

Tun Hussein Onn: A Most Personal Appreciation

*I*t is a trade secret that in newspaper offices, the obituaries of important personalities are written well before their demise. The all-important deadline necessitates such a cold and clinical approach. But while such an obituary has its function, it is the tribute from the heart that will always be remembered. And the very personal appreciation that pulls at the heartstrings can only be written by those close to the man himself. Such was the situation former ISIS Chairman and CEO **Tan Sri Dr Noordin Sopiee** found himself in when he wrote this tribute for Tun. It was published in *The New Straits Times* on June 1, the day when Tun was finally laid to rest. The article was reproduced in *ISIS Focus Issue No. 64*, July 1990. The following is an edited version.

I WRITE this article in the quiet of midnight in a secluded San Francisco hotel on the day Tun Hussein Onn passed away (in a hospital in San Francisco) – reflecting on what this man of Malaysia had been to his family, to his friends ... and to the country that he so dearly loved and so earnestly tried to serve.

It might seem out of place to say it of a statesman, but the Tun was probably above all a family man. He was devoted to his home, to his wife Toh Puan Suhaila with whom he shared a rich and full 42 years and to his four daughters and two sons. That bond of love was deeply moving as the family crowded around his death bed in the last critical hours of his life.

And each time a member of the family spoke to the Tun through his unconscious state, his graph beeped back to life, as if he heard — and wanted to reply.

But he could not. In the end, a series of post operation complications took their toll and the Tun could fight no more. He went away peacefully — in serenity -- with the trace of a smile on his face, the slightly upturned lips that his friends knew only too well.

The last few hours of the Tun bring back to me my first recollections of those days when the Tun was a law student in London and his wife was a



(From Left) Noordin Sopiee and Tun Hussein Onn

radiant, vivacious young woman, sometimes appreciative of a young boy's help in pushing the pram.

I remember most vividly a particular Friday in August 1973 when I received a phone call from Tun Razak's office asking me to write a quick article 'introducing' the man Razak had decided would be his deputy. 'We're going to appoint him Deputy Prime Minister in three days' time, on Monday. The people hardly know him. 'But it's ok, I was told, though I was hardly assured.' 'We have arranged for you to meet him for dinner tomorrow'.

I vividly remember the simple dinner at Tun Hussein's house that long Saturday night. We had nasi goreng, fried chicken, chili sauce... And coffee. Lots of it.

The Tun hardly ate. But over thick black *Nescafe* and amidst clouds of his favourite *Craven A* (a brand of cigarette), we talked for hours about his life.

We talked about his father, Dato' Onn bin Jaafar, the charismatic father of Malay nationalism, whom he deeply revered. They were exceedingly close — no generation gap there.

We talked about his career: as the first leader of Umno Youth (1946); the third Secretary General of Umno (at age 28, in 1950); and Minister of Education (1970).

Above all, on that unforgettable night, we talked about what he believed in and what hopes he had for the country he would one day have to lead. (Even then, before anyone had any inkling of Tun Razak's fatal affliction, we all knew that the Tun was choosing not only a Deputy Prime Minister but also a future Prime Minister.)

Yet there he was, on the eve of becoming Deputy Prime Minister, and one step away from the premiership of the nation, yet still a mystery to the general public — a public figure of unknown quantity.

It was his own fault, I politely suggested. With a smile, he agreed. But why did he shun personal publicity, I asked. Almost apologetically, he replied: 'People can be too easily led into wanting publicity more than achievement.'

'If you are down, you must not be downhearted. But if you are up, you must not lose your head. 'With too much publicity, you cannot be humble. You can come to a stage where you feel you can't be wrong.'

'What I do is important. But me, I'm not important.'

Me, I am not important. To his credit, during his premiership, it was clear that this was a rare politician — a man who was acutely unaware of his own importance.

But even on that night, 17 years ago, it was clear to me that what the Tun had said was a justification not only of his own natural shyness but was a central part of the philosophy of a man who had been touched by the hand of defeat, who knew the pain of profound disappointment, who had a deep-seated fear of the corruption of power and of the tyranny of applause, who was much more worried by the responsibility of high public office than enamoured of its heady trappings.

Throughout his premiership, Tun was concerned — perhaps to a fault — by the responsibility of leadership. It did not lie light on his earnest shoulders. And it was not helped by an equally profound sense of duty — handed down from father to son. All his life, he lived by a great old-fashioned sense of what duty demanded. He had a great sense of duty to his father, to his mother, to his wife, to his children, to his friends. And to his country.

'I am an old soldier,' he once told me. 'In the Military Academy at Dehra Dun where I was trained during the war, there was this inscription on the wall: "The safety, honour and welfare of the men under your command come first, always and every time. Your own safety, comfort and welfare come last, always and every time". He did put nation before self.'

On that night in 1973, on the eve of his Deputy Prime Ministership, he was adamant: 'I would rather be politically unpopular than fail in my duty; what is one's political future compared to one's responsibility?'

I would rather be politically unpopular than fail in my duty ...

'*Baik diumpat keji sekarang daripada dikencingkan kubur kemudian* (It is better that they curse me now than that they urinate on my grave),' he quoted an old Malay saying.

'Many of the miseries of life,' he went on, 'are due to sacrificing the future for the present; the happiness of years to come for the satisfaction (and he might have added, the expediency) of the moment.'

It is the Malaysian way that we will speak not evil but good upon the passing of any man. And practically all Malaysians will today think only the best things of this man of honour and duty.

The historian has to look at the negative side of the ledger as well as the positive side.

History may well say that Tun Hussein bin Dato' Onn had weaknesses and was flawed. He made mistakes. I am sure the Tun himself would have agreed.

Was he too much of a statesman when he needed to be much more of a politician? Was his total integrity too idealistic in a world where even the most powerful ideals must be bereft of even the slightest shred of illusion? He would have said a resounding 'NO'.

Was he straight and honest to a fault? He would have found the very question perplexing.

Many questions can of course only be answered with the benefit of 20-20 hindsight. It is not for us to judge from the myopia and the emotion of this day. I feel assured that history will say that Malaysia has been fortunate with regard to its Prime Ministers. Each was different. Yet each was appropriate for the time in which he had to lead the way.

I have been privileged to have known this man, and to have worked closely with him these last six years. He has helped to shape my life even as he has shaped a great deal of the life of his nation.

It is good that he spent his last days in the bosom of his family who loved him dearly. And that he passed away peacefully, tranquilly.

Seventeen years ago, on the eve of his Deputy Prime Ministership, his last words to me were on the country he hoped to help build. It was not an uncommon vision: a united Malaysian nation at peace, and living in harmony.

'There is no alternative to such a nation — only chaos,' he said. 'My children and their children must have a future. Differences of opinion we may have, but this is too big to let differences stand in the way.'

'We, the Malaysian people who love this country, must build this nation. My father's generation has passed. Now it is my generation's turn to struggle. Those who follow us must continue.' Indeed we must.

The Tun is now no longer with us. But these parting words of his — as meaningful in 1990 as they were in 1973 — should inspire all Malaysians, even as they had guided him during his years in office. May God bless him and shower upon him His blessings. May the life he tried to live, and the ideals he tried to uphold, guide all those who will lead the Malaysian nation for generations to come.