compels parts of it to be censored and create a distorted history!

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