

After 50 Years of Independence: What We All Can Do For A Better Malaysia

Kai-Lit Phua, PhD

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Preface

August 31, 2007 is a milestone for Malaysia and its citizens. It marks 50 years of independence from the shackles of British colonialism. Our country has come a long way and made much progress indeed.

As a concerned citizen of Malaysia who has had the privilege of a university education up to the level of the PhD (who has also lived and worked overseas for many years), I see a lot of positive things in Malaysian society. I see a society that has become richer in terms of material goods and a society that has become better educated and more sophisticated. But I also see a country where the environment has deteriorated significantly. Malaysia is a country where crime rates seem to have risen and violent crimes have become more common. Unfortunately, I also see a society where tolerance for the cultures and beliefs of others seem to have decreased.

As a university professor trained primarily in sociology and public health who is privileged to hold a job that offers time to think and write and also to practice life long learning, I have decided to contribute (however slightly) to the betterment of Malaysian society by what university professors do best, i.e., by educating the next generation, doing research, and by writing books and articles to pass on our knowledge and to change the thinking of the public and policy-makers.

This book, therefore, contains my ideas (based on knowledge learned from other social scientists as well as my current state of thinking) on how all of us can live our lives so that we can help to bring about a better Malaysia for ourselves, our children, grandchildren and our subsequent descendants. I hope the book you are now holding in your hands can help you to think more critically about the state of contemporary Malaysian society and also give you new ideas on how we can all pitch in to help to make it a better place to live in. Finally, I would be very pleased to hear from you, dear reader, about the ideas contained in this book.

Kai-Lit Phua, PhD
Shah Alam, Selangor
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Adopt a Healthy Lifestyle 1

How Can Adopting a Healthy Lifestyle Help to Bring About a Better Malaysia?

How, you might think, can the adoption of a healthy lifestyle help to bring about a better Malaysia? What does the writer of this chapter mean by this? Bearing in mind that bad health can be due to reasons outside the control of an individual such as a hazardous job or living in an unhealthy environment such as a slum, if a person suffers from bad health as a result of an unhealthy lifestyle, a lot of other people are also affected. The people who are affected include the following:

- Spouse (husband, wife) or other long term partner
- Children
- Close relatives
- Friends
- Our employers
- Our colleagues at work
- Strangers whom we interact with
- Tax payers and the government

If we get sick, injured or disabled as a result of an unhealthy lifestyle (e.g. having a bad diet that contains a lot of fat, salt, sugar, meat but lacks fruits and vegetables; being significantly overweight; being sedentary; smoking tobacco; drinking alcohol excessively; abusing drugs; engaging in sexually promiscuous behaviour or unprotected sex (not using a condom in high risk sexual situations); driving recklessly or when drunk; indulging in high risk sports and other dangerous recreational activities; not getting vaccinated against vaccine-preventable infectious diseases), we reduce not only our quality of life but also negatively affect the physical health, emotions and finances of other people.

If we become sick with a “chronic disease” (a long-lasting disease or injury which is often incurable and needs to be carefully managed throughout the rest of one’s life, e.g. diabetes, arthritis, HIV/AIDS, heart disease, stroke, transportation-related disability etc.), we may have to spend a lot of money to treat and manage the disease or medical condition, prevent further complications, function as independently as possible or even to just remain

alive. Our spouse, children, close relatives, friends or even neighbours may have to help to take care of us and this can generate significant inconvenience, psychological stress and financial pressures on them. If our unhealthy lifestyles make us die before we reach old age and we leave behind a spouse and dependent children, they would be subjected to all sorts of stresses (including emotional and financial ones).

Our state of ill health may create problems for sympathetic employers (e.g. we may be absent from work more than other employees who are healthy, we may be less productive, employers may have to spend more to pay part of our medical bills or forced to pay more for our health insurance) and for our colleagues who are forced to do some of our work when we are away on sick leave.

If we do not get vaccinated against vaccine-preventable diseases, we are more likely to get an infectious disease and spread it to other people (including strangers whom we come into contact with). If we smoke in our homes, our non-smoking spouses and children are at higher risk of developing respiratory and other diseases. If we smoke in public areas, other people who are non-smokers are also forced to breathe the “environmental tobacco smoke” and “second hand smoke” we generate. If we drive recklessly or drink alcohol and drive, we increase the chances of getting other people injured because of our erratic driving. If we engage in promiscuous or unprotected sex, we increase the risk of acquiring a sexually-transmitted disease such as gonorrhea, syphilis or HIV/AIDS and transferring it to others (including our spouses). If we get infected by the Human Immunodeficiency Virus, the chances are that we will not only become stigmatised but our family members will become stigmatised too. In other words, because of lack of knowledge of how HIV/AIDS is transmitted from one person to another, people we come into contact with may avoid or behave in other negative ways toward us and our family members.

If our unhealthy lifestyles result in us getting sick with chronic diseases and we seek treatment at government clinics and hospitals, the tax payer and the government has to foot the overwhelming portion of our medical bills because of the highly-subsidised medical care provided at government health facilities. Thus, we would be contributing to the problem of inefficient use of our country's resources.

Keep on Learning Throughout Life (Practise Lifelong Learning) 2

Why is it Necessary to Learn Throughout One's Life?

Here are some reasons why it is a good idea to keep on learning throughout life:

Helps to keep us mentally alert

Helps us to keep our job skills up to date

Helps us to keep up with new technology

Makes us more productive

Makes us more interesting to interact with as we are more knowledgeable

Example to the younger generation

Research has shown that if we keep on learning and engaging in critical-thinking and problem-solving throughout life, it is beneficial to our mental health. Learning can be carried out in various ways including formal education (like what is carried out in schools and colleges), informal education (such as learning on-the-job or from relatives, friends and colleagues) and non-formal education (educational programmes implemented outside of schools such as agricultural extension programmes). Thus older adults can sign up for credit or non-credit courses in colleges and universities (formal education), read a high quality book or learn a useful skill such as baking or car repair from a friend and so on. The importance is to keep on learning throughout one's life.

In countries like the USA, it has been argued that the average person will hold as much as five different jobs throughout the course of the person's work history. The five jobs can be very different in nature too. Why is this occurring? This is occurring because of technological and socio-economic changes, i.e., technological advances that make some skills obsolete for the job market (watch repairer) while creating demand for other types of skills (computer technician). Socio-economic changes would include jobs that become more demanding in terms of educational and skill levels over time (nursing), the shifting of jobs overseas to lower wage countries once wages get to relatively high levels in one's own country (such as assembly line jobs in the textiles and electronics industries) and so on.

Some of the more extreme examples of technologically-driven change affecting jobs would be computer engineering where new technology emerges all the time and product life cycles are relatively short; and scientific research in areas like genetics and molecular biology. Scientists who do not keep up with advances in the scientific literature and techniques would fail to be productive researchers fairly quickly.

By practicing continuous learning, we also maintain or even improve our productivity. The most obvious example is learning how to use a computer (even if we are middle aged) and spending less time to write a book or an article.

With greater knowledge, including knowledge of current events, we would be more interesting conversationalists. Also, by possessing more knowledge, when we travel in foreign countries, we would be able to appreciate the architecture, customs etc of the local people more.

Finally, if we want our children to value knowledge and to learn (and keep on learning throughout life), we adults should practice what we preach and serve as good examples for them!

Help to Take Care of the Environment 3

The Nature of Environmental Deterioration

“Environmental deterioration” can include any of the following:

Air pollution

Water pollution

Solid waste pollution (including e-waste i.e. computer equipment that has junked)

Hazardous waste disposal problems

Habitat destruction (including coral reefs) and loss of greenery

Adverse climate change brought about by human activities

Undoubtedly, air quality in Malaysian towns and cities has deteriorated to a significant degree. The amount of pollutants such as ozone, carbon monoxide, sulphur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide and particulate matter are usually considered in the determination of air quality. (It should be kept in mind that indoor air pollution can also be a threat to the health of Malaysians). Motor vehicles are a major source of air pollution. So are factories and power stations. Air pollution in Malaysia is made worse by the “haze” that periodically blows in from Sumatra and Kalimantan in Indonesia.

Water pollution is also increasing in Malaysia as we industrialise. In the past, water could be contaminated by faecal material (both animal or human), agricultural sources such as rubber and oil palm plantations, tin mining activities or timber extraction/deforestation (including siltation). With industrialisation, water can be contaminated by a much larger range of chemicals and radioactive substances. The seriousness of water pollution in Malaysia is indicated by the rising number of rivers that are moderately polluted and heavily polluted. Rivers that are brownish-looking indicate that they are carrying a heavy load of silt and that deforestation is serious upstream.

Solid waste pollution is also becoming a significant problem in Malaysia as we become more and more of a “throwaway” society and the amount of solid waste generated per household increases in volume. Solid waste includes “e-waste”, i.e. computer and other electronic equipment that has

been junked. As the amount of solid waste increases, Malaysia's landfills are filling up fast.

The safe disposal of hazardous waste is a major challenge in environmental health. It should be noted that a lot of e-waste can be hazardous to health. Hazardous waste that has not been properly processed and which is simply dumped in landfills or other non-designated places can be a serious threat to the health of humans and other living things through contamination of the soil and water. Improper incineration of hazardous waste can also contribute to air pollution.

Loss of greenery and habitat destruction (including destruction of coral reefs) also add to environmental deterioration. The cutting down of forests for timber, road construction, factory construction, the building of housing estates and other forms of urban sprawl can have a negative impact on the environment. Deforestation can result in landslides and flash floods as the water retention capacity of soil is reduced. It can also lead to increased water pollution. Habitat destruction can result in the disappearance of highly valuable plant and animal species, e.g. plants that have medicinal properties or commercial value and animals that can keep insect pests under control.

Human activities can also contribute to adverse climate change (such as "global warming"). The clearing and burning of forests will add to the greenhouse gases (such as carbon dioxide) that trap the sun's energy in the atmosphere and contribute to global warming. Scientists believe that global warming can result in negative developments such as the following:

A rise in the sea level as ice caps melt in the polar regions (with the result that low-lying islands and coastal areas will be threatened)
Warmer ocean surface temperatures leading in the generation of more and increasingly powerful typhoons, hurricanes and cyclones
Changes in weather patterns leading to more heatwaves, droughts and water shortages in various areas of the world
The spread of vector-borne diseases such as malaria and warmer climates enable mosquitoes to spread to higher elevations and to regions that are getting warmer and warmer

What Can We Do to Help Take Care of the Environment?

Install better air pollution control devices in our motor vehicles, factories etc.

Walk more
Ride the bicycle
Take public transport
Avoid driving petrol-guzzlers and overpowered motor vehicles
Prudent use of electricity
Do not waste water
Reduce the amount of solid waste we generate
Recycle
Avoid littering and polluting the environment
Help to plant trees
Join environmental groups
Pressure the government to protect the environment more actively

Since motor vehicles are a major contributor to deteriorating air quality, better air pollution control devices should be installed in all motor vehicles. The government can also pass laws that require all motor vehicles to be tested once a year in order to meet minimum emission standards. Owners of vehicles that fail to satisfy emission standards can be compelled to either get their vehicles fixed or be prohibited from operating their vehicles permanently. Similarly, factories and other sources of air pollution can also be subjected to more stringent anti-pollution standards and to be subjected to heavy fines for violating air pollution laws.

As individuals, we can walk and ride the bicycle more when we travel short distances. We can also make it a point to take public transport whenever possible so as to drive less. We should avoid buying petrol-guzzling and overpowered motor vehicles. Driving a huge “sport utility vehicle” when a smaller car will suffice is decidedly not an environmentally-friendly act.

Other things we can do to protect the environment include using electricity prudently and avoiding wasteful consumption of water. This is because the production of electricity and clean water requires the use of energy resources. The production of electricity can also contribute to the generation of more “greenhouse gases” that add to global warming.

Other things we can do include reducing the amount of solid waste we generate and by taking part in recycling activities. We should also avoid littering and polluting the environment. We can help to plant more trees, join environmental groups, teach our children to have “green consciousness”

(environmental consciousness) and to pressure the Malaysian government to protect the environment more actively.

Be a Good Parent to Your Children 4

What is a “Good Parent?”

Characteristics of a good parent include the following:

Providing for the physical, emotional and social needs of our children to the best of our ability

Protecting our children from danger and harm

Disciplining our children without resorting to physical, verbal or emotional abuse

Avoid working so hard (if this is possible) that we pay inadequate attention to our children

Getting our children educated to their full potential

Teaching our children to adopt a healthy lifestyle

Teaching our children values that are appropriate to our culture

Teaching our children to be responsible citizens and to get on with others

Teaching our children to be tolerant of people from other ethnic groups

Being good role models to our children, i.e. actually practising what we preach

In all cultures and societies, parents are expected to fulfill certain responsibilities toward their children. If parents fail to do this, external parties such as the state can step in, prosecute them or even forcibly take children away from their parents.

Parents are expected to protect children from danger and harm and to provide for their physical, emotional and social needs to the best of their ability. If they are unable to do so, charitable organisations and the state may step in to assist. The physical needs of children include food, clothing, shelter and medical care. Emotional and social needs include a loving, caring and supportive parent-child relationship. Children who grow up in very poor families may be seriously malnourished and become adults who are stunted, physically disabled or intellectually impaired. This is why more progressive countries such as those of Northern and Western Europe pay a lot of attention to the welfare of their children and some even automatically provide “child allowances” to all families with children (i.e. money is given by the government to parents to avoid having children grow up in financially deprived circumstances).

A good parent is one who disciplines a child without resorting to physical, verbal or emotional abuse. Physical abuse includes beating children harshly to “discipline” them, verbal abuse includes abusive or demeaning language directed at children, while emotional abuse includes treatment that seriously affects the psychological well-being and self-esteem of children.

If there is no economic necessity to do so, a good parent will not work so hard that there is little time available to spend with his or her children. Children with “workaholic” parents often feel neglected and unloved and are more likely to grow up with behavioural problems. Read, for example, the views of child development experts on how parental neglect can have a serious negative impact on the well-being of children (including teenagers) at the website listed below. The views of these experts are from a programme called “The Lost Children of Rockdale County”:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/georgia>

A good parent will also try to get his or her children to be educated to their full potential but without forcing a son or a daughter to study for a university degree in a subject which is totally unsuitable for the latter for “prestige” reasons or for anticipated future financial gain, i.e. the son or daughter has absolutely no interest in the subject and may even detest it. A good parent will not discriminate against daughters in favour of sons when it comes to educating the children.

It is also essential to teach children to adopt a healthy lifestyle (especially with respect to proper nutrition) because children tend to avoid eating vegetables and are very attracted to unhealthy foods that are laden with sugar or fat such as soft drinks, sweets, cake, ice-cream etc. Unhealthy eating habits will increase the risk of developing serious illnesses such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes and so on later in life.

We need to teach our children the values that are appropriate to our culture while, at the same time, teaching them tolerance toward the culture, values, beliefs and lifestyles of people from other ethnic groups. We need to teach our children open-mindedness and tolerance so that they can get on with others. Finally, we ourselves must practice what we preach to our children in order to serve as good role models to them.

Effects of Poor Parenting on Children and on Their Future as Adults

What are some major effects of poor parenting on children and their future as adults? The effects include the following:

Neglected children

Children who are physically, verbally, emotionally or even sexually abused

Children who live an unhealthy lifestyle

Children who have personality disorders and who keep getting into quarrels and fights with other people because of their behaviour patterns

Children who behave in irresponsible ways, e.g. children who litter, vandalise public property, exhibit delinquent behaviour or engage in gangsterism, drive recklessly, abuse drugs, commit crimes etc.

Children who are prejudiced and who discriminate against other people on the basis of ethnicity ("race"), social class, gender ("sex"), age etc.

Children who grow up to be adults who are a real problem to others, e.g. adults who engage in domestic violence, abuse their own children, behave irresponsibly toward their employers and co-workers, adults who have serious personality problems or have a criminal lifestyle (including engaging in financial crimes).

Work for Companies that are Responsible Corporate Citizens

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What is Corporate Social Responsibility?

“Corporate social responsibility” refers to the idea that corporate “citizens” (just like individual citizens) should behave in ways that are responsible and contribute to the welfare and progress of the larger society. Assuming the country and its government are reasonably fair and responsive to its citizens’ needs, good citizens should pay their taxes, obey the laws of the land, vote regularly in elections, run for political office, volunteer their services and so on. Similarly, the good “corporate citizen” should not engage in illegal tax evasion, obey all laws (including labour and environmental laws), donate to charitable organisations of the host country, support the arts and other cultural activities and so on.

What Can We Do?

What can we (as ordinary citizens of Malaysia) do to make corporations – whether local companies or multinational corporations – more socially responsible? If possible, we can:

Avoid working for companies that mistreat their workers

Boycott companies that knowingly expose their workers to preventable health hazards on the job

Avoid companies that discriminate against their female workers

Boycott companies that supply harmful goods or services such as tobacco companies

Report companies that pollute or destroy the environment to the authorities

Avoid companies that engage in tax evasion, attempt to bribe public officials in order to derive underserved economic gain etc.

Be A Good Employer to Your Workers 6

Characteristics of a Good Employer

A good employer is one who exhibits the following characteristics:

Hires, trains, promotes and terminates (if necessary) workers in a fair and objective manner.

Takes active steps to promote affirmative action (i.e. actively recruiting staff from underprivileged and underrepresented minority groups such as disabled people and Orang Asli) while following the principle of merit as far as possible in terms of handling workers

Prohibits ethnic, religious and age discrimination and sexual harassment on the job

Pays a “good day’s wage for a good day’s work” i.e. pays workers fairly (or even above market levels in order to reward loyalty/long service, initiative and productivity)

Tries to ensure that his or her workers also enjoy a reasonable level of fringe benefits

Takes steps to protect workers from health, safety and occupational hazards on the job

Actively solicits suggestions from its employees (and rewards them accordingly!) to improve the running of the company, the welfare of its workforce, and to enhance the competitiveness of its products and services

Benefits of Being a Good Employer to Your Workers

A good employer will develop a good reputation and therefore, will be more likely to attract the best and brightest job applicants and potential employees. Good employees (people who are bright, eager to learn, hard-working, show initiative and possess good inter-personal skills) will contribute to the human capital of the company and make it more competitive in the marketplace. Satisfied employees are also less likely to “job hop” and leave for other competing companies. Companies that reward employees who keep on improving themselves and employees who show initiative and creativity that help to enhance the competitiveness of the company and its products or services, will benefit greatly in the long run.

Pay Your Taxes and Volunteer Your Services 7

Why Taxes are Necessary in Order for us to Live in a Civilised Society

There is a saying: “The price of living in a civilised society is taxes”. If you think about this saying carefully, you would appreciate how wise the saying actually is!

A civilised society would be one where the streets are clean, the drains are not clogged up with rubbish and smell bad, the buildings are not tumbling down, the people are educated and look healthy, there are no hordes of people living in the streets, it is safe to wander about in broad daylight, the police are not people to be feared and avoided, people have access to and appreciate cultural events etc. In a civilised society, the government and its agencies would be the entities that provide many of the services that keep the society in such a positive state. But in order for the government to function effectively, money is needed in order to do so. These funds will come largely from taxes borne by its citizens. Our taxes help to pay for goods and services supplied by the government (these goods and services are often not provided by the private sector because of profitability problems). Of course, even if sufficient funds are generated through taxes, corruption in the government must be controlled so that the funds are properly spent to better the lives of its citizens.

Examples of government expenditure carried out to improve the welfare of its citizens include spending on:

Public health services (disease surveillance, vaccination, food inspection, occupational health programmes, environmental health programmes, direct medical care etc)

Education

Social security transfer payments

Parks and recreational areas

Museums and libraries

Roads, railways, ports and airports

Telecommunication services

Public safety services, e.g. police protection and fire protection

National defense

The Consequences of Widespread Tax Avoidance and Evasion in Developing Countries

In countries where there is widespread tax avoidance and evasion (especially among the rich and powerful), the following would result:

- Governments without funds to operate properly
- Poorly paid civil servants who are tempted to indulge in corruption or abuse their power to get more money
- Poor state of social services provision
- Poor state of infrastructure leading to lack of foreign investment
- Emigration of talented people to foreign countries
- Social tension and political instability

Governments that do not have enough funds to operate properly will not be able to supply public good or services properly (whether in terms of quantity or quality). An example would be a country where the electricity supply is erratic and unreliable with plenty of blackouts and “brownouts”, the water supply keeps getting interrupted and the water is of poor quality and so on.

If the civil servants of a particular country are poorly paid, they would be tempted to engage in corruption or to abuse their power in order to increase their incomes, e.g., customs and immigration officials who harass importers/exporters and travelers unless they are paid bribes, police officers and soldiers who set up road blocks to extort money from citizens, civil servants who hold up the paperwork unless they are paid “coffee money” (bribes) etc.

Countries where there is widespread corruption would also be countries where social service provision is lacking and the infrastructure is in bad shape. If the infrastructure is in bad shape (e.g. the roads are full of potholes or are crumbling, rail service is inadequate, the ports and airports are heavily overcrowded), foreign companies will be less likely to invest in such countries. This will result in low job creation, big problems with unemployment and underemployment that will result in emigration of talented citizens to foreign countries.

Countries where there is widespread corruption would also be countries where the vast majority of the people live in squalour while a small number of the elite live in luxury, e.g., in countries such as Haiti in the Caribbean. Such countries would be ridden with social tensions and would also be politically unstable because the government and its leaders are lacking in legitimacy and viewed with distrust.

Therefore, in order to ensure that Malaysia is a pleasant place to make one's home, all of us should pay our taxes. We should also make sure that the government is a "good steward" and does not squander the funds raised through our taxes.

Sometimes, goods and services can be supplied by the private sector (for-profit sector) and the non-profit sector as well as by the government. Thus, as good citizens, we can also serve as volunteers for non-profit organisations or non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Examples include NGOs that help the poor, battered women (victims of domestic violence), the elderly, the sick or the disabled, the socially isolated, etc. Other examples include NGOs that promote culture and the arts which help to enrich the lives of ordinary people.

Not only can we volunteer our services to existing NGOs, we can also start up new NGOs ourselves. For example, we can start up an organisation to plant more trees, shrubs and flowers. This would help to make a positive impact on the environment as well as make our surroundings more pleasant to look at and experience.

Help the Less Fortunate and Promote the Welfare of the Elderly 8

Who are the Less Fortunate?

Malaysians who are less fortunate include the following:

Poor people

People in poor health

Socially isolated people

People who are stigmatised and discriminated against

The ranks of poor people include not only those who are poor because they have poorly-paying jobs or can only find part-time jobs, but also include those who have become poor because of an unfortunate major event in their lives. The latter group includes those who are unable to work because of the development of a serious disease, a serious injury on the job or because of a transportation-related crash that left them severely disabled.

People in poor health include those who are physically ill with a serious acute or chronic disease, people with a serious mental illness or those who are severely disabled (either physically or intellectually). Some disabilities are congenital while others are acquired later on in life. An example of a disability that is congenital is Down's Syndrome. Children who have this condition have severe learning disability in addition to their physical problems. An example of an acquired disability is a major stroke resulting in paralysis, loss of speech and memory problems.

The "socially isolated" are people who live alone and are negatively affected by it, e.g. elderly people who have lost their spouse and are living alone either because they are childless or because their grown children are living far away from them. Research has shown that socially isolated individuals are at higher risk of poor physical and mental health. Amazingly enough, research has also shown that people who live alone (and do not have a supportive social network) even take a longer time to recover from physical illness!

People who are stigmatised and discriminated against include people who are HIV-positive or have “deviant” lifestyles such as trans-sexuals or *Mak Nyah* as they are called in Malaysia. Some people fear or shun those whom they know are HIV-positive (even those who are HIV positive but who have not developed AIDS yet) although the risk of getting the virus from non-sexual contact with HIV-positive people is very, very low. Thus, HIV-positive people may be stigmatised and discriminated against. Their family members and friends may shun them, they may lose their jobs, experience difficulty in getting jobs, have difficulty in renting flats or houses and so on. HIV/AIDS victims who are dying may also experience a “lonely death” if family members and friends avoid them although they are on their death beds.

Mak Nyah in Malaysia are heavily stigmatised and often discriminated against by other members of the public. They are often ridiculed, and they may experience trouble getting jobs and renting flats and houses. In fact, research by Dr Teh Yik Koon has shown that they are often forced into prostitution because of serious discrimination in terms of getting a proper job.

Why Should We Help the Less Fortunate? How Can We Help Them?

Ethics and Ethical Principles

Ethics deals with the question of what is “right” and what is “wrong” as they pertain to norms, values, and individual behaviour. It also deals with “social justice” questions such as the allocation of resources and how these affect different groups of people. Ethics is based on four principles:

Autonomy – the capacity of a person to make decisions for himself or herself

Beneficence – the obligation to promote the welfare of others

Nonmaleficence – refraining from harming others

Justice – the distribution of benefits and costs

A socially just society is one that attempts to promote all four principles as much as possible and pays special attention to the needs of the less fortunate and more vulnerable. Deep down, a decent person will feel that something is

wrong with one's society if a small number of people live a very luxurious lifestyle while large numbers of people are homeless and living in the streets or make their homes in horrible slums. This same decent person will also feel uneasy if people in need of help are ignored, shunned or treated badly by others. Stigmatising and discriminating against particular groups of people such as *Mak Nyah* in Malaysia certainly violates against some of these ethical principles, e.g. the principle of nonmaleficence. This is especially so when there is evidence that trans-sexualism may not be a "lifestyle choice" but may have a genetic basis.

How can the welfare of the poor, the sick, the socially isolated and the stigmatised/discriminated against be promoted in a socially just Malaysia? Financial help can be provided to the poor in the short term. For the long term, they can be given higher pay by their employers, better jobs can be created for the unskilled and semi-skilled by public policies that promote job creation and a tight labour market, and the government can also introduce training programmes to raise the educational level and skill level of the unskilled and semi-skilled. People who are sick and who are not financially well-off can continue to be provided with free or subsidised medical care by the government. Concerned citizens can get involved in the work of non-governmental organisations that provide services for children and adults with physical, mental or intellectual disabilities. In the case of groups of people who are stigmatised and discriminated against, the government can pass laws prohibiting discrimination against them. Individuals can also learn more about these groups and avoid stigmatising or discriminating against them on the grounds that they are also fellow human beings (even if one may not approve of their "deviant" lifestyle because of one's religious beliefs).

Why Do We Need to Pay Attention to the Elderly and How Can We Help Them?

Elderly people are usually retired or semi-retired from the world of paid work. Thus, they may be dependent on others – usually close relatives – for their financial well-being. Malaysia does not have a system of social security transfer payments whereby working people are taxed to support non-related elderly people. Thus, the elderly are at risk of being poor during their years spent in retirement. Some elderly may be living in poverty because of reasons such as inadequate savings and investments, not having an EPF

account to withdraw money from upon retirement, EPF funds that have already been exhausted (an estimated 80% of workers in Malaysia actually use up all their EPF savings within 3 years after retirement), not being covered by a pension scheme, or having close relatives who are unable or unwilling to give them enough financial support. Thus, the government, charitable organisations, concerned citizens and social-minded corporations should try to find ways to financially assist elderly people who are living in poverty so that they can live the remainder of their lives in dignity and free of financial pressures.

Stereotyping of the elderly (such as “elderly people are senile” and “the elderly are a burden to society”) and ageism (discrimination against people on the basis of age) should be actively discouraged. Research has shown that although elderly people are more likely to suffer from ill health than younger people, most are still relatively healthy until their late 70s and 80s and are still actively contributing to society after retirement in various ways, e.g. by being active in non-governmental organisations, helping younger relatives with household chores, helping to take care of young grandchildren and so on. Indeed, as population ageing (i.e. the percentage of elderly in a country increasing over time from less than 5% of the total population to more than 25%), many of the developed countries are rethinking the practice of forcing people into compulsory retirement at a fixed age. Unless employment among young people is a serious problem, it is more logical to allow the elderly to continue working as long as they are physically and mentally capable of doing so. As people age, they can be allowed to gradually reduce their weekly hours of work until they enter into full retirement.

As people get older and older, they will start to experience problems with carrying out ADL (Activities of Daily Living) such as getting out of bed, going to the toilet, grooming themselves, dressing, preparing food and feeding themselves, doing housework, walking, shopping, handling money and so on. Their emotional and social needs will also need to be met if they are living alone (either because they never married or their spouse had died and they are childless or their grown children are not living with them and seldom pay them visits). The rest of Malaysian society can help to meet their needs in the following ways:

The government can improve social welfare services aimed specifically at the elderly, e.g. such as introducing a category of civil servants whose job title is “home visitor” and whose work is to check on the overall well-being

of the elderly in the community. The home visitor can be a combination of public health nurse and social worker.

Private corporations can contribute money to charitable organisations that work to promote the welfare of the elderly. They can also make donations of goods they manufacture to these charitable organisations.

The private sector can introduce and offer for sale more goods and services that will make the lives of the elderly easier, e.g. by inventing or introducing products that the elderly can use more easily such as books printed in large type, more advanced hearing aids, offering home help services, having home delivery services, offering health services that are provided in the homes of the elderly, building houses and motor vehicles that are more “elder friendly” or “wheelchair friendly” etc.

Volunteers and non-governmental organisations can help with programmes such as “Meals on Wheels” (delivering free or subsidised cooked meals to the elderly in their own homes), home visiting, helping the elderly with their housework or shopping chores, providing them with transport to see the doctor or to go shopping, providing them with companionship and so on.

Tolerate and Respect the Cultures and Beliefs of Others (Even if You Disagree With Them) 9

What is Meant by the Term “Culture”?

Culture refers to learned patterns of behaviour, and ideas and physical products that are characteristic of a particular ethnic group. These can include language, non-verbal communication, and observable acts carried out regularly (e.g. eating and drinking certain foods and avoiding other kinds of foods). Ideas include things such as religious beliefs, norms and values, ideas about “proper” gender roles (how men and women should behave) and so on. “Material culture” refers to physical objects produced by the members of a particular ethnic group.

Why it is Necessary to Be Tolerant of the Cultures and Beliefs of Others (Even if You Disagree With Them)

Malaysia is a multicultural society and will remain this way for the foreseeable future. Inter-marriage rates between the different ethnic groups are not high enough to “homogenise” the people in the near future. Thus, tolerance is necessary for political stability, economic progress, social harmony, cultural creativity, psychological well-being, and personal safety. The consequences of intolerance (especially ethnic and religious intolerance) can be severe indeed. In recent years, sad examples such as Rwanda in East Africa, Bosnia-Herzegovina in the former Yugoslavia, Chechnya in the former Soviet Union really drive home the importance of tolerance of others who are different from us so that there will be peace and harmony.

How We Can Practise Tolerance and Teach Our Children
Tolerance Towards Others

How can we practice tolerance and teach our children tolerance towards others? We can do the following:

- . Learn about the culture, values and beliefs of others
- . Respect the right of others to live differently from us (even if we disagree

with them)

- . Do not discriminate against others who are different from us (keeping in mind that we are all fellow human beings who have similar physical needs and feel the same range of emotions)
- . Be culturally sensitive

The following aspects of the culture of a particular ethnic group can be significantly different from that of other cultures:

Language

Norms and values affecting behaviour

Family structure

Gender roles: What are the gender roles for men and women like?

Marriage patterns

Sexual behaviour

Contraceptive behaviour

Customary diet

Religion: Religious values, beliefs and practices

By learning the language of another ethnic group (rather than regarding it as “gibberish”), we will better understand the culture of our neighbours from other ethnic groups. For example, if we can speak Mandarin or one of the Chinese dialects, we will better understand the importance of the family and strong family bonds for Malaysians of Chinese ancestry. We will also better understand norms and values affecting behaviour, e.g., cultural concepts such as “filial piety” and its continuing importance in the Chinese mind set. (Filial piety refers to the view that one should honour and respect one’s parents, obey them, take care of them when they are old etc).

The term “ethnocentrism” is used by anthropologists to describe the tendency of many people to evaluate other cultures in terms of their own, i.e., comparing others’ norms, values, beliefs and lifestyles in a negative manner to one’s own. The tendency is to think that one’s own is the “best” and to consider those of others to be “strange”, “unusual” and even worse, to be “ridiculous”, “primitive”, “backward” or “inferior”. Ethnocentrism can range all the way from simple ridicule or denigration of other cultures to intolerance, discrimination, persecution and ultimately to genocide.

“Cultural relativism”, on the other hand, is the conscious effort to be broad-minded, to learn about and try to understand the cultures of other people, to

evaluate the norms, values, beliefs, lifestyles etc of other peoples using *their* criteria and finally, to accept/tolerate the right of other people to live differently even if we do not agree with them. As the world gets increasingly globalised and countries get more heterogeneous because of immigration, this gets more and more important if people from different cultures are to live side by side in harmony with each other.

In Malaysia, we are conscious of the fact that we are a multiethnic (“multiracial”) nation and we have to get along with each other in order to avoid highly regrettable tragedies like that of May 13 1969. We need to teach our children the importance of cultural relativism, tolerance, acceptance of differences and so on. At the level of the nation, the different ethnic groups need to share political power, there should not be gross differences in the educational and economic situation of different ethnic groups and above all, there should be religious tolerance. There should be “equality of opportunity for all” but this should be coupled with active policies and programs to help those groups and peoples who are straggling behind, e.g., the Orang Asli who are significantly disadvantaged in terms of education and economic achievement as compared to the other ethnic groups.

Help to Protect the Rights of Ethnic Minorities and Women and Improve Their Socio-Economic Position in Malaysian Society 10

Who are the Ethnic Minorities in Malaysia?

Ethnic minorities in Malaysia include the following:

Orang Asli

East Malaysian natives such as the Penan

Other minority groups such as the Portuguese and the Thai

Malaysian Indians (10% of the population)

Malaysian Chinese (25% of the population – a large ethnic minority group)

Why the Rights of Ethnic Minorities and Women Should Be Given Special Recognition and Protection

These are some of the major reasons why the rights of ethnic minorities and women should be given special recognition and protection:

Poor socio-economic position of some of the ethnic minorities

Less political power or influence as compared to the bigger ethnic groups

Loss of the traditional resources and livelihoods of groups such as the Orang Asli and their marginalisation in Malaysian society

Deculturalisation of ethnic minorities whereby their languages, customs and traditions are under threat and in danger of disappearing

Greater vulnerability of women and their dependent children (as a result of divorce, abandonment, widowhood, domestic violence and mental abuse, sexual violence)

The problems of deprived minority groups and women are often unrecognised or given insufficient attention by male policy-makers from the larger and more influential ethnic groups such as the Malays and the Chinese.

The poorest ethnic group in West Malaysia is the Orang Asli. Many of them live in poverty, very few are university graduates, their health is generally poorer than that of other Malaysians (i.e. as indicated by higher disease rates, more disabilities, shorter life expectancy, having significantly higher infant

mortality and maternal mortality rates than the Malays and Chinese), and few Orang Asli hold positions of power and influence in the country. Malaysia's recent history has shown that government action can be used to raise the socio-economic position of the Malays. Thus, government action can be undertaken to do the same for the most deprived minority ethnic groups in Malaysia too.

The loss of the traditional resources (such as access to tribal lands and the plant and animal resources within these lands) and livelihoods of groups such as the Orang Asli in West Malaysia and the Penan in East Malaysia has also contributed to their poverty and ill health. Increasingly, they are less and less able to continue their traditional hunter-gatherer lifestyle and are tied up more and more in various aspects of the market economy. Unfortunately, they often lack the education and skills necessary to achieve positions of power, prestige and wealth in the market economy/contemporary industrial society. The plight of Indians who used to live and work on rubber and oil palm plantations is also similar since more and more plantation land are being converted to land for housing, factories and offices. This group of people lose their jobs as well as their homes because of land conversion (often with meagre compensation after years of plantation work) and thus, they are forced to move into slums in the urban areas and look for insecure, poorly-paying jobs in order to survive.

Deculturalisation of the ethnic minority groups is also a major problem. As their music, arts and crafts, customs and traditions, indigenous technology etc. decline and disappear, these will be major losses to the rich multicultural heritage of Malaysia. More needs to be done to preserve these (including indigenous technology and knowledge of the natural environment that may be medically useful or possess commercial value).

The greater vulnerability of women and their dependent children (as a result of divorce, abandonment, widowhood, domestic violence and mental abuse, sexual violence etc.) means that special recognition of their needs and greater protection is necessary from the public authorities. Women and their dependent children often end up in poverty as a result of divorce, abandonment or widowhood because women tend to be less well-educated and more likely to hold poorly-paying jobs or to be completely outside the job market than men. Victims of domestic violence (violence within the home including physical abuse, verbal abuse and psychological abuse) are more likely to be women and children. Women (including female children)

are also at greater risk of experiencing sexual violence such as rape, molest and incest. Often the problems of women and ethnic minority groups are unrecognised or given insufficient attention by male policy-makers from the larger and more influential ethnic groups such as the Malays and the Chinese. If we want to have a Malaysia where “equality of opportunity” is a reality for all its citizens, the most deprived ethnic minorities and women will need special protection and assistance from the government.

How can individual Malaysians contribute to the improvement of the lot of deprived ethnic minorities and women in Malaysia? One way is to refrain from discriminating against ethnic minorities and women when it comes to offering them jobs or promoting them in formal organisations. Malaysians from better off ethnic groups such as the Malays and the Chinese can also support the most deprived groups such as the Orang Asli and the Penan in their struggle to retain control of or access to their traditional tribal resources such as land. The Malays and Chinese can also get rid of negative stereotypes and learn about and be respectful toward the cultures and traditions of other ethnic groups. They can also teach their children to do the same.

Contribute to the Support and Creation of High Culture and the Fine Arts 11

High Culture and the Fine Arts

The following can be considered high culture and the fine arts:

Literature and non-fiction books of high quality
Music (formalised contemporary music as well as traditional music)
Movies and documentaries of high quality
Painting, sculpture and the decorative arts
Architecture

Literature such as high quality novels deal with various aspects of the human condition. It can give us insights, instruct us, inspire us, as well as enrich our lives. Non-fiction books of high quality can also do the same. There is a book written by the American scholar Robert Downs called “Books that Changed the World”. Downs argues that the ideas contained in books can be very powerful and can indeed change the world. He mentions examples such as the Bible (a religious book), Charles Darwin’s book *The Origin of Species* (a scientific book), Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations* (a book on economics), Niccolo Machiavelli’s *The Prince* (a political book), Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (a book of popular science that helped to launch the environmental movement) and even poorly-written and rambling books such as Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* (a political book full of hate and objectionable, pseudo-scientific ideas). The creation, distribution and reading of literature and non-fiction books of high quality need to be promoted in our society. The prices of books also need to be lowered and made more affordable to the Malaysian public in order to encourage reading.

Music in Malaysia can include traditional music (an important part of the cultural heritage of the various ethnic groups in Malaysia), popular music, as well as more formalised systems of music (including imported ones such as Western classical music). Music, like books and literature, can inspire us as well as enrich our lives. Listening to popular music is fine. But we also need to preserve the traditional music of the various ethnic groups in Malaysia or traditional music will decrease in popularity and may even disappear under

the onslaught of Western popular music in its various forms. The government needs to establish schools where traditional music can be taught to the younger generation and also needs to provide recognition and financial support to “living treasure” master traditional musicians. Where necessary, traditional music can be formalised and musical notation systems can be created in order to preserve them in written form. The creation of high quality contemporary music (including popular music that is of high quality), preferably based on our rich cultural heritage rather than just blind copying of Western or other foreign forms, should also be encouraged and supported by the government.

Appreciation for and good taste with respect to movies and the decorative arts need to be learned and cultivated among the younger generation. If this is not done, Malaysians will continue to flock to Hollywood, Bollywood or Hong Kong movies of low quality and will fail to appreciate the decorative arts. The production of high quality movies need to be given financial support by the government (e.g. many French movies are of high quality because the government of France levies an entertainment tax for each movie ticket purchased and the funds collected are used to provide financial support to outstanding movie directors) because art movies may not be able to attract mass audiences. Similarly, creators of high quality decorative arts need to be given recognition and financial support by the government in order for them to continue creating objects of art.

As for architecture, Malaysian architects should be encouraged to come up with Malaysian-influenced architectural works rather than just blindly copy Western forms. Otherwise, our cities and towns will look just like copies (or even poor imitations) of cities and towns in Western countries. We should be glad that some of our architects have designed buildings such as the Tabung Haji building in Kuala Lumpur, the Dayabumi Complex, Parliament House, Muzium Negara, Masjid Negara and so on. Our opinion is that the destruction of the original Subang Airport control tower and terminal building complex is an unforgivable offense and even an act of architectural vandalism against the architectural heritage of Malaysia. A beautiful and distinctive building which is a landmark in Malaysian architectural history has now disappeared forever!

Why We Need to Support Creators of High Culture and the Fine Arts

The government of Malaysia (as well as concerned citizens) should actively support Malaysian creators of high culture and the fine arts. Why is this necessary? It is necessary because usually, no mass market exists for their creative works. Therefore, they are often financially hard-pressed and may have to hold other paying jobs and therefore have less time to concentrate on the process of creation. Creators of high culture often feel unappreciated by the public and isolated too. If they are given financial support, public recognition and granted widespread public acclaim, this would go a long way toward rewarding them for their contributions to the enhancement of the quality of life in Malaysia.

How Do We Support Creators of High Culture and the Fine Arts?

We can show our support for the creators of high culture and the fine arts in the following ways:

Get our children exposed to and become appreciative of traditional culture, high culture and the fine arts

Learn to enjoy high culture and the fine arts ourselves, e.g. regularly read good fiction as well as non-fiction books, enjoy fine music, watch art movies, visit museums and art galleries etc.

Buy art works created by Malaysian artists to decorate our homes or to give as gifts (especially to foreigners)

Provide financial and moral support to artist organisations

Get our employers to buy local arts and crafts and paintings by Malaysian artists to use as office decorations

Push the government to provide more financial and moral support to “living treasure” traditional culture practitioners, and to creators of contemporary high culture and the fine arts, e.g. give highly-publicised prizes to Malaysian creators of high quality works of art

Push the government to include the teaching and appreciation of high culture and the fine arts in primary and secondary schools

Learn from Our Policy Mistakes as Well as the Mistakes of Other Nations (If You are a Policy-Maker) 12

Major Policy Mistakes of Recent Years

1. The Development of an Inefficient and Heavily Protected Local Automobile Industry

In my opinion, the development of a Malaysian automobile industry under heavy tariff protection has been a major policy mistake. This mistake has been compounded by the strategy of producing automobiles mainly for the limited domestic market rather than for export markets. From a strictly economic point of view, this is an inefficient use of the country's economic resources and it also distorts the structure of the Malaysian economy. Lacking a "comparative advantage" in the production of automobiles, it would have been more advantageous for Malaysia to import cheaper foreign-made automobiles (either fully assembled or in the form of kits to be assembled in Malaysia) and to concentrate on the development of other sectors of the economy where we are able to develop products that can penetrate foreign markets instead.

The development of a Malaysian automobile industry producing mainly for the domestic market under heavy tariff protection has resulted in "local companies" (which are actually partially owned by foreign companies) that have not been subjected to strong competition from imports until recently. This protection from foreign competition has resulted in the phenomenon of "different" models of Malaysian cars that look curiously like each other, e.g. the Satria, Wira, Perdana and Arena models from Proton. It has also resulted in the slow introduction of new models into the local market. Heavy tariff protection means that the prices of foreign models are kept higher than they would actually be in a competitive market and it also means that local companies earn higher profits than they actually deserve. In spite of this, it is amazing that some foreign-made cars subjected to heavy tariffs can actually sell at prices comparable to mid-range Malaysian cars such as the Gen-2 or the Waja. Further evidence that the Malaysian automobile industry is inefficient are the facts that relatively few Malaysian cars have been sold

overseas and the low ratings given to Malaysian cars by impartial consumer groups in countries like Britain.

2. The Continued “Motorisation” of Malaysian Society and the Accompanying Failure to Develop Comprehensive Public Transport Networks

With the development of the Malaysian automobile industry (coupled with rising incomes), motorisation of Malaysian society has continued unabated. The term “motorisation” refers to increasing reliance of the public on private cars as the main means of transport in a particular country. Why are the effects of motorisation negative when total costs and total benefits are taken into account? The reasons are because the private car is a major contributor to air pollution, solid waste pollution and traffic congestion; it is an inefficient means of transport (in the sense that a lot of fuel is burned to move only about 1 to 5 persons from Point A to Point B) as compared to the bicycle, train or the bus; the building of roads, highways, parking lots, petrol stations etc. take up a lot of valuable land; and dangerous or drunk driving results in a large number of injuries and deaths every year (especially to young adults in the prime of their lives).

Motorisation also reduces the push to develop comprehensive public transport networks such as buses, trams, light rail, trains – networks that are less environmentally destructive and more fuel efficient – between and within towns and cities in Malaysia. It would have helped if revenue from the high import tariffs slapped on foreign-made cars (actually meant to protect local car companies) are used to develop or improve public transport networks in Malaysia. However, this does not appear to have happened. It is also illogical to tear up bicycle lanes in small towns such as Kuantan in favour of road expansion for the benefit of motor cars. The tearing up of protected bicycle lanes has made it quite dangerous to ride bicycles in towns like Kuantan and this has therefore, pushed people more strongly toward the use of motorcycles and cars even for short distances.

The building of more and more roads and highways is not the solution. It is only a matter of time before the new roads and highways become filled with more and more cars (and more and more traffic jams develop). According to transportation experts, the only possible solution is to develop better (as well as more affordable and convenient) public transport systems while increasing the disincentives for unnecessary ownership or use of private cars.

How can we be sure that good systems of public transport can be developed? Countries like Japan and individual cities such as Vienna in Austria (examples that I am familiar with) are showing us the way. Japan's bus and railway systems are excellent – one can travel almost anywhere in Japan just by taking buses and trains (including the world famous “shinkansen” bullet trains that travel at very high speeds). It is also interesting to notice that relatively large numbers of people ride bicycles in Japan – even in neighbourhoods within Tokyo (one of the world's largest cities). Vienna's public transport system is also excellent. Again, its inter-connected tram, subway and train systems make it easy to travel within the city and out into the suburbs and the rest of Austria. It is a real pity that increasing motorisation in Malaysia has led to significant decline in the use of bicycles in small towns in Malaysia and to the decay of public transport systems within and between larger towns and cities.

3. Uncontrolled Urban Expansion and Other Forms of So-Called Development

By blindly following Western models of economic growth (where “economic growth” is measured purely by increases in per capita Gross Domestic Product or per capita Gross National Product), we have allowed considerable harm to be done to our rich sociocultural heritage and our once pristine natural environment. Although our material wealth has increased, our health is better overall and we are better and better educated, has our “quality of life” increased as much as we think when we consider the following?

Worsening traffic jams

Deteriorating air and water quality

Less and less greenery (which are replaced by asphalt and concrete)

Habitat disruption/destruction resulting in extinction or threatened extinction of plant and animal species (including the giant leatherback turtle of Terengganu)

More crimes (and more violent crimes too – remember the old days when we kept our doors open and our gates unlocked during daylight hours?)

More discipline problems in schools

More demanding and more stressful work lives

Less and less time to spend with our children, ageing parents and other loved ones

Influence of undesirable aspects of foreign cultures on our children and youth (such as violent movies and TV programmes from Hong Kong, India or the USA)

Economic growth as measured by increases in per capita GDP or GNP is not enough! GDP and GNP (which attempt to measure economic output in terms of the value of all goods and services produced) are actually imperfect measures of a nation's wealth. Ironically, Simon Kuznets (the Nobel Prize-winning economist who played a major role in devising measures of economic growth), wanted to include household production in measures such as GDP and GNP too. However, his wish was not accepted by other economists. Other reasons why GDP and GNP are problematic measures of wealth include the fact that economic activities that have negative consequences such as cigarette production and sales (and the medical care needed to treat people who fall sick from using tobacco products) also add to the size of the GNP. Massive public works projects such as the building of dams that flood vast areas, disturb flora and fauna, and displace people also add to the size of the GNP. A high rate of growth in per capita GNP can also be accompanied by worsening income and wealth distribution and deteriorating environmental conditions.

In Malaysia, geographically unbalanced economic "development" has resulted in high rates of immigration and urbanisation in certain areas of the country such as the Klang Valley, Penang and Johor Baru. The result has been urban sprawl and the growth of the "concrete jungle" together with worsening traffic congestion, rising prices for housing, air pollution, strains in the provision of basic services such as electricity and water supply, rubbish collection etc. All these are having a negative impact on the "quality of life" of Malaysians living in these areas.

We need to rethink our blind acceptance of Western models of economic growth and take into consideration how unplanned and uncontrolled "development" can harm our quality of life. We need to take measures to control urban sprawl, improve public transport so that it becomes affordable and convenient to use (so that usage of private cars will be reduced), fight environmental pollution, prevent unnecessary reduction of greenery and habitat loss, stop being such as wasteful "throw away society" etc. If urban sprawl is reduced and public transport is improved, we will not have to spend so much time commuting (or getting stuck in traffic jams) and we will be able to spend more time with our children and loved ones.

4. Privatisation Resulting in Higher Priced (and Even Lower Quality) Provision of Basic Utilities Such as Electricity, Water Supply and Rubbish Collection

“Privatisation” can be defined as the government’s handing over or permitting the private sector to take part more actively in the supply of goods and services that used to be supplied solely or predominantly by public sector bureaucracies in the past. In Malaysia, examples include the privatisation of electricity supply, water supply, rubbish collection, telephone services, the mass media, parts of the road system, ports and airports, rail travel, air travel, health services, education services and so on.

The idea of privatisation of public services to promote efficiency (adopted in Malaysia in 1983 during the rule of Dr Mahathir bin Mohamed) originated from conservative economists and think tanks in countries like the USA and the UK. Privatisation of public services does have its merits and has brought about significant benefits to the Malaysian public, e.g., good quality cellular phone services, better quality programming by private sector television stations, and cheaper air travel. However, it can also bring about significant negative results.

The theoretical arguments in favour of privatisation include the possibility of competition among private sector providers leading to greater efficiency in the production and provision of goods and services (as indicated by better quality, lower price per unit of good or service supplied), or fear of loss of a government contract to other rival private sector companies. The need to pay constant attention to the “bottom line” (i.e. to profits) supposedly forces private sector companies to operate more efficiently in contrast to public sector bureaucracies which are not subjected to such pressures.

That is the theory. What has been the evidence derived from the real world (i.e. from the record of privatisation in Malaysia)? The record is decidedly mixed. Successes like cellular phone services, private sector television stations and cheaper air travel have been offset by the performance of private sector companies in the areas of electricity supply (high prices to the consumer), water supply (lower quality resulting in the need for people to install water filters in their homes), high and constantly rising tolls in order to use privatised roads, and the “renationalisation” of Malaysia Airlines by the government in the face of poor financial performance when it was in

private sector hands. Negative effects of privatisation on the state of health and education services will be discussed in the next section of this chapter.

The main lesson is that privatisation is not a panacea for any sluggish performance on the part of the public bureaucracy. (In fact, public bureaucracies can actually perform at high levels as evidenced by the evidence from Northern and Western European countries and from Singapore). Privatisation that is not accompanied by an increase in competition between private sector companies or privatisation that replaces a single public provider with a single private provider (without proper regulation to force the latter to meet minimum performance standards) will most likely result in decreased efficiency in the form of higher prices, lower quality, more customer dissatisfaction, opportunities for corruption and rent-seeking (using political influence to gain undeserved economic advantages), wastage of the nation's resources and so on.

Policy-makers should evaluate the performance of all privatised entities and privatised sectors of the economy. If privatised entities perform poorly, action can be taken to remedy the situation, e.g. replacement of poorly-performing managers and staff, loss of government contracts, more stringent regulation, and even renationalisation. Privatised sectors of the economy that show evidence of inefficiency can be made more competitive by encouraging the appearance of larger numbers of competing companies (including foreign companies).

5. Growth of the Private Sector in the Provision of Health and Educational Services at the Expense of the Public Sector

Health services and educational services have traditionally been provided solely or mainly by the government in Malaysia. Thus, although private sector GP (General Practitioner) doctors have traditionally been important in the provision of primary care, specialist care and hospital care was provided mainly by the government. With privatisation, private medical centres and private hospitals have sprung up all over Malaysia, and private schools (both primary and secondary) and private colleges and universities have also become prominent features on the educational landscape.

One major negative development associated with the multiplication of private hospitals and private medical centres is that more and more specialist doctors are leaving the public sector in order to practice in the more lucrative

private sector. This is certainly rational behaviour from the individual point of view. However, the overall effects are not so positive. As more and more experienced specialists leave the public sector, staff shortages get worse and worse in the government hospitals and workloads get heavier and heavier for the remaining staff. The staff who remain are either specialist doctors who somehow have decided to remain in the public sector (at significant personal financial sacrifice, it should be noted. Therefore, hats off to them!), less experienced recent medical school graduates who are doing their three years of compulsory national service or foreign doctors who have been recruited from neighbouring South Asian and Southeast Asian countries to fill vacant positions. Foreign doctors who come to work for the Ministry of Health may not be able to speak Malay and other local languages properly. Language and other cultural barriers will make it harder for them to communicate properly with their patients. It should also be noted that by recruiting doctors from poorer neighbouring countries to work in Malaysia, we are depriving these poorer countries of skilled workers who have been trained at enormous cost.

The continued proliferation of private medical centres and private hospitals may result in a two class specialist care and hospital care system in Malaysia, i.e. a private sector serving better off patients (often, private sector specialists are under utilised and they often see patients who can be treated easily by GPs) and a public sector serving poorer patients and with workloads that are so heavy that the quality of care that is provided to patients can be negatively affected. In my opinion, the proliferation of private medical centres and private hospitals should have been limited by the government while pay and working conditions in the government hospitals should have been made much better so that the specialist doctors would have been induced to stay with the Ministry of Health.

The continued growth and proliferation of private primary and secondary schools will also result in similar problems, i.e. more experienced and better qualified teachers leaving the government schools to teach children from wealthy families at higher pay in private schools. Just as in the health sector, a two class system would arise in both Malaysian primary and secondary education. (The growth of private higher education may have a less strong negative impact on public higher education because university professors who are actively engaged in research activities usually find the situation in government universities to be more conducive for doing research). Wealthier students in private schools would have more experienced and better

qualified teachers and enjoy better school facilities while poorer students in government schools would be taught in more crowded classrooms by less experienced and less qualified teachers and be faced with school facilities of lower quality.

Private schools and private medical care facilities can be allowed to exist in Malaysia. But they should not be allowed to grow and proliferate to the detriment of public schools and public medical facilities (especially in terms of human resources since both the education and health sectors are labour-intensive and skill-intensive).