

COMMENT

Making a difference in lives and society

FOR LOVE OF NATION: Good leaders fight for people's rights and against unjust policies

PEOPLE from all ethnic communities contribute in their spheres of interest, influence and meaning. There are people who support their causes and there are people who diminish, dismiss or even despise their causes. Whatever the consequences of their actions, good leaders engage in the conscious raising of virtues and rights, and confront policies and practices considered unjust.

During his presidency of the National Union of the Teaching Profession (NUTP), P. Ramanathan fostered effective cooperation between NUTP and the Education Ministry. Ramanathan championed the International Labour Organisation's agenda regarding continuous improvements in the "Terms and Conditions of Service of the Teaching Profession". He was the initiator who drove contributions by students and educators towards education reconstruction in Bosnia, and passed on the donations of the Bosnia Education Fund to the ministry until the Malaysia School in Bosnia was built. He also drove the Carling Campaign among schoolchildren for victims of the Kobe earthquake in Japan in 1995. He was the principal driver of NUTP's memorandum on the New Secondary School Curriculum (KBSM). Many of the recommendations from the memorandum were incorporated in the reformation of KBSM.

Ramanathan raised Malaysia's stature internationally when he became one of the 24 council members of Education International,

the largest and most influential of the teachers trade unions in the world. Although he has retired for 20 years, he continues to contribute to enhance bonds with other organisations, and to build the next generation of trade union and professional organisation leaders. In his contributions to education, he focuses on teacher excellence in the classroom, school leadership, efficiency of the education system, and cooperation and collaboration between teachers movements in ASEAN and globally.

Datuk Ambiga Sreenevasan is a human rights advocate, including for the rights of indigenous people. She is co-chair of a non-governmental organisation coalition advocating free and fair elections. She serves on the executive committee of a women's rights association. She champions issues relating to the law, judiciary, administration of justice, legal aid, religious conversion and other human rights issues. She organised Bersih 2.0 in 2011 and summed up her cause as "...unhappiness of the lack of independence of our institutions". She believes that people from different ethnic, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds can come together to fight for common causes, such as free, fair and neutral elections, judicial reform, good governance, religious respect and gender equality.

While she may be considered

controversial in Malaysia, Ambiga has been recognised internationally as someone whose influence is felt beyond Malaysia's borders. Among her awards are an Honorary Doctoral Degree in Law from Britain, the Legion of Honour Insignia from France and the International Women of Courage Award from the United States.

Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam held important posts in the government, including deputy secretary-general of the Finance Ministry, secretary-general of the Transport

Ministry, and member of the National Development Planning Committee, National Economic Consultative Council and National Unity Advisory Council. As a former civil servant, Navaratnam was privy to the mechanism of governmental decision-making, character of civil-service mentality, and priorities of politicians and their ways of achieving their ends. He brings

his acumen to private-sector leadership. In between his public- and private-sector leadership is his NGO leadership. He was president of Transparency International Malaysia, director of the Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute and chairman of the Centre for Public Policy Studies.

He has written significant books on Malaysian economic development and, also, *My Life and Times - A Memoir*. In explaining the 57th Merdeka spirit, he stated: "How can our people enjoy declining education standards, high crime rates, rising prices and relatively low incomes? We even have to endure water shortages in a rain-



Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam and S.M. Mohamed Idris are among those whose contributions have benefited the nation and its people.

blessed country!" For the love of the nation, he has become a constructive critic on education, public policy, business, development and economic planning.

Tan Sri M. Thambirajah, a Kirby-trained teacher, has a passion for lifelong learning. He was one of the early history textbook writers who approached history from the indigenous Malaysia-centric perspective, while fostering critical thinking and historical objectivity, benefiting thousands of primary and secondary school students. At Universiti Malaya, he introduced one of the earliest courses on Russian History. Later, he studied law and established his own law firm. He is a member of many government and non-governmental committees with the aim of fostering unity and development. Committed to helping Indian students who were neglected and marginalised, on Sept 24, 1982, he founded the Sri Murugan Centre (SMC), which has assisted thousands from primary, secondary and post-secondary schools, and university to achieve their potential.

SMC upholds three core beliefs, namely: All are created equal, all are bestowed with the same intelligence, and faith in religion is crucial to success in education. The principles embody an enabling philosophy, which acts as a dynamic change agent to mobilise a marginalised people towards individual and community excellence. Every year, he mobilises students and parents for the Kalvi Yathirai (educational pilgrimage), walking up the 272 steps of Batu Caves to become disciplined, confident, successful and filial. His educational mission has raised the consciousness of parents regarding the importance of education.

At a time when the people had no voice and consumers had no rights, the Consumers Association of Penang (CAP) was speaking on their behalf. For 40 years, S.M. Mohamed Idris, president of CAP, steadfastly alerted society to the issues of the rights of fishermen in Juru, factory girls, endangered aborigines, species at risk, environment degradation, polluted rivers and seas, road safety and food poisoning in schools. *Utusan Konsumer* has educated millions of Malaysians on consumerism, health, rights and the environment. CAP has worked closely with Sahabat Alam Malaysia and other NGOs championing consumerism. Mohamed raised awareness on the dangers of smoking, sugar in carbonated drinks, and oppression of small and medium enterprises by middlemen. CAP has provided scores of opportunities for law and science students to learn about law and have access to scientific literature on consumerism and health. CAP has published many books that are affordable and set the standards for a good quality of life through the protection of the people's health by prevention, rather than cure. Examine the literature of CAP and we will see that issues that were raised decades ago and denied by the authorities are now key in the formation of government policies and have become matters of public awareness.

Mohamed is a role model, being a humble, outspoken and committed leader, a person of integrity devoted to a cause, altruistically. He did not expect anything from the authorities, except for them to formulate policies, take action to protect the people and uphold the people's rights.

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