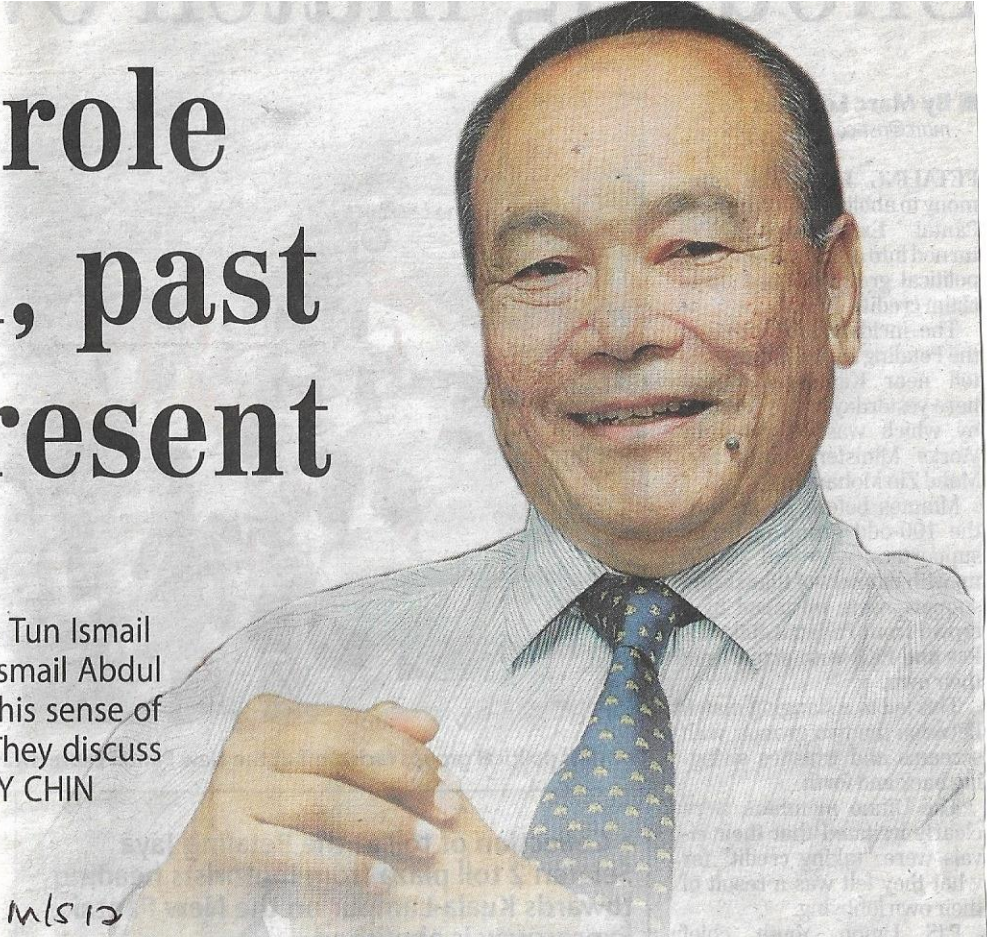




One role model, past and present



Tunku Abdul Aziz and Seth Tun Ismail both hold the late Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman in awe, especially his sense of fair play and work values. They discuss his attributes, with KOH LAY CHIN listening in

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"Before our meeting at the Royal Selangor Club, I was in awe of Tunku Abdul Aziz as he possesses great knowledge. He exudes warmth and understanding, and his recollection of my grandfather gave me invaluable insight into the man who remains relatively unknown to me. My grandfather's values had inspired the Tunku. This made me proud, yet also regretful at how we are left today with declining standards of ethics and morals."

— Seth Tun Ismail

only probably heard about him from your father and relatives and people who worked for him.

Seth: Yes, my dad on many occasions used to tell me and my siblings about the many things my grandfather did, such as when he was the ambassador to Washington.

Tunku: Yes, he was also our permanent representative to the United Nations. Your grandpa represented our country at this very important international forum. Looking

back and comparing his role and presence, he was a man of tremendous presence.

He may not have been 6 feet 9, but if he came into a room, you could sense that something was happening or about to happen. That kind of presence.

Seth: Well I'm a bit ashamed to say this, but I have not actually had a lot to look into my grandfather. In a sense that I did not get to see what he has done in government, only the effects of what he did.

Like when he was home

minister and what he did during the 1969 riots.

It's all very limited because the stories I get are from my father, and nowadays I see that there are more stories about him, so I'm learning more and more.

I'm quite amazed that it's taken me so long to discover this great man, who everyone has held in such high acclaim, and I'm quite shocked that not many people have actually been able to pass on that knowledge to my generation.

Because sure, his name is on roads and Taman Tun Dr Is-

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People needed someone like him because they knew he would not stand for any sort of racism. To him, the law was the law. And as minister in charge of home affairs, in charge of the police and security, he made it very clear that the interest of the nation and its people, of all races, must come first.”

Seth: I have actually spoken to a handful of people who worked with my grandfather, and from what I hear, he was a consistent man in terms of his character and manner. How did you find him?

Tunku: He struck me, even without the benefit of hindsight, even as an acquaintance, as a very exceptional person.

Someone who loved his country, and someone who was already well-known for his integrity in public, as well as in his personal life. He was a man of tremendous character, and carried with him a reputation as a great national leader.

Seth: What were his work ethics like? I know he was driven because I've heard stories about him working 20 hours a day, tirelessly, about how he devoted himself completely. But I haven't been able to actually speak to anyone about how he worked.

Tunku: Well, I think people

took him very seriously because they knew he did not stand for any nonsense. He had certain work principles, ethical standards, that rubbed off on a lot of people who worked with him and under him.

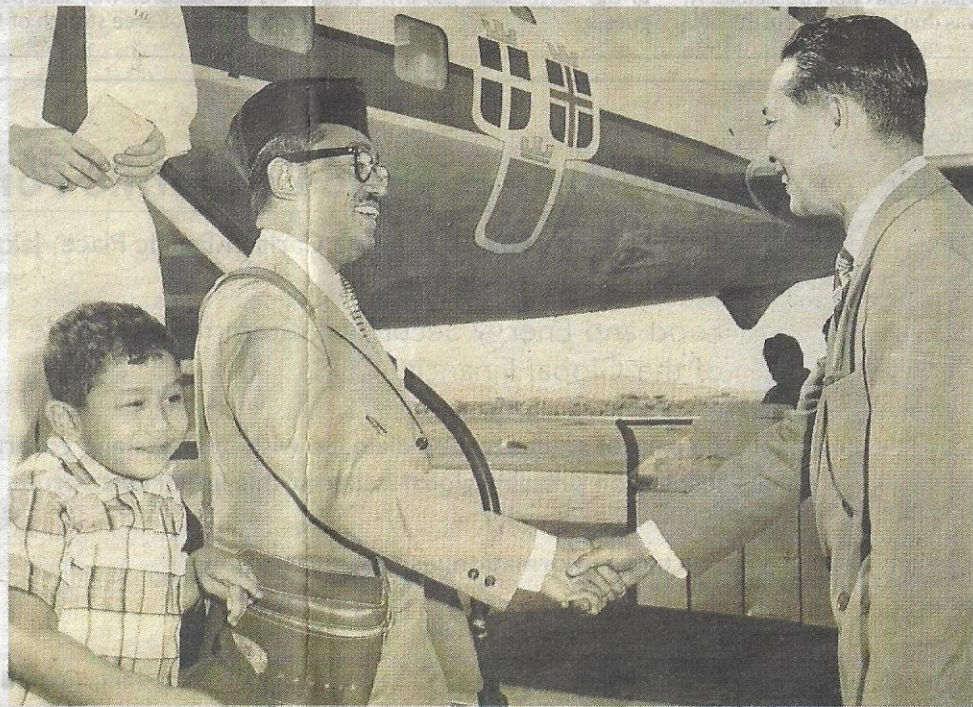
People had this feeling that if they did the right things, then they would get his full backing and support. That he would not let you down or blame you. He would take responsibility in the final analysis, although not, of course, if you were doing silly things.

So he was that kind of man; people respected because he led by example. So for Tun Dr Ismail it wasn't about rhetoric, it was really about getting to the bottom of things, but actually leading the charge.

This may sound like a silly question, but I don't suppose you ever got to really know your grandpa?

Seth: I've only seen him in pictures.

Tunku: Yes, that's right, and



Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman (left), with his 8-year-old son Tawfik, being greeted by his successor, Malayan ambassador-designate to Washington, Datuk Nik Ahmad Kamil, at the Kuala Lumpur Airport in 1959.

— Tunku Abdul Aziz

mail is named after him, but I think the history behind it is a little lost, so to speak. I wasn't really sure how long his tenure in Guthrie was, and what he did, and why he was there.

Tunku: He wasn't there very long. He went to Guthrie in the late 1960s and soon after that we had May 13, 1969.

The country was in turmoil, and that was when he went back to the government to help. In bringing about some semblance of stability. Because you know, in a situation like that, when people were not sure what was going to happen to the country, they needed an anchor, someone who could provide the strength. Someone to meet the challenges.

People needed someone like him, because they knew he would not stand for any sort of racism. To him, the law was the law.

Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman

Born Nov 4, 1915 in Johor Baru
Degree from the King Edward
VII College of Medicine
MBBS from University of Mel-
bourne — 1945

Umno vice-president — 1951
First ambassador to the United
States — 1957

Malaya's first permanent repre-
sentative to the United Nations
— 1957

External Affairs Minister (1959)
Home Affairs Minister (1961-
1967)

Retired from politics — 1967
Head of the Guthrie Group of
Companies

Home Affairs Minister (1969-
1973)

Appointed Deputy Prime Minis-
ter in 1970

Died Aug 2, 1973 after a heart
attack



went too far the other way. When we created the New Economic Policy, the intention was to merely to address poverty.

As most of the Malays happen to be poorer than other ethnic groups, naturally they had to benefit more because they belonged to a group that was very poor. But there were also, as you know, poor Indians, Chinese and others.

But the poor have remained poor. And the few people who have benefited have become rich, corrupt and uncaring.

So when you have these factors, you get a disunited, highly polarised country. This is something we have to address quickly. I was just wondering, now that you have been exposed to quite a lot more, to what your grandfather had done for this country, both in his personal capacity and as a leader.

With all these qualities and attributes that you have

to colour, race or skin. And those issues are issues we see around the world. To be quite honest, it shouldn't be an issue. And for me, to actually hear people say racist things is both demoralising and disgusting. Revolting, to say the least.

But it's the world that we live in, and all we can do is to try and better ourselves and this nation. What I feel is, we need a platform to actually be able to do this. Parliament is actually supposed to be the platform to do this and voice these concerns, but somehow it's become irrelevant. They haven't been addressing our needs.

Tunku: Well, that's a strong word to use. But I think you're right and I agree with you. (Laughs)

Seth: I might be overstepping this a bit...

Tunku: Well if it hasn't be-

Your grandfather would have become very rich if he was corrupt. He held enormous power, and he had the confidence and friendship of the prime minister. But I know when he died, he did not die rich. I think that is a good lesson for all to bear in mind, because public duty is about public trust. It's not about self-enrichment.

— *Tunku Abdul Aziz*

And as minister in charge of home affairs, in charge of the police and security, he made it very clear that the interest of the country and its people, of all races, must come first.

So, having the right man on the job, at the right time.

It can also happen that when you put the wrong people in charge, in whom the public had no confidence, you could really have a lot of uncertainty, suspicion.

Seth: And mistrust.

Tunku: Yes, mistrust. So we were very lucky. He worked so hard that I think in a way it was not good for Malaysia.

There was one man, and because he was willing and very capable, he had to undertake all these assignments for the country and was put in a place where he had to make some extremely difficult decisions.

He went to an early grave.

The same thing happened to your granduncle, Datuk Suleiman, the High Commissioner of Australia.

I think you must have heard this story. That when your grandpa wanted to continue to do some of these things, Tunku Abdul Rahman said "I don't want (this), I feel responsible for the death of one brother, I don't want to be responsible for the death of Tun Dr Ismail."

So I mean, that was the kind of feelings people had for your grandfather. We must create this awareness of the need for citizens of a country to put Malaysia first. I think one of the concerns that a lot of people have, and I certainly have, is that we are tending to neglect ethics in national life.

Seth: In what sense do you mean by that?

Tunku: Well, in the sense that we do not pay any attention to whether what we do is ethical or not. Many of the things that are perfectly legal, but that doesn't mean they are ethical. I think the ethical

standards that your grandfather not only embraced but practised, the example that he set, were all based on ethical considerations.

When he was minister for home affairs for example, he just wouldn't sign any detention papers to send people to Kamunting (detention camp).

He would go over the reasons very carefully. Quite often, he would say no.

So these are things which are important, because many of the things that the government does as a body may be perfectly legal, in a sense that they are not breaking any law, but the next thing that must come to mind is: Is this really ethical? Is this just?

Integrity in national life is in short supply. So one of the things that we must get across to the young people are these traditional values, whether Confucian values, or Malay cultural values, or Indian values. Otherwise, just open your papers. Today, money politics, allegations of millions offered to party-hop and so on. I'm sure if your grandfather had been alive, Umno would today be a much better party.

Seth: I agree with you, the situation in Malaysia today is very messy. I feel, looking at the papers and all, that we are not really addressing real life issues.

What we are seeing today are issues of people in power. What I would want to see is what is actually happening in the country.

What are the new ambitions of our country? What is our nation today aiming to achieve in the long and short term? What do we hope to achieve by the end of this year?

I haven't been able to see any of that anywhere or anywhere I've seen. People are just going about their everyday life

as if, well, life is normal, and there is nothing left to move forward to.

Your suggestion that we need to imbue ethics in society today, how would you do it? Setting institutions?

Tunku: No I think institutions are useless for this. (Both laugh.) If by institution you mean home, then yes, it must come from the home and it cannot be imposed from outside. We are what we are today because of our upbringing. But a lot of people seem to think they should leave all this to the schools. Now, the schools can only do so much, to supplement.

But the primary source of ethical behaviour must come from our parents. They are our role models. Your grandfather was a role model. Not only to his own immediate family, but to the country as a whole.

This is what we want. This is what leadership is all about. Leadership is not about amassing power, abusing power or enriching yourself.

Your grandfather would have become very rich if he was corrupt. He held enormous power, and he had the confidence and friendship of the prime minister.

But I know when he died, he did not die rich. I think that is a good lesson for all of us to bear in mind because public duty is about public trust. It's not about self-enrichment. I put great stock on high ethical standards of behaviour.

Leaders have the responsibility to create an environment in which business can be conducted without recourse to corruption.

I think the other thing people must understand is that although your grandfather was a nationalist, a patriot, he also understood the need for this

country to be united through racial integration. That suggests there is no one dominant race; it's about integration.

Seth: About synergy. Working together. So in your opinion what has happened to that? Where did we drift off that path?

Tunku: Well, I think in our rush to redress the imbalance, mainly economic, I think we



Tunku Abdul Aziz, 74, is a former special adviser to the United Nations secretary-general on ethics. He began his business career with the Guthrie Corporation Ltd, later moving to Central Bank of Malaysia as adviser. He has held senior management positions in large private and public sector organisations in Malaysia, Hong Kong and the United Kingdom. He founded the Malaysian Chapter of Transparency International, of which he was president until 2004. He worked with the late Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman and has frequently mentioned him as a true role model for the nation.

learned about him, would you yourself like to adopt and embrace? As a basis for your own personal development?

Seth: Well, to me, my grandfather has always been an icon. He has been a pillar of integrity and adaptability.

And he did not tolerate nonsense, he was industrious and very efficient. And for me, I'd be lucky to adopt at least half of the attributes my grandfather possessed.

I would personally want to pursue my grandfather's sense of righteousness.

Tunku: And justice.

Seth: Yes, justice. And his ability not to judge according



Seth, 19, who prefers to be known as Seth Tun Ismail, is the son of Tawfik Ismail, eldest son of Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman. He lives in Johor Baru with his family but will soon head to RMIT University in Melbourne to do his degree in social sciences. He never had the chance to meet his grandfather, but is well aware of his contributions to the country.

on the way to becoming irrelevant. (Laughs) I do wish you well. I'm sure given your pedigree and your personal sense of values, you would achieve this great ambition.

Seth: Well, my grandfather did not rest on the fact that he was the son of the state treasurer of Johor. And all of his achievements were by himself.

Tunku: Yes, of course.

Seth: And I hope to be able to do that myself. I feel that is the same way with my father, to do things ourselves. My grandfather, he was not a man of many words, and he used his actions to speak.

And I think the essence of his industriousness was that he wanted to speak louder than people of his time, and he showed this through his work, as opposed to speeches. He was an orator as well.

Tunku: He was. He was really a man of few words. I think he chose his words very carefully, and this is very important. Because, whenever he made pronouncements, it was significant; it was something that people had confidence in.

So it was not as though people would say: "Ah yes he would say that, wouldn't he?" When he said something, it was very carefully thought through. He realised that every word he said, people would listen to. I am very pleased to meet you.

Seth: It's an honour to meet you.

Tunku: I wish you well.

■ For the full CrossTalk interview with Tunku Abdul Aziz and Seth Tun Ismail, visit www.nst.com